How To Use This Directory

Welcome

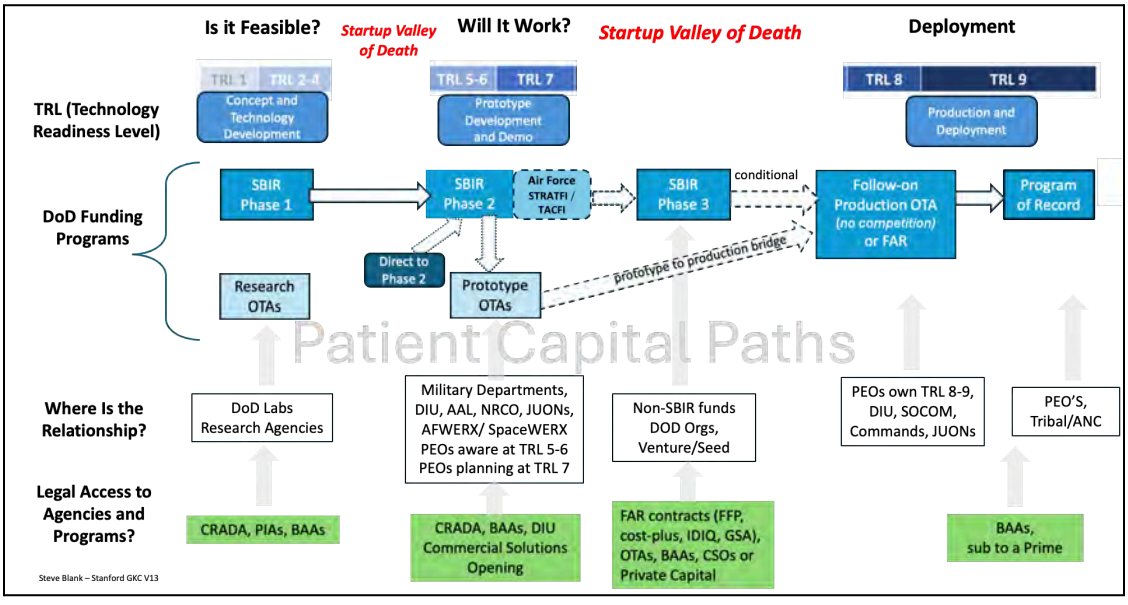
PAEs, CPEs, PEOs, PMs, PIAs, PoRs, Consortia, SBIRs, OTAs, CSOs, FAR, CUI, SAM, CRADAs, Primes, Mid-tier Integrators, Tribal/ANC Firms, Direct-to-Operator, Direct-to-Field Units, Labs, DD-254… For a startup it's an entirely new language, new buzzwords, new partners, new rules and it requires a new "Go-To-Market (GTM)" strategy. At first, it's overwhelming but if you read through this section, refer to the rest of this document, follow the links, and read the Appendices, you can get a running start in making sense of it.

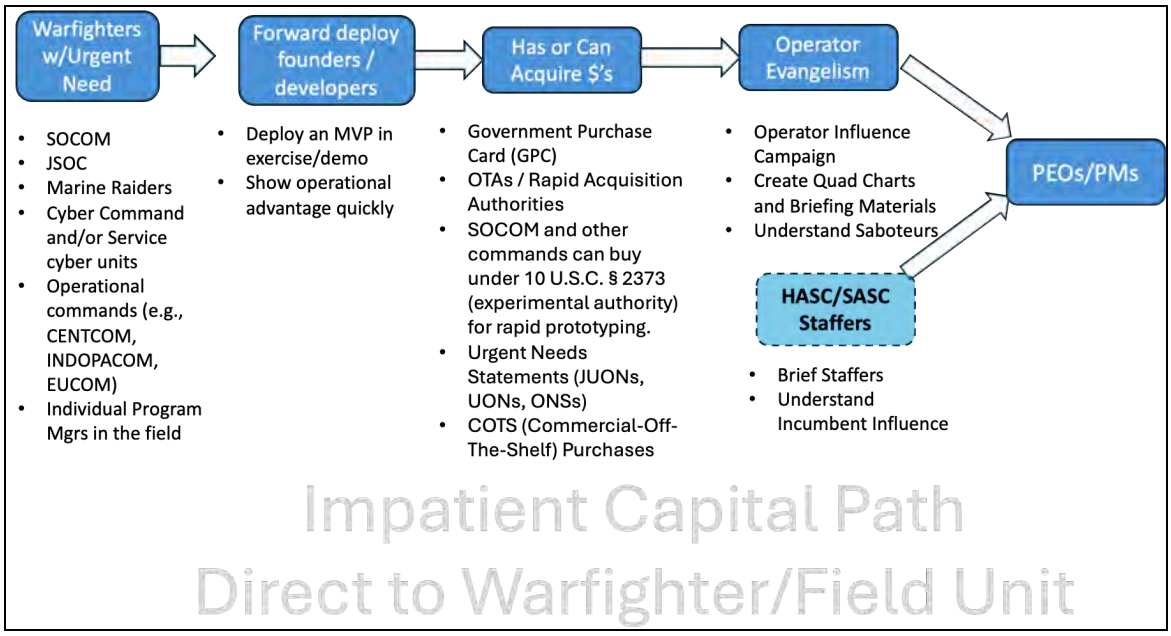
How to Work With the DoW

For a startup, how to sell to the DoW is an endless maze of buzzwords, processes and paperwork. How and where do you start? Below are simplified diagrams of two of the many paths for how a startup can get funding and revenue from the Department of War. The first example, the Patient Capital Path, illustrates a startup without a working product. They travel the traditional new company journey through the DoW processes.

The second example, the *Impatient Capital Path*, illustrates a startup with an MVP and/or working product. They ignore the traditional journey through the DoW process and go directly to the warfighter in the field. With the rise of Defense Venture Capital, this "swing-for-the fences" full-speed ahead approach is a Lean Startup approach to become a next generation Prime.

The November 2025 directives to turn the Defense Acquisition System into the Warfighting Acquisition System will change ***how*** the Department of War ***buys*** and who it buys from.





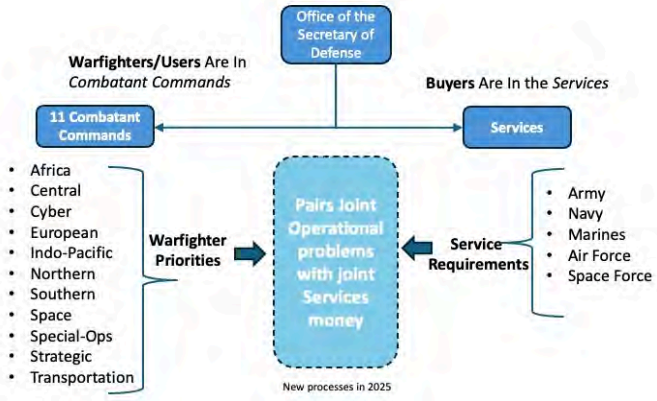
We're going to describe the buzzwords and details in both of these diagrams, but first cover some basics about *who buys* and *how they buy* in the Department of War.

The Services Versus the Combatant Commands - Buyers Versus Users

Since 1985 the U.S. military has been organized into two different types of organizations; the 5 Armed Services - the Army, Navy, Marines Corps, Air Force and Space Force, and the 11 Combatant Commands.

The Services are responsible for recruiting, training ***and buying*** the equipment that will be used by the Combatant Commands. But the Services do not fight wars by themselves. Instead, the Combatant Commands are matrix organizations (called Joint Forces) made up of members of *all* the Services.

Some Combatant Commands are responsible for a specific part of the world (Africa, Middle-East, Europe, Indo-Pacific, the U.S., Central and South America and Space. Other Combatant Commands are responsible for specific functions, e.g., special operations, Nuclear deterrence, transport, and cybersecurity. (See sections on Combatant Commands starting on pages 217 and 222)

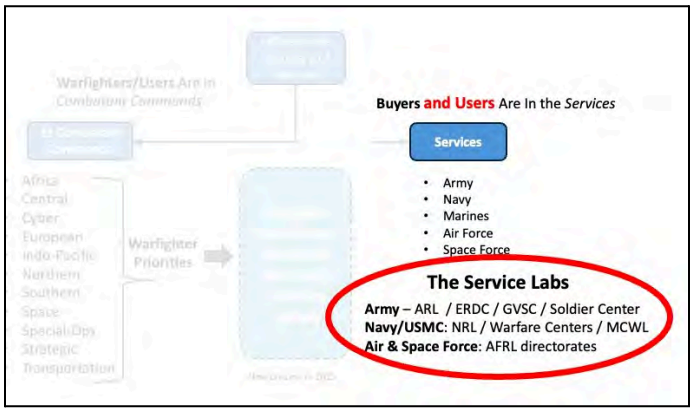


There is always inherent tension between what the services want to buy (historically they looked at *systems that will be delivered in years and last for decades*) and the needs

of Combatant Commands (*they need it now*). As we write this, how those two are reconciled is in the midst of radical/positive reform.

The Services Are Also Users - And Likely Early Customers

Thinking of the Combatant commands as only the Users and Services as only the Buyers of products that Combatant Commands need is a bit misleading. It turns out that *the Services have lots of their own Users in organizations who can fund and buy from a startup*.



These organizations are the Service's Labs. Each military service has their own laboratories with ~ 60 labs scattered across the DoW. Some of them include:
The Army Research Laboratory (ARL), Army Application Lab (AAL), Army Ground Vehicle Systems Center (GVSC,) Naval Research Lab, the Navy System Commands, Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL,) and a DoW-wide lab, DARPA (Defense Research Projects Agency).

The DoW Service's labs are described in more detail later in this section.

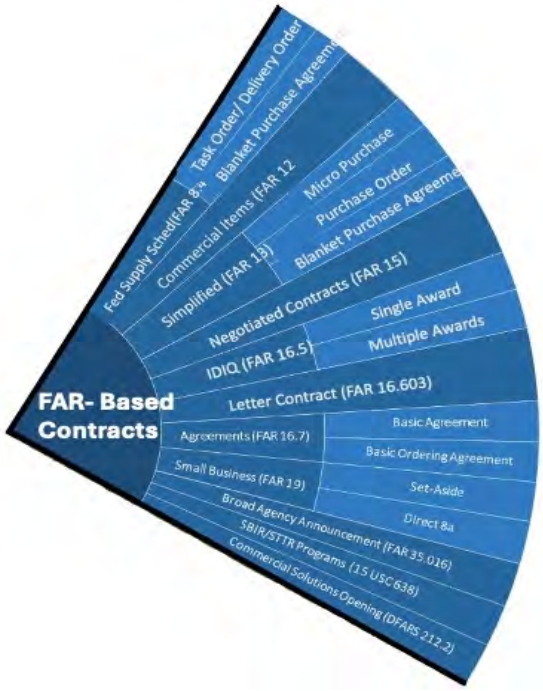
SOCOM - A Combatant Command That Can Be An Early Customer

Most Combatant Commands do not have their own major acquisition authority like the Services. However, SOCOM - the Special Operations Command - is an exception. It can buy directly, without going through a Service. SOCOM runs its own acquisition programs, labs, and prototyping efforts, and has a history of buying new equipment from startups. The SOCOM yearly tradeshow -SOF Week - is a market for new and emerging technologies. Call on SOCOM and go to and/or exhibit at the show.

Other Combatant Commands can buy items with their Operations and Maintenance money as long as the item's unit cost is under $250k and there is no Program of Record producing the same capability. There is no ceiling to how much a COCOM can spend under those two conditions. (Previously Combatant Commands O&M money was tied up in a restrictive R2 (where they weren't allowed to shift funds away from the described project or activity without going back to Congress or going through the formal reprogramming process.) That seems to have changed.

How Do (Did) the Services Buy? The Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR)

The Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) is the set of government-wide rules that governs how agencies (including the DoW) buy goods and services.
The FAR specifies a wide range of *contract types*. (See the adjacent Figure.)



The FAR also describes the *processes* that the DoW uses to select a seller: competition requirements, source selection and how they handle protests from the losers. And it has a ton of *clauses* that companies have to abide by: cybersecurity, small business, Buy American, etc. Finally, it specifies government *oversight* - via audit, reporting and ethics.

The FAR contains thousands of pages of complex rules. (The DoW has a Defense Acquisition University to train contracting officers in its complexity.) Competitive RFPs, protests, audits, and reviews stretch acquisition timelines into years. This makes the DoW buying process extremely slow.

