

# Military Generals and Admirals: Information on the Effects of Senate Nomination Blanket Holds

GAO-25-107679

Q&amp;A Report to Congressional Requesters

May 15, 2025

## Why This Matters

Generals and admirals, known as general and flag officers (GFO), are the senior military leaders within the Department of Defense (DOD) who plan and implement U.S. military operations, among other things. For example, GFOs include the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Senate, in its capacity to give advice and consent to the President on appointing officers of the United States, routinely considers and votes whether to approve nominations for positions including GFOs. When a Senator objects to a category of nominations, such as all GFOs, this is known as a “blanket hold.”

On two occasions in 2020 and 2023, all nominations for GFOs were on a blanket hold from Senate confirmation. While the 2020 blanket hold was in effect for about 2 weeks, the 2023 hold lasted approximately 10 months. Senior leaders within DOD, including the Secretary of Defense at the time and a group of former Secretaries of Defense who served in bipartisan administrations, expressed concerns that the nomination hold in 2023 posed a risk to national security and the well-being of military families, among other things.

You asked us to review issues surrounding past holds on GFO nominations. This report describes effects on military readiness, leadership continuity, nominated officers, and military families as a result of past Senate blanket holds on GFO nominations, as well as steps DOD took to mitigate the effects of the holds.

## Key Takeaways

- The 2023 Senate blanket hold on GFO nominations lasted for approximately 10 months and affected 447 individual GFO nominees.
- During the 2023 hold, DOD senior leaders expressed concerns about risks to national security. The 2023 hold on GFO nominations affected DOD’s leadership continuity across the department. Our review of readiness documentation and data did not identify challenges for unit-level readiness.
- The 2023 hold disrupted the military promotion cycle for some officers, which affected nominated officers’ eligibility for promotions and pay. Effects on military families varied based on individual circumstances. DOD officials cited military families’ inability to move to planned duty stations, enroll children at their next schools on time, and seek new spousal employment opportunities as financial and personal challenges stemming from the hold.
- DOD mitigated potential operational effects of the 2023 hold by proceeding with planned assignments for some officers, deferring retirements, and having senior civilian executives and officers serve in acting capacities to ensure continuity of operations.

Who are GFOs and how many has Congress authorized?

In the active and reserve components, GFOs are senior officers with high-level interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational responsibilities.<sup>1</sup> These officers plan and implement military operations by integrated military forces across the domains of land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace.

GFOs are all officers in pay grades O-7 through O-10; thus, they include one-star, two-star, three-star, and four-star officers. These pay grades make up the four ranks of general and admiral. At the highest level, O-10, GFOs hold the most visible and important military positions in DOD. These include the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the chiefs of the military services, the Chief of the National Guard Bureau, and the combatant commanders. At the lowest level, O-7, they hold positions that span an array of roles, including commanders, deputy commanders, and key staff roles in large organizations.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 displays the pay grade, title of rank, and insignia worn by GFOs.

Table 1: Pay Grade, Title of Rank, and Insignia Worn by General and Flag Officers

| Pay grade | Title of rank                                  |                           |          |
|-----------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------|
|           | Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Space Force | Navy                      | Insignia |
| O-10      | General                                        | Admiral                   | ★★★★     |
| O-9       | Lieutenant general                             | Vice admiral              | ★★★      |
| O-8       | Major general                                  | Rear admiral              | ★★       |
| O-7       | Brigadier general                              | Rear admiral (lower half) | ★        |

Source: 10 U.S.C. § 741, 37 U.S.C. § 201, and the Department of Defense. | GAO-25-107679

Congress sets limits on the number of GFOs in each military service as well as the grades or duties of certain key positions.<sup>3</sup> Table 2 displays the maximum number of active duty and reserve in active status GFOs by military service as of April 2025.

Table 2: Congressional Authorized Strength Limits on General and Flag Officers as of April 2025

| Military service | Active duty | Reserve in active status |
|------------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| Army             | 219         | 207                      |
| Marine Corps     | 64          | 10                       |
| Navy             | 150         | 48                       |
| Air Force        | 171         | 157                      |
| Space Force      | 21          | — <sup>a</sup>           |
| Total            | 625         | 422                      |

Source: 10 U.S.C. §§ 526 and 12004. | GAO-25-107679

Note: This table excludes the minimum number of general and flag officers, by military service, who may serve in joint duty positions (e.g., the Joint Staff).

