

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Roles of the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

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*This white paper originated in 2015, when a sitting secretary of defense asked me to help with his upcoming decisions in selecting the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and the new vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (VCJCS), the military's two most senior positions. My input was not focused on specific individuals but, rather, on the requirements of the positions, the experiences necessary to succeed, and the expectations of the Goldwater-Nichols Act (GNA) for those two essential positions. In short, this white paper lays out methods for finding the right officers with the needed experience and qualifications. These recommendations are based on years of prior observation and my firsthand knowledge of what the framers of the GNA intended. Since its inception, this memorandum has been updated and redistributed to senior officials in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) whenever a new chairman or vice chairman has been selected.*

**W**hen the CJCS and VCJCS positions become vacant, careful consideration should be given to the two positions and their differing requirements and responsibilities. When determining which officers would best fill these roles, the decision-makers would benefit from revisiting the GNA's eight goals, which have a direct statutory bearing on these positions.

Additionally, a number of areas are ripe for further reforms in order to align more closely with the GNA's original intent. These areas would include strengthening the chain of command, reducing redundancies between the Joint Staff and OSD, reducing other bloated overhead, and strengthening the service chiefs' roles in the requirements process.

## History

The position of the CJCS was established by a 1949 amendment to the National Security Act of 1947. The concept intended to have the CJCS provide the president with military advice that reflected a consensus of the Joint Chiefs, rather than having the president sort through the differing views of the service chiefs. The CJCS had no direct command authority. This role holds true today.

In August 1949, President Harry Truman appointed General Omar N. Bradley, then Army chief of staff, who had established himself as a major military figure during World War II, as the first CJCS. The following year, Bradley was promoted to five-star rank so he would not be outranked by his supposed subordinate, General Douglas MacArthur, who received his five-star rank in World War II. Bradley would be the last military officer promoted to five-star rank, and the only CJCS with five stars.

With the exception of Admiral Arthur Radford (President Dwight Eisenhower's second CJCS), the first nine chairmen were selected from among the service chiefs—or a former service chief, in the case of General Maxwell Taylor, appointed by President John F. Kennedy. This trend was quite understandable, as these were the senior officers with whom the president would be most familiar. Given they all had significant combat experience from World War II, they were well-known, national figures. (The unified and specified combatant command structure in the field was still in its formative stage.)

Beginning with General John Vessey in 1982, none of the next seven chairmen were former service chiefs, suggesting the emerging perception that the CJCS should have recent field experience in the strategic and operational demands most encountered by the unified and specified commanders in chief (CINCs), as combatant commanders were then known. This trend was unbroken until 2007, when President George W. Bush appointed Admiral Michael Mullen, then the chief of naval operations (CNO).

However, Mullen's appointment was largely driven by the decision not to reappoint General Peter Pace as CJCS for a second two-year term. While Pace had previously served as vice chairman and commander of US Southern Command,

he was expected to face a difficult Senate reconfirmation battle if appointed to a second term. Additionally, Secretary Donald Rumsfeld changed the title of officers running the unified commands from CINCs to combatant commanders (CCDRs), to avoid confusion with the president's constitutional role as commander in chief of the armed forces.

The first VCJCS, Air Force General Robert Herres, was appointed in 1987. The GNA made the VCJCS the second-highest-ranking military officer (above the service chiefs) and assigned duties to the position "as may be prescribed by the chairman with the approval of the secretary of defense."<sup>1</sup> Other specified responsibilities for the VCJCS were largely associated with succession or substituting for the CJCS. A 1992 amendment to title 10 US Code (USC), section 154 specified that the VCJCS would perform "the duties prescribed for him as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff" in addition to duties prescribed by the CJCS (with the approval of the secretary of defense (SecDef)). The GNA also mandated that the CJCS and VCJCS be chosen from different military services, but it was further recommended in hearings and other discussions that they be chosen from different service pairs (the pairs being the historically linked Army-Air Force, Navy-Marine Corps, and now the Air Force-Space Force). Evidently, the GNA authors did not expect the VCJCS to "fleet up" to chairman but, because the position passed by only one vote in the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), the authors left open this option. Heading to conference, the Senate bill included the vice-chairman position, while the House bill included provisions for prior joint experience of general officers. Consequently, both positions were added in a compromise.

