

CREATIVE DISRUPTORS IN THE DESERT

Feb. 20–21, 2026 | Disruptors in The Desert

LA QUINTA, CALIFORNIA

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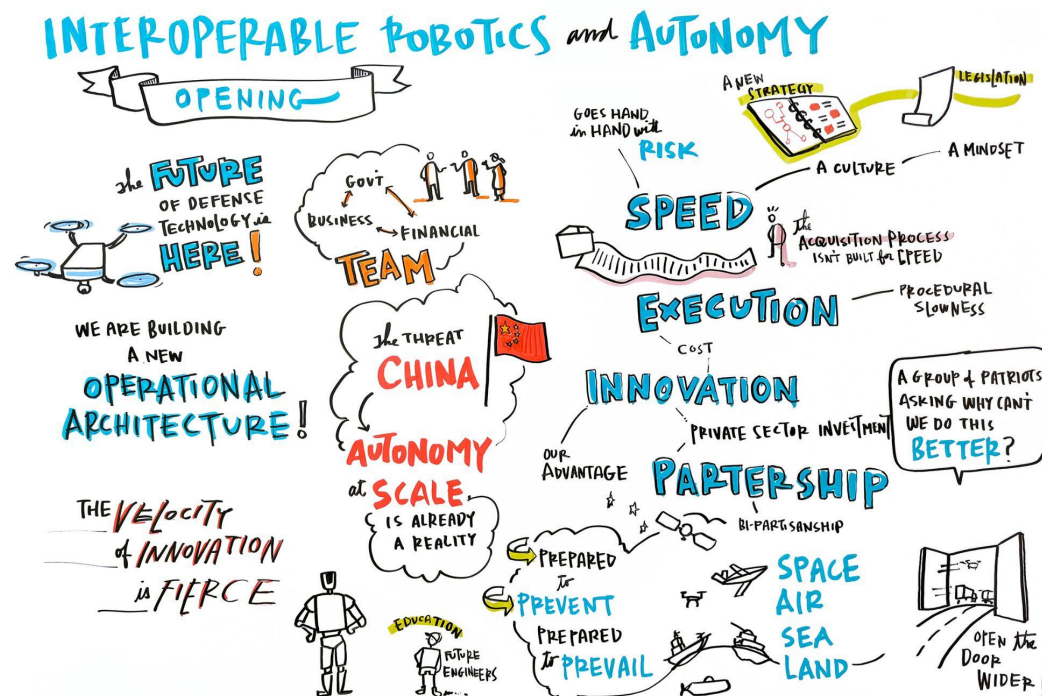
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Opening Remarks

Summary

The Creative Defense Foundation convened a high-level triad of government, industry, and finance leaders at the **2026 Creative Disruptors in the Desert** conference to formalize a new operational architecture centered on interoperable robotics and autonomy. Moving beyond mere hardware acquisition, the agenda focused on building an adaptable and composable force designed to outpace 21st-century threats through unprecedented cross-sector collaboration.

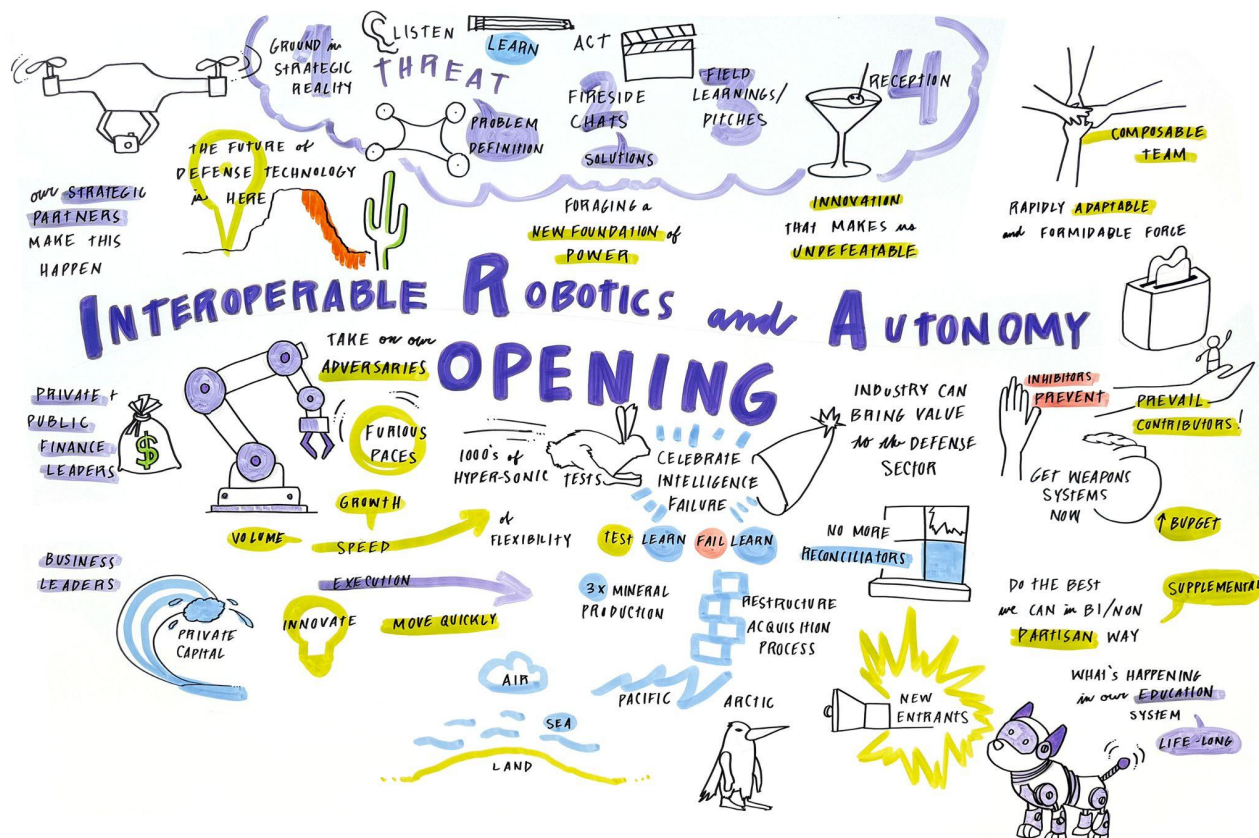
The gathering signaled a definitive shift from traditional defense procurement toward a high-velocity innovation ecosystem that integrates private sector creativity with strategic military requirements to forge a new foundation of national power.



