

## Speed Trap: The USAF 24-Year Pole to General Officer

by

Lieutenant Colonel Travis D. Rex  
United States Air Force



United States Army War College  
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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Lieutenant Colonel Travis D. Rex  
United States Air Force

Colonel Richard Wagner  
Department of Command, Leadership, and Management  
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013



## **Abstract**

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## **Speed Trap: The USAF 24-Year Pole to General Officer**

No Management Action Carries the Impact of Promotion.

—Col Martin E. B. France, et al.<sup>1</sup>

The United States Air Force (USAF) selects its Colonels for General Officer earlier than any other armed service, with the average time-in-service (TIS) at Brigadier General (O-7) selection clocking in at just over 23 years.<sup>2</sup> In fact, over 90 percent of all USAF O-7s are selected on or before 24 years in service, nearly two years earlier than all other services.<sup>3</sup> There is no law or official policy that mandates this timeline as a requirement or stated Air Force goal. Yet for well over a decade, the results of the O-7 selection board have spoken loud and clear: in order to make General in today's active duty Air Force, one had better be highly competitive, ready, and qualified by 24 years.

This self-imposed early timeline to General Officer gives the USAF some advantages valued by senior USAF leaders. Theoretically, it enables the best strategic leaders the service has to offer the ability to serve longer in the top grades, gaining breadth and experience that prepare them for even higher rank and responsibility. This breadth at the strategic level is expected to make them more attractive candidates for top joint positions and commands, areas in which the Air Force has historically been under represented.<sup>4</sup> However, in any hierarchical organization, the way those who ascend to the top of the pyramid are selected has a profound impact on the lower levels of the structure. In this case, the timeline required for Brigadier General selection, with the necessary assignments and experience that make an officer competitive for O-7, has a host of effects that cascade down to the youngest Lieutenant entering the service. Although the number of officers who ascend to General ranks is extremely low, representing less than half a percent of the total officer force, the dynamics of General

Officer promotion play a major role in personnel management and development priorities for all officers, and are felt throughout the promotion system.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the aforementioned time constraint translates into the requirement for a candidate to be promoted Below the Zone (BTZ) multiple times as well as serve and succeed in a multitude of highly competitive command and staff positions. This has pushed the entire current USAF line officer promotion system to evolve to one absorbed with early identification, stratification, and fast-tracking of High-Potential Officers (HPOs). These officers can then be groomed and managed to create a pool of top future strategic leader candidates.

While preparing the best officers to be future strategic leaders is essential for the long-term health of the Air Force, the current speed emphasis in the promotion system is creating adverse effects across the officer force in the areas of talent development, retention, and operational capability, and is often counterproductive in producing the quality operational leaders the USAF requires at the Lieutenant Colonel (O-5) and Colonel (O-6) level. The stated goal of Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley in 2010 of producing a “deeper bench” of elite General Officer candidates at the 24-year point in service partially undermines the ability of the USAF to effectively carry out its stated roles and missions.<sup>6</sup>

This paper will focus on the rationale, general methodology, and intended effects of the current promotion construct on the USAF line officer corps, which comprises the majority of the senior leaders in the active Air Force.<sup>7</sup> It will pay particular attention to the rated (flying) component, which is the most costly in time and money to train and replace, executes the majority of the operational missions assigned to the Air Force,

and makes up the preponderance of General Officers.<sup>8</sup> It will start with an in-depth look at the reasoning behind the current officer development and promotion construct. It will then compare the USAF system to that of the other armed services, particularly with regard to General Officer selection. Finally, it will examine the drawbacks of the current Air Force paradigm, to include strategic joint leadership competitiveness, negative organizational behavior, overall leadership development, and retention, and provide recommendations to mitigate said drawbacks. Ultimately, the USAF active component can and should make adjustments to the system to better develop both operational and strategic leaders while preserving and promoting an officer talent pool that will ensure current and future success.

#### Current System Rationale

There are a number of reasons the USAF has evolved to the current promotion timeline to General Officer, including BTZ promotion emphasis. First and foremost, there are essential issues of human capital management, leader development, and promotion inside any vertical organizational structure with fixed timelines for exit. The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act of 1980 (DOPMA) codified modern military officer management, and obligated the development of a generally standardized professional officer corps and promotion system across all services, with some flexibility for service preferences and missions.<sup>9</sup> DOPMA was written with the explicit understanding that with a 20-year retirement available for most officers, promotion was not only a force management and talent development tool; it was also an incentive structure to retain the best leaders and officers through 20 years of service.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the DOPMA-mandated structure has become the backbone for the up-or-out system used throughout the military today.

Coupled with DOPMA guidelines is the fact that the Armed Services can neither hire senior leaders from outside the force nor permit lateral entry, and must necessarily develop future leaders from within. The active component of the Air Force conducts leader development similar to other services, relying on training and education programs, specific leadership positions, experience, and upper-level leaders to teach and mentor the junior officer force. At its core, all promotion within the military is inherently based on competition; all services need to identify the best performers with higher potential for increased responsibility and rank. However, the technical nature of the USAF leaves the service with an additional wrinkle; most officers are highly-trained in vocations that are lucrative and in-demand outside the military.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the USAF relies even more on promotion as a retention tool for its best talent, ensuring that the 'up' occurs before the 'out'.

Given the multiple constraints of overall talent management, DOPMA mandates, and retirement eligibility timelines, the USAF has made a conscious decision to identify and promote prospective top talent earlier. This enables those officers to be selected as Colonels prior to the DOPMA-mandated average timeline of 21 years, bridging the 20-year retirement point and incentivizing longer service as a senior leader, as well as serving in the General's ranks longer if selected as such. This gives the additional benefit of having a larger pool of officers available for progression all the way through four-star General. Since all USAF General Officers are promoted early, none will run up against mandatory retirement dates specified in DOPMA.<sup>12</sup>

Second, there is service-level attention on the best ways to manage the talent that enters the force, in order to shape today's best Lieutenants into the finest Generals

three decades in the future. By turning a focused eye on identifying the very brightest in the officer pool at early stages and creating specialized opportunities and career paths for growth, the USAF practice echoes a business technique known as *talent spotting*.<sup>13</sup> Due to the volatility and complexity in the contemporary business environment, many senior corporate executives have discarded the practice of hiring managerial candidates based on existing qualifications, and instead search for those who have potential to adapt to today's extremely dynamic business atmosphere.<sup>14</sup> Corporate directors now actively seek candidates who are motivated, insightful, can engage and communicate, and most importantly are able to grow into increasingly challenging roles.<sup>15</sup>