In 1986, the GNA elaborated on the criteria for the CJCS, stating a candidate should be appointed only after having served as either the vice chairman, a service chief, or a CCDR. However, the GNA provided ample latitude for presidents to make other choices if they deemed this "necessary in the national interest." The GNA also stressed that a service chief should have first served either as a CCDR or in a senior operational joint role, underscoring the fact that the GNA authors wanted service chiefs to bring a joint orientation to their role as a JCS member. Added by a 2016 amendment to 10 USC 154, 10 USC 154(a)(4)(A) states that, "The Vice Chairman shall not be eligible for promotion to

1 Vice Chairman, 10 U.S. Code § 154(c), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/154>.



Army Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of U.S. Central Command, right, consults with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Colin L. Powell, May 14, 1992, as the leaders took part in a meeting to discuss the allied military coalition in Operation Desert Shield. General Powell was the first chairman to serve in the role fully under GNA reforms. Courtesy US Department of Defense. <https://www.defense.gov/Multimedia/Photos/igphoto/2001177679/>.

the position of Chairman or any other position in the armed forces.”<sup>2</sup> But 10 USC 154(a)(4)(B)—also added in 2016—allows the president to waive this prohibition if doing so is in the “national interest.” In any event, 10 USC 152 (relating to the officers who can be appointed to be CJCS—including the VCJCS) and 10 USC 154 (providing that the vice chairman will not be appointed to be chairman, absent a waiver from the president) need to be read in concert.

The framers of the GNA, including myself as the then staff director of the SASC, felt previous joint experience to be a necessary credential for service at the senior military

level. This prerequisite—sometimes formal, sometimes not—applied to the CJCS, the VCJCS, the other Joint Chiefs, and the CCDRs. This was a serious concern for several reasons, most stemming from disasters that precipitated the GNA.

A key point in the GNA is that it did not set the appointments of the CJCS and VCJCS on the same schedule. The authors wanted to give a new president the flexibility to select a CJCS, and they concluded that the four-year tours of the service chiefs would prove too restrictive. Yet, they also saw that it would be virtually impossible to “fire” a

2 Vice Chairman, 10 U.S. Code § 154(a)(4)(A), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/154>.





The explosion of the Marine Corps building in Beirut, Lebanon, created a large cloud of smoke that was visible from miles away. The bombing of Beirut helped motivate the Goldwater-Nichols Act. Courtesy Photo, Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort. <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/1038763/remembering-beirut>.

sitting chairman. Consequently, the law provided for two-year terms and the chance at reappointment for a second term. The authors, being members of Congress and their staffs, also wanted the Senate to be able to reconfirm these senior leaders, ensuring that a full four-year tour would only be possible for leaders who conferred appropriately with the legislature. In the case of General Colin Powell, a never-publicized issue was addressed in a closed session during his reconfirmation.

However, as General Powell's example illustrates, a pair of two-year terms fulfilled at irregular intervals does not lend itself to stability. Furthermore, the Senate having the de facto ability to cut a chairman's tenure in half put unnecessary pressure on the apolitical nature of these military leaders. In the fiscal year 2017 (FY17) National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the CJCS and VCJCS positions were converted to singular four-year terms. I am proud to have been a proponent of this, as the new setup means

that those leaders do not need to weigh political popularity in their recommendations, advice, or decisions, many of which are difficult enough as it is.

To avoid the further disruption caused by having both the chairman and the vice rotate in and out at the same time, the tours have been staggered by two years, so that the Joint Staff and the national command authority have some continuity, even during transitions. The verdict was to short-tour one (limiting one to just a two-year term) instead of extending the other. Vice Chair General John Hyten started his two-year term in November 2019, while General Mark Milley started his four-year term as chairman in October 2019. Admiral Christopher Grady took office in December 2021 for a four-year term as VCJCS, achieving the two-year stagger.

The division of labor that has evolved between the CJCS and the VCJCS—the former focused on operational issues, with the latter focused on managerial issues—is consistent with the intent of the GNA. This also confirms the judgment of the GNA authors that the vice should not be a “training position” for becoming chairman. The authors did not believe the VCJCS, even if that person met the expectations of the duties of the vice-chairman position, would necessarily also have the different background and experience that Congress thought necessary to be CJCS. The recent amendments to GNA in 2017 state this intent more explicitly.