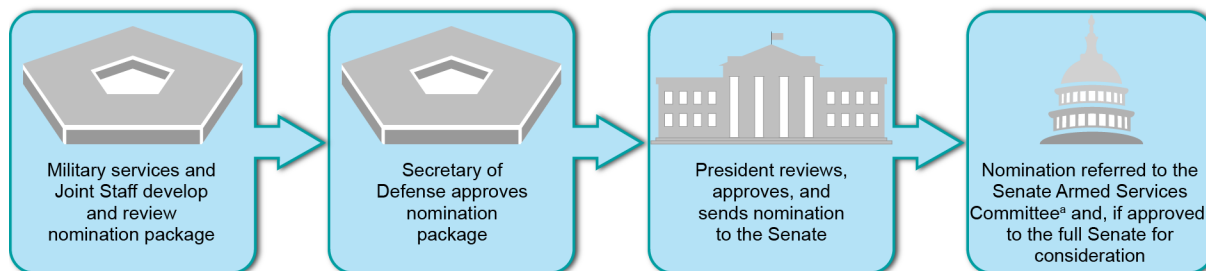
<sup>a</sup>There is no reserve component in the Space Force.

There are some exceptions to these limits. For example, the Secretary of Defense may designate a certain number of positions that are joint duty assignments (e.g., the Joint Staff and combatant command staffs). Section 526 of title 10, United States Code, authorizes up to 232 active duty GFO positions for these purposes.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Section 12004 of title 10, United States Code, states that Army and Air Force reserve officers who are serving in the National Guard Bureau or as adjutants general or assistant adjutants general of a state do not count against the limit for reserve GFOs in an active status.<sup>5</sup>

## What is the nomination process for GFOs?

The nomination process for GFOs begins in DOD and continues when the nominations move on to the President and Senate. The Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the military services and the Joint Staff, develops, reviews, and approves active and reserve components' GFO promotion and assignment nomination packages for the President to review. After presidential approval and signature, the White House sends the nominations to the Senate Armed Services Committee for consideration and ultimately on to the full Senate for a confirmation vote (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Nomination Process for General and Flag Officers



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense and Congressional Research Service information; and GAO (icons). | GAO-25-107679

\*Some nominations may also be referred to other committees—for example, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

Prior to the nomination packages leaving DOD, the nomination process for O-7 and O-8 grades (one- and two-star GFOs) is different from the nomination process for O-9 and O-10 grades (three- and four-star GFOs).

### Nominations to the O-7 and O-8 grades

For nominations to O-7 and O-8 grades, officers are selected for promotion, which is advancement in rank and pay grade. The military services select these officers via a promotion selection board, position vacancy board, or special selection board. States also promote National Guard officers to O-7 and O-8 pay grades, but these promotions must be federally recognized for officers to wear the insignia or to receive the pay of their new grade when under federal orders. The process of federally recognizing state promotions of National Guard officers is intended to ensure that officers meet federal promotion requirements. After the civilian leadership in DOD recommends and approves these officers, they are considered nominated for a promotion when the President approves their nomination.

### Nominations to the O-9 and O-10 grades

Nominations for appointments in O-9 and O-10 grades are temporary, position-based, and fall under the purview of section 601 of title 10, United States Code.<sup>6</sup> This section provides that the President may designate positions of importance and responsibility to carry the grade of general, admiral, lieutenant general, or vice admiral. An officer is not promoted to O-9 or O-10 unless appointed to a position requiring an officer in that pay grade. Also, officers may be nominated to a new position within their current grade of O-9 or O-10. For National Guard officers in these pay grades, there is no federal recognition board or process. After a call for nominations is distributed by state adjutant generals, the officer must be nominated by the governor with the concurrence of DOD leaders. After the civilian leadership in DOD recommends and approves these officers, they are considered nominated for a temporary appointment in these pay grades when the President approves their nomination.

## Senate consideration of GFO nominations

Once the President approves the nominations, they move on to the Senate for consideration. The Senate Armed Services Committee reviews the nominations and then moves those they approve to the full Senate. Then, the full Senate considers which nominations to approve or reject.