In grooming the next generation of military leaders the USAF adheres to what authors of a 2014 *Harvard Business Review* call the most important precursors to future success as senior managers and leaders in the modern world: robust potential to continue learning new skills, and hand-picked opportunities in "stretch jobs" that will force them to adapt and grow.<sup>16</sup> Amazon and other leading corporations, for example, try to identify their own best young talent and then give those individuals challenging assignments that break the standard flow of career progression, but accelerate their development.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the current HPO career model used in the Air Force seeks to identify and groom the very best in the service as early as possible, reward them with BTZ promotions, and push them through education and mentored assignments to help develop them quickly into the senior leaders the USAF needs in the future.

Finally, the USAF has instituted the early promote, early to O-7 construct as a potential solution to the historical lack of selection of Air Force Generals for competitive senior Joint Staff and Combatant Command billets.<sup>18</sup> As of 2010, only twenty USAF

Generals had been selected as functional or geographic combatant commanders out of 129 General and Flag Officers appointed since the National Security Act of 1947 and institution of Unified Commands.<sup>19</sup> The majority of these served functionally in either U.S. Transportation Command or U.S. Strategic Command, narrowly aligned with Air Force core competencies.<sup>20</sup> This is far below the level of representation garnered by the Army and Navy over the same time period.<sup>21</sup> This fact, combined with general scarcity of Air Force Generals selected for competitive three- and four-star director billets on the senior Joint Staff, has fueled the belief that in comparison to the other services, the USAF exerts only marginal influence on the development of joint operational strategy and policy.<sup>22</sup>

In an era of defense spending declines amidst a decade-plus of Army-dominated global strategic planning with the Air Force playing a supporting role, there is a perception that when competing for future Department of Defense (DoD) vision and dollars, the lack of key joint leadership billets translates into less overall impact in senior decision-making processes.<sup>23</sup> In order to remedy this, the USAF has actively sought younger General Officers with time available to season in a multitude of strategic joint positions.<sup>24</sup> The expectation is that with more time available at the one- and two-star level before mandatory retirement dates dictated by DOPMA, the USAF can increase the strategic competence of its most senior officers to make them more attractive for selection to senior joint commands and billets.<sup>25</sup> In turn, this would lead to garnering a more balanced influence for the USAF at the highest levels of strategy and policy, better serving the service, the joint force, and the nation.<sup>26</sup>

## Early Identification and Timeline

The USAF has a sound rationale for its current development strategy for senior leaders. However, the execution of that strategy warrants closer examination. In order to produce a supremely-qualified O-7 candidate in 24 years, the USAF must overcome two large challenges: it must identify top talent in a pool of thousands quickly, and it must develop those candidates on an accelerated timeline. The current promotion system has evolved in an attempt to meet these challenges, but in doing so has created some significant liabilities.

First, the Air Force has placed extremely heavy emphasis on early performance cues as key identifiers of future success.<sup>27</sup> These are narrow discriminators, inclusive of all line officers, that allow arguably standardized comparison across the junior officer force. The primary focus is on Distinguished Graduate (DG) status from officer accession, initial career field pipeline training, and primary developmental education (PDE), also commonly known as Squadron Officer School.<sup>28</sup> These discriminators, combined with positive stratification on the first few Captain Officer Performance Reports (OPRs) and advanced academic degree completion, are what the promotion board for Major looks for at typically eight years of service.<sup>29</sup> The key result from the O-4 promotion board is not actually promotion, since well over 80 percent of line officers get promoted; it is identification of the top 15 percent of officers meeting the board being designated as in-residence Intermediate Development Education (IDE) selects.<sup>30</sup> This guarantees that the selected officer will attend Air Command and Staff College (or equivalent) in the future.<sup>31</sup> The generation of early career momentum and IDE-select status cannot be understated; it is the key to early promotion and fast-track status, and is the first de facto quality cut in making General Officer. It creates an early two-track

promotion system of haves (IDE selects) and have-nots, with extremely limited opportunities for those not selected. One senior leader stated, “If you don’t think we pick our future Generals as Captains, you’re lying to yourself.”<sup>32</sup>

After IDE selection and promotion to Major, the career path to General Officer for line officers now takes on an all-important timeline constraint. Officers will typically have just twelve years to complete in-residence IDE, potentially attend advanced strategic studies (School of Advanced Air and Space Studies or equivalent), serve squadron director of operations and squadron commander tours, and complete in-residence Senior Developmental Education, a joint tour, and two O-6 level commands.<sup>33</sup> They also will have to be selected for Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel a minimum of two total years below the zone in order to stay on the required timeline.<sup>34</sup> Advocates of the present system point to these steps as additional highly competitive quality cuts that continue to evaluate, develop, and cull the very best officers and commanders at every level, and promote those who shine into higher responsibility.<sup>35</sup> But the logic is also somewhat circular; promotion results indicate that primary BTZ discriminators, particularly to O-5, are the same early momentum indicators mentioned earlier. Additionally, the competitive selection boards for squadron, group, and wing commands, looking at six selection criteria, consistently value BTZ promotion (hence meeting timeline constraints) above all else.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in selecting the best operational commanders to lead the service forward, early career inertia, BTZ selection, and HPO timeline have become the top discriminators in the Air Force today.

Certainly, the current promotion system seems to support the overall goal of identifying top talent early and placing those who excel on a scripted path for grooming

and development to prepare for selection as General Officers by 24 years. But there are downsides to how the USAF tackles the issues above. The majority of officers, and especially those without early momentum, can never realistically compete for General Officer and have limited chances at competing for Colonel. Is anointing the best early standouts at the Lieutenant and Captain ranks the best path for selecting our future senior strategic leaders? Should there not be opportunities for above-average officers who did not warrant superstar status as a Captain, but truly shine at the O-4 and O-5 operational leadership levels?