The investigation into the 1983 bombing of the marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, determined that the chain of command was convoluted, contradictory, and so extensive that it prevented quick decision-making, leaving the commander of US European Command (EUCOM) with many responsibilities but insufficient authority. The study, conducted by retired Admiral Robert Long—himself a former head of US Pacific Command (PACOM)—argued there was too much interference in the mission from both Washington and the Marine Corps bureaucracy, a conclusion greatly resented by then Marine Corps Commandant General P. X. Kelley. From this study, it became evident that the services’ parochialism—something that was supposed to be rooted out by their sublimation into the Department of Defense (DoD)—had not only persisted, but also caused deadly consequences.

Within days of the Beirut bombing, the United States invaded Grenada. Although the mission was eventually a success (a fact frequently cited by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger during his GNA testimony to argue against the need for defense organizational reform), the mission was still too costly in terms of time and casualties.

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With these two events fresh in their minds, the GNA advocates set out to greatly increase joint experience in leadership by making it a prerequisite for command of the unified commands, as well as for service in the JCS. They were immediately impressed when President Ronald Reagan nominated a rare kind of officer—Admiral William Crowe—to replace General Vessey as chairman.

Admiral Crowe, the former commander of PACOM, had gone out of his way to carve out a career far from the US Navy’s normal progression. Crowe had been a diesel submariner and had taken time from traditional naval duties to earn a PhD in international relations at Princeton University. As the *New York Times* noted: “Admiral Crowe has an unusual amount of experience in joint positions where his Navy loyalties were subordinated to responsibility to all the services.”<sup>3</sup> This was the ideal that GNA sought to normalize, making Admiral Crowe a worthy fit.

While Crowe was in favor of reform—a fact known by Senator Barry Goldwater, Senator Sam Nunn, and their senior SASC staff, including myself—he kept this position quiet to the other senior military leaders. Despite this, Crowe’s appointment alone was a major advancement for

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3 Bill Keller, “Man in the News: Politically Attuned Admiral: William Crowe Jr.,” *New York Times*, July 11, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/11/us/man-in-the-news-politically-attuned-admiral-william-crowe-jr.html>.



Senate Armed Services Committee chairman Senator John McCain speaks at DoD leadership testimony. Senator McCain was instrumental in GNA reforms. Photo by Senior Master Sgt. Adrian Cadiz. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/secdef/22332993078/>.

reform; in open testimony, General Vessey had been rather subtle about the subject.

After the GNA passed, Crowe was initially cautious in exerting control over the Joint Staff (JS), as the law mandated. However, on January 20, 1989—the day President George H. W. Bush was inaugurated—Crowe summoned all JS officers down to the division-chief level and announced that he was implementing “Phase 2” of the GNA, meaning the JS would no longer use the old consensus process regarding the services. Input from officers on the Joint Staff would still be sought and considered, but the Joint Staff officers would no longer have veto power over either decisions of the JS as a whole or the chairman’s own decisions.

### Shortcomings of the Resulting Structure

Although not a point of major discussion at the time, the GNA appreciably expanded the CJCS’s management responsibilities beyond strategic direction and war planning into such areas as readiness, logistics planning, force capabilities, and, most significantly, providing advice on requirements, programs, and budgets. The GNA even required the CJCS to offer to the secretary of defense “alternative program recommendations and budget proposals within projected resource levels and guidance provided by the secretary, in order to achieve greater conformance with the priorities [established by the secretary].”<sup>4</sup>

4 Chairman: functions, 10 U.S. Code § 153(a)(5)(E), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/153>.

This was a major insertion of the CJCS into top-level management areas. Although it was somewhat predictable, the GNA authors never envisioned the huge staffs that would grow to support these newly assigned responsibilities. As the JS grew, certain SASC members questioned the utility of the change.

Although the directorate for force structure, resources, and assessment (J-8) on the JS intended to draft alternative recommendations, the position has grown considerably. This growth has not always translated into the CJCS providing such alternatives with any degree of consistency. In the past, the CJCS has simply provided a brief memo to the secretary that the service budgets and program objective memorandums (POMs) were satisfactory. This is well short of the intent of the GNA.