Honorary Co-Hosts & Congressional Attendees

Summary

The co-hosts underscored a critical pivot in national defense strategy, prioritizing "speed of relevance" over traditional bureaucratic risk-aversion to counter the rapid military expansion of global adversaries. Congressional and defense leaders emphasized a historic coalescence between government and the private sector, aiming to integrate massive flows of private capital and commercial innovation into the national arsenal. The overarching takeaway was a commitment to dismantling procedural barriers and scaling mass-producible, low-cost technologies to ensure American dominance in a defining 21st-century arms race.



Honorary Co-Hosts & Congressional Attendees

Key Themes

- **Velocity as a Strategic Mandate:** The discussion centered on transitioning from lengthy, multi-year design cycles to rapid prototyping and "intelligent failure" to outpace adversary development timelines.
- **Integration of Private Capital:** Leaders highlighted the necessity of leveraging the \$90 billion+ in private AI investment and venture capital to fuel revolutions in autonomy and space outside of traditional military R&D.
- **Acquisition and Regulatory Reform:** There was a focused effort to remove inhibitors—bureaucratic gatekeepers and rigid requirements—in favor of contributors who prioritize delivery and mission success.
- **Fiscal Agility and Bipartisanship:** Participants advocated for returning to regular order appropriations and utilizing bipartisan supplementals to address immediate capability gaps while planning for substantial top-line budget increases.
- **Workforce and Regional Infrastructure:** Strategic emphasis was placed on regional innovation hubs and lifelong learning initiatives to bridge the critical gap in engineering and trade talent.

Additional Insights

- **The Tuition of Failure:** A notable perspective emerged that failed prototypes should be viewed as "tuition" paid for faster learning rather than wasted effort, marking a major cultural shift in oversight.
- **Historical Mobilization Parallels:** Speakers compared the current level of collaboration between the Pentagon and Congress to the pre-World War II mobilization of the "Arsenal of Democracy."
- **Arctic Strategic Emergence:** Leaders identified the Arctic as an emerging theater of competition, requiring new technological investments for a region where adversaries are increasingly active.
- **The Shift to New Entrants:** There was a strong signal that the defense sector is moving toward a more inclusive ecosystem where "new entrants" and non-traditional primes are expected to break through with real contracts this fiscal year.

Honorary Co-Hosts & Congressional Attendees

Actionable Recommendations

- **Streamline Technology Transition Pathways:** Establish clearer, faster routes for dual-use startups to move from tech validation to scaled production contracts, reducing the drag of government processes.
- **Adopt Commercial Production Models:** Replicate successful commercial-style agreements that incentivize vendors to spend private capital on expanding production capacity for critical munitions.
- **Prioritize Attritable Mass:** Shift the acquisition mix toward low-cost, mass-producible systems to counter the volume and scale being fielded by competitors.
- **Decouple Requirements from Engineering Perfection:** Encourage a culture that accepts 80% solutions delivered quickly rather than chasing 100% perfection through decades of development.
- **Formalize Regional Innovation Hubs:** Utilize consortium models and shared infrastructure, such as proving grounds, to support early-stage ventures and regional workforce development.