There are problems associated with the HPO timeline as well. Is there a point where certain positions become merely square-fillers instead of real opportunities to truly perform and develop? What happens when an early high-performer demonstrates that they may not yet have the full set of skills to succeed at higher levels? With such a fixed timeline, is there enough time to correctly cultivate the emotional maturity and broadening that successful senior leadership requires? Is there pressure to push officers to command positions they may not be quite ready for due to timeline concerns? These questions and problems dominate promotion system discussion among field-grade officers today, most of whom have had at least one leader that has epitomized bad leadership but due to early pedigree and momentum continued up the command chain.<sup>37</sup>

### Comparisons to Other Armed Services

It is interesting that none of the other services value BTZ promotion and early accession to General Officer like the Air Force does, yet still place a host of senior officers into highly competitive joint leadership positions.<sup>38</sup> The average TIS of the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps officer selected to General or Flag rank is 25.7, 27.5,

and 25.6 years, respectively--nearly two years longer than the Air Force average.<sup>39</sup> Even more telling is that although the same laws govern all four services in allowing for early promotion, none of the other services make BTZ a tacit requirement for General Officers, and some of them actively discourage it.<sup>40</sup> This is evident in the numbers of those selected for General or Flag rank. A 2010 study looked at various service data assembled from a range of recent promotion boards. Of all United States Marine Corps (USMC) officers selected for Brigadier General, none were ever promoted BTZ.<sup>41</sup> In the Navy, 55 percent of those selected for O-7 had never received a BTZ promotion; the other 45 percent were promoted a total of only one year BTZ.<sup>42</sup> Even in the Army, who has early promotion possible at the O-4, O-5, and O-6 ranks, over 65 percent of Brigadier General selects were either never promoted early or only one year BTZ.<sup>43</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the Air Force, where nearly 100 percent of line officers selected for Brigadier General are BTZ, 91 percent are two years total BTZ, and over 50 percent are three or more years BTZ.<sup>44</sup>

These numbers suggest a large difference in how the other Armed Services view BTZ promotion, both as value in officer development and use as a discriminator for future selection. BTZ promotions are extremely rare in the USMC and are viewed by senior leaders within the service as trading away valuable career broadening experience.<sup>45</sup> The U.S. Navy, while allowing early promotion to Lieutenant Commander, Commander, and Captain, has not promoted a line Commander or Captain BTZ since 2006.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Navy O-7 selects have the longest average TIS and time in grade of any of the services, making the desired promotion window later than the rest of the armed forces. The Navy does this because of the value it places in the O-6 billet and

the desired length of time to serve, broaden, and be evaluated in that leadership position before moving on to the Admiral ranks.<sup>47</sup> The U.S. Army has the most similarities to the Air Force system, with top officers eligible and selected for BTZ at multiple field-grade ranks. However, the Army internally limits these to one year early at each rank, limiting the total possible time to three years.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, the Army uses this extra time for BTZ officers as added grooming at the O-5 and O-6 level, serving on strategic headquarters and joint staffs and other broadening assignments rather than preparing for early General Officer selection as the Air Force does.<sup>49</sup>

The other services, in contrast to the USAF, seem to place more value on the idea that there are a wider variety of skills essential to successful senior leadership than those manifested at the tactical level. By delaying the selection of General and Flag officers by several years, as well as centering selection criteria on the performance of the officer in key command billets and high-ranking staff assignments at the senior O-5 and O-6 levels, they emphasize demonstration of the type of skills needed at the strategic level. This allows for three things that the current USAF system does not: (1) those officers with elite potential and tactical success early in their careers can be rewarded with BTZ promotion, but not necessarily fast-tracked to senior leadership; (2) those who succeed early but have difficulties at higher echelons are more easily culled, without fear of limiting the pool of qualified General Officer candidates; and (3) those above-average officers who shine bright later in their careers as they approach the strategic realm are given the chance to compete for O-7 and beyond.

#### Developing Competitive Joint Strategic Leaders

Air Force senior leaders have overtly stated an express intent to build a deeper bench of competitive joint leaders. However, the current HPO methodology is partially

exacerbating the problem. Due to the abbreviated timeline requiring passage through an array of mandatory education and command billets previously discussed, the Air Force habitually pulls its officers out of top field-grade joint billets at the legally mandated minimum of 22 months.<sup>50</sup> This is in stark contrast to Army, Navy, and Marine Corps counterparts, who will occupy the position for the desired 36 or even 48 months.<sup>51</sup> As one Air Force Colonel stated, “This dynamic kills our credibility, reputation, and joint experience.”<sup>52</sup> The lack of credibility often translates into less competitiveness when seeking placement into higher joint billets. In the words of former U.S. Central Command Commander, Admiral William Fallon, it conveys a service attitude in which “...joint experience seems to be an afterthought.”<sup>53</sup>

Under the original Mandatory Retirement Date (MRD) limits of DOPMA, the rush through the field grade ranks, including joint and command requirements, may have made sense. The highly technical nature and heavy training cost of all rated and most line officer jobs in the USAF requires the first decade or more of service to be spent in the tactical environment, unlike most other services. As a result, most career seasoning in the political-military strategic environment had to be either abbreviated at the field grade level or gained as a General Officer. However, MRD changes were instituted in the 2007 Defense Authorization Act, and mandatory retirements at the General Officer ranks became much less of a factor.<sup>54</sup> The other services continue to view this additional time as value-added for broadening and seasoning at the senior O-6 level, in preparation for General Officer.<sup>55</sup> However, the Air Force has not changed its paradigm. As a result, the perception remains that the USAF would rather develop a small pool of BTZ colonels who have the tactical and operational expertise to become Air Force

General Officers, rather than a larger pool of on-time officers with the breadth and depth of service, joint, and interagency experiences to become senior leaders in the DoD.<sup>56</sup>

In order to change the perceptions above and better develop joint leaders, the USAF will likely need to change focus to broaden at the senior O-5 and O-6 level and promote to O-7 later, not earlier. A full 36-month joint tour will enhance service credibility, and increase interagency experience and expertise of officers.<sup>57</sup> As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates suggested, the Air Force must “allow officers to get [more] joint time early in their careers.”<sup>58</sup>