Similarly, the CCDRs have not provided the intended level of detail when articulating their own resource needs through means including integrated priority lists (IPLs). Additionally, some CCDRs have indicated that they lack sufficient staffing to even develop IPLs and complete other resource inputs. Talking about the IPLs, one resourcing authority noted: “As the Holy Roman Empire was neither ‘Holy,’ nor ‘Roman,’ nor an ‘Empire,’ so the IPLs are neither ‘integrated,’ nor ‘prioritized’—but they are a ‘list.’”<sup>5</sup> However, if the CJCS is to play a serious role in resource allocation, CCDRs’ inputs must become more detailed, timelier, and seriously considered. The 2017 NDAA added section 10 USC 222a to the code. This provision requires that combatant commanders (as well as the service chiefs, and now the chief of the National Guard Bureau) to submit to the SecDef, the CJCS, and the congressional defense committees, a report on their unfunded priorities. This report must be submitted shortly after the president submits his or her budget each year. The congressional defense committees often add authorizations and appropriations based on these unfunded priority lists.

For their part, the service chiefs maintain a covetous attitude toward POM preparation, taking advantage of a small loophole in the GNA regarding financial management. Though the legislation clearly states that the service secretaries are responsible for budgets and financial management, the POMs have remained under the purview of the service chiefs.

Shortly after the passage of the GNA, the CJCS assigned oversight of these expanded budget and requirement duties to the newly created vice chairman. Implicitly, while the CJCS would focus on developing events on the world scene, the VCJCS would focus on the internal planning and management of the Pentagon, offering alternative views to those of the services. Accordingly, those who have served as the VCJCS tend to have a background weighted more toward defense management than military operations. None of the twelve officers who have thus far served as the VCJCS have been former service chiefs, although all but four had previously served as CCDRs. During his time as VCJCS, Admiral William Owens was given the assignment by the chairman to attempt to control the requirements process through his chairmanship of the Joint Requirements Oversight Council (JROC). Owens made a credible attempt in this regard, but that effort has now expanded into the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS) process, which has further added to JS size.

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## Original Objectives of the GNA

In assessing how the roles of the CJCS and VCJCS have evolved, it is useful to reflect on the original objectives of the GNA.

### 1. Civilian Primacy

While the GNA addressed both administrative and operational dimensions, it significantly prioritized operational matters. The overall push of the GNA was to balance joint and service interests, and to enhance civilian control of the military. The chief purpose was to strengthen civilian authority and control of the military. The authors were very clear in this goal, as the language in Title 10 makes nearly every action in the DoD subject to “the authority, direction, and control” of the secretary of defense.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Personal conversations with the author in his time as a senior SASC staff member.

<sup>6</sup> Secretary of Defense, 10 U.S. Code § 113, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/113>.



## 2. Consolidated Management

The GNA sought to improve military advice by clarifying and expanding the responsibilities of the CJCS in several ways. First, the chairman became the principal military advisor to the president, the secretary of defense, and the National Security Council (NSC). Second, the chairman was handed duties assigned previously to the JCS as a body, in addition to the new duties assigned. Third, a position of vice chairman was created to support the chairman. Lastly, he was given full control over the JS, whereas previously the collective Joint Chiefs controlled it.

## 3. Direct Chain of Command

The GNA aimed to clearly assign the CCDRs mission-execution responsibility and empower them with authorities to carry out that responsibility. The act mandated that the chain of command run from the president to the secretary of defense to the CCDR, eliminating previous confusion. The legislation gave the CCDRs the ability to streamline the chain beneath them, to promote accountability and avoid recurrence of the tragedies that led to the new law.

## 4. Articulated Plans

The GNA mandates that the president publish an annual national security strategy document, a requirement designed to improve strategy development and contingency planning. The CJCS was required to submit strategic plans in line with defense budgets, and the secretary was instructed to oversee the preparation and review of contingency plans. The GNA obliged civilians to assist the secretary in his or her review of contingency plans, ultimately vesting this role for the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

## 5. Budget Efficiency

The GNA sought to provide for a more efficient use of resources by assigning additional duties to the CJCS, such as advising the secretary on the CCDRs' budgetary priorities and assessing the alignment of proposed programs and budgets from defense components with overall DoD strategy and unified-command priorities.