The Senate can consider and vote on nominations in large groups or on an individual basis. The Senate routinely considers and approves most nominations for military promotions and appointments, such as all GFOs, in large groups by unanimous consent. Under unanimous consent, the Senate agrees to approve nominations without taking individual votes on each nominee. Unanimous consent is not necessary to approve a nomination in the Senate, but it makes it easier for Senators to approve nominations quickly. If the Senate adjourns at the end of a congressional session or goes into recess for more than 30 days, pending GFO nominations are returned to the President.<sup>7</sup> The GFOs would require a new nomination to be reconsidered by the Senate.

The number of GFO nominations the Senate considers varies each year. In 2023 and 2024, the President sent the Senate 555 and 670 individual nominations, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

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### What are Senate holds, including blanket holds, on nominations?

During the confirmation process, a Senator can place a “hold” on a nomination. According to the Congressional Research Service, Senators use a hold for a variety of purposes—for example, to receive notification of upcoming legislative proceedings or to object to a particular proposal.<sup>9</sup>

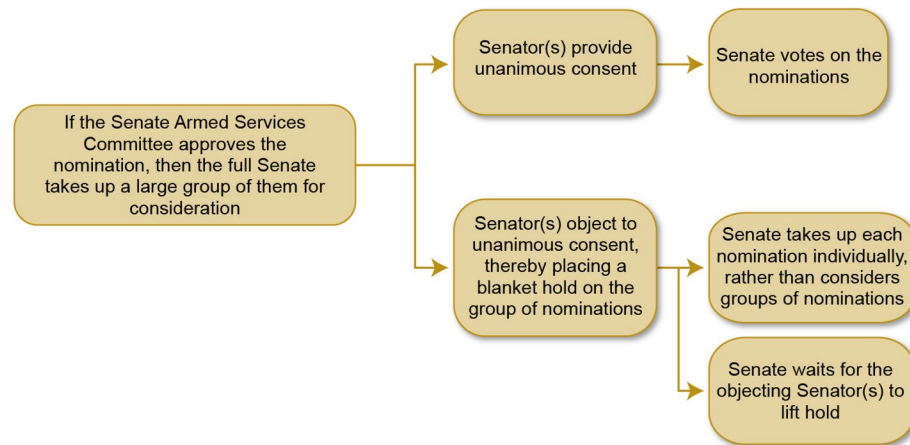
A Senate hold on a nomination is a communication to the majority or minority leader that a Senator would object to approving the nomination by unanimous consent. When a Senator informs their leadership that they would object to approving a category of nominations by unanimous consent, such as all GFO nominations, this is known as a “blanket hold.”

In response to a blanket hold, the Senate generally has the following options.

- The Senate can approve individual nominations by pursuing regular order through the cloture process, which is a procedural step to end debate on a nomination and bring the Senate to a vote. The cloture process involves numerous steps and can take up considerable time on the Senate floor. For example, the Congressional Research Service estimated that with cloture the Senate would need around 30 days—assuming 24-hour workdays without break or interruption—to individually confirm the pending 273 individual GFO nominations as of late August 2023.<sup>10</sup>
- The Senate can wait until the Senator lifts the hold.

Figure 2 shows how blanket Senate holds can affect nominations.

**Figure 2: Senate Confirmation Process for Nomination(s) with and Without a Blanket Hold**



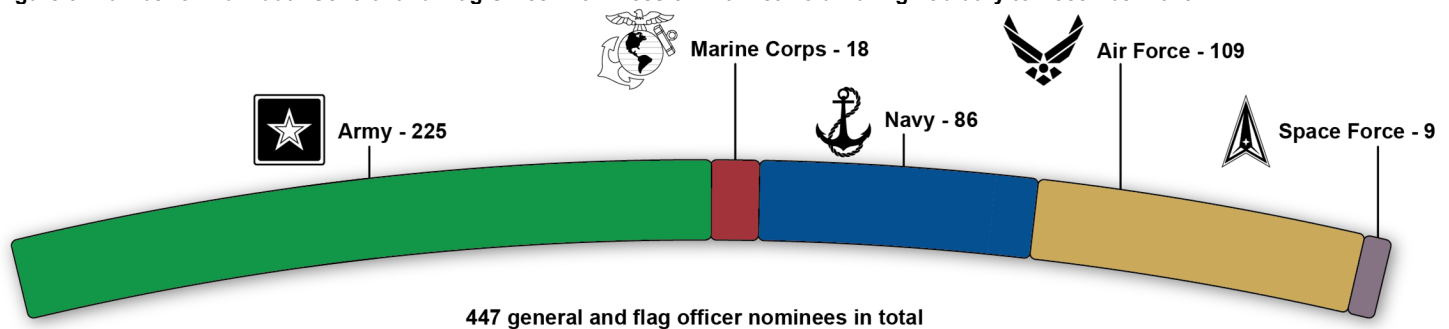
Source: GAO analysis of Congressional Research Service information. | GAO-25-107679