#### Behavioral Drawbacks of Early Promotion

While early talent identification and promotion have some advantages in officer grooming and placement, they have downsides as well. There are drawbacks that are well-documented in studies of organizational behavior, both in and out of the military. The first is the *Halo Effect*, the confirmation bias that perceives ambiguous or average performance as a reinforcing positive due to previously held indicators of success.<sup>59</sup> As previously mentioned, DG is a moniker held in high esteem both by commanders (which can affect stratification) and promotion boards, with particular regard to PDE performance. In fact, several senior leaders have postulated that a DG designation from the five-week SOS course can have more impact on an officer’s career progression than five years of performance reports as a Captain, including combat deployment time.<sup>60</sup> The danger is that the service puts too much weight on any narrow group of discriminators which are imperfect in judging the future potential of an officer. This bias can lead supervisors and organizations to occasionally select the wrong person as their best candidate, occasionally ignoring other negative factors in that selection while minimizing positive factors among those not initially stratified as high. In the current

USAF system, with the O-4 board and IDE selection occurring at just the eight-year point, there is a likelihood that the Halo Effect happens more regularly than many would like to admit.<sup>61</sup>

The second and perhaps more destructive downside of early promotion is the development of excessive hubris in extremely talented individuals that have known success their entire careers. This has been dubbed the *Bathsheba Syndrome* by researchers.<sup>62</sup> Experts have found that the earlier a person found great success, the faster they moved up the ranks of any establishment, and the more impressive their accomplishments compared to peers, the more likely they would have ethical temptations that could result in a fall from power.<sup>63</sup> Today, nearly 100 percent of Wing Commanders in the Air Force are BTZ promotees, with records of success at every level of command.<sup>64</sup> Yet there has been a regrettable track record of removal in recent years, nearly always with unacceptable personal conduct as the underlying cause.<sup>65</sup> By crafting a narrow pool of favored BTZ talent, the Air Force subjects its HPOs to a greater degree of temptation to the hubris that can lead to the *Bathsheba Syndrome*.

Both of the phenomena detailed above can occur in any organization, particularly in the hierarchical military. However, both are exacerbated by emphasis on key discriminators and a multi-track promotion system which favors the few who possess those identifiers early on. The bottom line is if certain standout discriminators are used consistently in promotion, they had better be the right ones--representative of what the organization values most, with consistent linkages to future success. Leaders at all levels need to be extremely cognizant and corrective of possible bias and hubris

associated with early exceptional performance, both in themselves and those they lead and mentor.

### Leader Development - Timeline over Growth?

An Air Force Wing Commander received an e-mail in 2014 from a Senior Executive Service (SES) Member in the Pentagon.<sup>66</sup> It advocated the hire of a rated Major in her department who had been selected for Lieutenant Colonel promotion two years early, though he would not pin-on for nearly a year. Due to the timing of his staff assignment, he had originally anticipated attending IDE in residence the next summer, as he was designated an IDE select from his O-4 promotion board. Now, however, he had made O-5, and was also on the recently released squadron command list. She was pushing him for hire as squadron commander, detailing a carefully scripted timeline with every position he would be placed in over the next twelve years, culminating in selection to Brigadier General. The e-mail went on to suggest that if he was not selected immediately for commander, he could easily get tracked “off timeline,” with the result that the USAF would lose another quality General Officer candidate.

This anecdote underscores the current attitude that exists among many senior leaders and staff officers today, and according to one assignment officer who works command hires, is not an isolated incident.<sup>67</sup> It happens regularly throughout the USAF officer management process. Certainly, the push from an SES (or any USAF senior leader) for hiring consideration is admirable, and there is no question that the officer had been identified as having elite potential. Yet the underlying assumption was that this officer could now bypass accepted developmental milestones, to include IDE and Director of Operations (or equivalent), with the implicit notion that he was talented enough to overcome this and still succeed in the short and long run. Timeline became

the priority, with talent being the overriding assumption, and experience, operational proficiency, and maturity concerns taking a back seat.

This highlights a leadership philosophy conundrum that plays out repeatedly across the Air Force. Should the USAF treat the current job an officer is in as an essential growth and evaluation tool, simultaneously fitting the operational needs of the service and preparing the officer for the next position up? Or, in the case of a HPO, is it acceptable to view various assignments as wickets to run through, gaining as much experience as possible while still maintaining the desired timeline? Arguably the former scenario is more desirable for the service and the member alike. But when there are mentoring assignments such as executive officer to a General, or specialized operational requirements that pull the officer off of an optimal track, assignment officers find themselves managing the latter scenario, often prodded by senior leaders.<sup>68</sup> This becomes the impetus for placing an officer into a leadership billet for which he or she may not be fully prepared due to abbreviated or skipped steps along the way, all in the name of talent and timeline.

Additionally, because the Air Force limits BTZ promotions to such a small percentage of the force (typically less than four percent), but requires BTZ to be competitive for Wing Commander and General Officer, the burden to keep those officers on track is palpable.<sup>69</sup> The pool is small enough that between assignment officers and senior leaders, there can be pressure to ignore undesirable behavior or low-level indicators of toxic leadership at the field-grade level in order to avoid further reducing the pool.<sup>70</sup> Ultimately, this can play out in a high-profile relief of command, which one former officer in the Air Force Colonel Management Division called “both fortunate and

unfortunate.”<sup>71</sup> It is fortunate that an officer who did not have the skills to be successful at the current level or the next was appropriately removed. It is unfortunate that either the Air Force got it wrong to begin with, possibly ignoring precursors that may have been overlooked due to career inertia, or simply that a HPO was not ready for the position to which they were pushed--but may have been if allowed more time to develop.

Of course, some leaders need less time to progress than others. Their talent and maturity is more developed, they adapt and perform regardless of where they are placed, and they thrive and grow in demanding positions. It is precisely these officers that the USAF attempts to identify and place in jobs that will most benefit both member and service in the short and long term. When done correctly, the result is an amazing leader with a string of successes at every level, ready to assume the duties of high command and Generalship. However, when the system becomes enamored with identifiers and BTZ designation, there is often a reluctance to admit that sometimes the organization gets it wrong. This is an area where enlarging the overall pool of eligibles and delaying identification of future strategic leaders may pay dividends by taking pressure off the system to keep a small group of top performers on a specified timeline.