## 6. Continuity and Jointness

The GNA sought to enhance the effectiveness of military operations by granting authority in peacetime and wartime. The CJCS was given responsibility for developing joint doctrine and joint training policies.

## 7. Reduce Redundancy

The GNA sought to improve DoD management by addressing deficiencies such as reporting structures with unrealistic supervision expectations, a high number of layers of staff review leading to duplicated effort, a disproportionate number of personnel serving on staff in headquarters, a lack of responsibility for supervising the defense agencies, and an opaque division of labor among different defense components.

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## Unfinished Business of the GNA

Although assessments of the GNA are overwhelmingly positive, not every objective was fully achieved.<sup>7</sup> Any law that has been on the books for more than thirty-five years should be reviewed; the GNA is certainly no exception. Operational reforms have achieved much of what was desired and expected, yet some criticism continues on the question of whether there has been too much emphasis on jointness and OSD oversight.<sup>8</sup> In the view of some, the current arrangement, built to fix past imbalances, has itself become unbalanced. The focus of the GNA was clearly on the operational side, with aspirations regarding defense management remaining a secondary concern. Arguably as a result, key efforts on the management side have been disappointments.

7 See, for instance: James R. Locher III, "Has It Worked?—The Goldwater-Nichols Reorganization Act," *Naval War College Review* 54, 4 (2001), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2537&context=nwc-review>.

8 Mark Cancian, "We Need a Map for Goldwater-Nichols Reform so We Don't Get Lost," *War on the Rocks*, March 17, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/we-need-a-map-for-goldwater-nichols-reform-so-we-dont-get-lost/>.



Any “GNA II” should review operational practices but focus primarily on defense management, where numerous duplications have emerged, certain authorities granted have not been exercised, and other spans of control have been exercised too broadly.

It is important to note the role the CJCS and VCJCS play in the NSC process once they take up their respective offices. The VCJCS is a participant in the deputies’ meetings, which frame the basic issues or options for the principals. When the principals meet, the chairman usually accompanies the secretary. As the military official with the deepest programmatic and resource knowledge, the VCJCS should initially articulate the DoD position. As the deputies tee up options, having that resource-informed perspective is helpful, and having someone with a track record representing the secretary’s enterprise-wide view is important.

There is a good pre-GNA example of the desirable backgrounds of the CJCS and VCJCS. In the mid-1980s, the Army chief was General John Wickham, a former commander of US Forces Korea (USFK), vice chief of staff, director of the JS, commander of the 101st Air Assault Division, and senior military assistant to the secretary of defense. In other words, he had CCDDR, internal Army management, joint, and civilian-office experience—the proverbial whole package. His vice chief was General Maxwell Thurman, who in previous posts was head of Army recruiting command, deputy chief of personnel, and director of Army Program, Analysis and Evaluation (PA&E).

These two officers were a highly effective team because their skills and backgrounds complemented each other’s tremendously. During this period, the Army restructured itself to eighteen divisions, learned how to recruit effectively, fielded the Pershing II missile in Europe as well as each of its “Big Five” modernization programs, established the Army’s aviation and special operations branches, and revolutionized its training processes. General Wickham focused on the strategic, while General Thurman focused on the institutional—perspectives reflected in their respective congressional testimonies, during which Wickham described strategic direction and Thurman provided programmatic detail.

In the same vein, Chairman Admiral Crowe and General Robert Herres, a former commander of US Space Command, complemented each other well. The same is said for CJCS General John Shalikashvili, a former Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), and Admiral William Owens, who had served as the Navy N-8 and whose ten-

ure as the VCJCS saw the JROC become a major player in requirements, program, and budget issues.

Despite reforms instituted by Admiral James A. “Sandy” Winnefeld during his tenure as vice chairman, the JROC and JCIDS have grown far too bureaucratic and time consuming. There is clearly enormous merit in having a CJCS highly experienced in strategic and operational issues thinking about “what we’re doing and where we’re going” and a VCJCS focused on “how we’re doing and how we get there.” Hopefully, following this approach will create opportunities to streamline both the JROC and JCIDS.