A company getting a FAR contract is burdened with high compliance costs: Flow-downs, accounting rules, cost data, and audits. These are expensive and time consuming. It's why Prime contractors have 10's or 100's of -people who do nothing but FAR paperwork. As a rule a FAR contract is not for small businesses/startups. The FAR is designed for buying Aircraft Carriers not startup technology.

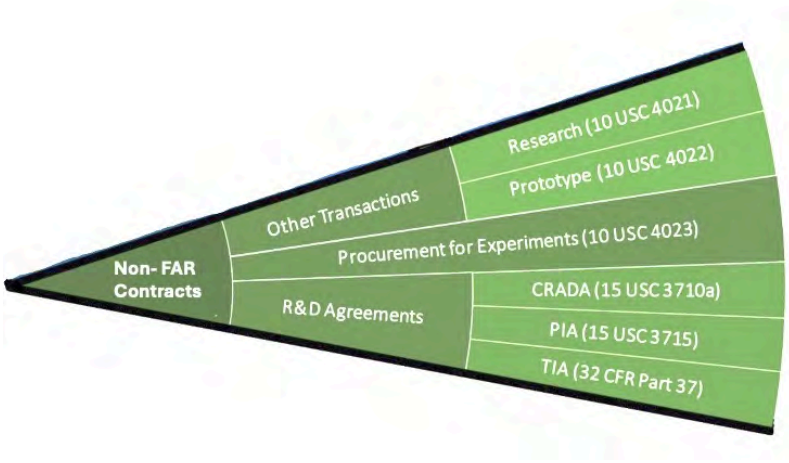
Up until November 2025, FAR contract types were still the preferred method for the DoW to acquire. That's no longer true. The mandate for DoW acquisition is to now use OTAs, CSOs and other rapid procurement methods. Time will tell if this takes hold.

Keep in mind that the goal is to solve a real DoW problem. Don't show up with a solution in search of a problem. Start by getting out of your building and finding and deeply understanding the Warfighter/Lab gaps or unfilled problems. And the multiple stakeholders from users, requirements writers, and acquirers.

Build Minimal Viable Products (prototypes), to show your solution matches a valid requirement.

How Do the Services Buy From Startups? *Non*-FAR Acquisition.

Because the FAR is a brick wall between DoW and commercial innovators, Congress created a series of Non-FAR rules for buying from startups. These have much shorter contracts, simpler processes and clauses, and less stringent oversight.



The two types of Non-FAR acquisition relevant for startups are *Other Transaction Authorities* (OTAs) and *R&D Agreements.*

Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs.)
OTA's give the DoW more flexibility to work with startups.

An OTA can exceed **billions of dollars** if it gets the proper signature. (≤ $100 million can get approved by the Senior Procurement Executive of the service or defense agency. $100 million to $500 million requires approval by the Assistant Secretary of the Army (Acquisition, Logistics & Technology), ASN (RDA) for Navy, SAF/AQ for Air Force. $500 million and up must be approved by the Under Secretary of War for Acquisition & Sustainment (USD(A&S)).

Realistically, a startup can expect $250K–$5M for a prototype OTAs as the entry point. Success can lead to $10M–$100M+ follow-on production OTAs. These can be awarded without further competition if that possibility was stated in the original prototype agreement Some OTAs scale into programs-of-record worth billions, bypassing traditional FAR competition.

Who Can Award OTAs in the DoW?
Research OTAs are held by Research and Engineering-focused agencies (DARPA, MDA, ONR, AFRL, DTRA. Research OTAs are typically used for early-stage science and technology projects, so award sizes are usually smaller than Prototype OTAs. Unlike Prototype OTAs (which can roll into multi-hundred-million Production OTAs), Research OTAs range from $500K – $5M for single projects, but they are not usually meant for large-scale procurement.

Prototype OTAs are held by Military Departments and the Defense Innovation Unit, AFWERX / SpaceWERX, Army Applications Lab and Naval Rapid Capabilities Office. When a prototype is successfully completed, the law explicitly allows a follow-on Production OTA without further competition, provided:

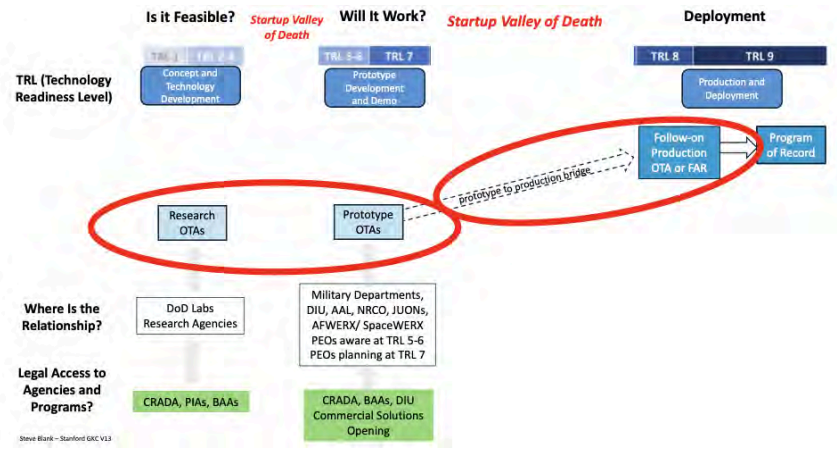
- The Prototype OTA was competitively awarded, and
- The Prototype OTA notice stated that follow-on production was possible. This is sometimes called the "prototype to production bridge."

For startups the good news is that under OTAs Intellectual Property (IP) rights are fully negotiable. In general, companies retain ownership of IP assets created during the effort. The DoW is usually licensed certain rights to use these assets with the agreed terms and conditions.

Many startups turn their SBIR Phase 2 awards into Prototype OTAs by using OTA Consortia. See the OTA Consortia section and Appendix B.

Production OTAs

Each Military Department (Army, Navy, Air Force) has Service Acquisition Executives (SAEs) who hold OTA authority. They typically delegate OTA authority down to Portfolio Acquisition Executives (PAEs)and then to their Capability Executive Offices (CPEs), contracting centers, or specialized offices. See the DoW DARPA here.[1]



In addition, the Army Contracting Command (ACC) has OTA-capable offices like ACC-New Jersey and ACC-Orlando. The Navy's OTA execution often flows through NAVSEA or the ONR (Office of Naval Research). The Air Force Life Cycle Management Center (AFLCMC) executes AFWERX/AFOTEC OTAs.

R&D Agreements - CRADAs (Cooperative R&D Agreements)

CRADAs allow companies to work with DoW labs without procurement contracts. A DoW Laboratory can contribute people, services, facilities, equipment, intellectual property, data, and other resources, but not money. CRADAs don't have funding attached to them, they can be a great way for startups to jointly pursue R&D with potential DoW customers and better understand end user problems, people, processes and requirements.

Successful Defense tech companies (Anduril, Saronic, Capella et al) all have had multiple CRADAs to engage in the detailed conversations needed to learn warfighter/customer requirements, and what to build. This typically occurred when they had high-fidelity prototypes. If companies use CRADA effectively, they should result in follow-on contract dollars.

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1 https://acquisitioninnovation.darpa.mil/docs/Guides/Guide%20to%20Research%20Other%20Transactions%2009132023.pdf

Some DoW organizations/agencies can use a CRADA to get your people and your company cleared before you have a formal contract. One of the other benefits of a CRADA is that under a CRADA, a startup can access DoW test ranges. See Appendix C for a list of DoW test ranges and centers.

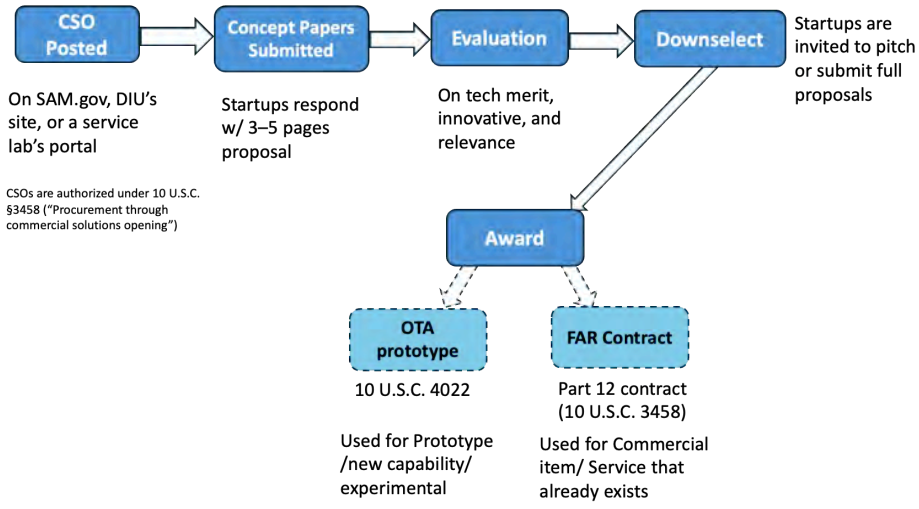
R&D Agreements - Partnership Intermediary Agreement (PIA)
Partnership intermediary organizations are the technology scouts and matchmakers for the DoW. They don't have funding attached to them, and cannot issue contracts or OTAs. But under the FAR DoW labs, program offices, and technology centers can work with a partnership intermediary organization—often a nonprofit, state/local government, or university entity—to help transfer technology and foster collaboration with startups. There are over 50 PIAs and they are executed decentrally by labs, warfare centers, and commands.

Keep in mind that getting a CRADA (Cooperative R&D Agreement) with a DoW lab accomplishes the same thing, or better. Appendix B lists and links to most PIAs.

R&D Agreements - Technology Investment Agreement (TIA)
In the past, TIAs were used by DoW research offices (OUSD(R&E), DARPA, ONR, AFRL, ARL, NRL, DTRA, MDA) for pre-competitive, cost-shared R&D projects with startups. They're rare today because OTAs are more flexible, but still on the books and occasionally used

Commercial Solutions Opening (CSO)
CSOs are *not a standalone statute/contract type like OTAs or CRADAs*, but they are a *new competitive procedure* authorized by DoW pioneered and used by the Defense Innovation Unit-DIU (and others) to quickly solicit and fund innovative commercial solutions.

CSOs at DIU are used to describe broad DoW problem statements, then down-select a small set of vendors who come in and pitch and demo. DIU then offers quick contract awards - typically prototypes or research OTAs. Legally, CSOs solve the problem that the FAR doesn't allow rapid down-selects or "pitch day" style competitions easily.



CSO's can be used to buy commercial products and services, R&D studies for commercial technology or to mature/transition commercial technology for use in the DoW.

CSOs are great for startups as they have negotiable payment milestones, terms and conditions, and intellectual property and data rights. And there is no requirement to adhere to government accounting standards. If the DoW partner who issued the CSO wants to deploy the prototype solution, OTA authority *allows them to issue a follow-on production contract without the need for further competition.*

Think of CSOs as an "open door" contracting method that looks more like how venture capital or industry scouting works than traditional DoW contracting.

Multiple Authority Announcement (MAA)

An MAA is a government contracting vehicle that combines multiple acquisition authorities under a single announcement. MAA's are specifically targeted toward disruptive technologies and rapid capability development from startups, and other innovative companies that might not engage with traditional government contracting processes.

MAAs eliminate the need for agencies to issue separate solicitations under different authorities, reducing administrative burden and accelerating the speed of purchasing. This allows agencies to use different types of contracts based on the nature of proposed work, including Broad Area Announcements (BAAs), Commercial Solutions Openings (CSOs), Other Transaction Agreements (OTAs), Procurement for Experimental Purposes (PEPs), and Cooperative Research and Development Agreements (CRADAs).

This means that as a company's research and product matures, a single MAA can span multiple solicitations supporting basic research and advanced development under one framework.

MAAs uses both Calls for Proposals, which use defined closing dates for specific government requirements, and Open Periods, which allow continuous submissions within specified timeframes, enabling offeror-generated ideas and concepts.

The Missile Defense Agency's implementation of MAA is called the Nimble Options for Buying Layered Effects (NOBLE). (Many of the MDA Golden Dome Solicitations will be via MAA.) The Air Force Research Lab (AFRL) calls their MAA program the CHEERS program.

TRLs - Technology Readiness Levels

The Department of War (DoW) uses the Technology Readiness Level (TRL) scale to figure out how ready a company's technology is before they buy it. This framework was adapted from NASA's original 1-page TRL definitions, and is codified in the 89-page DoW Technology Readiness Assessment (TRA) Guidebook, June 2023.