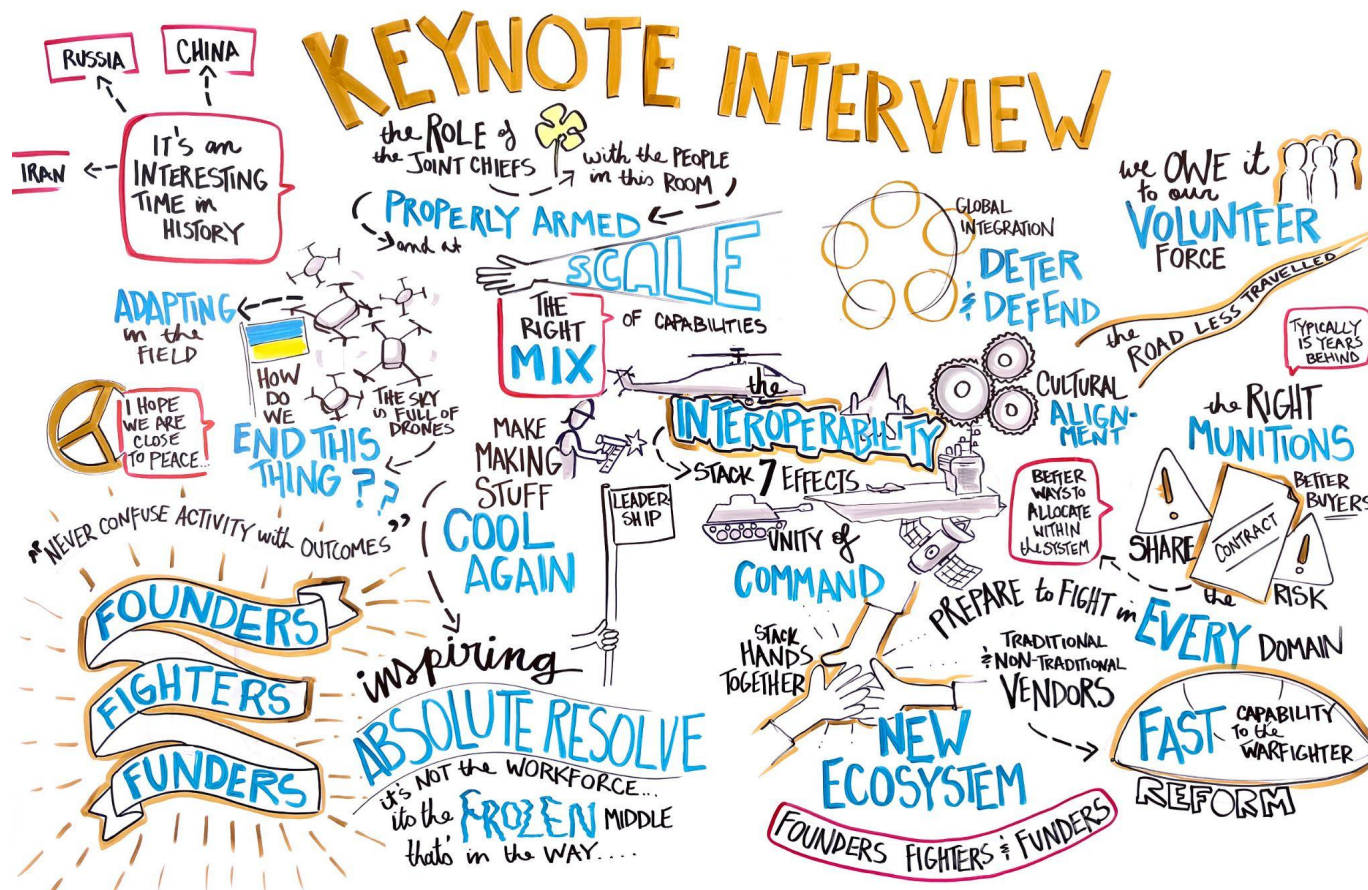
Key Challenges

- **Adversary Lead Times:** Significant lead times in hypersonic testing and naval fleet expansion by global competitors have created an urgent execution gap that the current system struggles to close.
- **Bureaucratic Risk-Aversion:** Deep-seated procedural habits and "lock-box" funding mechanisms continue to block the rapid adoption of innovative technologies.
- **Budgetary Friction:** The complexity of navigating reconciliation bills versus regular appropriations creates uncertainty and potential "broken glass" scenarios for major service branches.
- **Workforce Shortages:** Critical gaps in tradespeople and specialized engineers, particularly in the submarine and aerospace sectors, threaten the long-term scalability of the defense industrial base.

Keynote Interview

Summary

This discussion addressed the imperative of national readiness under the 2026 National Defense Strategy, emphasizing a shift toward proactive, tech-forward procurement. The discussion centered on moving beyond traditional defense silos to integrating the national industrial base and private sector capital, aiming to secure a properly armed force before crises erupt. Ultimately, the discussion underscored that maintaining a credible deterrent requires a cultural overhaul of the acquisition system to prioritize speed, shared risk, and the rapid scaling of autonomous and software-defined capabilities.



Keynote Interview

Key Themes

- **Proactive Procurement:** Shifting the department's focus from buying technology that is 15 years behind the commercial curve to procuring capabilities ahead of the development cycle.
- **Integrated Global Deterrence:** Leveraging the equation of goodness—combining active forces, reserves, the intelligence community, and international allies—to present simultaneous dilemmas to near-peer adversaries.
- **Three Pillars of Innovation:** Aligning Founders, Funders, and Fighters as the three pillars of innovation to bridge the valley of death and ensure that private capital acts as a shock absorber for government acquisition.
- **National Industrial Revitalization:** Rebuilding the domestic Mom & Pop machine shops and skilled trade labor force as a fundamental component of national security.
- **Operational Interoperability:** Utilizing lessons from successful joint operations to layer kinetic and non-kinetic effects across all domains, from the seabed to lunar space.

Additional Insights

- **The Mission Hook:** Specialized talent, particularly in software and cyber, demonstrate a willingness to forgo higher private-sector compensation when they feel a direct, tactical connection to the success of a mission.
- **Dystopian Battlefield Realities:** Observations from current European conflicts reveal a World War I style of trench warfare integrated with high-tech fiber optic drones, indicating a shift away from traditional radio-frequency environments.
- **Domain Expansion:** The joint force must now prepare for a warfighting theater that extends from the seabed to lunar and beyond within the current generation's lifetime.
- **The Reality of Mass:** While the U.S. focuses on high-end platforms, adversaries are producing millions of drones annually, necessitating a shift toward quantity and software-enabled agility.

Keynote Interview

Actionable Recommendations

- **Implement Shared Risk Contracting:** Redesign contract structures to balance the financial burden between the government and private innovators, incentivizing rapid scaling over bureaucratic compliance.
- **Accelerate Attritable Mass:** Prioritize the production of low-cost, autonomous systems at scale to counter the "quantity as quality" business models of modern adversaries.
- **Incentivize the Manufacturing Workforce:** Launch national initiatives to connect trade labor and manufacturing roles to high-stakes missions, mirroring the successful mission-driven recruitment seen in the cyber and intelligence communities.
- **Bypass the Frozen Middle:** Empower senior leadership to utilize blowtorch tactics to remove mid-level bureaucratic layers that stall the transition of technology from the lab to the 18-year-old Warfighter.