The last four CJCSs—Admiral Mullen, General Martin Dempsey, General Joseph Dunford, and General Mark Milley—broke the pattern that had existed since 1982; these men were appointed while serving as a service chief. Mullen came to office during a difficult period, when there were alleged confirmation concerns for his predecessor, General Peter Pace, and Dempsey had only served as the Army chief for three months. Nonetheless, Mullen, Dempsey (who had also served briefly as the commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM)), and Dunford (who had been the commander in Afghanistan) all had solid credentials on strategic issues and were well complemented by their vice chairmen, all of whom also had experience as CCDRs (General James Cartwright at US Strategic Command (STRATCOM), Admiral Winnefeld at US Northern Command (NORTHCOM), and General Paul Selva at US Transportation Command (TRANSCOM)) and as senior program staffers (Cartwright as J-8 and Winnefeld in senior warfare and transformation programs for the Navy and Joint Forces Command)). Admiral Christopher Grady, the current VCJCS, came from commanding US Fleet Forces Command. But, as with all previous VCJCSs, not one among Cartwright, Winnefeld, Selva, Hyten, and Grady had been a service chief. General Milley and Admiral Grady also mirrored this previous approach.

Past experience suggests that it is difficult for a CJCS to perform the duties of evaluating requirements, devising alternative programs and budgets, and developing department-wide capability trade-offs if his or her past senior military experience comes from having been either a service chief or service vice chief. This is one of the reasons why the GNA authors wanted service chiefs to have key joint operational roles first. Senior service officers have a major responsibility for advocating for their service and campaigning for its needs and requirements. It is understandably difficult for an officer to move from that role, particularly during an era of constrained resources and

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on-again, off-again sequestration, to one requiring the recommendation of reductions that will inevitably be seen as one service being reduced to benefit another. The zero-sum politics would only create more friction between the services.

Similarly, the evolution of the VCJCS toward a more technical and programmatic background, with some recent distance from his or her commissioning service, also has great merit. It is, therefore, of note that no VCJCS has come from the Army, where the focus has always been more on labor than capital. In a period in which some major challenges are addressing reduced manpower, controlling the fully burdened cost of personnel, and finding the technologies that best preserve capability at lower manning levels, the ground forces are the least likely to produce an officer with this past background or future perspective.

### The President's Relations with the Military

As clearly stated by the GNA, which provided a needed clarification, the CJCS is the principal military adviser to the president in his or her role as commander in chief. The CJCS should be constantly mindful of this responsibility and authority, and the president should always be respectful of it and appreciate the burdens it places on the CJCS.

The CJCS has to synthesize the inputs of many military officials—the service chiefs, the CCDRs, the senior staff of the

JCS, and even to some degree the senior OSD staff—into coherent observations and recommendations for the president. This synthesis will span many areas, including strategic direction, operational decisions, operational planning, and budget allocations, and can even reach down to issues where the strategic and tactical intersect, as they did with the raid on the compound of Osama Bin Laden. The CJCS has to exercise his or her authority in this regard and spare the president from wrestling with too many conflicting opinions regarding complex issues. However, the CJCS also needs to recognize that there will be times when the president will need to hear other, sometimes opposing, views. In this regard, the judgment of the CJCS becomes vital in exercising his or her role as principal adviser, not sole adviser.

The president must rely on the CJCS for this, yet not be shy about soliciting other views directly from the service chiefs or the CCDRs whenever such views are desired or needed. The president may also solicit views on military matters directly from other members of the NSC or the OSD staff. However, when it comes to military matters, the president should resist suggestions to go outside the formal chain of command regarding major issues.

For instance, in deciding strategic direction in Iraq, President George W. Bush solicited the advice of an outside group that included academics and retired military officers, who met with him without the presence of the CJCS. In addition, one of the retired military officers was using a back channel to the commander in Iraq, resulting in information and recommendations flowing to the president without any input from either the CJCS or the responsible CCDR. The president, as one member of this ad hoc group commented, has the right to “consult with anyone he wants.”<sup>9</sup> This is certainly true, but consulting with such a group on a major strategic decision without the presence or input of the CJCS will be perceived as a vote of no confidence in the military leadership—and will damage, if not destroy, an important relationship.

