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NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUES

FOR CONGRESS

# Managing the National Security Workforce Crisis

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## KEY ISSUES

The federal government is not on track to hire, retain, develop, or promote the diverse and highly skilled civilian experts and leaders it believes it needs for today's and tomorrow's national security challenges.

Talented national security experts are deterred from federal service due to needless barriers.

The federal workplace's tools, benefits, and incentives have fallen behind private counterparts.

Toxic rhetoric across the political spectrum inaccurately paints federal workers as lazy, untrustworthy, disloyal, and less valued than their military counterparts.

Congress must make national security workforce as a vital component of a strong national security strategy by pursuing known tactical fixes, elevating human capital into oversight discussions, and laying the groundwork for a long-term personnel reform agenda.

The federal national security workforce is entering a perfect storm shaped by workforce demographic trends, short-sighted leadership, slow adaptation to modern challenges, and inflexible talent acquisition and management. Government civilian human capital is typically relegated to an administrative function not demanding serious legislative or senior policymaker attention—despite intensive interest in military counterparts. But senior leaders should begin to imagine a future crisis or opportunity wherein the people required to manage such events on behalf of the nation will not be in the right place, and, more importantly, not be accessible in the time they are needed. This should not come as a surprise to any lawmakers—respected institutions such as the Partnership for Public Service have been highlighting these problems for years.<sup>1</sup> And much of the challenge is not subject to a legislative fix as the dysfunction is due to a complex mix of law, regulation, leadership, and culture. But if the United States is entering an era of great power competition, doing so with a weakened intellectual roster inside its own public bureaucracy is foolhardy—and demands immediate focus.

It is critical for members of Congress to recognize that deliberate, often well-intentioned policy choices have severely impacted civil servant morale and development. In the past six years the national security bureaucracy has faced three recent government shutdowns with unpaid furloughs, multiple years of frozen pay, recent proposals to cut federal compensation and retirement, and unpredictable hiring freezes. Uncertainty over hiring, promotion, and pay can have a large effect on retention—particularly for staff with high-demand skills—and policymakers too rarely utilize employment models that tell them how their tactical budget and policy changes will impact the workforce. In short, both Congress and the executive branch have made highly consequential moves on the federal workforce with little assessment of the consequences. Congressional national security committees should treat civilian human capital as a vital building block to any American foreign policy by pursuing known tactical fixes across the workforce, elevating human capital into oversight discussions, and laying the groundwork for a long-term personnel reform agenda.

## MAKE UP OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY WORKFORCE

The federal government is not on track to hire, retain, develop, or promote the diverse and highly skilled civilian experts and leaders it believes it needs for today's and tomorrow's national security challenges. Despite public service remaining a top career interest for college graduates,<sup>2</sup> several indicators for national security talent recruitment and management are flashing red, with little energy and few avenues for repair. Notable trends include:

1. The Partnership for Public Service's Civil Service Reform research efforts are thorough and thoughtful; though most of their work does not highlight the specific needs of the national security field, many of their findings are broadly applicable. Their collection of research can be found here <https://ourpublicservice.org/our-work/civil-service-reform/>.

2. "College Students are Attracted to Federal Service, but Agencies need to capitalize on their interest," Partnership for Public Service, March 2014, [https://www.govexec.com/media/gbc/docs/pdfs\\_edit/031713e2.pdf](https://www.govexec.com/media/gbc/docs/pdfs_edit/031713e2.pdf).