Think of TRLs as a way for the DoW to ask - Is this technology feasible? If it is feasible, will it work? And if it works can it be built and deployed at scale?

Questions about your startup product/service Technology Readiness Level (TRL) will come up in almost every conversation with a DoW lab, Program Office, Research Agency, etc. You should be clear where your product is now, and be able to articulate an evidence-based plan on how it will get to deployment.

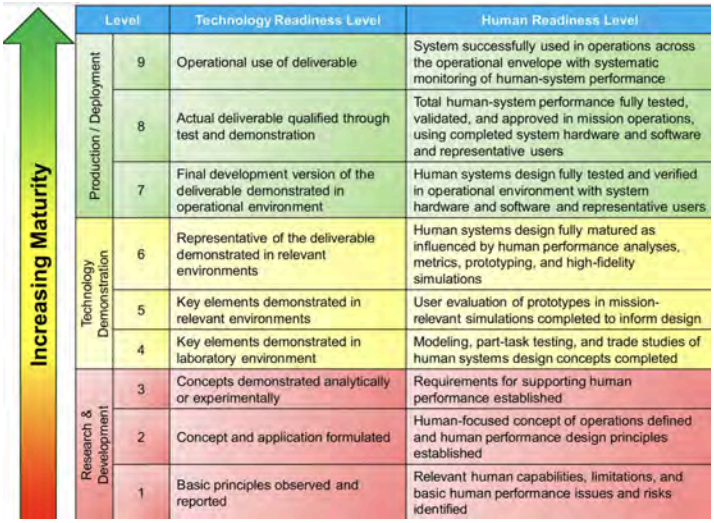
TRL	Definition (Hardware)	TRL Example
1	Basic principles observed and reported	Scientific findings published
2	Technology concept and/or application formulated	Speculative use cases identified
3	Analytical and experimental proof-of-concept	Lab bench validation of concept
4	Component and/or breadboard validated in lab	Subsystem tested in lab
5	Component and/or breadboard validated in relevant environment	Subsystem in simulated field
6	System/subsystem prototype demo in relevant environment	Prototype test in field conditions
7	System prototype demo in operational environment	Prototype UAV flight test
8	Actual system completed and qualified through test and demo	Weapon subsystem qual'd via testing
9	Actual system proven through successful mission operations	Fielded system used in operations

HRLs - Human Readiness Levels

In August 2025, OSD (R&E) added long-needed - HRLs - Human Readiness Levels - to incorporate items like weight, layout and form, so they can be understood and designed in as early as possible during development.

The DoW has adopted the existing ANSI/HFES 400-2021 standard.

A HRL primer is here.[2] It will take awhile but eventually HRLs, like TRLs will start showing up in requirements.



[2] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361248019

Note to startups: While the DoW might be asking about your TRL or HRL, they don't tell the whole story.

What drives your company's readiness to deliver and the right path to sell, is not only the maturity of the problem-solution match and the ability of your company to build it, but the government willingness and capability to integrate it.

For example; If you have an immature technology and an immature company you need SBIR Phase I.
Or if you have a mature company, mature technology, but the government can't transition it, then the path might be to get a CRADA, educate the government, then jump to later stages in the diagram.
Or use the second diagram of going direct to the Warfighter.

Keep in mind the formula **TRL +HRL + ARL + IRL**.
TRL the Technology Readiness Level - is the state of your product.
HRL the Human Readiness Level - are the product human factors optimized for use.
ARL the Adoption Readiness Level - does the DoW know they have a problem, need a solution and have or can find a budget to pay for it
IRL the Investment Readiness Level - can you find the capital to fund your company.

SBIRs - Small Business Innovation Research Grants (Currently not Re-Authorized)

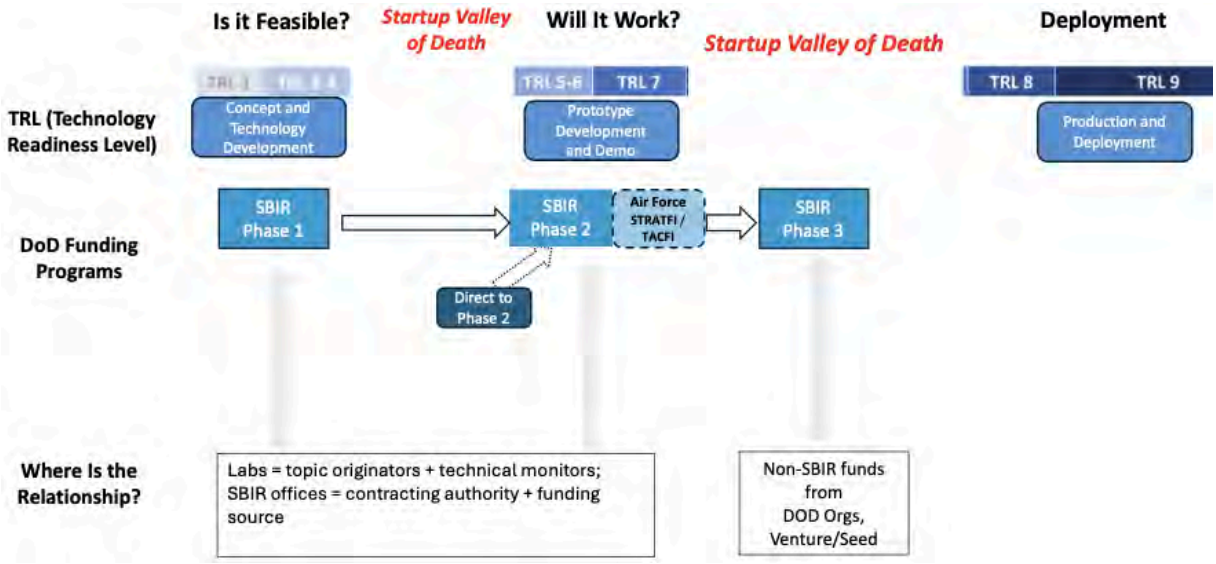
As of December 1, 2025 Congress has not reauthorized the SBIR Program. New solicitations and grants programs are on hold until the program is reauthorized. Don't expect to hear a response from anyone in any of the SBIR/STTR offices until then**.**

The DoW Small Business Innovation Research - SBIR - program offers startups the equivalent of *pre-seed funding - in the form of grants - without taking any equity* (but in exchange for lots of paperwork.)

Each service, and the DoW, have their own SBIR/STTR office, and each is looking for different things and has different criteria. Look at the DoW SBIR/STTR portal here[3] for all the active SBIR solicitations. Note that an SBIR process is not a "get big fast" process.

Applying for a DoW SBIR *makes sense for startups who don't have a working product or even a prototype.* You can get a SBIR Phase 1 grant to prove technical feasibility, and investigate potential military/commercial value, or to do a Concept Study. The deliverable of a Phase 1 SBIR could be limited prototyping and/or technology risk reduction.

[3] https://www.dodsbirsttr.mil/submissions/login



If you get accepted to a SBIR, the money comes in two phases; Phase 1 $50K - $275K and if you apply and if you get accepted, a follow-on Phase 2 of up to $2 million. Some companies with strong commercial traction can skip Phase I through Direct-to-Phase II (D2P2).

(One approach to selling to the DoW is to start with a small pilot R&D program and get it funded via SBIR grants and then hopefully turn that into an OTA and eventually a Program of Record (PoR).)

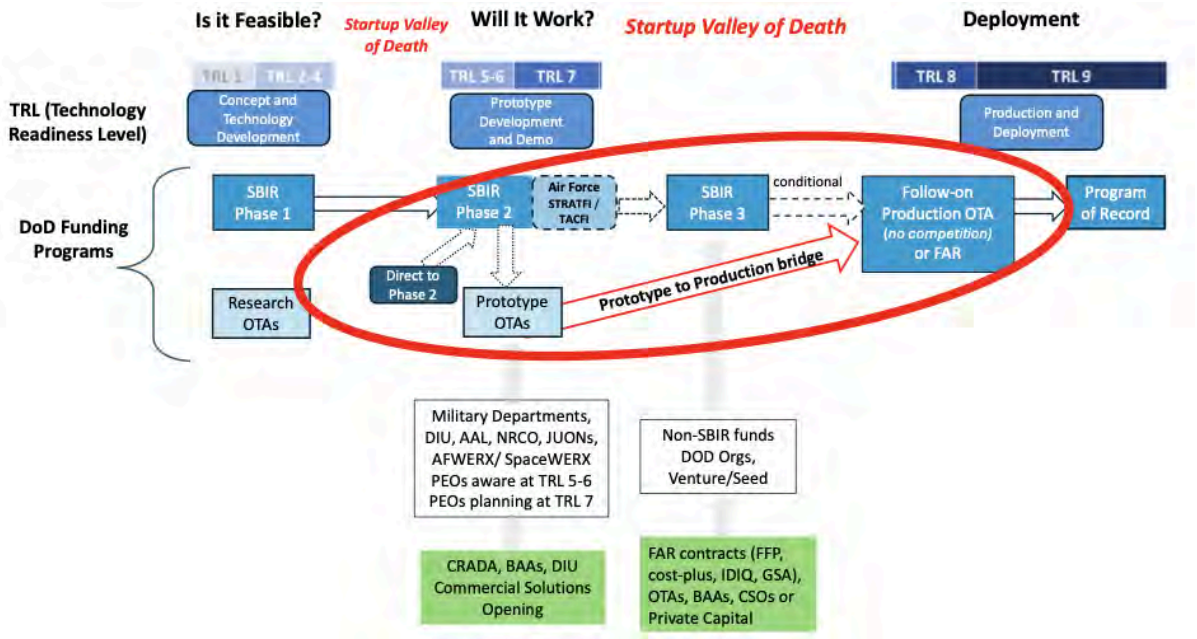
The goal of a DoW SBIR Phase II grant is to build and test a working prototype/functional demo in a relevant DoW environment. (Look for Direct-to-Phase II (D2P2) programs.)

One of the benefits of getting a DoW SBIR is that if a company had a SBIR Phase 1 or Phase 2, the government contractor can use DoW SBIR Phase III sole source authority to go directly to contract and forgo a more open competitive process.

What's Next After a SBIR Phase 2? - ***TACFI/STRATFI***
The Air/Space Force both have bridge funds - Strategic Funding Increase (STRATFI) and Tactical Funding Increase (TACFI) Programs. Companies that have been awarded a Phase II contract within the last two years are eligible to apply. TACFI provides an additional $375K-$2M and STRATFI an additional $3M-$15M.

What's Next After a SBIR Phase 2? - ***SBIR Phase 3***
A SBIR Phase 3 contract needs to be funded with non-SBIR money (procurement, O&M, RDT&E, or even private/VC). The benefit of a SBIR Phase III is that it is eligible for a sole-source contract (no re-competition is required), it's unlimited in size and duration, and it preserves your company's SBIR data rights.

How to Get a SBIR Phase 3? Find a DoW Program Office / CPE (the customer with the real budget). They fund you with their dollars through a Phase III award. The contracting office can use an IDIQ, GSA schedule, or other vehicle. You don't have to wait on DoW money only. Phase III can be funded by Commercial sales, Prime contractor partnerships, Venture capital, other government agencies (NASA, DHS, DOE)



What's Next After a SBIR Phase 2? - ***Prototype to Production OTA***
Many SBIR firms parlay their Phase II tech into a Prototype OTA (via a consortium like SpEC, IWRP, MCDC). If successful, this can roll into a non-competed Production OTA (like Phase III).

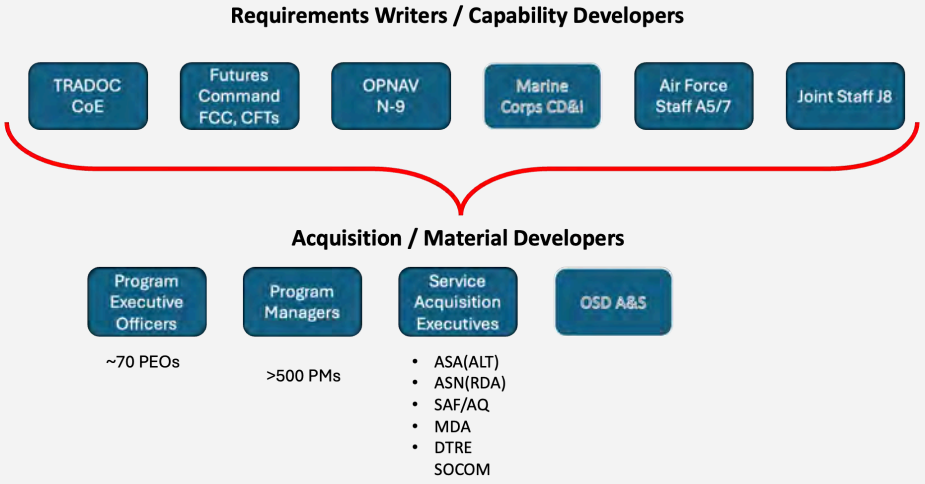
If you've been working the system, you would have found CPEs/PEOs /Program Managers as sponsors (the critical customer) to know about you when you are in the early-prototype stage in the lab, and sponsor you as your product was being tested in the field.