## What were the characteristics of the 2020 and 2023 blanket holds on GFO nominations?

We identified two occasions, in 2020 and 2023, where Senators placed blanket holds on all GFO nominations. For 14 days in July 2020, a Senator placed a blanket hold, according to the Congressional Record and the Senator's public statements.<sup>11</sup> Based on our analysis of official nomination information covering this time frame, we found that the hold affected 42 individual GFO nominees.

For approximately 10 months in 2023, from February to December, a Senator placed a blanket hold on GFO nominations, according to the Congressional Record. We found based on our analysis that the hold affected 447 individual GFO nominees (see fig. 3). This count excludes previously confirmed GFOs who were affected by the 2023 blanket hold. For example, as discussed below, some incumbent GFOs deferred their retirements.

**Figure 3: Number of Individual General and Flag Officer Nominees on Blanket Hold During February to December 2023**



Source: GAO analysis of Congress.gov data; and GAO (icons). | GAO-25-107679

In addition, we identified more specific characteristics of the GFO nominations affected by the 2023 blanket hold. For example:

- For the O-9 and O-10 pay grades (3- and 4-star GFOs), the hold affected 85 individual nominees. These included the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the top two military leaders of four of the five military services—the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force. Additionally, the hold affected the nomination for the officer who became the Vice Chief of Space Operations for the Space Force.
- For the O-7 and O-8 pay grades (1- and 2-star GFOs), the hold affected 362 individual nominees. Excluding the National Guard, this total included 148 and 98 O-7 and O-8 individual nominees, respectively. The hold affected 116 National Guard individual nominees.

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### What concerns did DOD senior leaders express about effects from the 2023 nomination hold?

In response to the 2023 hold on GFO nominations, various former and then-current DOD senior leaders issued statements mentioning risks to national security. In their statement, a group of seven former Secretaries of Defense who served in bipartisan administrations identified two command positions affected by the hold as critical to obstructing Iranian and Chinese aggression. Further, the former Secretaries wrote that leaving senior positions in doubt at a time of enormous geopolitical uncertainty sent the wrong message to adversaries and could weaken deterrence. The Secretary of Defense and the Secretaries of the military departments at the time stated that the holds on a large number of experienced GFOs endangered national security. The then-Secretary of Defense also stated that orderly and prompt transitions of confirmed military leaders are necessary for the United States' security.

Additionally, the Secretary of Defense at the time expressed concerns that the hold on nominations added stress and uncertainty to service members and their families. The then-Secretary stated that long-term holds prevent officers and their families from predicting promotion and rotation windows, increasing pressure to leave the military. The group of former Secretaries of Defense further stated that real-world impacts to military families included their inability to move and resettle, enroll children in school on time, and start spouses' jobs.

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### What do DOD data show about the 2023 nomination hold's effect on unit-level readiness?

At the military unit level, our analysis did not find challenges to readiness—the ability to meet missions—from the 2023 GFO nomination blanket hold. DOD measures unit-level readiness through personnel, equipment, supply, and training, and captures it through the Defense Readiness Reporting System (DRRS).<sup>12</sup> DOD uses this unit-level readiness data from DRRS to produce two key readiness reports that are provided to Congress.<sup>13</sup> Upon reviewing these readiness reports covering calendar year 2023 and part of 2024, we did not find that DOD identified the 2023 hold as a unit readiness challenge.

A DOD official from the office that oversees the strategic and operational readiness of the services also told us that the readiness data did not show an impact on unit readiness stemming from the 2023 hold. According to this official, this office constantly monitors readiness. If there had been an effect on readiness related to the hold, this official explained that the information would have been elevated to DOD leadership.

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### How did the 2023 nomination hold affect DOD's leadership continuity and succession planning?