### Retention

One of the problems with creating an early multi-track promotion system is that officers rapidly figure out where they stand. If they do not like where that is, they have the option to leave. Over the last ten years, rated retention has steadily declined, with more pilots opting to leave the service when given the opportunity.<sup>72</sup> Fiscal Year 2014 was another watershed year on the downside, with only 53 percent of qualified pilots accepting a retention bonus to remain on active duty, and a total pilot loss among all

those eligible to separate, retire, or otherwise leave active rated flying duty topping a staggering 84 percent.<sup>73</sup> This drops the average pilot total active rated service (TARS) to just over twelve years, well below USAF planning assumptions and regarded as untenable in the long run.<sup>74</sup> The drop in retention is happening despite the USAF lengthening the initial Active Duty Service Commitment (ADSC) for pilot training from eight to ten years in Fiscal Year 1999.<sup>75</sup> This move was expected to increase retention by mandating service beyond the half-way point to retirement, making completion of a military flying career more appealing.<sup>76</sup> Retention has been a major issue across the rated force in the last several years, but has reached near-critical levels in the combat air forces, where the ability to train new pilots has been restricted through multiple defense drawdowns.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, recent fiscal constraints have impacted pilot production at the same time that the cost to produce a combat pilot has increased, currently estimated at over six million dollars.<sup>78</sup> With these limitations on the USAF's ability to produce future pilots, retaining the rated force is more critical today than ever.

For well over a decade, many senior Air Force leaders and strategic think tanks have highlighted the problem of rated retention as a grave issue affecting the readiness and capability of the Air Force.<sup>79</sup> A host of reasons have been put forth to explain the lack of retention: increased deployments and operations tempo, less family stability due to higher permanent change of station rates, less flying hours due to budget cuts, and growing demand for airline pilots.<sup>80</sup> But the current promotion structure is also a grossly understated contributor. As many pilots contributing to online forums have explained, the system offers little opportunity for those not pushed to a command track early on, and is perceived as having “little to do with leadership ability and actual performance,

but rather filling a series of squares.”<sup>81</sup> What is remarkable is that a similar sentiment, that of “an unclear career sight picture” as a major contributor to the retention problem, was echoed by the current Chief of Staff, General Mark A. Welsh III, in a 2011 e-mail to the military fliers in Europe, when he served as their Commander.<sup>82</sup> With less slots available for developmental education due to budget constraints, less career broadening opportunities due to pilot shortages, and less flight hours available to train, pilots not explicitly on the career track to leadership positions and beyond have little incentive to stay on active duty past their initial commitment when the airlines, Air National Guard, and Reserves are all hiring.<sup>83</sup>

This would not be such a critical problem if the USAF officer structure and missions were parallel to that of the U.S. Army. The Army officer structure is more pyramidal in nature, meaning that there are far more Lieutenants and Captains needed to lead troops on the ground than there are Majors and Lieutenant Colonels needed as Battalion Commanders or in key staff billets. The Army expects to lose a significant amount of officers during normal career progression, and retain and groom the best for development as future operational and strategic leaders.<sup>84</sup>

The USAF rated officer structure, however, is different. With the majority of service operational capability being provided by rated officers, the USAF will always require a far flatter pyramid in its company and field grade officer organization, with almost as many Majors and Lieutenant Colonels as Captains--even if they are not in leadership billets.<sup>85</sup> This is why a retention rate of only 55 percent after completing initial ADSC is unsustainable, and the Air Force is nearly 500 combat pilots short of stated requirements and getting worse.<sup>86</sup> The USAF needs to retain nearly 65 percent of its

rated force through retirement age, and beyond if possible, in order to sustain its mission capability.<sup>87</sup>

With lack of retention comes a shortage not only of air power, but of mid-level leadership at both the wing and squadron level that helps supervise and mentor the younger force.<sup>88</sup> Many wing-level positions filled in the past with senior O-4s and O-5s are now manned by newly-minted majors who have not yet completed their initial ADSC.<sup>89</sup> At the squadron level, the cadre of mid-career leaders who possessed the breadth and depth of tactical experience to provide sound operational control of flying operations are no longer there. They are either out of the active force, filling an out-of-cockpit requirement, or doing specific career broadening in preparation for senior leadership. The typical USAF flying squadron is often led by a young BTZ O-5 with limited mid-grade organizational support, reliant on junior captains to provide leadership, tactical competency, and instruction to absorb both inexperienced young pilots and returnees to the cockpit.<sup>90</sup> They must do all this while preparing for the next exercise, inspection, or combat rotation. This puts a severe strain on flying units to accomplish their stated missions while preserving both readiness and safety.<sup>91</sup>

Some familiar with the current retention situation liken it to a downward spiral, where every negative factor further exacerbates others.<sup>92</sup> The lack of retention combined with budget constraints means fewer experienced pilots tasked to do more, with limited guidance from mid-career officers. Pilot shortages translate into less opportunities for career broadening and professional growth except for those designated as such early in officer development. These factors combine to negatively affect retention. There is no way for the Air Force to produce its way out of the problem,

given the current budget and force structure caps.<sup>93</sup> There have been recent adjustments in the bonus structure to entice more pilots to stay on, but so far have yielded unsatisfactory results.<sup>94</sup> While not the sole solution, providing rated aircrew better strategic messaging on career tracks and additional opportunities to compete for promotion and leadership positions should be part of any comprehensive solution that will give more incentives to stay on active duty. This will help ensure the USAF can deliver on its primary mission sets.

### Recommendations

Colonel Russell Mack, Senior Air Force Research Fellow, writing on the development of USAF officers into credible and competent joint leaders in 2010, argued that what was needed most was *time over timeline*.<sup>95</sup> In other words, the breadth and depth of understanding gained through additional years of experience at the field grade ranks are critical to acquiring the skills needed to be successful as a future strategic leader in the joint environment.<sup>96</sup> There is much less opportunity to further broaden these skills upon reaching the General Officer level due to the robust duties and responsibilities of any senior-level position. Colonel Mack contends that this is one key reason why the USAF struggles to be competitive in three- and four-star billets at the joint staff and combatant commands.<sup>97</sup> Hence, the USAF would be better served both internally and externally by emphasizing officer professional growth with additional time at the lower field grade ranks to master the skills required at higher levels.<sup>98</sup>

In order to do this, the Air Force must first relax the 24-year timeline to Brigadier General, with the accompanying emphasis on BTZ selection and early HPO identification. Delaying the milestone year of O-7 selection to 26 years would give more time to those who are among the most talented and have the potential to become the

senior leaders of the future. By doing so, the USAF may not necessarily be changing the list of officers who ultimately get promoted to Brigadier General and above.

