Observations on Whether the Military Service Chiefs’ Role in Managing and Overseeing Major Weapon Programs Should Be Expanded

What GAO Found

Five of the six studies GAO reviewed recommended an expanded role for the military service chiefs in acquisition management, often citing this as a means to improve the integration of the requirements and acquisition processes that support a weapon system’s development. Three studies expressed concerns that the services have gone too far in their implementation of the Goldwater-Nichols Act and removed the service chiefs from the acquisition process. However, the studies provided little evidence or support that such a change would in fact improve program outcomes. Studies varied on the degree to which and ways in which service chiefs should be involved in the acquisition process. While two studies advocated strengthening service chief’s roles and responsibilities within the current structure, three studies called for changing the current chain of command structure by making adjustments such as inserting the service chiefs above program executive officers. Authors GAO interviewed were uncertain what effect incorporating the chiefs of staff into the acquisition chain of command would have on individual programs. These authors noted that service chief involvement does not guarantee success for a weapon system program and, in fact, pointed to examples of past programs that had significant service chief involvement, but poor outcomes. Finally, the authors we interviewed agreed that strong leadership is essential to acquisition success, but all six studies identified other factors that need to be addressed in acquisition programs such as unrealistic and changing requirements, optimistic cost and schedule estimates, and issues with the current budgeting process.

DOD and military department policies provide the service chiefs multiple opportunities to be involved in the management and oversight of major defense acquisition programs. Although responsibility and authority differ for the two distinct processes of requirements and acquisitions, multiple reviews, milestone decision points, and mechanisms are in place for these two processes to work together in planning and executing programs. Within each military department, the service chiefs and their staffs lead the development of operational requirements and are supported by acquisition officials to help ensure that requirements are feasible and affordable. Similarly, as acquisition programs progress through key phases of planning, development, and production, opportunities exist for continued chief of staff involvement beyond requirements development. For example, the offices of the service chiefs participate in senior-level acquisition review boards that assess proposed programs and advise the service acquisition executive at key milestone decision points. Once a program has been established and development has begun, additional opportunities remain for service chiefs to monitor progress and help resolve any issues that may occur. For example, military departments are required to hold annual configuration steering board meetings to discuss tradeoffs between requirements and cost and schedule delays.