

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4418 | JUNE 10, 2015

Congress Should Give Responsible Guidance on Reductions in DOD Civilian Workforce

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As the Senate considers the fiscal year 2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and as both the House and the Senate consider their defense appropriations bills, Department of Defense (DOD) civilian personnel reductions will likely be debated. If Congress mandates, individual employees should be let go based on their performance, not on their length of service.

As it stands, according to Office of Personnel Management guidance, performance is the last factor used when reductions in force are implemented, and seniority is first.¹ This means that instead of releasing their least productive civilian employees, managers are forced to cut their most recent hires regardless of performance.

While many DOD civilian employees are extremely motivated and highly productive, poor performers exist in every organization. Simultaneously, newer hires are often more motivated to work hard and are brought in because they possess specific skills or knowledge. If poor performers are not the first to go, a major reduction in personnel will both discourage high-level performance and could significantly hamper the capabilities required to support our service members.

Federal employee unions will likely fight to protect seniority in employee reductions, requiring

reformers to make their case aggressively.² In fact, Representative Mac Thornberry (R-TX), Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, included a provision in his proposed version of the NDAA that would have made performance the primary criteria for individual reductions of civilian employees.³ This provision was removed from the bill during the committee markup by an amendment supported by union groups.⁴ In the Senate, Senator John McCain (R-AZ), Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, inserted similar language into his version of the NDAA.⁵ McCain's performance requirement could face a similar attack.

If the NDAA is signed into law with mandatory civilian employee reductions but without the requirement that individuals be released based on performance, it could cause significant problems for DOD. Poor performers should be the first to go, regardless of whether they have worked for the Department for 20 days or for 20 years. Instead of removing dead weight inside DOD bureaucracies, seniority-based cuts would result in the loss of some of the young, eager, and bright DOD civilians who perform new and critical missions. A significant seniority-based cut to the DOD civilian workforce would mean less support for our service members and would weaken our national security.

DOD civilian employees play an important role in keeping our nation safe. If civilian reductions are going to be made, Congress should:

- **Ensure that individual employee reductions are made primarily based on performance.** Underperforming civilian employees could critically hamper the ability of DOD to keep our

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nation safe and diminish the ability of the various services to respond to critical and urgent threats quickly.

- **Make it clear to DOD that seniority cannot trump performance when our national security is at stake.** DOD should treat civilian employees well, but accomplishing the mission requires effective employees. Employee performance should always be the primary metric.

DOD civilians play a critical role in keeping our nation safe and secure. Many of these positions are vital and the employees who fill them should be measured by their performance. If Congress is going to reduce DOD's civilian workforce, it must do so in a way that prioritizes strong and effective employees.

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 3. Armed Services Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, "H.R. 1735—FY16 National Defense Authorization Bill: Chairman's Mark," April 29, 2015, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20150429/103288/BILLS-114HR1735ih-FC.pdf> (accessed June 5, 2015).
 4. William Samuel, Director of Government Affairs, American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, letter to Members of the U.S. House of Representatives, April 28, 2015, <http://www.aflcio.org/content/download/155021/3872651/file/AFL-CIO%27s%20letter%20on%20the%20NDAA.pdf> (accessed June 5, 2015).
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