

Air Force could recall as many as 1,000 retired pilots to address serious shortage

By [Tom Vanden Brook and Gregory Korte](#), USA TODAY Published 4:18 p.m. ET Oct. 20, 2017 | Updated 8:50 p.m. ET Oct. 20, 2017

WASHINGTON — President Trump signed an executive order Friday allowing the Air Force to recall as many as 1,000 retired pilots to active duty to address a shortage in combat fliers, the White House and Pentagon announced.

By law, only 25 retired officers can be brought back to serve in any one branch. Trump's order removes those caps by expanding a state of national emergency declared by President George W. Bush after 9/11, signaling what could be a significant escalation in the 16-year-old global war on terror.

"We anticipate that the Secretary of Defense will delegate the authority to the Secretary of the Air Force to recall up to 1,000 retired pilots for up to three years," Navy Cdr. Gary Ross, a Pentagon spokesman, said in a statement.

But the executive order itself is not specific to the Air Force, and could conceivably be used in the future to call up more officers and in other branches.

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The Air Force needs about 1,500 pilots more than it has. Bonus programs and other incentives have not made up the shortfall.

The Air Force has been at the forefront of the Pentagon's battle against the Islamic State, flying most of the combat sorties in Iraq and Syria since 2014.

In June, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., labeled the pilot shortage a crisis that would prevent the Air Force from fulfilling its mission.

"This is a full-blown crisis, and if left unresolved, it will call into question the Air Force's ability to accomplish its mission," said McCain, chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

Richard Aboulafia, an aviation analyst and vice president of the Teal Group, said the shortage stemmed from a number of issues.

"One is competition from commercial airlines," Aboulafia said. "Another is delays and funding shortfalls in training. And, due to military operations, utilization of the aircraft and crew has been higher than expected."

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On Capitol Hill, Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., and a member of Armed Services Committee, said that the fight against Islamic State and al-Qaeda linked terrorists will be expanding. He spoke to reporters while speaking about the four U.S. soldiers killed Oct. 4 in Niger.

Counter-terrorism rules under President Obama had been too restrictive and ineffective, Graham said.

"The war is morphing," Graham said. "You're going to see more actions in Africa, not less. You're going to see more aggression by the United States toward our enemies, not less. You're going to have decisions made not in the White House but out in the field. And I support that entire construct."

Last month, President Trump became the third president to renew the post-9/11 state of national emergency, which allows the president to call up the national guard, hire and fire officers and delay retirements.

Those extraordinary powers were supposed to be temporary. But even after 16 years, there's been [no congressional oversight of the emergency](#).