However, those same officers now have time to develop additional maturity, critical thought, and leadership skills that will better serve them and the USAF as squadron, group, and wing commanders along the way.

Additionally, instead of skipping developmental and education opportunities or short-running command and staff tours in order to stay on timeline, HPOs would have time for additional opportunities to enhance their skill sets. This could include diverse experiences with joint, interagency, and international partners that would pave the way for greater success as future senior leaders. Of course, it will be incumbent on assignment officers and senior leaders to determine the best mix of assignments that will give each talented officer the breadth and depth they need to cultivate and hone the skills needed. But relaxing the timeline and de-emphasizing BTZ promotions as a de facto requirement due to that timeline will result in better leaders at every level of the Air Force. It would enable the USAF to actually create a more experienced General Officer cadre who will be competitive for joint billets through the 4-star level.<sup>99</sup> Further, due to the 2007 changes in MRDs, this relaxed timeline will still yield General Officers with enough time to serve and advance while allowing broader opportunities for specialized mentoring prior to being selected for Brigadier General.<sup>100</sup>

Second, reframing promotion to allow on-time officers to realistically compete for General Officer selection should be considered. This would allow at least some consideration for those officers who stand out at the upper operational levels, and through well-above-average growth in the field grade years, are now poised to become

superior senior leaders. These officers would also be part of a broader pool of quality candidates for group and wing command, as opposed to the relatively narrow pool of BTZ candidates that currently dominate upper command lists.<sup>101</sup> As a corollary, the expansion of the pool would enable commanders to take a slightly more critical eye to those officers with early momentum, but may have difficulty transitioning to the broader strategic environment and lack the skills to flourish in a senior role. There would be less hesitation to pull an HPO off track for substandard behavior or performance, and more emphasis on continual improvement and officer assessment.

This does not mean doing away with BTZ promotions altogether. Early promotions can continue to be used as discriminators and incentives to award and retain superior performers, which can lead to select assignments to further develop those with great potential. However, if the 24-year timeline is relaxed, the BTZ timeline can and should be changed as well. If the USAF limited its promotion timeline to permit only one-year-early eligibles as BTZ at both the O-5 and O-6 boards (similar to the Army), it could still accomplish the design of identifying and rewarding the very top performers. This would increase service in the rated flying force several years and avoid the HPO timeline designation currently in play. It would also give those promoted BTZ additional time in the senior O-5 and O-6 ranks for exactly the type of joint and interagency broadening spoken of earlier, before being considered for General Officer. This would help change the current perception on Air Force joint performance and ultimately produce General Officers more competitive and better prepared to succeed as joint leaders.

Third, the USAF should strongly consider delaying or abolishing the IDE-select status, currently held as the key discriminator at O-4 selection. By making all officers across the USAF a candidate for IDE as their year groups become eligible for school, the Air Force would delay determination of the top talent in the service for at least three years, to the junior O-4 timeframe. This would allow time for additional, more appropriate discriminators to be evaluated and included in addition to early standout DG status. These discriminators include Air Expeditionary Force deployments, combat performance, operational leadership, and officer development and maturity. It would permit additional time for those struggling to complete advanced academic degrees and correspondence Professional Military Education in the face of current high operations tempo, if the USAF chooses to still hold those items as discriminators.

More importantly, by including every officer as an IDE candidate, every year, it would place the burden on operational commanders and senior leaders to determine who their true superstars have been and are expected to continue to be at the mid-career point, instead of relying on a board score of a record heavily reliant on early success. With a three-year eligibility window for IDE attendance, this would provide a potential onramp for those high-quality officers who may have been average Lieutenants, but are superior Majors. It would also foster more buy-in to the current promotion system, with more competition inherent across the force at the appropriate time, instead of a single board determination at the eight-year point.

Finally, the Air Force needs to provide more formal stratification guidance and enforcement to supplement the promotion system. If the 24-year timeline to Brigadier General is relaxed and current highly held early identifiers are de-emphasized, there will

be more of a need to determine who the top officers are through OPR stratification. Currently, too many senior raters are “bending the system to take care of [their] people.”<sup>102</sup> This has caused much consternation at promotion boards and has been decried by many senior leaders, reinforcing the current over-reliance on the early standardized indicators in an attempt to equitably compare officers.<sup>103</sup> If the USAF vectors away from board designations and well-used discriminators, it will necessarily rely more on senior raters and leaders to provide an accurate picture of an officer’s potential. This will require institutional implementation to prevent senior rater speeding on performance reports, to include: explicit Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) intent inculcated into Air Force Instruction 36-2406 (Officer Evaluation Instruction), more formal governance of authorized stratifications across various-sized organizations, and restructuring and restriction on time frames and types of stratifications given.<sup>104</sup> This will permit the Air Force to more effectively use OPRs as a rating and evaluation tool, lessening the need to rely on current early benchmarks to determine who the best and brightest are.

### Conclusion

The current Air Force promotion system, including the 24-year pole to Brigadier General, has evolved to the current form for many reasons. Many senior leaders, as well as staffs that manage Colonel and General Officer assignments, claim that within the current construct, the USAF “gets it right the vast majority of the time” in developing, grooming, and selecting the best commanders to lead our force.<sup>105</sup> By the time an officer is competitive for O-7, he or she has been through a myriad of quality cuts at the company grade and field grade levels, each one designed to not only improve and educate, but also test the leadership capability and future capacity of the officer.