The president should try to become personally familiar with other senior members of the military. Dinners in the White House with the service chiefs—such as those hosted by presidents including George H. W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump—help develop an important relationship and provide the president with additional insights about the differing positions within the services. The president should also take advantage of certain routine opportunities that,

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9 Personal conversations with the author in his time as a DOD advisor.



President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. greets service members in Hawaii. Presidential engagements with the military are important for maintaining civilian – military relations. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Anthony J. Rivera. <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/7523663/president-biden-greets-service-members-hawaii>.

on the surface, appear mundane but serve an important purpose, such as reflecting a familiarity with and respect for military culture. Attending certain military ceremonies—commemorations, retirements, and promotions, for example—can be useful and provide an informal opportunity for evaluating senior leaders for consideration as future CJCS, VCJCS, or service chiefs.

Famed Duke military historian Russell Weigley once noted that President Abraham Lincoln went through several commanders of the Army of the Potomac—the principal element of the Union army and the one opposing Confederate General Robert E. Lee—before he found the one he was confident would aggressively press the war: General Ulysses Grant. Weigley speculated that, had the war occurred a decade earlier during the presidency of Zachary Taylor, this search for the right Union commander might not have taken so long, as Taylor, being a former general him-

self, already knew the senior military leaders rather well. Accordingly, becoming familiar and comfortable with contemporary military leaders can serve a significant purpose.

Other recommendations the CJCS should encourage, and the president should seriously consider, include the following.

1. See and be seen in the Pentagon: The president usually comes to the Pentagon for a formal briefing by the secretary and CJCS once or twice a year. This might be expanded to a quarterly event and could include visits to the service secretaries and service chiefs. When it comes to budget formulation, allocation, and execution, the vast majority of this is done at the service level, as funds are primarily appropriated to service accounts. However, services can feel their key role is not understood beyond the Pentagon

and that they are junior partners to OSD and the Joint Staff. A presidential visit would enhance their morale and signal understanding of how the building actually functions.

2. Visits to the CCDRs: The president should visit with the CCDRs in their headquarters once a year. Three of these headquarters—CENTCOM, US Special Operations Command (SOCOM), and US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)—are in Florida, making access easy. The same is true of a visit with NORTHCOM and US Space Command (SPACECOM) in Colorado, STRATCOM in Nebraska, or TRANSCOM in Illinois. Combatant command (COCOM) headquarters in overseas locations should be visited routinely during visits beyond the contiguous United States.
3. Service birthday appearances: Over the past two decades, all of the military services, taking after the Marine Corps, have begun recognizing and celebrating the service's birthday. These are: Army—June 14 (also Flag Day); Marine Corps—November 10; Navy—October 13; Air Force—September 18; Coast Guard—August 4 (although an organization within the Department of Homeland Security since 2003, the Coast Guard's role as a military service should be recognized), and, as of December 2019, Space Force on December 20. The president should consider participating in these ceremonies and, perhaps, hosting a cake cutting in the White House.
4. Appearances at the service academies: The president, vice president, and secretary of defense should continue the practice of giving commencement speeches at the three major service academies. The president should not follow a fixed rotation, but should give the commencement speech at the academy celebrating a specific milestone. For instance, the West Point class of 2019 graduated just days before the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Normandy landing (the class of 1944, including Cadet John Eisenhower, actually graduated on June 6), and the Air Force Academy class of 2019 was its sixtieth class. Going forward, these are the types of events at which the president might consider giving the commencement address. In addition, the service academies provide a superior venue for major presidential addresses regarding security policy, which President Obama and President Trump both utilized. However, the occasion must be chosen carefully; commencement addresses should not be used for major policy addresses. Historically, these

fall flat with both the graduates and their families, such as with Vice President Al Gore's commencement speech at West Point in 2000. If a president would like to give a policy address at a service academy, he or she should choose a visit other than a commencement to do so.