Key Challenges

- **The Technology Lag:** Today's legacy systems excel at procuring outdated tech, leaving the joint force at a disadvantage against rapidly adapting adversaries.
- **Industrial Atrophy:** Decades of outsourcing have resulted in a critical shortage of skilled labor, such as welders and machinists, and a diminished domestic supply chain for steel and microelectronics.
- **Capital Uncertainty:** The lack of Long-Term Agreements (LTAs) and inconsistent funding cycles discourage private sector investment and facility expansion.
- **The House of Pain:** A defense acquisition system that remains badly broken despite years of reform efforts, often prioritizing activity over tangible warfighting outcomes.

This discussion centered on the Department of War's (DoWs) aggressive pivot from "innovation theater" to the large-scale, combat-ready deployment of critical technologies. Leaders emphasized that structural consolidation of innovation units and the implementation of shared risk models were essential to matching the pace of peer adversaries and breaking decades of bureaucratic stagnation. By prioritizing speed to delivery and volume over traditional administrative metrics, the DoW has sought to transform the defense industrial base into a responsive, commercially-driven ecosystem that ensures warfighter overmatch through 2028 and beyond.



Fireside Chat with Under Secretaries of War

Key Themes

- **Structural Realignment and Focus:** Consolidating disparate innovation offices under a unified Chief Technology Officer to eliminate duplication and focus on high-priority sprints in areas like applied AI, hypersonics, and directed energy.
- **Commercial Integration and Shared Risk:** Shifting toward business models where industry partners invest private capital and take on developmental risk in exchange for stable, multi-year demand signals.
- **Rapid AI Scaling:** Transitioning from experimental AI use to enterprise-wide adoption, significantly increasing the user base to accelerate everything from administrative tasks to battlefield decision-making.
- **Open Systems Architecture:** Prioritizing modular, interoperable frameworks that allow for the rapid plug-and-play of new technologies, preventing vendor lock-in and maintaining competition throughout a system's lifecycle.

Additional Insights

- **Deterrence as a Metric:** Success is increasingly defined not by internal milestones, but by shifting the adversary's calculus so they think twice before taking action.
- **AI-Driven Time Collapse:** New entrants demonstrate that integrating AI into testing infrastructure could reduce post-processing and uncertainty analysis from six months to less than three minutes.
- **Allies as Proving Grounds:** Realignment of foreign military sales allows for a proving ground model where allies could adopt and test innovative U.S. technologies before the domestic department was ready for full integration.
- **Personnel as Policy:** High-level leaders argue that recent progress is being driven less by new rules and more by placing disruptive, commercially-minded leaders into key decision-making roles.

Fireside Chat with Under Secretaries of War

Actionable Recommendations

- **Accelerate Contracting Cycles:** Align contract award timelines with the pace of technological change rather than rigid administrative processes to prevent losing momentum with small and nontraditional innovators.
- **Incentivize Private Capital:** Utilize multi-year procurement authorities and agreements to provide the stability necessary for industry to invest in expanded production capacity.
- **Maximize Government Intellectual Property:** Expand programs like Patent Holidays to allow entrepreneurs royalty-free access to government-funded lab innovations, catalyzing new product development.
- **Empower a Risk-Tolerant Culture:** Train the acquisition workforce to move away from a zero-failure mindset in development, treating prototype failures as necessary learning moments rather than programmatic setbacks.