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- » **Young talent is under-represented:** Only around 6 percent of the professional federal workforce is under 30 (versus 24 percent of the overall workforce), constraining access to fresh perspectives and cutting-edge skill sets.<sup>3</sup> At the Department of Defense, where innovative and technical skills are at a premium, the share of employees with less than 5 years of federal experience—the pipeline for future leadership—has plummeted since 2011.<sup>4</sup>
- » **Government hiring is under frequent unmitigable stress:** Periodic government-wide and agency-specific hiring freezes (government wide in 2017;<sup>5</sup> 2017–2018 at State;<sup>6</sup> and periodic in the Office of the Secretary of Defense due to headquarters cuts<sup>7</sup>) have cut off agency access to request influxes of cutting-edge expertise necessary to sustain dynamic national security analysis and policymaking. Applications for the foreign service officer test have decreased significantly, from 14,580 in 2015 to 9,519 in 2017.<sup>8</sup> Prestigious new-entry programs (Presidential Management Fellowship, Boren, Rangel<sup>9</sup>) face lower confidence from applicants and hiring managers due to unplanned pauses and wavering commitments to transition sought-after fellows into permanent positions.
- » **Mid- and senior-level talent are departing disproportionately:** Short periods of attrition in federal departments are expected during administration transitions. But the recent scale of departures in the national security civilian workforce exceed prior trends; for example, between September 2016 and September 2018, the State Department lost 9 percent of its civil service workforce and just over 20 percent of staff with five to nine years of service. The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) has experienced a roughly 9 percent drop off in its staff in the same period: those with five to nine years federal service has decreased by 24 percent. A series of interviews with current and recent federal employees raised greater alarm about these departures than any other current national security challenge. “The people who are leaving will have an effect on government over the long term. There are pockets of talent, but the ranks are so thin,” one said.<sup>10</sup>
- » **Diversity may be valued, but policies constrain it:** Recent assessments find that the national security workforce is generally less diverse than the overall federal workforce, though this varies widely across agencies.<sup>11</sup> While some trends influencing diversity align with the broader economy, a few are driven by policies specific to the national security community. One example is the application of veterans’ preference. Veterans are overrepresented in the federal workforce and particularly so in specific agencies: they represent 30 percent of all federal employees, 49 percent of all DoD civilians, 40 percent

3. “Fed Figures,” Partnership for Public Service, [https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FedFigures\\_19Shutdown.pdf](https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FedFigures_19Shutdown.pdf).

4. Unless noted otherwise, federal employee statistics originate from the Office of Personnel Management’s “Fedscope” database, <https://www.fedscope.opm.gov/>.

5. *Presidential Memorandum Regarding Hiring Freeze*, The White House, January 23, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-memorandum-regarding-hiring-freeze/>.

6. Robbie Gramer, “Pompeo’s Pledge to Lift hiring Freeze at State Department Hits a Big Snag,” *Foreign Policy*, June 7, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/07/pompeos-pledge-to-lift-hiring-freeze-at-state-department-hits-big-snap-diplomacy-tillerson-congress/>.

7. Gordon Adams, “Behind the Rhetoric,” *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/15/behind-the-rhetoric/>.

8. State Department Briefing by Heather Nauert, November 17, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2017/11/275768.htm>.

9. Robbie Gramer, “State Department Withdraws from Top Recruitment Programs - Sowing Confusion,” *Foreign Policy*, July 28, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/28/state-department-withdraws-from-top-recruitment-program-sowing-confusion/>.

10. In the summer of 2018, the author conducted a series of not-for-attributions interviews with current and former DoD, State, and NSC employees on the state of the national security bureaucracy for a project sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation.

11. Deborah A. McCarthy, “Leveraging Diversity for Global Leadership,” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2018), [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180522\\_McCarthy\\_LeveragingDiversity\\_Web\\_0.pdf?LAMarrozXNhMxM-DtUrvE6EesifBlg6S](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180522_McCarthy_LeveragingDiversity_Web_0.pdf?LAMarrozXNhMxM-DtUrvE6EesifBlg6S).



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of all new federal hires, and 50 percent of all new defense civilians.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the gender and ethnic makeup of the veteran population influences the civilian workforce; for example, because veterans are preponderantly male, there is a 9-percent representation gap between the civilian and the DoD workforce.<sup>13</sup> Some OSD personnel perceive that hiring a non-veteran is nearly impossible administratively.

## RECRUITING THE RIGHT TALENT

Because each department and agency in the national security sphere maintains or relies on a range of personnel systems and policies (itself a barrier), it is difficult to generalize the overall challenges they face. However, one assessment is alarming: senior policymakers in the national security civilian workforce cannot get timely access to the specific expertise they need for the period they need it, even when resources are available for such requirements and the requirement is urgent and consequential. More broadly, they cannot shape the workforce they require for today's and tomorrow's challenges. On the other side of this dynamic, talented national security experts are significantly deterred from federal service—and not because public sector hiring is so selective, but because it has needless barriers. The reasons for this are numerous and well documented; organizations like the Partnership for Public Service and government study groups such as the Defense Innovation Board have routinely detailed the flawed logic of relying on a decades-old civil service system that in no way reflects the “changes in the nature of work or the expanded responsibilities of our government.”<sup>14</sup> Key challenges include:

- » **Government hiring processes for permanent full-time positions remain harmfully slow:** The average government hiring action is over three months long (well over private-sector standards), with clearance-requiring jobs potentially tripling that time.<sup>15</sup> This dynamic deters high-demand talent from applying, or loses such talent mid-process.
- » **Personnel systems are out of step with labor force expectations and hiring manager needs:** Government hiring practices presume a workforce that will stay in a single organization for the duration of a 30-year career and not require reskilling or broader exposure.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, trends in the broader labor force indicate demand for regular career shifts, mid-career upskilling and broadening, and “on demand” talent offerings and availability. As a result, the sort of deeply expert, highly-technical, frequently re-trained, flexible workforce the national security world needs cannot be attained with the present federal model. This has serious impacts on policymaking. A DoD office seeking a leading-edge expert in artificial intelligence for an urgent short-term assignment can't get it in a timely manner—even if it could afford it. A former foreign service officer with six years managing a sector at Google cannot be rehired at a level reflecting her experience. A civil

12. “Employment of Veterans in the Federal Executive Branch for Fiscal Year 2017,” Office of Personnel Management, February 2019, <https://www.fedshirevets.gov/veterans-council/veteran-employment-data/employment-of-veterans-in-the-federal-executive-branch-fy2017.pdf>.

13. David Schulker and Miriam Matthews, “Women’s Representation in the U.S. Department of Defense Workforce: Addressing the Influence of Veterans’ Employment,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2458.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2458.html).

14. Max Stier and Thomas W. Ross, “Civil Service is stuck in the mid-20th century,” *The Hill*, October 10, 2018, <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/410722-civil-services-are-stuck-in-the-mid-20th-century>.

15. Nicole Ogrysko, “It took agencies an average of 106 days to hire new employees in 2017,” Federal News Radio, March 1, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2F6uXQp>.

16. “Renewing America’s Civil Service: Partnership for Public Service and the Volcker Alliance, <https://www.volckeralliance.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Renewing%20America%27s%20Civil%20Service%20policy%20paper%20-%20FINAL.pdf>.



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servant within DoD moving within the department to another subcomponent as treated as a totally new employee. “Exchange” programs encouraging broadening experiences in the private sector or non-profit world are too bureaucratically constrained or poorly rewarded. Recently departed government experts with irreplaceable knowledge are inconsistently given ongoing access for consultative roles. None of these practices serve the nation well and substantially drive up costs for talent management.

- » **On-ramps for highly qualified entry-level personnel are too limited or poorly understood:** The federal government has a large pool of highly qualified entry-level talent at its fingertips due to widespread federal internship and specialized fellowship programs (Presidential Management Fellow, Boren, American Association for the Advancement of Science, etc.). The Partnership for Public Service has assessed that the federal government lags far behind the private sector in hiring its interns into permanent positions.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, specialized fellowships, including programs in which the government pays for education in high-demand skills, are not well understood by human resources personnel;<sup>18</sup> hiring freezes and headquarters cuts have also made it challenging to bring such candidates into suitable roles. Put simply: the government is making investments in talent it requires and not using it.
- » **Hiring flexibilities for specialized fields exist, but are too niche and poorly utilized:** Congress has authorized a wide range of hiring authorities to bring on board high-demand technical talent for short- and long-term government roles at high speed. These programs are well intentioned, but face a range of challenges: human capital specialists and hiring managers are poorly educated about their availability (with resources for training limited);<sup>19</sup> credential expectations for these hires are out of alignment with the sorts of experts available in technical fields;<sup>20</sup> and overall, the pilot programs offer a Band-Aid to a limited set of typically cybersecurity roles when many other fields face similar challenges.
- » **Efficiency initiatives target the strengths of the national security workforce:** Recent federal reform drives—both congressionally and executive branch led—have emphasized the need for headquarters cuts and bureaucratic de-layering (as in the years-long effort to shrink the Office of the Secretary of Defense). These initiatives are well intentioned, but generate minimal savings, target the small pool of experts available to defense leaders, and prevent hiring new talent into the civilian defense world.