The 2023 GFO nomination hold disrupted the standard flow of leadership across the department's existing military promotion and succession planning system. According to documents and interviews with DOD officials, we identified the following examples:

- **Vacancies due to statutory limitations.** Since the tenure of the top officers of the military services is limited by law, the incumbent leaders of four of the five services vacated their positions during the hold, prior to the confirmation of their replacements.
- **Line of succession issues.** DOD has rules of succession for managing open positions, and military officers primarily fill such positions in an acting capacity. However, during the 2023 blanket hold on GFO nominations, there were instances where the nominated officer could not assume the open position without being confirmed. The next person in the line of succession was a civilian, who filled the open position in an acting capacity. For example,

multiple military services relied on senior executive service civilians to fill open positions that had been vacated by incumbent GFOs.

- **Interim assignments.** During the 2023 blanket hold, the military services had to make interim leadership assignments. In some instances, the military officers filling positions in an acting capacity did not have the full authorities or capacity to fulfill the position's responsibilities. For example, the Army Reserve Command assigned O-6 grade officers to O-7 grade positions to avoid leadership gaps.

However, according to Army Reserve officials, these O-6 grade officers could not exercise the legal authorities that confirmed officers have. Consequently, the O-6 grade officers would have to coordinate related issues with the next higher general officer in their chain of command, thus increasing that general officer's workload and causing delays, according to the officials. In another example, a Navy official told us that during the 2023 blanket hold, the then-Vice Chief of Naval Operations was performing two jobs (as the Vice Chief and the Acting Chief of Naval Operations) at once. Consequently, this affected the officer's ability to travel and engage with units within the Navy's fleet and international counterparts, as the Chief of Naval Operations typically does.

- **Changes to subsequent promotion boards.** The delays in confirming GFOs affected the composition of subsequent promotion boards. For example, Army officials stated that the 2023 hold of 24 O-7 grade nominations affected two subsequent promotion boards. Specifically, because those O-7 grade nominees did not have 1 year in their new positions by the October 2024 promotion boards, they were ineligible for consideration for promotion. Army officials explained that there was a shortage in the number of officers eligible for selection in October 2024 to fill future requirements for the number of O-8 grade positions. Further, Army officials said that there will be an unusually large number of officers eligible for the promotion board process for O-8 grade positions in October 2025.
- **Long-term retention effects.** Officials from three of the military services stated that there may be long-term retention effects as a result of the 2023 blanket hold. For example, they noted that service members at the lower grades who observed the impacts to GFOs during the holds may not want to proceed with promotions at higher grades.

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### How did the 2023 hold affect nominated officers' time-in-grade credit and pay?

According to documents and interviews with DOD officials, we identified effects on officers' time-in-grade credit and pay as a result of the 2023 hold.

#### Time-in-grade credit

The 2023 blanket hold disrupted the military promotion cycle for some officers, which affected nominated officers' ability to accrue time-in-grade requirements. These are specified amounts of time that GFOs must spend in a grade before they are eligible for promotion or retirement in their highest grade served satisfactorily. DOD officials told us they have decided or will need to decide whether to curtail or extend position rotations to realign the GFOs' length of tenure in positions with promotion cycles.

Additionally, a number of officers held positions in an acting capacity during the blanket hold without getting time-in-grade credit.

Pay

Due to the 2023 blanket hold, some officers’ projected date of promotion or appointment and corresponding pay increases were delayed. To illustrate a range of possible pay increases that occur when a GFO is promoted from one pay grade to another after Senate confirmation, we used DOD compensation tables to calculate measures of monthly basic pay increases for these positions. We estimate that the monthly average basic pay increases could have ranged from \$350 to \$2,106 (see table 3).

**Table 3: Calendar Year 2023 Monthly Basic Pay Differentials Between General and Flag Officer Pay Grades**

| From pay grade | To pay grade | Minimum change in pay (in dollars) | Maximum change in pay (in dollars) | Average change in pay (in dollars) |
|----------------|--------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| O-9            | O-10         | \$225                              | \$474                              | \$350                              |
| O-8            | O-9          | \$129                              | \$975                              | \$564                              |
| O-7            | O-8          | \$959                              | \$2,436                            | \$1,973                            |
| O-6            | O-7          | \$1,503                            | \$3,244                            | \$2,106                            |

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-25-107679

Notes: Data are from “Selected Military Compensation Tables 1 January 2023 – Monthly Basic Pay Effective 1 January 2023.”