However, this assessment of the existing system concludes that not only does the Air Force get it wrong sometimes, but that the system itself contributes to the wrong picks. While deciding on who the top-tier talent is early on gives the USAF some advantages, it also causes problems when the officer fails to measure up to assessed potential or has problems maturing into bigger operational or strategic roles. Early career momentum generated from a small sample of standout accomplishments can indeed indicate superior capability to grow into the future senior leader the service requires. However, early pushes for officers based off of these indicators can also produce those who ride the Halo Effect to positions for which they are not ready, or the Bathsheba Syndrome in others who develop an attitude of hubris and expected privilege. A string of early-promote Wing Commanders relieved for loss of confidence over the last decade is evidence that even with the hundreds of thousands of hours spent on officer education, performance reports, promotion recommendations, and command selection boards, the USAF still occasionally comes up short. Perhaps Colonel Mack was right when he argued that what Air Force officers with outstanding potential need most is simply time. They need time to learn, time to grow, time to lead, time to broaden, time to educate, time to staff, and time to mature into better officers and commanders who will then provide outstanding leadership across the entirety of the Air Force.

Change will require CSAF-level direction and involvement to migrate away from a 24-year push to Brigadier General, and de-emphasize the HPO timeline that dominates the promotion system today. However, it can be done, and the promise is great that the entire service will benefit. Those talented individuals who are promoted below the zone

and succeed at every level will have an extra two years or more for another high-level O-6 assignment that can ultimately make them better General Officers. The USAF will have experienced, broadened Generals who will be more competitive in the joint community, not less, something the service has desired for some time. Assignment officers and leaders alike will be able to focus less on timeline, and more on the specific jobs that not only meet the current needs of the service, but allow a better range of skills for those officers who will become the next strategic leaders--without having to skip steps along the way. Leaders and mentors can re-direct assignments for those talented officers who may need additional time to develop at the operational or strategic level, without fear of tracking off timeline or lessening the pool of senior officer candidates down the road.

The timeline slip will lessen emphasis on early identifiers and delay quality cuts for developmental education, which will allow greater focus on job performance and leadership progression. This promises more buy-in to the promotion system from mid-grade officers weighing their options with regard to staying in the military, and increases the chances for late-bloomers who are primed for future success. Particularly in the rated community, delaying identification of the best by only a few years could prove key to enabling a more equitable system and providing the jump in retention that our rated forces need. Of course, this may make the job of promotion and command selection boards more difficult, as it will open the aperture away from narrow selection criteria and expand the pool of eligibles in an already crowded and competitive talent management system. But it will also enable the USAF to avoid the negative effects directly associated with the current speed trap.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Col Martin E. B. France, et al., "Toward a Superior Promotion System," *Air and Space Power Journal* 26, no. 4 (July-August 2012): 24.

<sup>2</sup> Col Lenny Richoux, "USAF Colonel Management: SDE Spread the Word," briefing slides with scripted commentary, Carlisle Barracks, PA, U.S. Army War College, November 15, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with confidential source, December 28, 2015. (unattributable). Senior and staff officers, serving in official capacities, are duty-bound to execute current USAF policies. For this research paper, the author garnered a wide range of information from current and former senior officers, civilians, and staff members of USAF agencies tasked with personnel management, leader development, assignments, promotion boards, and force requirements. As part of this data collection process, the academic non-attribution policy was honored. The author wishes to personally thank all those who were candid and honest in discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the current system, and gave expert insight on how the USAF can change the system for the better.

<sup>5</sup> Colonel Russell Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University, June 2010), 50.

<sup>6</sup> "The Chief [General Norton Schwartz] and I are committed to developing senior Air Force leaders who are competitive in the joint arena, and in order to do that, we have to build a *deeper bench* of joint leaders to choose from..." Michael B. Donley, Secretary of the Air Force, 2010. Quoted by Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Richoux, "USAF Colonel Management: SDE Spread the Word."

<sup>8</sup> Maj W. M. Bruce Danskine, *Fall Of The Fighter Generals: The Future Of USAF Leadership* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University, June 2001), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Schirmer, et al., *Challenging Time in DOPMA: Flexible and Contemporary Military Officer Management* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2006), [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND\\_MG451.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG451.pdf) (accessed December 27, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>11</sup> Scott Shpak, "Highest Paying Air Force Careers in the Civilian World," <http://work.chron.com/highest-paying-air-force-careers-civilian-world-30568.html> (accessed February 22, 2015). Historically and empirically, this has been the case; the majority of USAF officers are in vocations that immediately transfer to civilian careers. This includes pilot, air traffic control and airfield manager, intelligence, supply and logistics, weather, medical, legal, and engineering. Of course, other services have some of the same easily-transferrable career fields. However, for the majority of Army infantry, artillery, and other combat arms officers, their specialized vocation does not immediately transfer to a lucrative civilian career field. Navy and Marine Corps officer career fields have similar constraints.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 14, 2015. (unattributable). Originally, DOPMA instituted the mandatory retirement dates (MRD) of 35 years TAFCS for both 3- and 4-star Generals/Flag officers, and 35 years TAFCS/5 years TIG for 2-star and 30 years TAFCS/5 years TIG for 1-star General/Flag Officers. The NDAA of 2007 raised the MRDs for 3- and 4-star General/Flag Officers to 38 and 40 years TAFCS, respectively. See Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Claudio Fernandez Araoz, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Talent-Spotting," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2014, 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* This perception is repeated throughout Colonel Mack's paper, and is the basis for Secretary Donley's statement about building a deeper bench of competitive joint officers. Additionally, this sentiment has been reiterated by several senior officer management officials in confidential interviews by the author.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 14, 2015. (unattributable)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 2-3. Also reiterated in interview with confidential source, January 14, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Lt Col Chris Kibble, *(Unofficial) Fighter Career Guide: Taking the Long View* (Washington DC: Headquarters Air Force, Combat Air Forces Rated Manning, September 2014), 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* Stratification is the ranking of an officer as compared to his peers on performance reports (e.g., #1/15 Captains in my squadron). Some guidance is provided in U.S. Department of the Air Force, *Officer and Enlisted Evaluation System*, Air Force Instruction (AFI) 36-2406 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Air Force, January 2, 2013). For a detailed discourse on the strengths and weaknesses of the current stratification system, see Maj Douglas J. Huttenlocker, *Officer Stratification: Elevating the Strategic Dialogue* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Command and Staff College, December 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 14, 2015. (unattributable)

<sup>33</sup> The USAF is the only service with two O-6 level commands: Group and Wing. Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 70.