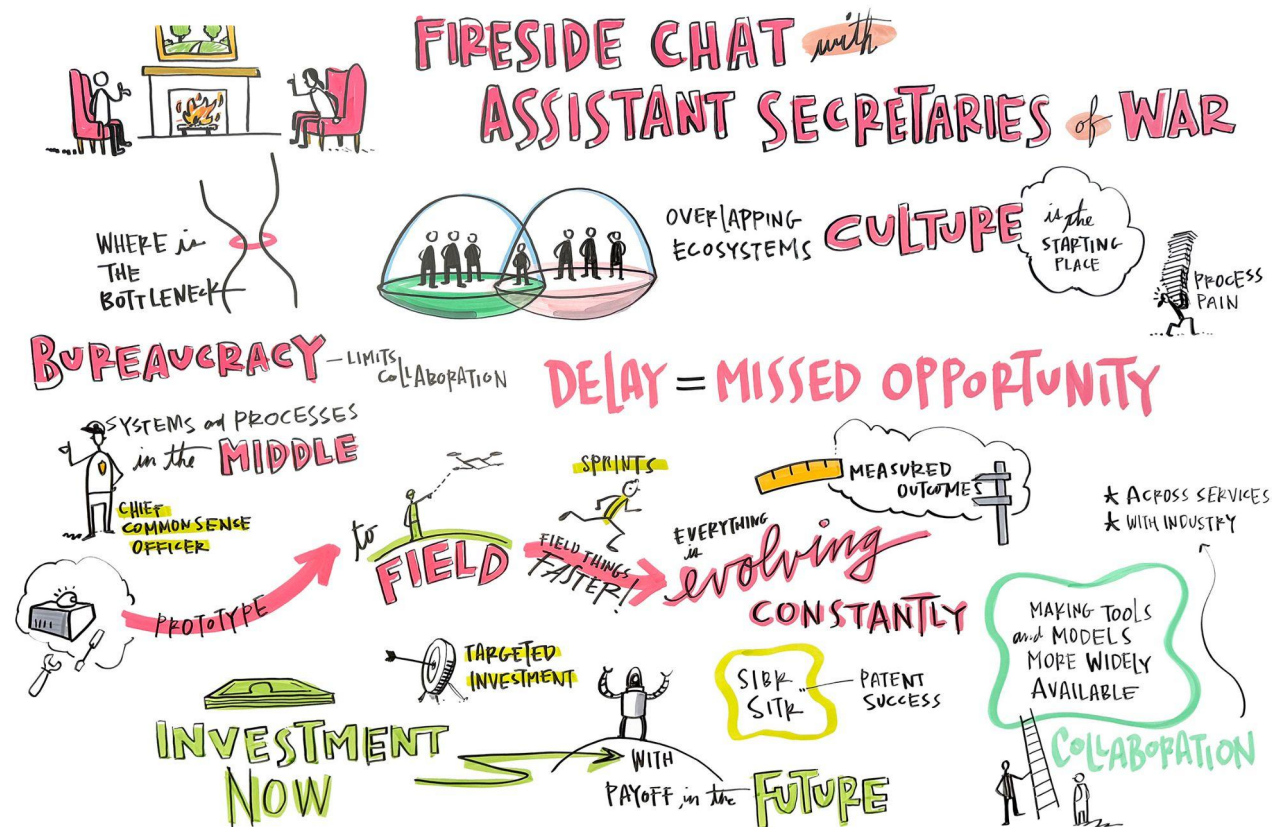
Key Challenges

- **Bureaucratic Barnacles:** Overcoming decades of entrenched culture and complex processes within a massive acquisition workforce that remains naturally resistant to rapid change.
- **Adversarial Industrial Capacity:** Addressing the rapid military buildup of peer competitors who possessed significant industrial scale and a higher tolerance for developmental risk.
- **Production Bottlenecks:** Resolving constraints in the supply chain, particularly regarding critical minerals and solid rocket motors, which threatened to limit the scaling of munitions and advanced systems.
- **Modernization Failure Rates:** Managing the high inherent risk of failure in long-term software projects and the transition of old business systems into modern, AI-driven environments.

Fireside Chat with Assistant Secretaries of War

Summary

This discussion centered on a pivotal shift in the Department of War's (DoWs) approach to technology, moving from isolated prototyping to a unified, execution-oriented innovation ecosystem. Leaders emphasized that while top-down vision and bottom-up innovation exists, the "middle tier" of bureaucracy remains a critical bottleneck for scaling capabilities. By fostering unprecedented collaboration between senior leadership and the joint force, the department aims to bridge the valley of death and deliver operationally relevant technology within twenty-four months. The ultimate goal is to transition from a culture of deliberation to one of decisive action, ensuring the United States maintains a decisive technological advantage in both immediate and long-term horizons.



Fireside Chat with Assistant Secretaries of War

Key Themes

- **Systemic Scaling Success:** Leadership reframed the challenge of scaling prototypes into a rainforest of opportunity by establishing clear processes for rapid production and fielding.
- **Decisive Cross-Functional Collaboration:** Under Secretaries and the Joint Staff have utilized direct, daily communication to dismantle institutional silos and accelerate the decision-making cycle.
- **Agile Acquisition Sprints:** Development timelines were compressed from decades into focused, twenty-four-month sprints with predefined transition pathways and measured outcomes.
- **Standardized Mission Engineering:** The department formalized the use of shared data standards and simulation to ensure all new hardware and software remained interoperable and threat-informed.
- **Strategic Capital Integration:** Officials prioritized the use of institutional finance and private capital to provide non-traditional firms with the financial capacity required to scale at the speed of relevance.

Additional Insights

- **Direct Communication Efficiency:** The speakers described a desire for an Under Secretary “email culture” to bypass traditional committee-based delays, allowing senior leaders to resolve complex issues in real-time.
- **Proven Investment ROI:** Data revealed that Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grants act as a force multiplier, with every dollar invested attracting four dollars in additional funding.
- **Bias for Action:** Leadership emphasized two-way decisions, favoring rapid choices that can be adjusted later over the pursuit of 100% perfection upfront.
- **Concentrated Strategic Focus:** The department intentionally narrowed its priority list from fourteen critical technology areas to six to ensure maximum senior-level oversight.
- **Versatile Maritime Capability:** The successful integration of runway-independent technology demonstrated the potential to transform any surface vessel into a functional aircraft carrier.

Fireside Chat with Assistant Secretaries of War

Actionable Recommendations

- **Empower Bureaucracy Reformers:** Appoint mid-level leaders as "chief common sense officers" tasked with eliminating inefficient processes to accelerate production approvals.
- **Mandate Technical Transparency:** Require industry partners to publish interface control documents and APIs to ensure joint force interoperability and eliminate proprietary stovepiping.
- **Synchronize Budgetary Alignment:** Integrate research and development efforts with service budgetary timelines during early prototyping to secure seamless transitions into programs of record.
- **Expand Simulation Access:** Provide industry partners with advanced modeling and simulation tools to grant tech companies a clearer understanding of how their products impact warfighting outcomes.
- **Incentivize High-Stakes Risk:** Encourage aggressive risk-taking by rewarding failed sprints, ensuring only the most viable and disruptive technologies receive long-term investment.

Key Challenges

- **Persistent Bureaucratic Resistance:** The intermediate levels of military services continue to serve as a bottleneck, hindering the movement of innovation through administrative systems.
- **Mismatched Programming Timelines:** A significant gap remains between rapid technology development cycles and the slow-moving, multi-year federal budget process.
- **Information Sharing Barriers:** Over-classification and internal security silos frequently prevent industry partners from accessing vital threat intelligence and performance data.
- **Critical Supply Vulnerabilities:** Reliance on single-source suppliers or foreign components remains a primary blocker for the low-rate initial production of advanced systems.
- **Obsolete Certification Standards:** Outdated legal and reliability frameworks, particularly in biomanufacturing, continue to delay the acquisition of cutting-edge technologies.