The Department of Defense calculates the monthly basic pay amounts based on years of service. The minimum and maximum change in pay amounts per pay grade reflect the minimum net positive amounts listed in the table (for less than 2 years of service) to the maximum amount listed (for 40 years of service). We calculated the average change in pay by taking the average of the sum of all available differential amounts between pay grades by years of service (for less than 2 to 40 years).

How did the 2023 nomination hold affect military families?

The effects of the hold on military families varied based on individual circumstances. Some families experienced limited impact. In other cases, military families were unable to move to planned duty stations, enroll children at their next schools on time, and start new spousal employment opportunities during the hold.

According to DOD officials, the hold had limited impact on some nominee families. The military services were able to proceed with some GFO nominees’ planned geographic permanent changes of station. For example, certain Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force nominees for the O-7 and O-8 pay grade moved to their next duty station during the hold. Additionally, the military services did not move other nominees. For example, some affected Space Force general officers stayed at the same military installation and took another assignment after they were confirmed. In other instances, affected National Guard officers’ nominations were for federal recognition of their promotions within their state and thus did not require any permanent changes of station.

In some instances, the hold affected nominees’ families. DOD officials shared examples in interviews and documents of the hold’s effects on permanent change-of-location moves and corresponding schooling and employment opportunities for military spouses. For example:

- The Marine Corps canceled a general officer’s planned geographic move because the officer was needed to fill a position for which the nomination was on hold. Prior to the cancellation, that officer’s household goods had been sent to and were in storage at the future duty station. Additionally, one Marine Corps officer’s teenage child was unable to enroll in a new school due to the hold.

- While one flag officer's nomination for an overseas command position was on hold, the Navy moved this officer and his spouse from one state to another within the U.S. for 2 months. Due to the uncertainty about the length of the hold, this officer's spouse did not seek employment.
- Some Air Force general officers sold their homes, lived in temporary housing, and paid for storage out of their own pocket. Further, officers with elderly parents, family members with medical conditions, school-age children, and spouses with employment opportunities faced hardships due to the instability as a result of the hold.
- One Space Force general officer was geographically separated for multiple months from his spouse while his retirement was deferred because his replacement's nomination was on hold.

### How did DOD mitigate effects of the 2023 GFO nomination hold?

Relying on existing statutory authorities and internal guidance, DOD took numerous steps to mitigate effects of the 2023 hold on its normal operations, officers, and military families.

The Secretaries of the military departments have broad authority to assign, detail, and prescribe the duties of their military service members and civilian personnel.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the then-Secretary of Defense issued a memorandum in August 2023 with mitigation guidance.<sup>15</sup> It outlined multiple strategies for the Secretaries of the military departments to consider. For example, one strategy was to ask incumbent heads of organizations to remain in place until their successor had been nominated, confirmed, and appointed.

Another strategy was to have officers who were in the normal line of succession, such as a deputy, step into the head role in an acting or temporary capacity, regardless of whether they were nominated for that role. According to service officials who are responsible managing GFO matters, this guidance was sufficient and enabled them to mitigate the effects of the hold on a case-by-case basis.

To mitigate any potential operational effects, DOD proceeded with assignments, deferred retirements, had individuals (senior civilian executives and officers) serve in acting or temporary capacity to ensure continuity of command/operations, and created special assistant roles for some GFO nominees.

- **Proceeded with assigning some GFO nominees.** Whenever possible, the military services proceeded with planned assignments and change-of-station moves for active duty O-7 and O-8 grade nominees, which have fewer statutory limitations than the higher grades.<sup>16</sup> For example, as of September 2023 the Air Force was able to assign 41 of the 57 O-7 and O-8 grade nominees into their new positions.
- **Deferred retirements of incumbent GFOs.** Across DOD, the then-Secretary of Defense approved deferring the planned retirements of some incumbent O-9 and O-10 grade GFOs, though the department allowed other planned retirements to occur. For example, the then-Secretary of Defense further extended the anticipated retirements of multiple Army officers in January 2024, because their replacements needed time to move into place after being confirmed once the hold was lifted. According to Marine Corps officials, one reserve officer's and one active duty officer's retirements were deferred. Five Navy officers' retirements were deferred by 1 to 5 months. As of September 2023, seven Air Force officers delayed their retirements. According to Space Force officials, one officer's planned date of retirement was deferred.

