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Military Faces High Turnover of Top Brass, as Civilians Serve in Acting Posts

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The Pentagon within the coming months is expected to undergo its most dramatic period of turnover at top military levels under the Trump administration, during which top civilian leaders aren't serving in a permanent capacity.

At least five of the seven members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff will be replaced this year, including the chairman, vice chairman and heads of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps.

Military leaders in charge of regional combatant commands are undergoing a shift as well, with new top officers expected for commands in the Middle East, Europe and Africa. Generals who are in charge of special operations forces and the Pentagon's nuclear program also will be changed, as planned by the Defense Department.

The procession of generals and admirals changing jobs was on display recently at the White House. Of the 17 generals hosted by President Trump for dinner on April 3, just under half won't be in uniform—or will be moved to new jobs—by year's end.

Part of the military's ethos demands flexibility in top leadership, as no single officer or soldier is considered indispensable. Because of that, commanders usually rotate jobs every two to four years. Sometimes, rotational changes converge during the same calendar year.

"The scheduled and periodic turnover of senior leaders throughout the U.S. military at all echelons is a common occurrence and one for which we are well-prepared as an institution," Air Force Col. Pat Ryder, a spokesman for the Joint Staff, said in an email.

Such turnover has been seen as an opportunity for Defense secretaries in prior administrations to shape their own military leadership rather than lean on prior appointees.

But there is a difference in the changeover now under way. The department doesn't have a presidentially nominated and Senate-confirmed defense secretary or deputy secretary of defense—the top two civilian posts—and has at least a half dozen high-level civilians also serving in an acting capacity, including the comptroller, the deputy comptroller, the undersecretary, and the deputy for personnel and readiness.

There also is an acting official serving in the Pentagon's No. 3 job, the chief management officer.

"I am not sure we've had this level of turnover at the Defense Department, with this level of vacancies among the civilians, not only within DoD, but across government," said David

Berteau, chief executive of Professional Services Council, and former longtime Pentagon official. "It may be unprecedented."

Adding to the unusual circumstances is new leadership on the key congressional committees that oversee the Pentagon. Control of the House recently shifted to Democrats from Republicans, and the death last year of Republican John McCain of Arizona led to a change in the leadership of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Military experts said that civilian officials and intergovernmental decision-making is important for maintaining institutional knowledge. Added flux on the civilian side can make changes on the military side more challenging.

"Each individual person is changing, but there is a layer of staff that doesn't change at the same time, maintaining continuity," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute think tank. "But that civilian layer has been understaffed persistently under President Trump. What would normally be a source of continuity is weaker than it would have been in previous administrations."

The 2017 National Defense Authorization Act sought to prevent the top leaders of the Joint Staff from leaving at the same time, asking for rules that set alternating terms for the chairman and vice chairman, so they don't leave at the same time. But those changes will begin to apply to the successors of the current officers.

CHANGES AT THE MILITARY

--Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman: Marine Gen. Joe Dunford is retiring; Gen. Mark Milley, now the Army chief of staff, was nominated to succeed him.

--Joint Chiefs of Staff vice chairman: Air Force Gen. Paul Selva is retiring. Air Force Gen. John Hyten, head of U.S. Strategic Command, was nominated to succeed him.

--Head of the Army: Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. James McConville was nominated to succeed Gen. Milley.

--Head of the Navy: Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson is retiring. Vice Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Bill Moran was nominated Thursday to succeed Adm. Richardson.

--Commandant of the Marines: Gen. Robert Neller is retiring. Lt. Gen. David Berger was nominated to succeed him.

--Head of U.S. forces in Middle East and Afghanistan: Army Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, has retired. Marine Lt. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, the Joint Staff director, succeeded him.

--Commander of European Command and Supreme Allied Commander, Europe: Army Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti is retiring. Gen. Tod D. Wolters, commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe, Africa and Allied Air Command, was nominated to succeed him.

--Commander of U.S. Africa Command: Marine Corps Gen. Thomas Waldhauser is retiring. Army Gen. Stephen Townsend, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, was nominated to succeed him.

--Head of U.S. special operations command: Gen. Raymond Thomas III, commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, retired. Army Lt. Gen. Richard Clarke, director for strategic plans and policy at Joint Staff, succeeded him.

--Head of U.S. nuclear forces: Air Force Gen. John Hyten, commander of U.S. Strategic Command, has been named vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His replacement hasn't been named.