5. Meeting returning units: On occasion, when a major unit or headquarters returns from a deployment, the president should welcome the unit home. This will provide the president a chance to congratulate the leadership and the troops, and to mingle with family members before and after the arrival.
6. Participate in command post exercises (CPX) and simulations: Several senior military educational institutions in close proximity to Washington routinely conduct simulations of various contingencies, from nuclear confrontation to other stressful scenarios. The institutions include the National Defense University at Fort McNair, the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and the Marine Corps Combat Development Command at Quantico, Virginia. In addition, there are public policy organizations that also conduct simulations of conflict scenarios, and even budget-allocation assessments. These are in addition to those that are conducted within the Pentagon and at several COCOMs, including STRATCOM and NORTHCOM. In many of these scenarios, an individual with senior-level experience is selected to play the role of the actual president. Participation by a notable civilian trains the military staff, but simulating with the actual president has greater value, for both the president and the troops. The president should, therefore, personally ask to participate in one simulation and one major CPX per year. Such an effort will familiarize the president with military procedures, military language and jargon, the thought process of senior leaders, and the time intervals in which decisions must be made and in which action must be taken.

## Summary

As they have evolved over the past four decades, the roles of the CJCS and VCJCS require officers with backgrounds and experiences that are distinct, yet complementary. The CJCS should have experience in the strategic and operational community, be fully immersed in the perspectives of regional commanders and the CCDRs, and ideally possess recent senior-level combat experience. The VCJCS should





US Air Force Chief of Staff General Charles Q. Brown speaks to the National Guard Association of the United States in August 2022. In May 2023, media widely reported that General Brown was President Biden's choice to be the next Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Photo by SPC Jessica Silhavy, Courtesy Ohio National Guard.

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The CJCS and VCJCS should be continuously mindful of their roles in representing the military to the president and representing the president to the military.

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have experience with the institutional and managerial side of the defense establishment, be aware of the demands of the CCDRs, and stay immersed in the institutional processes of the defense establishment while understanding emerging technologies. These are quite distinct skillsets,

and while it may be overly simplistic to view these two roles as being those of “the operator” (the CJCS), and “the manager” (the VCJCS), using this general paradigm as a reference while selecting new occupants for these key positions is worth considering.

The CJCS and VCJCS should be continuously mindful of their roles in representing the military to the president and representing the president to the military. These responsibilities exceed serving as the principal military adviser to the president, especially as recent decades show a decrease in military and combat experience among presidents. Of the past eight presidents, extending back over forty years, only two—Presidents Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush—possessed any significant military experience. The others—Reagan, Clinton, George W. Bush,

Obama, Trump, and Biden—possessed either little or no operational military experience. Accordingly, contemporary CJCSs must fill this experience gap and provide the president with insight into the world of military operations, society, and culture.

As always, there is room for improvement, and some changes to the existing GNA structure are worth serious consideration in the coming years, such as the following.

- Include all the Joint Chiefs in operational planning.
- Delegate resource-allocation authority to the CJCS in terms of balancing combatant commanders' needs, but not authority to deploy forces.
- Reemphasize the chain of command, specifically that the SecDef and CCDRs should go through the chairman, while making it clear the chairman is not in the chain of command.
- Lessen the duplication between the OSD and Joint Staffs in the personnel, legal, policy, logistics, requirements, and administrative areas.
- As noted previously, the GNA authors did not envision the immense staff growth that has occurred in both the CCDRs and the JCS for fulfilling this role. Given the current environment and the way in which these responsibilities have been addressed, perhaps the scope of these activities should be reconsidered, and likely reduced. Significantly reduce the scope, size, complexity,

and staffs associated with JROC and JCIDS, if not eliminate them altogether.

- For service chiefs, recreate an increased role in linking and streamlining requirements, acquisition, and budgets by creating the Army equivalent of the research, development, and acquisition position. This direct support to the service chief should be restored only as part of a serious reduction in the overall size of the other staffs of the military departments.
- The service chiefs should be designated as the chief requirements officers of their service.

### About the Author

Arnold Punaro is a nonresident senior fellow in the Atlantic Council's *Forward* Defense program and a member of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security's advisory board. He is also the CEO of the Punaro Group, LLC. He retired from the Marine Corps as a major general. In addition to his military service, Punaro served as the staff director of the Senate Armed Services Committee, as a defense industry executive at SAIC, as chair of the National Defense Industrial Association, and on a number of defense-related boards and commissions. He holds MAs from the University of Georgia and Georgetown University. He is the author of *On War and Politics: The Battlefield Inside Washington's Beltway* and *The Ever-Shrinking Fighting Force*. His third book, *If Confirmed*, will be published in Spring 2024.



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