



Highlights of [GAO-04-1003](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Congress has established a legislative framework that shapes the careers and the management of general and flag officers. The Department of Defense (DOD) has proposed eliminating or amending a number of legislative provisions, such as revising existing statutory retirement limits based on age and years of service, to provide greater flexibility in managing its senior officers in order to retain experienced leaders. GAO is issuing this report in response to a mandate in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2003. GAO's objectives were to (1) develop a profile of general and flag officer careers and (2) assess DOD's justification for its general and flag officer legislative proposals.

## What GAO Recommends

To retain experienced leaders, GAO recommends that DOD evaluate options for extending general and flag officer careers within the existing legislative framework. DOD did not concur with this recommendation. DOD stated that it had studied such options and found that the desired flexibility cannot be achieved within the current statutory framework. GAO found that DOD's commissioned study did not include a review of the legislative proposals and noted that improvements could be made without changes to the law. GAO continues to believe that DOD has not presented data to justify the need for its legislative proposals.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-1003](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-1003).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Derek B. Stewart at (202) 512-5559 or [stewartd@gao.gov](mailto:stewartd@gao.gov).

# MILITARY PERSONNEL

## DOD Could Make Greater Use of Existing Legislative Authority to Manage General and Flag Officer Careers

### What GAO Found

General and flag officers who have retired over the past several years typically retired at age 56 after having served an average of 33 years of active commissioned service and 3-1/2 years in their last pay grade. On average, retired general and flag officers were first promoted to general and flag officer at age 49, upon reaching 26 years of active commissioned service, and served 6 years as a general or flag officer before retiring.

**Average Age, Years of Service, and Time in Last Pay Grade for General and Flag Officers Retiring between Fiscal Years 1997 and 2002**

Pay grade	Insignia	Average age (years)	Average years of service	Average years in last pay grade
O-7	1 star	53	30	3.6
O-8	2 stars	56	33	3.7
O-9	3 stars	56	34	3.1
O-10	4 stars	58	35	3.7

Source: GAO analysis of Defense Manpower Data Center data.

DOD did not present evidence that the legislative provisions it seeks to change hinder the management of general and flag officers or the agency's ability to perform its mission. DOD presented various rationales for its proposals and sponsored a study of general and flag officer management but did not provide data to support the need for these proposals. GAO found that DOD can achieve its goal of extending some general and flag officers' careers and assignments within the parameters of the current legislative framework since many general and flag officers retire several years before reaching the statutory retirement limits. More specifically, the career profile data show that more than three-fourths of general and flag officers who retired in grades O-9 and O-10 between fiscal years 1997 and 2002 could have served at least 3 more years before reaching the current statutory retirement limits. Existing legislative authority provides some flexibility in managing general and flag officers, but the Executive Branch has not made frequent use of this authority. In particular, the Executive Branch has rarely used its existing authority to defer the retirement of general and flag officers on a case-by-case basis beyond the statutory limits on age and years of service. Additionally, factors other than the statutory limits, such as personal considerations and military service culture, may account for early retirements of general and flag officers. GAO also found that the proposals (1) would reduce congressional oversight and provide broad latitude to the Executive Branch in managing general and flag officers, (2) could impede the upward flow of officers by limiting promotion opportunities due to the extension of general and flag officer careers, and (3) would likely increase federal retirement outlays for retirement compensation, based on a cost estimate developed by GAO.