At this stage you may be ready to blend in commercial/VC funding to sustain development while DoW ramps.

Search this document for the word "SBIR" and see Appendix B for details for how each of the Services SBIR programs differ.

Talk to the Requirements Writers (Capability Developers)
All the services have Requirements writers (Capability Developers) who draft Initial Capability Documents (ICDs), Capability Development Documents (CDDs), and Capability Production Documents (CPDs). These influence what the Services are looking to buy. Capability developers **do not** sit inside CPEs, but **they are now part of a larger PAE**.

DoW capability developers (requirements writers) mostly sit in Service requirements commands and centers (Navy OPNAV N9 (Warfare Systems) on the Navy staff, Marine Corps Combat Development & Integration (CD&I), in the Army's new Transformation and Training Command Future Command +, TRADOC Capability Development and Integration Directorate (CDID), Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategy, Integration and Requirements (AF/A5/7), and in Joint Staff J8. They interface with Combatant Commands (CCMD J8/J9) for operational needs and with PEOs/PMs for acquisition.



Keep in mind:
- **Requirements Lane** (Capability Developers): Service Futures/Concepts commands, TRADOC CoEs, OPNAV N-9, Marine Corps CD&I, Air Force Staff A5/7, Joint Staff J8.
- **Acquisition Lane** (Materiel Developers): CPEs, PMs, Service Acquisition Executives (SAEs), OSD A&S.
- **Portfolio Acquisition Executives** - In theory will integrate Requirements and Acquisition Lanes

(The Materiel Developer is the organization or command responsible for acquisition, fielding, and sustainment of a materiel system. These are almost always the Capability Program Executive Offices (CPEs) / Program Executive Offices (PEOs) and their subordinate Program Managers (PMs) inside the Services and Defense Agencies.)

You need to talk to both the Requirements and Acquisition lanes inside PAEs.

Talk to the Service Front Doors, Service Labs, Future Concepts Centers and Forward Looking PAEs/CPEs ~~PEOs~~

A few of the services have put their programs to onboard new companies in one place. For example, the Army has the Pathway for Innovation and Technology (PIT). The Army describes it as the "forward edge" of their acquisition arm - ASA(ALT). The PIT has programs and is designed to help companies to get into the defense industrial base. It's the front door for startups wanting to partner with the Army.

The PIT includes the Army Applications Laboratory, Joint Innovation Outpost, the Global Tactical Edge Acquisition Directorate (G-TEAD) Marketplace, the FUZE program which includes (Army SBIR/STTR seed funding, MANTECH (Army Manufacturing Technology program), TMI (Tech Maturation Initiative) and XTech the Army's scouting program.

As mentioned earlier, one (of many) possible startup go-to-market strategies is to look to the DoW Lab ecosystem for early CRADAs, research and prototype/R&D SBIR grants, and OTAs. The DoW lab ecosystem is big and varied – with 60+ labs, warfare centers, and engineering centers across the services. The ones that are practical "entry points":

- Have discretionary budgets or rapid contracting authorities.
- Run open solicitations or challenges for nontraditional vendors.
- Have mandates to work with commercial tech and move quickly into prototyping.
- Write CRADAs with startups
- Have Partnership Intermediary Agreements (PIAs) and have given OTA authority to Consoritia (both described further below.)

Below are a few places to start listed by services/commands. Details and links about these organizations can be found in the rest of this document.

Federal Labs

Army Labs

The Army Application Laboratory (AAL) - part of the Army Pathway for Innovation and Technology (PIT) - mission is to get the best technology to Army units faster by putting new solutions in the hands of Soldiers, either through pilot programs or with units for extended experimentation. AAL has a list of open opportunities here.[4] For startups, AAL's ability to influence requirements documents is critical to help new technologies cross the valley of death. AAL's strategic contribution is to grow the base of commercial technology firms solving Army tech problems. Read AAL's performance report and then their website to get an idea of what they do.

DEVCOM - the Army Combat Capabilities Development Command focus is on Basic and Applied research for the Army, often 2- 5 years out creating prototypes, and technology seeded into Army programs. DEVCOM has 7 directorates.

DEVCOM also houses the Army Research Laboratory (ARL, Adelphi & Aberdeen). See here[5] for their engagement opportunities with startups via: Synchronized Persistent Army Experimentation (SPARX), CRADAs (Cooperative Research and Development Agreements), SBIR/STTRs, Other Transaction Agreements (less frequent than the Army Application Lab) to onboard nontraditional vendors.
DEVCOM often partners via Consortia like NAMC (National Advanced Mobility Consortium).

[4] https://aal.mil/industry/#opportunities
[5] https://devcom.army.mil/partner-with-us/

DEVCOM also offers Patent License Agreements (PLAs) to tech transfer their inventions out to companies.

The Army's xTechSearch manages all the Army innovation prize competitions. Open competitions here.[6]

ERDCWERX - offers collaboration and contracting with the Army Engineer Research and Development Center (ERDC) - part of the Army Corps of Engineers. Events, tech challenges, and opportunities here.[7]

The Army Software Factory, part of the Army's Future Command is an innovation program for active duty soldiers, SGT through SFC, CW2 and CW3, and 1LT through MAJ.

Navy Labs

NavalX - now part of the Navy Rapid Capabilities Office - offers startups opportunities via the NavalX Tech Bridge Network, regional connections for Navy/Small Business collaboration.

The Office of Naval Research (ONR) publishes a list of Broad Area Announcements (BAAs) - notices of funding opportunities (NOFOs) and commercial solution openings (CSOs). Each announcement provides technical and contracting points of reference. See here.[8]

The Navy Systems Commands - SYSCOMs - all use Broad Agency Announcements (BAAs) and SBIR/STTRs and OTAs. Look at the Navy SBIR page here.[9] A list of all Navy SBIR/BAA announcements can be found here.[10] Search this document for each system command small business office.

- Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA)
- Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR)
- Naval Information Warfare Systems Command (NAVWAR)
- Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command (NAVFAC)
- Naval Supply Systems Command (NAVSUP)
- Marine Corps Systems Command (MCSC)

The Navy has a SBIR/STTR Transition Program via the Virtual Transition Marketplace

Air Force Labs

Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL) located at Wright-Patterson (Dayton, OH), Kirtland (Albuquerque), Rome (NY), and Eglin (FL). Currently, AFRL has the easiest "on-ramp" into DoW with high transition success.

[6] https://xtech.army.mil/competitions/
[7] https://erdcwerx21.wpengine.com/category/event-tech-challenges/current
[8] https://www.onr.navy.mil/work-with-us/funding-opportunities/announcements
[9] https://www.navysbir.com/
[10] https://www.navysbir.com/solicitations.htm

AFRL's innovation programs include AFWERX, the innovation arm of the Air Force and AFWERX Ventures Program. Each year, AFWERX awards approximately 1,400 SBIR/STTR contracts worth more than $1.4 billion. AFWERX developed the Strategic Funding Increase (STRATFI) and Tactical Funding Increase (TACFI) Programs, a bridge for SBIR Phase II winners into programs of record. See here.[11] Small businesses that have been awarded a Phase II contract within the last two years are eligible to apply. TACFI provides an additional $375K-$2M and STRATFI an additional $3M-$15M.

AFRLs sponsors the Catalyst Accelerator offering a variety of Air Force/Space Force topics in a three month semi-residential program in Colorado Springs or Ogden. They take no equity.

STRIKEWERX is an innovation arm of the Air Force Global Strike Command Office of the Chief Scientist.
Look at the Air Force and Space Force Tech Connect website for other Air Force opportunities.

If you're looking for ideas and/or technology, the Air Force Tech Transfer Office has thousands of technologies to transfer to industry. See here.[12]

Space Force Labs

SpaceWERX (part of AFWERX) acts as the startup entry point for the U.S. Space Force. They run pitch days and commercial solution openings for space tech companies. Space Ventures is their investment arm via SBIR and STRATFI/TACFI. Space Spark connects end-users to lab engineers and acquirers to pursue novel solutions to their toughest challenges

The Space Development Agency also has a dedicated small business office.

SOCOM Labs

The Special Operations Command is one of the few combatant commands with its own innovation hub and acquisition authorities. SOFWERX looks for cutting-edge technologies that enhance the equipment and capabilities of U.S. special forces. Fast contract awards.

Defense Innovation Unit (DIU)

The Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) is the only DoW organization focused exclusively on fielding and scaling commercial technology across the U.S. military at commercial speeds. DIU has a $billion budget for acquisition.

DIU currently focuses on seven areas: Artificial Intelligence, Autonomy, Cyber and Telecom, Emerging Technology, Energy, Human Systems and Space, and has portfolio managers and staff.

[11] https://afwerx.com/
[12] https://www.aft3.af.mil/The-Technology/

DIU has OTA authority. For companies who already have off-the-shelf products, DIU's Commercial Solutions Openings (CSO) with 60-to-90 day timelines to contracts, posts their current open solicitations here.[13] Any individual or commercial entity is eligible to respond to a DIU solicitation. See the DIU CSO Guide here.[14]

The DIU Counter NEXT project is focused on leveraging the best-in-breed commercially derived technology and processes to accelerate the development, production, and fielding of these vital Counter UAS interceptors to our warfighters

DIU also posts "Challenges," a scalable prize competition that brings together ventures, DoW Mission Partners, and subject matter experts, resulting in an award and justification for potential post-program activities.

DARPA

DARPA funds startups through SBIR, BAAs, and program-specific solicitations. Companies that win DARPA work often get credibility that accelerates follow-on sales. See DARPAConnect and the DARPA Small Business Office. DARPA's list of open opportunities is here.[15]

DoW-wide Innovation Programs

DoW Office of Small Business Programs - part of the Acquisition and Sustainment in Industrial Policy (NDS-IP).

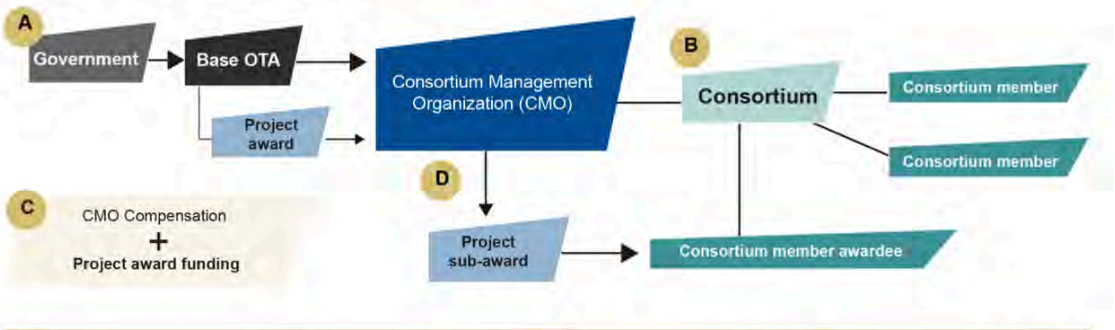
Rapid Integrated Scalable Enterprise (RISE) and APEX Accelerators is a network of 650+ procurement professionals that help local businesses compete successfully in the government marketplace.

OTA Consortia

A Consortia is a membership organization (usually run by a nonprofit or management firm) that pools companies, universities, and labs around a specific mission area (e.g., space, aviation, C5ISR, undersea warfare, armaments). Consortia exist primarily to issue Other Transaction Authority (OTA) solicitations — fast-track prototype contracts that bypass much of the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR).

[13] https://www.diu.mil/work-with-us/open-solicitations
[14] https://www.socom.mil/sof-atl/pages/baa.aspx
[15] https://www.darpa.mil/about/offices/sbpo#opportunities

Figure 1: Notional DOD Consortium-Based OTA Model



A. The government awards a base OTA, which provides terms and conditions that generally apply to all projects awarded and serves as a starting point for negotiations between the government, CMO, and consortium member awardees. In this notional model, the base OTA and projects are awarded to a consortium via the CMO. The project award includes the terms and conditions specific to the project.