<sup>34</sup> The USAF presently does not have BTZ to O-4. It does, however, offer a maximum of two years BTZ for both O-5 and O-6 ranks, resulting in a maximum of four years BTZ by Colonel pin-on. None of the other armed services have such an early promote eligibility. Most USAF General Officers have been promoted a total of two to three years BTZ. See Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 14, 2015. (unattributable)

<sup>36</sup> Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 73. The six identifiers are command experience, joint duty assignment, in-residence PME, operational credibility, pentagon assignment, and BTZ promotion.

<sup>37</sup> Jolly "Dear Boss 2011," July 15, 2011, <http://www.fighterpilotuniversity.com/index.php/wtfo/dear-boss-2011> (accessed February 4, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. The USAF allows BTZ promotions at one or two years early at Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel ranks. Hence, the maximum total years of BTZ is four.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 71-2.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 14, 2015. (unattributable). Reiterated by COL Daniel Morgan, U.S. Army, interview by author, December 15, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 14, 2015. (unattributable)

<sup>58</sup> Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 58.

<sup>59</sup> Tim Hindle, "The Halo Effect," *The Economist Online*, October 14, 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/14299211> (accessed January 31, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> Interview with confidential source, December 28, 2015. (unattributable) Also reiterated by author's personal experience as a Squadron Commander, discussing promotion with then-USAF Inspector General Lt Gen Stephen Mueller during a senior leader roundtable, April 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Kibble, (*Unofficial*) *Fighter Career Guide: Taking the Long View*, 7-8.

<sup>62</sup> Dean C. Ludwig and Clinton O. Longnecker, "The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders," *Journal of Business Ethics* 12, no. 4 (1993): 265.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with confidential source, December 28, 2015. (unattributable) There are multiple news articles dealing with USAF Wing and Group Commanders being relieved of command. A cursory search of the internet reveals that in the last five years, the 52 FW/CC, 33 FW/CC, 341 MW/CC, 91 MW/CC, 5 BW/CC, 319 ABW/CC, 66 ABW/CC, 11 ABW/CC, Philadelphia DLATS/CC, 737 TNG/CC, 374 MXG/CC, 341 SFG/CC, and 422 ABG/CC have been relieved of command, most in high-profile cases involving a loss of confidence due to personal conduct.

<sup>66</sup> Author's personal experience.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 29, 2015. (unattributable)

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. Also reiterated in interview with confidential source, January 22, 2015. (unattributable)

<sup>69</sup> Interview with confidential source, December 28, 2015. (unattributable) For a detailed look at both authorized and historical BTZ percentage selection, see Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 48.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Jennifer H. Svan, "Air Force Faced with 'New Reality': Fewer Pilots," *Stars and Stripes Online*, September 21, 2011, <http://www.stripes.com/news/air-force-faced-with-new-reality-fewer-pilots-1.155793> (accessed January 29, 2015).

<sup>73</sup> U.S. Department of the Air Force, *Rated Officer Retention Report, FY14* (Randolph AFB, TX: U.S. Department of the Air Force, November 2014), 5.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 22, 2015. (unattributable)

<sup>75</sup> William W. Taylor, et al., *Absorbing Air Force Fighter Pilots: Parameters, Problems, and Policy Options* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), 28. U.S. Title 10, Section 653, mandates a minimum of eight years of active service commitment upon completion of fixed-wing jet pilot training. For many years, the USAF held its own policy to match that of the law. Starting in FY1999, however, it increased it to 10 years.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>78</sup> John Zappe, "Air Force Ups Pay, Bonuses as it Struggles to Retain Fighter Pilots," July 30, 2013, <http://www.ere.net/2013/07/30/air-force-ups-pay-bonus-as-it-struggles-to-retain-fighter-pilots> (accessed January 29, 2015).

<sup>79</sup> There are multiple RAND reports that address this issue. See William W. Taylor, et al., *Absorbing Air Force Fighter Pilots: Parameters, Problems, and Policy Options* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006); William W. Taylor et al., *The Air Force Pilot Shortage: A Crisis for Operational Units?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2000); Richard S. Marken et al., *Absorbing and Developing Qualified Fighter Pilots* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007).

<sup>80</sup> Zappe, "Air Force Ups Pay, Bonuses as it Struggles to Retain Fighter Pilots."

<sup>81</sup> Jolly "Dear Boss 2011."

<sup>82</sup> Jennifer H. Svan, "Air Force Faced with 'New Reality': Fewer Pilots," *Stars and Stripes Online*, September 21, 2011, <http://www.stripes.com/news/air-force-faced-with-new-reality-fewer-pilots-1.155793> (accessed January 29, 2015).

<sup>83</sup> Maj Joseph Miranda, *Fighter Assignments* (San Antonio: Air Force Personnel Command, December 2014), [https://gum-crm.csd.disa.mil/app/answers/detail/a\\_id/24711](https://gum-crm.csd.disa.mil/app/answers/detail/a_id/24711) (accessed January 07, 2015). Additional follow-up telephone interview with Maj Miranda by author, January 29, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> COL Daniel Morgan, U.S. Army, interview by author, December 15, 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 22, 2015. (unattributable) Also reiterated by author's personal experience working with rated assignments and requirements personnel.

<sup>86</sup> Kibble, *(Unofficial) Fighter Career Guide: Taking the Long View*, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 22, 2015. (unattributable)

<sup>88</sup> Author's personal experience, having spent twelve of the last fourteen years in operational aviation units.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 29, 2015. (unattributable)

<sup>90</sup> Author's personal experience and assessment after three consecutive tours (2008-2014) in active flying units, including duty as an operations officer and squadron commander.

<sup>91</sup> Author's personal assessment, including duties as 56 FW Chief of Safety.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 29, 2015. (unattributable)

<sup>93</sup> Miranda, *Fighter Assignments*.

<sup>94</sup> U.S. Department of the Air Force, *Rated Officer Retention Report, FY14*, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Mack, *Creating Joint Leaders Today for a Successful Air Force Tomorrow*, 88.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>102</sup> Maj Douglas J. Huttenlocker, *Officer Stratification: Elevating the Strategic Dialogue*, 1.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-37.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with confidential source, January 14, 2015. (unattributable)