- **Used acting roles.** To ensure DOD organizations did not go without an official in charge while waiting for a confirmed GFO, the department filled positions with senior-level civilians or other GFOs. For example, civilian deputies led in an acting capacity four different organizations that are part of the Chief of Naval Operation's staff when the incumbent O-9 grade Navy officers retired during the 2023 hold. When the Missile Defense Agency, which is typically led by an O-9 grade GFO, did not have a Senate-confirmed director, an O-7 grade officer served as the acting director for approximately 4 months. However, as previously discussed, acting officials sometimes encountered challenges in these roles.
- **Created special assistant roles.** According to DOD officials, four of the military services addressed effects on certain officers and their families whose planned transitions were on hold by creating special assistant roles in the officer's existing or next location. For example, and according to a Navy official, to help a now-O-9 grade GFO's daughter start her school year in a new location where his nominated position was based, the Navy created a special assistant position for him. This enabled the family to move to the new location without putting the officer directly into the nominated position. Other impacts, however, such as the family living in temporary quarters for several months until the nomination was confirmed, could not to be fully mitigated. In another instance and according to Space Force officials, the service moved an officer and his family to Washington, D.C., from Colorado while he was awaiting confirmation by assigning him to an interim special assistant role.

## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. DOD provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

## How GAO Did This Study

To describe GFOs and the GFO nomination process, we reviewed DOD Instruction 1320.04, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1331.01E, and related laws and regulations such as section 601 of title 10, United States Code.<sup>17</sup> We also reviewed documentation from DOD and reports from the Congressional Research Service and RAND to identify the GFO nomination and confirmation process, including Senate procedures and rules related to blanket holds.<sup>18</sup>

To determine the universe of blanket holds on nominations of GFOs that occurred from January 2014 to September 2024, we identified and reviewed congressional documents and publications. We also reviewed Senators' public statements and press releases that mentioned Senate blanket holds. To corroborate our evidence, we confirmed and validated the instances of blanket holds with officials from DOD, the Senate Armed Services Committee, and the Congressional Research Service.

After we validated the blanket holds, we used nomination data from Congress.gov to identify the affected GFO population.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, we derived summary characteristics such as the nominee's name, rank, military service, and dates of nomination; and Senate actions. We found the nomination data on Congress.gov to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of identifying the summary characteristics of the GFO population affected by the 2020 and 2023 blanket holds. We based this assessment on interviews and outreach with DOD and Library of Congress officials and our review of documentation about how the data are collected and used, and any challenges and limitations.

To describe the concerns that DOD senior leaders expressed about the effects of the blanket hold that occurred in 2023, we reviewed their publicly available statements. Further, we reached out to 12 then-current senior DOD civilian and

military leaders to offer them an opportunity to provide additional information about the potential readiness implications past blanket holds had on the military, the affected GFOs, and their families. They declined or did not respond to our offer.

To assess the 2023 blanket hold's effect on unit-level readiness, we reviewed DOD readiness reports to Congress.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, we reviewed unit-level readiness information as it was presented in six readiness reports covering calendar years 2023 and the first part of 2024. Additionally, we interviewed a DOD official from the office that oversees the strategic and operational readiness of the military services about readiness data.

To describe how the 2023 blanket hold affected DOD's leadership continuity and succession planning along with nominated officers and their families, we reviewed DOD documentation such as correspondence with a member of Congress, briefing documents, and internal memorandums as well as related laws on senior military leaders.<sup>21</sup> Further, we reviewed DOD's *Selected Military Compensation Tables* report to identify GFO pay data for calendar year 2023.<sup>22</sup> We also interviewed officials responsible for managing GFO matters from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness; Joint Staff; the military services (the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Space Force); and the National Guard Bureau.

To describe the steps DOD took to mitigate effects of the 2023 blanket hold, we analyzed DOD documentation such as the then-Secretary of Defense's August 2023 memorandum, *Mitigating the Disruption from Delayed General Officer and Flag Officer Confirmations*, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1331.01E. We assessed documentation from the military services to identify mitigation steps they took, such as instances when GFOs or senior-level civilians were assigned to a position in an acting capacity or deferred their retirements. Additionally, we interviewed officials responsible for managing GFO matters from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness; Joint Staff; the military services; and the National Guard Bureau, as well as an official responsible for military community and family policy within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

We conducted this performance audit from July 2024 to May 2025 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## List of Addressees

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Robert Garcia  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jamie Raskin  
House of Representatives

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The military services each have an active component. Four of the five military services have reserve components (U.S. Army Reserve, Army National Guard of the United States, U.S. Air Force Reserve, Air National Guard of the United States, U.S. Navy Reserve, and U.S. Marine Corps Reserve).