Fireside Chat with U.S. Navy Leaders

Summary

This discussion centered on transforming the Navy's acquisition and operational frameworks to match the accelerating pace of modern warfare, specifically regarding autonomous systems and software-defined capabilities. Leadership emphasized a shift from legacy, Cold War-era organizational structures toward agile program offices designed to prioritize speed, scale, and combat mass. The discussion concluded that success depends on creating a unified general operating system for the fleet that allows for the seamless adoption of private-sector innovation while reimagining the sailor as a fungible knowledge worker capable of managing complex, integrated technology.



Fireside Chat with U.S. Navy Leaders

Key Themes

- **Reforming Organizational Structures:** Shifting from rigid, legacy program structures to consolidated agencies built for speed and scale to maximize return on investment.
- **Innovation vs. Adoption:** Recognizing that the primary hurdle was not a lack of technological discovery, but rather the systemic adoption problem of integrating and fielding new capabilities.
- **Autonomy as an Industrial Discipline:** Moving unmanned systems beyond experimental "science projects" into a standardized industrial discipline that provides reliable combat mass.
- **The Foundry, Fleet, and Fight Framework:** Implementing a holistic approach to the kill chain where the industrial base (Foundry) directly enables the fleet to deliver decisive tactical effects (Fight).

Additional Insights

- **Software as Operational Maneuver:** The realization that real-time software updates now function as a critical form of tactical maneuver in modern maritime conflicts.
- **Invisible Learning:** The concept that failed experiments provide essential data that must be recognized and valued to prevent future errors and accelerate development.
- **The Fungible Sailor:** A vision for a future force where sailors act as versatile knowledge workers, using intuitive app-like interfaces to manage diverse systems regardless of their specific technical specialty.
- **Combat Mass vs. Autonomy:** The consensus that while autonomy enables capability, it must be paired with physical combat mass to culminate in a decisive military victory.

Fireside Chat with U.S. Navy Leaders

Actionable Recommendations

- **Standardize a General Operating System:** Develop an open-architecture framework for the fleet to allow for plug-and-play integration of commercial technologies and rapid software updates.
- **Expand the Industrial Footprint:** Leverage regional and international partnerships for shipbuilding and component manufacturing to bypass domestic workforce limitations and supply chain bottlenecks.
- **Establish Adoption Cells:** Integrate engineers and acquisition personnel directly with warfare development centers to ensure tactics and training are developed in parallel with new prototypes.
- **Pilot "Capability-as-a-Service" Models:** Explore Contractor-Owned, Contractor-Operated (COCO) business deals to offload the sustainment and logistical burden of autonomous systems from the fleet.
- **Incentivize Disciplined Risk:** Reform the institutional reward structure to favor intellectual exploration and invisible learning over the current culture of error prevention and compliance.

Key Challenges

- **Cultural Risk Aversion:** A persistent organizational bias that punishes failure and prioritizes predictability, which continues to stifle the speed of innovation.
- **The "Last Tactical Mile":** Significant logistical and command-and-control hurdles in deploying and maintaining a persistent, unmanned presence in distant maritime theaters.
- **Fragmented Demand Signals:** Inconsistent communication between the warfighter and the research community, leading to duplicative efforts and misaligned funding across different agencies.
- **Legislative Constraints:** Restrictive domestic-sourcing requirements that limit the Navy's ability to leverage global partners for shipbuilding and modular component production.

Fireside Chat with U.S. Army Leaders

Summary

This discussion highlighted the US Army's progression toward a decentralized, outcome-focused innovation model that prioritizes operational speed and direct soldier feedback over centralized bureaucratic processes. By empowering tactical commanders with localized acquisition authority and streamlining requirements into concise, software-oriented pathways, the service is fostering a culture of "transforming in contact." This strategic shift is aimed to dismantle traditional barriers between legacy primes and nontraditional innovators, creating a unified industrial ecosystem capable of responding to rapidly evolving battlefield threats in real-time.





Fireside Chat with U.S. Army Leaders

Key Themes

- **Decentralization of Decision-making:** Authorities, including contracting and acquisition risk, were moved from headquarters to local commands and operational leaders to increase agility.
- **Interoperability as a Global Common:** The discussion emphasized moving away from proprietary architectures toward open standards and global commons to reduce the climbing costs of system integration.
- **Data-Informed Portfolio Management:** The implementation of live data environments has allowed leadership to view the enterprise as a whole, enabling faster trades across programs based on performance and warfighter needs.
- **Outcome-Oriented Metrics:** Success is increasingly defined by the speed and effectiveness of capabilities delivered to the field, rather than strict adherence to legacy cost and schedule benchmarks.

Additional Insights

- **The Four-Page Requirement:** A notable "aha" moment occurred with the revelation that a multi-billion dollar command-and-control system was managed via a requirements document of only four pages, signaling a radical departure from legacy norms.
- **Commanders as Product Managers:** Division commanders are increasingly serving as de facto product managers, taking direct responsibility for how new platforms are integrated and utilized within their formations.
- **Organic Teaming:** Industry is shifting toward self-organizing teaming arrangements and collaborative, best-of-breed ecosystems while moving away from government-mandated "winner-take-all" prime contracts.
- **Stealth Implementation:** Leadership noted that some significant structural changes, such as moving contracting authorities, were executed quietly to allow them to mature and show results before facing broader institutional criticism.

Fireside Chat with U.S. Army Leaders

Actionable Recommendations

- **Incentivize Calculated Risk:** Revise personnel evaluation systems for contracting officers and program managers to reward innovative outcomes and mission impact rather than procedural safety.
- **Adopt Streamlined Requirements Documents:** Transition from voluminous, rigid requirements to concise software pathways—some as short as four pages—to accelerate the transition from concept to fielding.
- **Optimize Certification Protocols:** Develop faster, cost-effective certification processes for additive manufacturing and commercial parts to ensure sustainment innovation remains economically viable for industry partners.
- **Expand Edge Acquisition Outposts:** Scale the model of integrated innovation outposts where operators, acquisition professionals, and industry partners collaborate in proximity to solve specific tactical problems.