B. Organizations join a consortium by signing a consortium membership agreement, and in some cases by paying membership dues. Once an organization is a consortium member, it is eligible to receive project awards.

C. The government obligates funding for both CMO compensation and the project awards. The funding can be obligated on the base OTA or project award, depending on the model. CMO compensation is used to pay the CMO for administrative and acquisition support that it provides to the government.

D. In this notional model, the CMO issues a project sub-award on behalf of the government to a consortium member, making it a consortium member awardee. A project sub-award executes the project.

Source: GAO analysis of DoD information GAO-22-10537

DoW organizations (AFRL, etc.) award a base OTA to the consortium manager (e.g., SOSSEC, NSTXL, AMTC), who then issues OTA solicitations and awards prototype project awards to its members. Startups join a consortium as members, paying a small fee, and then gain access to project awards normally hidden behind acquisition walls.

Consortia can be a primary OTA contracting pathway for startups.
See the Consortia list and links in Appendix B. These are worth looking at.

Tribal/Alaska Native corporations (ANC) Firms

Native American tribes and Alaska Native corporations (ANCs) have special status in DoW contracting, and the security clearance rules apply a little differently to them. They participate in DoW contracting through the 8(a) program and other SBA set-aside authorities. They often get sole-source contracts above the usual 8(a) caps. ~3% of Federal contracts have gone to Tribal/ANC firms. They are considered “nontraditional” vendors and sometimes bring unique capabilities (e.g., logistics, facilities, cyber, defense services).

Tribal/ANC firms can act as primes or subs on DoW contracts. They often get sole-source awards (sometimes >$100M) under 8(a) rules. They *cannot act as PIAs* (different legal authority). They do not operate as consortia (*not organized to issue OTA solicitations*). But Tribal/ANC firms can and do receive OTA awards if they are members of a consortium, just like any other company

For startups, working with Tribal/ANC firms can be a contracting shortcut. Particularly if Tribal/ANC firms have Sole-source authority, you get faster contract awards. Many Tribal/ANC

firms have Facility Clearances and can “wrap” your work. At times the Tribal/ANC firms can win large sustainment, IT or logistics contracts that you can feed technology into.

So in practice, your Go-To-Market strategy could treat tribal/ANC companies as both channel partners and prime contractors who can accelerate access and revenue — especially in the valley of death between prototypes and programs of record.

Appendix C lists and links to most of them. These are worth looking at.

PIA’s, Consortium’s and Tribal/ANC - What’s The Difference?

Entity Type	Can Scout?	Can Issue OTA?	Can Get Prime Contracts	Advantage
PIA	Yes	No	No	Outreach, matchmaking
Consortium	No	Yes	No	OTA vehicle for the services
Tribal/ANC	No	No	Yes	sole-source, faster awards

Accelerate the Procurement and Fielding of Innovative Technologies (APFIT)

One other source of funding that startups/scaleups that have working systems should investigate is the OSD (R&E) APFIT program. APFIT provides direct procurement dollars (typically $10 million–$50 million) for transition-ready technology, and this year software-only solutions are being considered. The Services, Combatant Commands, Defense Agencies nominate projects annually.

Programs of Record (PoR)

While OTAs can sustain a company (up to $500M), the prize In the Department of War (DoW) is a Program of Record (PoR). A PoR is a formally approved, funded, and documented acquisition program that is listed in the Future Years Defense Program (FYDP). Each PoR sits inside a Program Executive Office (PEO) and has a program manager and team overseeing its execution within budget and timeline. PoRs are subject to various oversight requirements, including reviews, reporting, budgetary constraints, and performance metrics.

Programs of Records turn startups into real companies. It’s the gift that keeps giving. They offer stability due to their reliable funding and reduced risk of sudden cancellations.

Validated Requirements

Most of the time, the Services can't spend money on new technology without a validated requirement to tell Congress what it is and why it needs it (although there are lots of exceptions.) Without being in a Service’s budget submission to DoW, there is little chance that, when the new fiscal year begins in October, the program will see any money. For a small company with only a single product or small number of innovative products for which the DoW is the only customer, that can mean the valley of death because of the length of time it could

take them to get funded. (See the section above describing Requirements Writers (Capability Developers.)

Validated requirements explain to Congress how a Service is spending its appropriations, and they explain to the contractor what the Service wants, very specifically. Requirements come from needs expressed by commanders, and they can also come from Service leaders looking to close capability gaps. For example, the Army Requirements Oversight Council vets and validates them—or doesn't. The Army likes capabilities to follow doctrine. This is a cultural thing—the Navy often experiments with capabilities and builds doctrine around new ones.

Note that this process is rapidly changing for the better in 2025.

The New Warfighting Acquisition Organization – The Portfolio Acquisition Executive

In November 2025, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth unveiled the biggest changes in 60 years of how the Department of War (DoW) plans for and buys weapons and services. These changes aren't a minor attempt at reform. It's a top-to-bottom transformation of how the DoW plans and buys weapons, moving from contracts that prioritize how much a weapon costs to how fast it can be delivered.

Instead of buying custom-designed weapons, the DoW will prioritize buying off-the-shelf things that already exist, and they'll use fast-track acquisition processes, rather than the cumbersome existing Federal Acquisition Regulations. To manage all of this, they are reorganizing the entire Acquisition ecosystem across the Services.

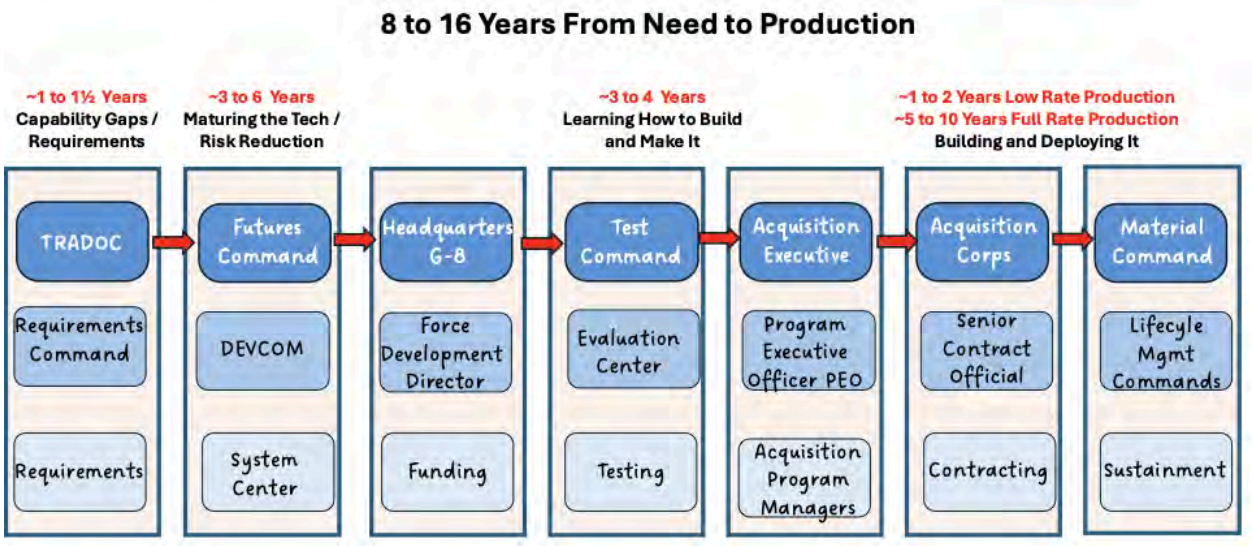
Reminder: What Did Our Acquisition System Look Like Until November 2025?
The Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Space Force train soldiers, sailors and airmen, and specify and buy the weapons for their Service. (It's the Combatant Commands, e.g. INDOPACOM, CENTCOM, etc., who fight the wars.)

One of the confusing things about Acquisition in the DoW is that it is more than just the buyers of equipment. In the DoW, Acquisition with capital "A", includes the entire end-to-end process – from concept, requirements, prototyping, testing, buying it, to using it and maintaining it.

In each of the Services, the current Acquisition system started with a group that forecast what the Service would need in the future and wrote requirements for future weapons/ services/ software. This process could take a year or more. Next, Service laboratories developed the technology, tested prototypes and concepts. This could take 3 to 6 years. Next, a vendor was selected and began to prototype and refine the systems. This added another 3 to 4 years. Finally, the system was ready to be built and delivered. It could take 1 to 2 years to deliver weapons in low rate production, or 5 to 10 years for something complex (e.g. aircraft, ships, spacecraft). In the system we're replacing, the time from when a need was turned into a requirement to delivery of a weapon would take 8 to 16 years. As you can imagine, given the

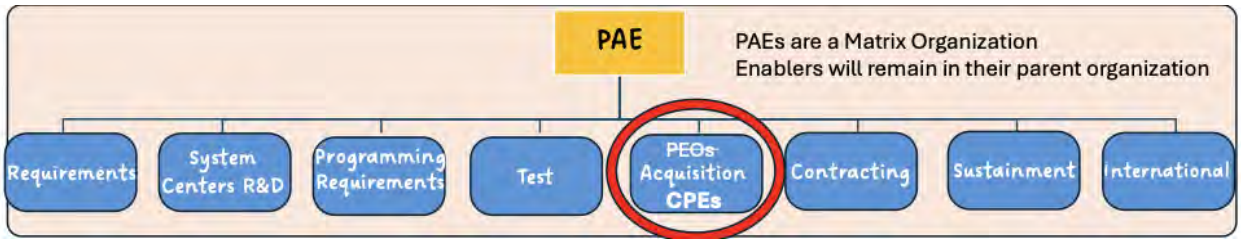
rate of change of current technology and new warfighting concepts our own Acquisition process was an obstacle to building a modern War Department.

As an example, the Army's current Acquisition system has 32,000 civilians and military(program managers, contracting officers, etc.) If you include the long tail of sustainment that's another 165,000+ people. The Acquisition system in the Army (representative of the other services) looks like this:



To cut through the individual acquisition silos, the services are creating Portfolio Acquisition Executives (PAEs) organized around common Warfighting Concepts, technologies, or operational integration needs.

The old PEO Offices are now part of this larger Portfolio Acquisition Executive. The difference is now each Portfolio Acquisition Executive (PAE) is responsible for the entire end-to-end process of the different Acquisition functions: Capability Gaps/Requirements, System Centers, Programming, Acquisition (the PAEs and CPEs), Testing, Contracting and Sustainment. In the past, Acquisition was organized by weapon systems and managed by Program Executive Offices.

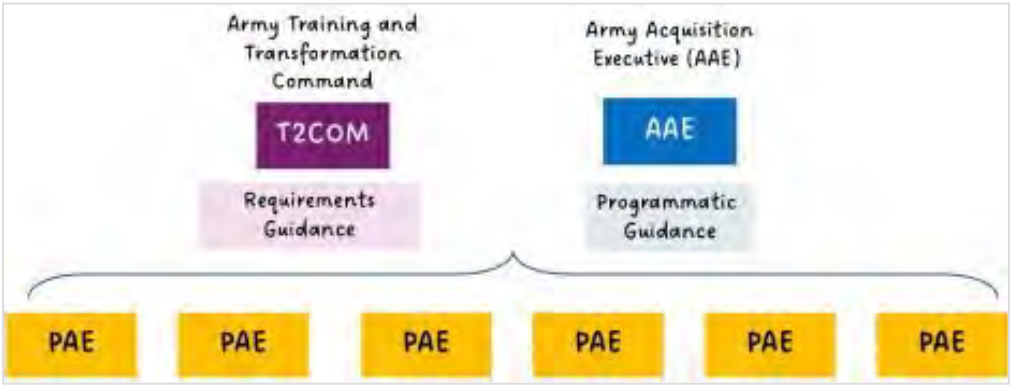


Portfolio Acquisition Executives (PAEs) are organized as a matrix organization – using people from existing organizations – requirements, CPEs, sustainment, contracting etc. The PAEs themselves will have a small staff for coordination. This means that the PAEs will have a small coordinating staff, while the existing organizations will remain in place.

Program Executive Offices/Officers (PEOs) will become **Capability Program Executives** (CPEs), and act as a Portfolios' acquisition arm.