<sup>2</sup>See Congressional Research Service, *General and Flag Officers in the U.S. Armed Forces: Background and Considerations for Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 8, 2024).

<sup>3</sup>10 U.S.C. §§ 525, 526 and 12004.

<sup>4</sup>10 U.S.C. § 526.

<sup>5</sup>10 U.S.C. § 12004.

<sup>6</sup>10 U.S.C. § 601.

<sup>7</sup>Via unanimous consent, the Senate can waive this required rule about returning nominations.

<sup>8</sup>The number of nominees may be different than the number of nominations each year. Some GFOs may be nominated more than once.

<sup>9</sup>Congressional Research Service, *"Holds" in the Senate* (Updated Jan. 24, 2017).

<sup>10</sup>Congressional Research Service Memorandum to Senator Jack Reed, *Floor Time to Process all Pending Military Nominations on the Executive Calendar* (Aug. 23, 2023).

<sup>11</sup>According to the Senator's press releases, the hold included nominations for grades O-6 and above. In the Navy, an O-6 is a captain, whereas in all of the other military services it is a colonel.

<sup>12</sup>According to Department of Defense Directive 7730.65, *DOD Readiness Reporting System* (May 31, 2023), the DRRS will provide information to support decision-making by using analytics that enable senior leaders to weigh options and make decisions informed by operational and strategic force-management considerations consistent with the *National Defense Strategy*. Reporting units vary in size and composition. For example, a fighter unit—specifically, an F-22 unit—reports readiness by squadron and each squadron contains a minimum of 20 total aircraft.

<sup>13</sup>DOD produces the *Semiannual Readiness Report to Congress* and the *Semiannual Joint Force Readiness Review*. The first report contains information contributed by the military services, combatant commands, and Joint Staff. The second report assesses the armed forces' capability to execute their wartime missions under the *National Military Strategy*.

<sup>14</sup>10 U.S.C. §§ 7013(g), 8013(g), and 9013(g).

<sup>15</sup>Department of Defense memorandum, *Mitigating the Disruption from Delayed General Officer and Flag Officer Confirmations* (Aug. 2, 2023).

<sup>16</sup>Officers in the O-9 and O-10 grades serve in temporary, position-based appointments. By law, they cannot be moved from the position for which they have been previously confirmed by the Senate while awaiting Senate confirmation for another O-9 or O-10 position without reverting to their permanent grade. 10 U.S.C. § 601.

<sup>17</sup>Department of Defense Instruction 1320.04, *Military Officer Actions Requiring Presidential, Secretary of Defense, or Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Approval or*

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*Senate Confirmation* (Jan. 3, 2014), (incorporating change 1, effective June 30, 2020). Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1331.01E, *Manpower and Personnel Actions Involving General and Flag Officers* (Mar. 31, 2022). 10 U.S.C. § 601 – Positions of importance and responsibility: generals and lieutenant generals; admirals and vice admirals.

<sup>18</sup>Congressional Research Service, *General and Flag Officers in the U.S. Armed Forces: Background and Considerations for Congress* (updated Mar. 8, 2024); Congressional Research Service, *Senate Consideration of Presidential Nominations: Committee and Floor Procedure* (updated Feb. 21, 2023); Congressional Research Service, *Holds on Nominations* (July 13, 2023); RAND, *Managing Adverse and Reportable Information Regarding U.S. Military Officers* (2019 update).

<sup>19</sup>Congress.gov is the official website for U.S. federal legislative information. Congress.gov is developed and maintained by the Library of Congress using data originated and owned by the United States Senate and the United States House of Representatives.

<sup>20</sup>Department of Defense, *Semiannual Readiness Report to Congress* and the *Semiannual Joint Force Readiness Review*.

<sup>21</sup>10 U.S.C. § 7033 – Chief of Staff; 10 U.S.C. § 8043 – Commandant of the Marine Corps; 10 U.S.C. § 8033 – Chief of Naval Operations; 10 U.S.C. § 9033 – Chief of Staff; and 10 U.S.C. § 9082 – Chief of Space Operations.

<sup>22</sup>Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Personnel and Readiness), Directorate of Compensation, *Selected Military Compensation Tables* (Jan. 1, 2023).