Key Challenges

- **Institutional Design Lock:** The persistent habit of over-specifying requirements early in the process often leads to rigid systems that become obsolete before they're fielded.
- **Sustainment Certification Barriers:** While new parts can be engineered in days, the high cost and long timelines of government certification often neutralizes the benefits of rapid manufacturing.
- **Incentive Alignment:** Shifting a deeply ingrained culture from risk-avoidance to outcome-pursuit remains a significant hurdle for personnel within the traditional acquisition ranks.
- **Capital Retention:** Without clear signals and wins from the government, private investment for dual-use technologies risks migrating toward more lucrative sectors like FinTech.

Fireside Chat with Air & Space Acquisition Leaders

Summary

This discussion highlighted a critical shift toward mission-driven acquisition, prioritizing the rapid delivery of warfighting capabilities over traditional administrative benchmarks. Success in high-priority Air and Space programs was attributed to the consolidation of authorities and a leadership culture that embraced "failing forward" to bypass bureaucratic silos. However, it was also noted that systemic hurdles in testing certification and a rigid personnel recruitment process remained significant barriers to scaling these innovation models across the broader Department of War.



Fireside Chat with Air & Space Acquisition Leaders

Key Themes

- **Unified Authority and Oversight:** The integration of requirements and acquisition authorities into single points of leadership eliminates functional bifurcations and accelerates delivery timelines for critical platforms.
- **Outcome-Based Management:** A fundamental pivot is occurring where programs are increasingly managed by mission outcomes and operational readiness rather than the traditional focus on the business deal.
- **Private Sector Risk-Taking:** Nontraditional contractors and privately held firms are frequently required to invest significant capital and establish production lines ahead of formal government orders to remain competitive.
- **Proactive Industry Engagement:** New "Front Door" initiatives and two-way communication channels are being established to provide industry with threat-based information and more accessible entry points for dual-use technology.

Additional Insights

- **Leveraging CRADAs:** Cooperative Research and Development Agreements (CRADAs) serve as a highly effective, zero-cost mechanism for granting nontraditional firms access to secure ranges and facilities.
- **Mission as a Recruitment Tool:** Emphasizing the greater purpose of national security proves more effective than financial incentives for attracting and retaining top-tier engineering talent.
- **The Power Trap:** Leaders caution that consolidated authority must be used to foster partnership rather than being weaponized to bypass necessary integration with service partners.
- **Rapid Prototyping Success:** The Collaborative Combat Aircraft (CCA) model demonstrates that a pre-production design can move from inception to first flight within only twenty-four months.

Fireside Chat with Air & Space Acquisition Leaders

Actionable Recommendations

- **Scale Pathfinder Models:** Replicate the direct reporting and rapid-prototyping frameworks used in successful aircraft programs across all major defense acquisition portfolios.
- **Accelerate Qualification Cycles:** Utilize modeling and simulation more aggressively to compress five-year testing and certification timelines for foundational technologies like energetics.
- **Modernize Human Capital Acquisition:** Overhaul the ninety-day hiring process to mirror commercial speeds and implement remote-work options to attract specialized talent in rural or high-cost areas.
- **Adopt Descriptive Requirements:** Move away from prescriptive specifications in favor of descriptive problem sets, allowing industry partners more flexibility to propose innovative solutions.

