

THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

"Men make history and not the other way around. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better."

Harry S Truman

The Joint Chiefs of Staff consist of the Chairman, the Vice Chairman, [the Chief of Staff of the Army](#), [the Chief of Naval Operations](#), [the Chief of Staff of the Air Force](#), [the Commandant of the Marine Corps](#) and [the Chief of the National Guard Bureau](#).

The collective body of the JCS is headed by the Chairman (or the Vice Chairman in the Chairman's absence), who sets the agenda and presides over JCS meetings. Responsibilities as members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff take precedence over duties as the Chiefs of Military Services. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the principal military adviser to the President, Secretary of Defense, and the National Security Council (NSC), however, all JCS members are by law military advisers, and they may respond to a request or voluntarily submit, through the Chairman, advice or opinions to the President, the Secretary of Defense, or NSC.

The executive authority of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has changed. In World War II, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff acted as executive agents in dealing with theater and area commanders, but the original National Security Act of 1947 saw the Joint Chiefs of Staff as planners and advisers, not as commanders of combatant commands. In spite of this, the 1948 Key West Agreement allowed members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to serve as executive agents for unified commands, a responsibility that allowed the executive agent to originate direct communication with the combatant command. Congress abolished this authority in a 1953 amendment to the National Security Act.

Today, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have no executive authority to command combatant forces. The issue of executive authority was clearly resolved by the Goldwater-Nichols DOD Reorganization Act of 1986: "The Secretaries of the Military Departments shall assign all forces under their jurisdiction to unified and specified combatant commands to perform missions assigned to those commands..."; the chain of command "runs from the President to the Secretary of Defense; and from the Secretary of Defense to the commander of the combatant command."

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[Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff \(CJCS\)](#)

The Goldwater-Nichols DOD Reorganization Act of 1986 identifies the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the senior ranking member of the Armed Forces. As such, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the principal military adviser to the President. He may seek the advice of and consult with the other JCS members and combatant commanders. When he presents his advice, he presents the range of advice and opinions he has received, along with any individual comments of the other JCS members.

Under the DOD Reorganization Act, the Secretaries of the Military Departments assign all forces to combatant commands except those assigned to carry out the mission of the Services, i.e., recruit, organize, supply, equip, train, service, mobilize, demobilize, administer and maintain their respective forces. The chain of command to these combatant commands runs from the President to the Secretary of Defense directly to the commander of the combatant command. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff may transmit communications to the commanders of the combatant commands from the President and Secretary of Defense but does not exercise military command over any combatant forces.

The Act also gives to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff some of the functions and responsibilities previously assigned to the corporate body of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The broad functions of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are set forth in Title 10, United States Code, and detailed in DOD Directive 5100.1. In carrying out his duties, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff consults with and seeks the advice of the other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the combatant commanders, as he considers appropriate.

☐ [Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff \(VCJCS\)](#)

The DOD Reorganization Act of 1986 created the position of Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who performs such duties as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff may prescribe. By law, he is the second ranking member of the Armed Forces and replaces the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in his absence or disability. Though the Vice Chairman was not originally included as a member of the JCS, Section 911 of the National Defense Authorization Act of 1992 made him a full voting member of the JCS.

☐ [Assistant to the Chairman](#)

This two-star oversees matters requiring close personal control by the Chairman with particular focus on international relations and politico-military concerns.

☐ [Assistants to the Chairman for National Guard and Reserve Matters](#)

These two major generals are the Chairman's subject matter experts concerning Reserve Component issues and as such provide advice and work initiatives to insure that the National Guard and Reserve effectively support the National Military Strategy.

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Military Service Chiefs

The military Service Chiefs are often said to "wear two hats." As members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, they offer advice to the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the NSC. As the chiefs of the Military Services, they are responsible to the Secretaries of their Military Departments for management of the Services. The Service Chiefs serve for 4 years. By custom, the Vice Chiefs of the Services act for their chiefs in most matters having to do with day-to-day operation of the Services. The duties of the Service Chiefs as members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff take precedence over all their other duties.

☐ The Joint Staff

The Joint Staff assists the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in accomplishing his responsibilities for: the unified strategic direction of the combatant forces; their operation under unified command; and for their integration into an efficient team of land, naval, and air forces. The "Joint Staff" is composed of approximately equal numbers of officers from the Army, Navy and Marine Corps and Air Force. In practice, the Marines make up about 20 percent of the number allocated to the Navy.

Since its establishment in 1947, statute has prohibited the Joint Staff from operating or organizing as an overall armed forces general staff; therefore, the Joint Staff has no executive authority over combatant forces.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, after consultation with other JCS members and with the approval of the Secretary of Defense, selects the Director, Joint Staff, to assist in managing the Joint Staff. By law, the direction of the Joint Staff rests exclusively with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As the Chairman directs, the Joint Staff also may assist the other JCS members in carrying out their responsibilities.

In the joint arena, a body of senior flag or general officers assists in resolving matters that do not require JCS attention. Each Service Chief appoints an operations deputy who works with the Director, Joint Staff, to form the subsidiary body known as the Operations Deputies or the OPSDEPS. They meet in sessions chaired by the Director, Joint Staff, to consider issues of lesser importance or to review major issues before they reach the Joint Chiefs of Staff. With the exception of the Director, this body is not part of the Joint Staff. There is also a subsidiary body known as the Deputy Operations Deputies (DEPOPSDEPs), composed of the Vice Director, Joint Staff, and a two-star flag or general officer appointed by each Service Chief. Currently, the DEPOPSDEPs are the Service directors for plans. Issues come before the DEPOPSDEPs to be settled at their level or forwarded to the OPSDEPS. Except for the Vice Director, Joint Staff, the DEPOPSDEPs are not part of the Joint Staff.

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Matters come before these bodies under policies prescribed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Director, Joint Staff, is authorized to review and approve issues when there is no dispute between the Services, when the issue does not warrant JCS attention, when the proposed action is in conformance with CJCS policy, or when the issue has not been raised by a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Actions completed by either the OPSDEPs or DEPOPSDEPs will have the same effect as actions by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Respectfully submitted,

Donna M. Richardson
Legislative Representative
Unit #41