## STRENGTHENING THE CURRENT WORKFORCE

Senior political and congressional leadership have historically paid too little attention to the management of the existing civilian national security workforce, despite ongoing intensive investments in their military counterparts (the Joint Chiefs routinely raise concerns about military readiness for national security challenges; there is no equivalent civilian measure). The necessity of talented civilians in developing, assessing, implementing, and evaluating

17. Testimony of Max Stier, President and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, “Improving the USAJobs Website” testimony to the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management, U.S. Senate, April 12, 2016, <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Stier%20Statement.pdf>.

18. Testimony of Laura Junor, Acting Director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies National Defense University, before the Armed Services Committee Personnel Subcommittee on Department of Defense Civilian Personnel Reform, U.S. Senate, March 23, 2017, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Junor\\_03-23-17.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Junor_03-23-17.pdf).

19. Congressional Research Services, *The Federal Cybersecurity Workforce: Background and Congressional Oversight Issues for the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security*, R44364, January 8, 2016, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44364>.

20. J. Michael McQuade and Richard M. Murray (co-chairs) Gilman Louie, Milo Medin, Jennifer Pahlka, Trae Stephens, *Software Is Never Done: Refactoring the Acquisition Code for Competitive Advantage*, Defense Innovation Board, [https://media.defense.gov/2019/Mar/26/2002105908/-1/-1/0/SWAP.REPORT\\_SUPPLEMENTARY.DOCS.3.21.19.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Mar/26/2002105908/-1/-1/0/SWAP.REPORT_SUPPLEMENTARY.DOCS.3.21.19.PDF).



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policy agendas is a bizarre afterthought for too many political leaders. Agencies already have a range of reports assigned by Congress or otherwise to map their human capital; reports are not the gap, leadership and accountability are. With this inattention, the federal workplace's tools, benefits, and incentives have fallen behind private counterparts, and federal service is growing into an unnecessarily difficult and unrewarding field that pushes away talent. Put simply, executive and legislative branch leaders have missed opportunities to treat the national security workforce as a national asset. Present challenges include:

- » **Professional development opportunities for civilian staff across national security agencies lag far behind military counterparts:** National security professionals don't benefit from the formal paths of military members, who will spend much of their career in carefully structured training and education opportunities designed to refine talents, reskill as requirements change, develop leaders, and prepare for specific assignments.<sup>21</sup>
- » **Technical development of present staff lags behind in two critical ways:** As national security agencies recognize their urgent requirements in highly technical fields—cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and more—they are lagging behind in upskilling their current technical workforce to advance in these areas.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, non-technical staff—particularly in the international affairs policy and acquisition sectors—will need to be conversant in these cutting-edge capabilities, their strengths and limitations, and political and ethical concerns in their employment. Few agencies take the substantial time or investment necessary for the continual professional development the national security workforce requires.<sup>23</sup>
- » **Incentives for high performance, flexibility for high-demand career group salaries, and accountability for poor performers are not easily available:** One massive attempt at personnel pay and evaluation reform, the National Security Personnel System, was disestablished in 2009 largely due to minimal attempts at bringing stakeholders on board the reform, and the remaining tools meant to continue to allow managers means for rewarding or holding employees accountable are scarcely used.<sup>24</sup>
- » **Modern benefits and flexible workplace features are increasingly available in the private sector, but are either not available, discouraged, or inconsistently offered in the national security workforce:** The absence of paid family leave and widely available childcare benefits, as well as inflexible working arrangements, have negative impacts on retention; their availability is assessed to drive healthier and more effective workforces. The federal government's antique approach to modern workforce practices has resulted in and will continue to result in vital talent avoiding the public sector for private opportunities that offer modern benefits. Worse, due to constraints on re-accession into the federal workforce, off-ramps pursued for more work/life flexibility are often permanent.

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21. Loren DeJonge Schulman and Kate Kidder, “Defense Problems as People Problems,” War on the Rocks, July 5, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/defense-problems-as-people-problems-mattis-human-capital-challenge/>.

22. McQuade et al. *Software is Never Done*.

23. “Mobilizing Tech Talent: Hiring Technologists to Power Better Government,” Partnership for Public Service, September 2018, [https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Mobilizing\\_Tech\\_Talent-2018.09.26.pdf](https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Mobilizing_Tech_Talent-2018.09.26.pdf).

24. Peter Levine, “Civilian Personnel Reform at the Department of Defense: Lessons from the Failure of the National Security Personnel System,” (Institute for Defense Analyses, October 2017), [https://www.ida.org/idamedia/Corporate/Files/Publications/IDA\\_Documents/SFRD/2017/P-8656.ashx](https://www.ida.org/idamedia/Corporate/Files/Publications/IDA_Documents/SFRD/2017/P-8656.ashx).