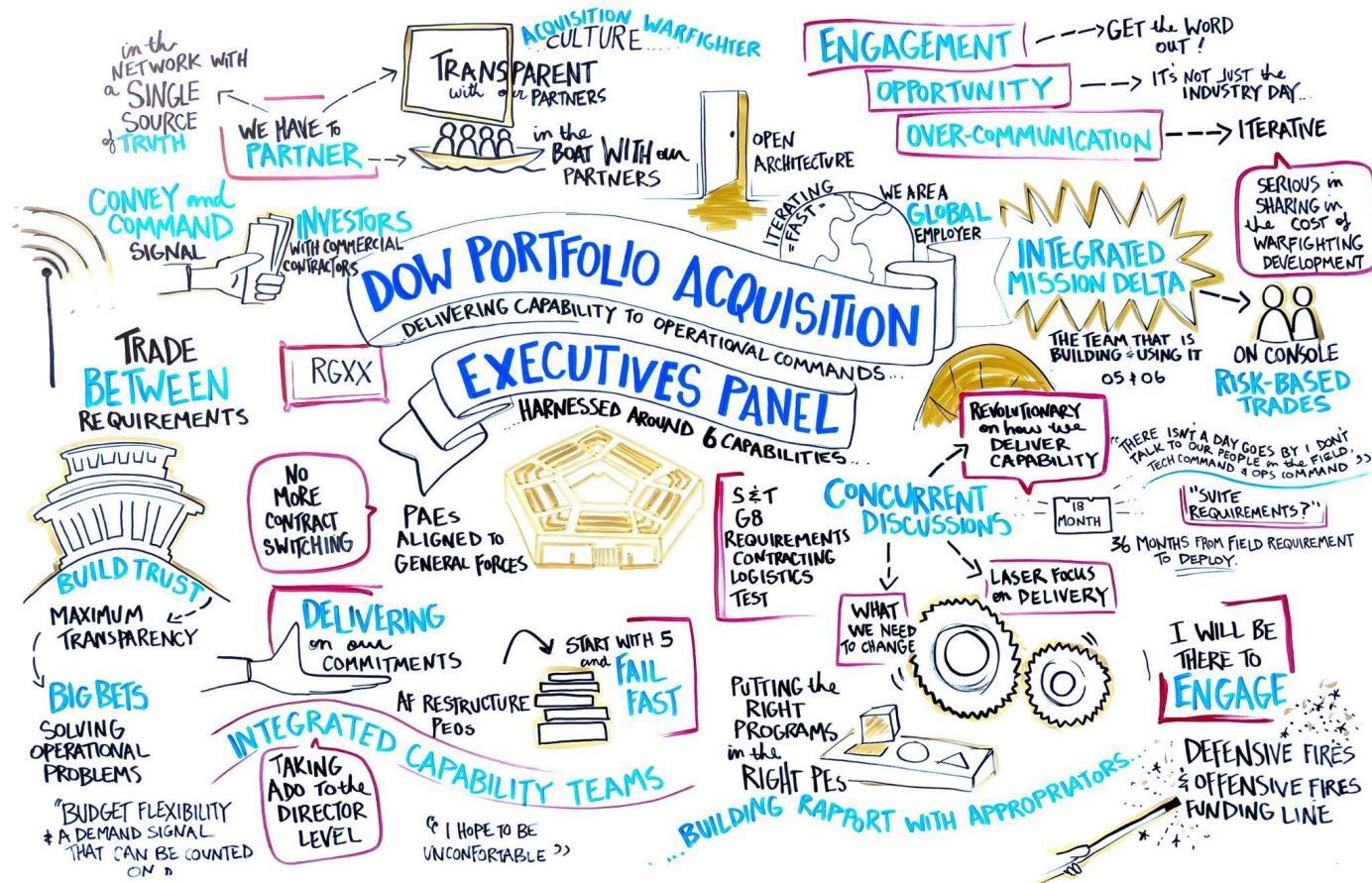
Key Challenges

- **The Valley of Death in Certification:** Lengthy and outdated qualification processes are forcing domestic startups to seek foreign markets to maintain financial viability.
- **Acquisition Workforce Risk-Aversion:** A cultural lack of "intestinal fortitude" within the workforce often prevents the use of existing legal authorities to streamline programs.
- **Contracting Officer Shortages:** Significant attrition in the contracting workforce, coupled with a slow onboarding process, creates a bottleneck for finalizing agreements with nontraditional partners.
- **Bureaucratic Distractions:** Traditional processes, such as the Analysis of Alternatives (AOA), are often viewed as distractions that delay progress on programs with clearly defined operational gaps.

DOW Portfolio Acquisition Executives Panel

Summary

The closing discussion marked a fundamental pivot in defense acquisition, moving away from siloed program models toward an empowered Portfolio Acquisition Executive (PAE) structure. By consolidating authorities over requirements, budgets, contracting, and testing under single accountable officials, the department aims to collapse traditional decade-long development timelines into rapid eighteen-to-thirty-six-month cycles. This transformation signals a wartime footing designed to prioritize integrated suites of capability and speed of delivery over bureaucratic compliance, ensuring the nation remains lethal against evolving peer threats.



DOW Portfolio Acquisition Executives Panel

Key Themes

- **Unity of Command:** The transition from Program Executive Officers (PEOs) to Portfolio Acquisition Executives (PAEs) centralizes control over disparate functions—including Science & Technology, contracting, and logistics—to eliminate "unity of effort" friction.
- **Open Architecture as a Mandate:** Adherence to Government Reference Architectures and Modular Open Systems Approach (MOSA) becomes the "ante to enter," enabling continuous competition and rapid plug-and-play capability insertion.
- **Shift from Vertical to Horizontal Integration:** A move away from stovepiped platform upgrades (e.g., individual fighter variants) toward cross-cutting mission systems and integrated battle networks is desired.
- **Radical Transparency with Stakeholders:** A commitment to over-communication with Congress and industry to rebuild trust, aiming for greater budget flexibility in exchange for honest, real-time reporting on performance and failures is desired.

Additional Insights

- **Acquisition Warfighter Identity:** A cultural shift where acquisition professionals viewed themselves as active participants in the kill chain, waking up with the same sense of urgency as the operators in the field.
- **The Hedge Force Concept:** The Navy's strategic separation of capital assets from hedge forces—tailored, low-cost autonomous offsets designed for rapid attrition and high-impact disruption.
- **Informal Hill Engagement:** A recognized need for informal, high-frequency touchpoints with Congressional staffers to maintain rapport outside of formal hearings.
- **Success through Discomfort:** A vision for a future state where the pace of innovation makes senior leadership "uncomfortable," signifying that the system is finally pushing its limits

DOW Portfolio Acquisition Executives Panel

Actionable Recommendations

- **Standardize Rapid Prototyping Timelines:** Target a maximum of 36 months from directed requirements to Warfighters to keep pace with technological and threat evolution.
- **Embed Acquirers with Operational Units:** Deploy acquisition professionals directly into mission deltas and forward-deployed commands to ensure immediate feedback loops and risk discussions rather than risk transfers.
- **Incentivize Production Line Leverage:** Prioritize commercial-off-the-shelf production lines and existing supplier bases to achieve inexpensive mass and affordability rather than building unique, bespoke systems.
- **Consolidate Budget Line Items:** Work with Congressional appropriators to merge individual program lines into broader portfolio funding streams to allow for rapid trades and reallocation during execution.

Key Challenges

- **Legacy Cultural Inertia:** Overcoming the program-centric mindset and the historical tendency for the government to avoid talking to industry unless a formal contract is open.
- **Budgetary Rigidity:** Navigating the current "death by a thousand budget lines" that prevents PAEs from making rapid trades to address emerging crises.
- **Sustainment of Distributed Assets:** Ensuring that rapid delivery does not come at the expense of wholeness, specifically maintenance and depot-level support for robotic and autonomous systems.
- **Technical Compliance:** The difficulty of forcing long-standing industry partners to move away from proprietary, locked systems toward truly open, interoperable architectures.