Multiple Portfolios In Each Service

Each of the services are consolidating and reorganizing the functions of what were their Program Executive Offices into Portfolios. Program Executive Offices/Officers (PEOs) will become Capability Program Executives (CPEs), and act as a Portfolios' acquisition arm. (The examples below are from the Army. Other Services will have equivalent organizational designs for their Portfolios.)



The acquisition chain of authority runs directly from Capability Program Manager to PAE to the Service Acquisition Executive (SAE), with no intermediate offices or approval layers. (The Service Acquisition Executive for the Army is the Assistant Secretary for Acquisition, Logistics & Technology. For the Navy/Marines, the Assistant Secretary for Research, Development & Acquisition. For the Air Force/Space Force the Assistant Secretary for Acquisition, Technology & Logistics.)

Saboteurs at Work

Saboteurs are already at work trying to roll back these changes. The final memo implementing these changes is different from Secretary Hegseth's speech. For example, the preference to use Other Transactions Authority (OTAs) was stricken from the final memo.

Have Patience

In any major transformation of a large organization who reports to whom, who owns what is often and who is responsible, chaos and confusion is the norm. That is likely the prospect for companies trying to navigate the new Warfighting Acquisition System. It will be worth the wait.

What is a Capability Program Executive (CPE)?

Nearly all of the hundreds of billions of dollars of products and services the DoW buys every year will be managed by Portfolio Acquisition Executives and their Capability Program Executive Offices - headed by Capability Program Executive Officers. Capability Program Executives have similar roles and responsibilities as today's PEOs. They are the Acquisition leader responsible for cradle-to-grave management of their programs within their portfolio. They are responsible for

the cost, schedule, and performance of a major system, or portfolio of systems - some worth billions of dollars for a specific program (e.g., the Joint Strike Fighter) or for an entire portfolio of similar programs (e.g., the Army Maneuver Ground Portfolio Acquisition Executive office).

While a startup may be happy securing early-stage funding, that's not the same as achieving scalable revenue. This is where CPEs become critical. CPEs oversee everything from early technology assessments to full-scale deployment. They can turn your startup from a hobby into a business.

CPEs define requirements and their Contracting Officers buy things (handling the formal purchasing, issuing requests for proposals (RFPs) and signing contracts with vendors). Program Managers (PMs) work with the CPEs and manage subsets of the larger program.

This 2025 version of the directory lists the Army and Navy Portfolio Acquisition Executive offices and their Capability Program Executive Office**rs** and ~500 Program/Project Managers. (It also provides an overview of the other offices in the DoW responsible for requirements, acquisition and innovation programs.)

By the time your product is at TRL 5-6, CPEs ought to be aware of you. And by TRL 7 they ought to be planning how to buy from you. To do so, get to know the program managers, the problems they're solving, the warfighters they serve, in the appropriate CPEs as early as possible. That will put your company in a great position to know how to offer solutions to solve their problems.

Before You Talk to CPEs/PMs, Start by Understanding Customers and their Problem

Start your journey by talking to the multiple customers in the DoW:
- Operators/Warfighters - these are the ultimate users; they validate the need.
- The service Labs (ARL, AFRL, NRL) - fund prototypes and experiments.
- Requirements Writers/ Capability Developers (OPNAV N-9, AF A-5/7, TRADOC CoEs, Joint Staff J-8).
- CPEs/PMs - control acquisition budgets and programs of record.
- PAEs - control the overall portfolio strategy

Match your proposal to a PAE/CPE/PM mission, budget, and acquisition path.
Make it easy for the CPEs/Program Managers to say yes:
- Share with them what you heard from other Customers and validate whether they believe that's a problem.
- Show low risk, high return, and fast results for your solution.
- Don't chase topics—chase problems.
- Find the pain point and reverse-engineer your solution around it.

Include CPEs in the path to scale in your Go-to-Market plan:
— Add transition options like IDIQs, OTAs, or named Phase III routes.
— Get someone in a program office to say, "We want this."

Who Are the CPEs?

Each Service branch has multiple CPEs, (or PEOs who will soon be CPEs) structured around mission areas like aviation, space, ground systems, intelligence, and cybersecurity. These offices report to service acquisition executives and control POR funding — which determines whether a technology moves beyond experimentation and into mass adoption.

A Capability Program Executive Office (CPE) in the Department of War has a fairly consistent hierarchical structure across services, though the exact titles can vary by branch. Here's the typical structure you'll see in this guide:

Capability Executive Officer (PEO)

- Rank / Grade: Often a Flag Officer (O-7/O-8) or Senior Executive Service (SES) civilian.
- Role: Senior acquisition official responsible for all programs in their portfolio.
    - Reports to: Service Acquisition Executive (SAE) — e.g., ASN(RDA) for Navy, ASA(ALT) for Army, SAF/AQ for Air Force — or in joint cases, to the Defense Acquisition Executive (USD(A&S)).
    - Accountable for cost, schedule, and performance of all assigned programs.

Deputy Capability Program Officer (DCPO)

- Rank / Grade: Senior military (O-6) or SES civilian.
- Role: Second-in-command; manages day-to-day CPE/PEO operations and acts as CPE/PEO when absent.

Remember to go back to the Budget Documents and understand the budget line and funding stream for each of these programs.

Program Managers (PMs)

- Rank / Grade: O-5/O-6 military or GS-15 civilian (sometimes SES for major programs).
- Role: Leads a single Acquisition Category (ACAT) program — e.g., ACAT I (Major Defense Acquisition Program) or ACAT II/III.
    - Responsible for execution within cost, schedule, performance parameters.
    - Reports to: The PEO.

In the Navy, some Program Executive Offices (PEOs) of major acquisition programs already had full acquisition authority, as Direct Reporting Program Managers (DRPMs). They report directly to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development, and Acquisition (ASN(RD&A)). Most others worked in tandem with OPNAV (Office of the Chief of Naval Operations) resource sponsors or Fleet Commanders. The addition of Portfolio Acquisition Executives (PAEs) make it important for you to know where the decisions are made — and who holds the money — will help you get traction. Take some time to review the Navy's recent budget submissions when looking for a resource sponsor — a large portion of the Navy's budget is aligned under platforms (ships, submarines, aircraft) — so if your technology benefits the platforms, it could be a better place to start than more niche sponsors.

Deputy Program Managers (DPMs)

- Supports the PM, may lead specific efforts within the program.

Note: Interactions with CPEs/PEOs/program managers are valuable at every stage, not just for getting an order. Talking to CPEs/PEOs early will give your company signals on whether the DoW will buy your product now or in the future. If possible a CRADA with a CPE/PEO office is a running start. These conversations help answer the question "Is there a market?"

Functional Leads / Chiefs

Typically include:

- Chief Engineer – Oversees technical design, integration, and engineering discipline.
- Business/Financial Manager (Comptroller) – Manages budget planning, cost analysis, and contract funding.
- Contracts Lead – Oversees contracting strategy, solicitations, and awards.
- Logistics / Sustainment Lead – Plans sustainment, supply chain, and lifecycle support.
- Test & Evaluation Lead – Oversees developmental and operational test planning.
- Cybersecurity / Information Assurance Lead – Ensures compliance with DoW cyber and security standards.
- Human Systems Integration Lead – Ensures systems meet human performance requirements.

Integrated Product Teams (IPTs)

- Cross-functional teams under PM/DPM guidance for specific system components or subsystems.
- Include engineers, logisticians, testers, contracting officers, and operators.

Understand Who and Where the Saboteurs Are

Odds are there's an incumbent supplier the Program Office is currently working with. None of those suppliers are going to give up their existing contract just because your company showed up. Many of these suppliers have lobbyists and have been working with congressional stakeholders who influence appropriations. Without you having your own internal DoW advocates and external congressional support, even the most promising startup can find itself excluded from long-term funding cycles.

Understand Why it Appears Like the Frozen Middle

Program managers have invested their time, political capital and a lot of government money in their program and existing suppliers. There is a tendency to continue a program because there is already quite a bit invested in it. This is the “sunk cost” fallacy. It occurs in all organizations, not just the DoW.

The trap for a program manager is thinking that if they cancel the program, their previous investment will have been "for nothing," even when abandoning the project would be the more

beneficial path forward for the warfighter, service and country. On top of it, is their emotional cost of recognizing that their bet on an incumbent supplier turned out to be less than optimal. Finally, in the DoW, rather than celebrating killing programs that aren't delivering, a failed program can be a black mark on a career. The result is that many program managers continue with existing contractors and a lack of interest in alternative solutions.

To a startup the sum of this can appear as a culture of the “frozen middle of field grade officers.”

It takes the rare CPE/PEOs/program manager who is willing to move on from existing vendors that are late, over budget, underdelivered, or have been leapfrogged by new technology. These forward looking CPEs/PEOs and program managers do exist. (And the acquisition and personnel changes in 2025 are going to accelerate a change in culture and behavior.) Find ones who want to solve warfighter problems. Make sure these are the ones you’re talking to.

Dual-Use Startups and Venture Capital

Venture capital investors have strong opinions - pro and con - about Dual-Use startups. Dual-Use refers to a startup trying to sell the same core technology to both Commercial markets (e.g., civilian, enterprise, consumer markets), and Defense/national security markets (DoW, DHS, intelligence community).

Some examples of companies that in theory could sell to both defense and commercial markets are:

- AI/ML software: Used in commercial logistics and can be adapted for military supply chains.
- Drones: Consumer or industrial inspection drones, a hot topic for kinetic, counter UAS and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) applications.
- Cybersecurity tools: Enterprise IT defense can be adapted (but with additional hardening) for DoW networks.
- Advanced materials: Lightweight composites for autos, potential applications for missiles, spacecraft, armor or aircraft.
- Biotech: Commercial diagnostics, synthetic biology, can be used for battlefield health monitoring.

On paper this is a good idea because your company (and the DoW) can piggyback on commercial R&D investment (DoW doesn’t have to fund 100%), and your company isn’t solely reliant on slow DoW contracts.

However, and this is a big “however,” *startups rarely have the bandwidth to do both at the same time*.

- Sales process, customers, problems/needs and business models have no commonality
    - That means the people you hire for one market have no expertise in the other. You need two distinct sales organizations.

- Selling to DoW means navigating FAR/DFARS clauses, CMMC (cybersecurity), ITAR/Export Control, security clearances.
- Even with "fast" tools like OTAs or CSOs, transitioning from prototype to real procurement can take years. The DoW "valley of death" is real. Unless you have deep-pocket VCs, DoW funding often runs out after SBIR Phase II, before a Program of Record picks up the technology.

The Rise of Defense Venture Capital
As of 2025 the market cap of Palantir, Anduril, et al has made defense startups the next hot thing for venture investors. It's getting to the point that most VCs will at least look at a startup in defense.
Appendix B lists and links to the VCs, Private Equity firms and family offices who are investing in defense and government startups.

The rise of defense VCs has changed the risk calculus of a startup wanting to sell to the DoW:
- It makes DoW-only startups viable (with the right investors in Appendix B).
- It reduces the need for a forced dual-use story.
- It provides capital and political cover to cross the valley of death.
- But it also raises expectations — defense startups are no longer "small boutique suppliers," they're expected to grow into prime challengers.

Once you survive the valley of death and make it into a Program of Record, the DoW can be a decade-long customer with billions in sustainment funding. FAR contracts may be painful up front, but they yield predictable, recurring revenue unlike consumer markets.

Security clearances, ITAR, export controls, and DFARS compliance, while also painful, create high barriers to competition. A DoW-only startup that "breaks in" can defend its niche better than in commercial SaaS markets, where competition is brutal. Being "classified capable" itself becomes a moat.

Some startups can bootstrap growth by leaning entirely on DoW R&D money (SBIR, OTAs, BAAs) in early years and use the government as the anchor customer. This can replace the need for Venture Capital, especially for founders who don't want to dilute equity. A handful of deep-tech hardware firms have grown this way, going government-first instead of VC-first.

So what's the right answer? It depends on your passion. Are you on a mission to solve problems to make the country safer and secure? And do you think you have a unique product/insight? Go defense.

Working with Congress
Part of a Go-to-Market strategy has to include talking to the House (HASC) and Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) Staffers and Congressman. They sit at the intersection of funding,

oversight, and requirements-setting that can make or break a new entrant. Another set of congressional players are the House and Senate Appropriations Committees (HACD/SACD.)