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## **PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND LEADERSHIP RHETORIC OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY WORKFORCE**

Perhaps most challenging to measure, but also most insidious in its impact, are the recent series of rhetorical and cultural shifts around the national security workforce. Painting bureaucrats as lazy or even evil has become an accepted, if short-sighted, political position across partisan lines, to include by executive branch leaders. The theory of a deep state, working behind the scenes toward their own ends and even against the president, has emerged from a paranoid conspiracy to a growing presence in the halls of Congress and at the White House podium. Trust in the assessments of the intelligence community, the loyalty of the diplomatic corps, and the judgment of the average policymaker has been questioned by senior officials, publicly and privately. Civil servants have complained about increased incidents of political retribution—sometimes career ending—and raised concerns about their avenues for fair hearings. More narrowly, civil-military relations experts have highlighted signals of weakening civilian control and over-reliance on military expertise in policy realms. As one former official said in 2017, “it is hard to believe we will continue to attract top talent with this as a background vocal.”<sup>25</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Congress must consider the national security workforce as a vital component to developing, honing, and executing a strong national security strategy. Relevant national security committees should pursue fixes to the challenges outlined above in three general buckets of activity: instituting system-wide tactical repairs; conducting productive oversight; and laying the groundwork for extensive reforms. Other organizations and experts have studied these and other recommendations extensively; there is a significant body of work available to congressional overseers and staffs in pursuing this agenda. What the agenda lacks is an urgency and a willingness to recognize that effective American foreign policy is not possible without people. Congress is vital to making this case.

### **Tactical Repairs**

- » Professionalize professional development: Allocate specific funds for professional development of the current national security workforce (general, technical, and managerial).
- » Elevate talent management: Dedicate resources for regular retraining of human resource specialists to access the full range of authorities and opportunities for hiring and managing a workforce. Create pilot programs for specialized recruitment and talent management teams akin to those used by the United States Digital Service, with plans to transition those programs to the broader workforce.<sup>26</sup>
- » Enhance talent mobility: Permit prior government employees to be re-hired non-competitively at any level for which they are qualified. Remove barriers to talent movement between departments and agencies and for on-ramps for internship and fellowship programs.

25. Laura Junor testimony.

26. Mobilizing Tech Talent.



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- » Share lessons and make them permanent: Use lessons learned from specialized technical hiring pilot programs across government. Expand and make permanent career-specific hiring authorities and salary caps for technical fields. End the Band-Aid/special case mentality of special hiring authorities.
- » Create a paid federal family leave program.
- » Measure twice, maybe don't cut: Develop and rely on employment modeling to assess impact of proposed workforce policies on recruiting and retention.

#### Productive Oversight

- » Generate leadership expectations: Raise national security human capital questions in confirmation and oversight hearings with senior administration officials, making clear that Congress expects federal personnel to be a priority matter in the nominee's tenure.
- » Drive the conversations: Regularly engage (in briefings and public hearings) agency leaders on how they use authorities aimed at shaping and strengthening the civilian workforce. Demand progress reports on how these opportunities and authorities are being maximized. Engage directly with recent federal hires and departed employees for personal experiences.
- » Investigate retaliation and workforce protections: Based on allegations of political retaliation, pursue long-term investigations of relevant reporting and the strength of whistleblower protections in the national security workforce, particularly when they may reference sensitive material.

#### Groundwork for Reform

- » Generate options for continuum of service: Begin a series of policy-generating studies and hearings setting an expectation for the national security field to be able to hire the talent it needs, in the time needed, for the period needed, and at a reasonable market cost. Likewise, set expectations for those in the national security workforce to be able to pursue flexible and rewarding careers that enhance their skills, broaden their exposure, and make them competitive for roles in and out of government. Consider a model in which sought-after national security experts are able to transition in and out of federal service multiple times throughout their career, in a wide range of time periods, with minimal barriers to entry, or in which federal offices with volatile technical requirements are able to generate, consult, and motivate further development of a community of interest within and outside government.
- » Pursue simpler personnel system with widespread flexibility in the national security space: Begin a series of studies and hearings that values long-term reform instead of packaging Band-Aids for each high-demand skillset.