HASC and SASC Committees Control DoW (and PAE and CPE) Money
The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and annual appropriations bills define what technologies, programs, and pilot projects get funded in the DoW. Staffers write the legislative "marks" that can insert new start program authority, plus-up funding, or special technology pilots that directly benefit a startup's product category. Without line-item funding or a budget wedge, even an interested CPE, lab, or operator may not be able to scale a prototype into a program of record.

HASC and SASC Committees Provide DoW Oversight and Leverage
Congress acts as a counterweight to the bureaucracy - when service labs or PAEs/CPEs drag their feet, staffers can demand briefings and pressure action. They write the annual Defense Appropriations bill, which actually provides the budget authority (the money). Without appropriations, nothing gets spent, regardless of authorization. They are more focused on funding lines than broad policy. Think of HASC/SASC as policy-setters: They decide what the DoD is allowed to do and how much it could spend, but not the actual release of funds.
In practice, Authorization - the HASC/SASC - to legally pursue an activity. Appropriation - the HACD/SACD - to actually spend money on it.

Interaction with HASC and SASC Gets You Access and Attention in the DoW
Building relationships with Congressional staff raises a startup's credibility with the Pentagon. Program managers notice when Members of Congress ask about a technology in hearings. (They will be annoyed but you are now on their "pay attention to radar.") Members and staffers can connect startups to key DoW offices, labs, or programs that align with Congressional interest.

Staffers Versus Congressman
Your first instinct might be to get to the "top" and talk to the congressman. If you do so, you're going to ignore other important people - the Staffers. *Staffers Are the Real Subject-Matter Experts*. Professional staff members (PSMs) on HASC and SASC often have years (sometimes decades) of experience with defense programs, acquisition law, and budget marks. They are the ones who actually draft the legislative language in the NDAA and appropriations bills. A Member's vote and remarks are critical, but the staffer is the one who writes "the Secretary shall establish…" or inserts a $20M "plus-up" line item. Staffers track hundreds of programs and technologies. They are the filter and gatekeepers of information — if you want an idea to land in legislation, it usually has to be convincing to a staffer first.

Staffers Shape Requirements and Priorities. They influence what the Pentagon must study, report on, or prototype. Language like "the Secretary shall establish a program for…" often originates with HASC/SASC staff. They can direct services to accelerate adoption of a given class of technology (e.g., autonomy, AI, hypersonics, counter-UAS).

Staffers Provide Continuity. While Congressmen come and go based on elections, committee assignments, or leadership changes, staffers often stay across multiple cycles, giving them institutional memory. A staffer you brief this year may still be there five years later when your technology is ready to scale.

Staffers Control Access. A Congressman/Senator's time is extremely limited. Staffers decide which companies/technologies get a slot on the calendar or a recommendation to the Member. If you haven't educated the staff, your five-minute "meet and greet" with the Congressman/Senator won't translate into actionable support.

You want the Congressman/Senator to be the visible champion of your technology (asking DoW about it in hearings, visiting your facility, touting local jobs). But the staffer is the one who, drafts the mark-up language, coordinates with the service on implementation, tracks whether the DoW followed through

Startups that educate staffers early may see their technology area prioritized in defense strategy documents, service roadmaps, or mandated pilot programs. They can protect against Policy and Budget shocks and help navigate threats like CRs (Continuing Resolutions), reprogramming cuts, or service budget reshuffles. They can secure report language or earmarks (congressionally directed spending) that stabilize funding streams for emerging tech.

You can find the names of the 2025 HASC/SASC staffers in Appendix G. And further details of Congressional Offices by subscribing to Legistorm or CQ.

DoW Go-To-Market Strategies

Go-to-Market in the DoW

In Commercial Business-to Business sales "Go-to-Market" means defining the:

- Target customers (who uses it, who buys, who recommends, who influences).
- Channels (direct sales, distributors, Value Added Resellers - VARs, online).
- Value proposition and messaging (pain points, Return On Investment - ROI).
- Path to revenue (land-and-expand, subscriptions, etc.).

Selling to the DoW is different. In the DoW, your "customers" and "channels" are not just end-users but an ecosystem:

- Customers:
    - Operators/Warfighters - these are the ultimate users; they validate the need.
    - The service Labs (ARL, AFRL, NRL) - fund prototypes and experiments.
    - Requirements Writers/Capability Developers (OPNAV N-9, AF A-5/7, TRADOC CoEs, Joint Staff J-8) specify needs
    - CPEs/PMs - control acquisition budgets and programs of record.
- Channels / Partners:
    - CRADAs/PIAs provide matchmaking, discovery, and early access.
    - Consortia (OTAs) - contracting vehicles for prototypes and possible path to production OTAs.
    - Primes - potential integration channel into billion-dollar programs.
    - Tribal/ANC firms - possible sole-source channel, can provide access to clearances.
    - Mid-tiers, UARCs, FFRDCs, DIU, AFWERX are accelerators and secondary contracting channels.
- Value Proposition / Messaging:
    - Speak in mission outcomes, not product features.
    - Show how your tech improves readiness, survivability, lethality, or cost.
- Sample Paths to Revenue:
    - Early - use SBIR / DIU / PIA pilot events.
    - Mid - use Consortia OTAs and subcontracts through primes/ANCs.
    - Scale - CPEs integration into Programs of Record.
    - Swing for the Fences - go directly to the Warfighter.

We'll expand on this outline in detail in this section. First some basics.

> Just to be clear, **there is no single entry point to the DoW that is "the right way."** The most successful startups run a multi-pronged strategy. Below are two very different examples of a DoW Go-To-Market strategy.

Keep in mind that **the DoW budget cycle plans 2.5 years ahead**, so depending on the source of your prototype funding (SBIR/Venture Capital, DIU, etc.) there may be the proverbial "Valley of Death" before you can scale with money Congress appropriates through the Program Objective Memorandum (POM). Help your sponsor understand how your product/service aligns to a validated requirement or Program Element (PE).

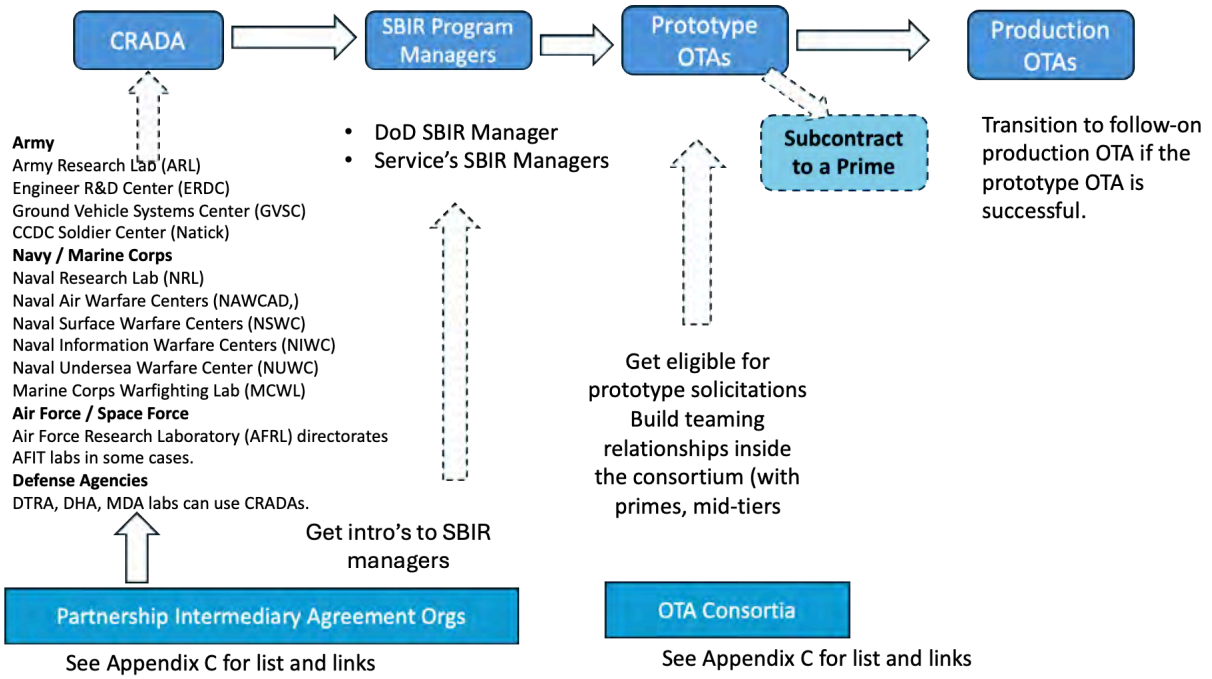
If you have a new capability, this may involve writing new requirements that explain why your technology will help the DoW stay ahead of our adversaries. Justify your inclusion in the Program Objective Memorandum (POM). Every line item in the budget is competed for and prioritized, and new starts are often treated skeptically by the bureaucratic frozen middle that have long-standing unfunded requirements.

Don't be shy about recommending divestments that your technology enables. While the DoW budget has grown, things still need to be removed to fit all the new programs.

Work the HASC and SASC staff and PAEs/CPEs/PMs with these messages. See Appendix F for a list.

If You Don't Have A Working Prototype or Product

A startup go-to-market strategy without a working product or even a prototype, might look as follows. (Note that this strategy - CRADA's, PIAs, SBIRs, prototype solicitations, etc. - is a *patient* capital approach that might take years for a company to scale. See the Direct-to-Operator / Direct-to-Field for an *impatient* capital approach.



Goal: Transition from “nontraditional” to fully cleared defense contractor.

1. Get out of the building and understand potential customers' problems and hypothesize how your theoretical solution might solve it for (warfighters/operators, lab managers)
2. Get introductions to SBIR/STTR managers.
3. Start with CRADAs and/or PIAs Partnership Intermediary Agreements
4. To gain eligibility for prototype solicitations, join relevant consortia
5. Build teaming relationships inside the consortium (with primes, mid-tiers).
6. Submit to OTA solicitations and win prototype contracts.
7. Transition to follow-on production if the prototype is successful.

Start with CRADAs and/or PIAs Partnership Intermediary Agreements

PIAs get you in the door but a CRADA is the beginning of a partnership.

A strong startup strategy usually involves engaging PIAs for exposure and getting aligned with the labs, and SBIR exposure and consortia for funded prototype opportunities and scaling.

PIAs (such as SOFWERX, ERDCWERX, Doolittle, IN3, TechLink, et al.) offer Pitch days, hackathons, and challenge events. This provides your company with Visibility and with warfighter/operator feedback. These PIAs (listed in Appendix D) help you connect with the DoW without you needing prior federal contracting experience.

PIAs can introduce you to DoW SBIR managers and help you write SBIR/STTRs proposals that have better odds of getting funded. A PIA might host an event (e.g., SOFWERX pitch day) that leads to awareness of your tech. That awareness can help DoW CPE program offices decide to sponsor an SBIR topic aligned with your solution or increase your odds of being selected. Some PIAs (like TechLink) provide free proposal support for SBIR applicants (help writing, aligning to topics, understanding DoW language). Many PIAs host defense innovation events: AUSA, TechConnect, Defense Manufacturing Conference. But keep your eye on SBIR solicitations (via dodsbirsttr.mil)

Use Consortia to Get to a Prototype Funding Path

Consortia can get your company your first prototype contracts and help you align to whatever the mission is of their DoW partners. Consortia exist to issue Other Transaction Authority (OTA) solicitations, fast-tracking prototype contracts that bypass much of the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR). Consortia get you on contract to DoW Labs they have relationships with (AFRL, ARL/DEVCOM, NRL). Consortia can also provide CRADAs, technical testing, TRL maturation.

Subcontract to Primes

When you start to win OTA prototypes, primes (Lockheed, Boeing, RTX, Northrop, General Dynamics, L3Harris, etc.) are often watching. Primes control most large DoW programs of record. They are under pressure to include nontraditional vendors for innovation.

If your tech aligns with a program of record (e.g., F-35, submarine systems, Army network), primes may invite you in as a subcontractor to test how your tech plugs into their architecture. Subcontracting lets you "ride" the prime's contract vehicle and compliance infrastructure. Your startup role is to supply primes with your niche technology (AI module, sensor, software stack, energy system) that primes integrate into larger systems. This helps your small company avoid the overhead of prime contracting (cyber compliance, supply chain, cleared facility). And it generates early revenue and credibility with DoW customers.

This is often the first path into classified programs (prime holds the clearance, you deliver the tech) and creates teaming relationships that can later scale into standalone contracts.

(Remember, Tribal/ANC Firms can leverage their 8(a) sole-source authority as a subcontractor, or partner on direct awards.)

Scale Into Acquisition

CPEs/PEOs can transition prototypes into programs of record. One path would be to work with a Consortia to get an OTA with a PEO with a funded prototype, then have them issue a follow-on production award.

Tribal/ANC Partners can help you win sole-source awards, flow down subcontract work. Primes can integrate your tech into billion-dollar programs and act as channel partners. The result is that you establish recurring DoW revenue streams and program adoption.

Security Clearance Phase

When you see a DD Form 254 in a contract, you need to get cleared.
Path A: Get sponsored by DoW or prime for Facility and Personnel Clearances.
Path B: Partner with a prime or Tribal/ANC firm that already has clearances and deliver unclassified modules until you mature.
See the Security Clearance Section further on.

Summary for a Don't Have A Product/Prototype Go-to-Market Strategy

CRADAs, PIAs + Labs = discovery and early validation.
Consortia = prototype contracts (OTAs).
Tribal/ANC firms = shortcut to sole-source awards and classified capability.
Primes = integration into programs of record, credibility, faster access to scale.
CPEs/PEOs = ultimate customers — they control the real money.

Direct-to-Operator / Direct-to-Field - Go to Market Strategy

A very different DoW go-to-market path is a Direct-to-Operator / Direct-to-Field Unit strategy. Unlike using PIAs, SBIRs, and consortia, your company is working directly with warfighters and/or field commands - often outside normal acquisition channels (or in advance of them). This is a more typical path for a company that has a working product or prototype and/or one that is venture funded and wants to become a next generation Prime.

This process is the “lean startup” approach inside DoW - iterate with real users, then scale with institutional buyers.

Palantir pioneered this strategy in Iraq in 2009. Despite a multi-year development and billions of dollars invested in the acquisition of the Army's DCGS-A (Distributed Common Ground System-Army) for collecting, processing, and disseminating intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) data from various sensors and sources, DCGS was a complex system of systems that didn't work well. Soldiers on the ground repeatedly requested and used Palantir's software. A Joint Urgent Operational Need Statement (JUONS) was issued for Palantir. (It took another six years of lawsuits but Palantir pioneered the way for startups to work with PEOs and the Department of War.)

Another example is Anduril’s early versions of Lattice (autonomous sensing system) and Interceptor drones were dropped into SOCOM and border security units for live field trials. Operators loved it and the DoW started buying small quantities for rapid fielding. Operator advocacy (and intense D.C./Pentagon lobbying) helped Anduril transition into larger contracts with DIU, SOCOM, and PEO Missiles & Space. Anduril skipped traditional SBIRs and went straight to operator demos and urgent needs then scaled.

Shield AI took their quadcopter (Nova) directly to Navy SEAL teams for room-clearing missions. SEAL operators tested it in the field, then pushed up to SOCOM acquisition staff. SOCOM bought units under 10 U.S.C. § 2373 experimental authority. Shield AI is now a unicorn, with programs inside SOCOM, Navy, and Air Force. Shield AI started with small, urgent operator buys, then transitioned to funded programs.

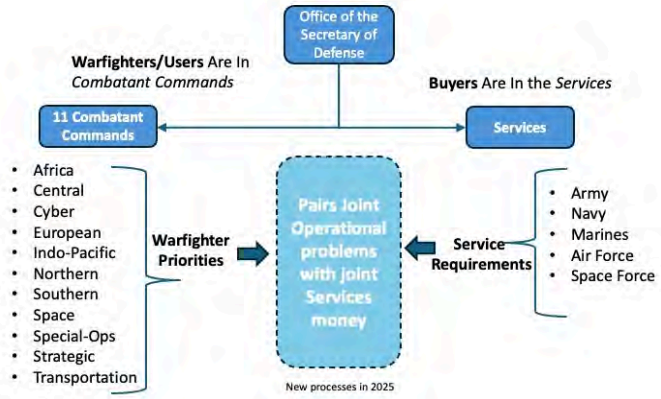
Here’s how Direct-to-Operator / Direct-to-Field Unit strategy looks:

Get Out of the Building - Find a “Customer” with a burning and urgent need

All these examples above had warfighters/units who had an *urgent* problem, understood they had a problem, were actively looking for a solution (and in some cases) had or had attempted to piece together their own solution and had or could acquire a budget. Very few of them were looking for a “shiny object” of a specific piece of technology - they were looking for a solution to a problem. You first need to do *Customer Discovery* and deeply understand warfighter/stakeholder problems.

Forward Deploy - developers/founders - Iterate Minimum Viable Products/Solutions

All the examples above had the companies "forward deploy" their developers/founders into the units to work side-by-side with them, deeply understanding warfighter problems and rapidly iterating on Minimum Viable Products/Solutions. Deploying an MVP in exercise/demo can show operational advantage quickly. (Most often the solution that solved their problem looked nothing like they thought on day one.)



Find a "Customer" who can and is willing to pay now

Everyone wants a solution, but your startup is looking for *Customer Validation* - Who has or can find money to pay for your product now. For example, Special Operations Forces (SOCOM, JSOC, Marine Raiders.) They have discretionary budgets and flexible authorities.

Or Cyber Command and/or the Service cyber units. They often run "bring your tool, we'll test it" pilots.
Or Operational commands (e.g., CENTCOM, INDOPACOM, EUCOM) with urgent operational needs (UONs).

Or Individual Program Managers in the field. They may have "operations & maintenance" (O&M) money they can use.

They can buy via Government Purchase Card (GPC). Up to $10K (services) / $250K (supplies) can be bought on a credit card. Units use this for quick buys (e.g., drones, sensors, software licenses).

Or they can use OTAs / Rapid Acquisition AuthoritiesUse or CSOs (Commercial Solutions Openings) to push a prototype into a pilot program. SOCOM and certain commands can buy under 10 U.S.C. § 2373 (experimental authority) for rapid prototyping. Or via Urgent Needs Statements (JUONs, UONs, ONSs) Like the Palantir example, combatant commands can declare urgent needs that bypass normal acquisition.

Or they can buy via COTS (Commercial-Off-The-Shelf) Purchases. Field units often test COTS directly, then escalate for larger buys if it works.

Brief the HASC/SASC Staffers

See the section on working with Congress above. Now is the time to take all the operator testimonials and your learnings from the field and brief the house and Senate Armed Services Committee staffers.

Show them evidence that the Warfighters have validated operational relevance that your solution works. Simultaneously, if you have built grassroots demand from the field (If Marines, SEALs, or pilots use it successfully), voices from the field can become advocates to their chain of command and to Congress.

This advocacy from the field derisks Congressional plus-ups: HASC/SASC Staff can feel more confident recommending a new program line or pilot funding if there's evidence of direct warfighter use. Even better, they can enable flexible funding lines so operators can procure and experiment (e.g., expanding OTAs, small rapid procurement authorities). They can protect transition dollars: make sure validated prototypes don't die in the "valley of death" and Insert report language / NDAA directives pushing the Services to act on warfighter-validated capabilities.

If operators like it but CPEs/PEOs are blocking, Congress can demand answers.

Operators, Congress and the PEOs/Program Managers

Use the Intersection of Operators and Congress to Influence the CPEs/PEOs/Program Managers

This strategy is like business-to-business startups seeding with influencers:

The Warfighters are the "Internal Evangelists/Power Users." They prove your company's tech works in the field, write after-action reports, and become the advocates that acquisition and Congress listen to.

The CPEs/PEOs/PMs are the "enterprise buyers." They don't usually take risks unless an operator is already pushing.

Congress are the "funders" like a board of directors. They don't use the product, but they authorize and fund it once they hear the pull and understand its value.

Summary: Startup Playbook for Direct-to-Operator

1. Identify Pain Points
    - Operators talk openly at events like SOFIC, AUSA Warrior Corner, or AFWERX challenges.
    - Listen for problems they're trying to solve this year.
2. Engage Through Demonstrations in the field of MVPs
    - Get your tech in their hands quickly (loaner units, demo software, sandbox access).
    - Forward deploy if you can
    - Iterate with the Warfighter
    - SOCOM loves "tech rodeos" and small unit evaluations.
3. Leverage Small Dollars First

    - Start with a pilot purchase ($25K–$250K).
    - Use that to get field feedback and operator endorsement.
4. Turn Operator Pull Into Acquisition Push
    - If operators like it, they pressure their CPEs/PEOs/program managers to adopt it.
    - You can win when operators love it so much they demand it from leadership and are willing to speak up and advocate for it.
    - This can trigger a Rapid Fielding Initiative, OTA solicitation, or SBIR topic.
5. Leverage into CPE/PEO program demand: Bring validated user stories to program offices + HASC/SASC staff.
6. Secure a budget wedge: Transition from demo to pilot to a program of record.

Advantages of Direct-to-Operator

- Speed: Can get tech into the field in months, not years.
- Feedback: Operators give brutally honest evaluations that help refine your product.
- Demand Signal: Creates "bottom-up pull" — acquisition officials take you more seriously when operators demand your product.

Risks / Challenges

While satisfying bypassing PEOs and traditional processes, Direct-to-Operator/Field Unit strategy are non-scalable revenue. Government Purchase Card or pilot buys won't sustain a business. Direct -to -Warfighter Go-to-Market is high-impact for validation and advocacy, but it must be paired with a follow-on strategy to pull in PAEs/CPEs/PEOs and Congress for budget. Otherwise, you risk becoming just another cool demo at a range.

Summary: What Startup Founders Selling to the DoW Should Do

1. Map the stakeholder chain before your first meeting.
    - Who sets requirements?
    - Who owns today's money?
    - Who owns tomorrow's money?
    - Which PEOs and programs buy at scale?
2. Use this 2025 DoW Directory as your starting grid.
    - Use this Directory to identify the right program offices and senior buyers, then tailor your message to each point in the chain. Different groups may need different messages.
    - And yes—read this entire 30-page preamble on go-to-market paths.
3. Sequence what you are asking/trying to learn..
    - With users: validate the mission problem and context; secure access and data.
    - With buyers (PAEs/CPEs/programs): how to align to requirements, budgets, and contract vehicles; negotiate a transition plan before the pilot starts.
    - With requirements and budget influencers: how to ensure your solution shows up where next year's money will be.
4. Run a "technical terrain walk" for yourself
    - Before you propose your product or service, do the hard interviews across cyber, CIO, data owners, test, and sustainment.

- Identify the objections (and saboteurs) upfront and build them into your plan.

5. Build an explicit contract strategy.
   - Keep two to three viable paths open (e.g., OTA, IDIQ task order, CSO, SBIR-derived sole-source) matched to the buyer's reality.
   - Don't anchor on one type of contract. Money moves fastest through the least painful legal path available to the DoW buyer you're talking to. If they can't access your type of contract, you don't have a path.
   - Maintain multiple contract paths (FAR and non-FAR) that match where you are: R&D, prototyping, production.
   - Teach yourself the FAR, DFAR, and non-FAR options well enough to develop a strategy for sequencing your decisions.
     - Read the FAR,DFAR, and non-FAR descriptions on pages 4-5 and explore the links on pages 41-45.
     - If you outsource understanding this entirely to your business development team, you've ceded control of your company's destiny.
6. Instrument for impact.
   - Quantify time saved, dollars avoided, lives protected.
   - You are selling outcomes—make them legible in the metrics that the government actually tracks.

Getting Ready to Work With the DoW

Register With SAM, Get a CAGE Code, UEI Number, and Form 2345

If you haven't already, register your company in the System for Award Management (SAM.gov). (The FAR requires all federal government contractors to be registered in SAM.gov.) Once registered your company will get a unique CAGE code used to identify you. You can also use SAM.gov to search for information about federal government contract awards.

Your company likely needs a DD Form 2345, the Military Critical Technical Data Agreement, to access unclassified export-controlled technical data for Department of War programs. This certification is required for U.S. contractors to bid on DoW solicitations, receive proposals, attend technical conferences, or conduct research and development involving such data. To apply, you'll need a UEI (Unique Entity Identifier). You'll also have to provide an Employer Identification Number (EIN), business bank account, bank routing number and business address. The DD Form 2345 process is managed by the Joint Certification Program (JCP), at the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). See here.[16] It can take 4 months to get certified.

Cyber Security and ITAR - International Traffic In Arms Regulations

If you're going to sell to the DoW, compliance with FedRAMP rules (cloud security), CMMC (cybersecurity maturity), and ITAR (export controls) is non-negotiable. Understand these rules and get in compliance as early as possible.

Controlled Unclassified Information (CUI)

CUI information is *unclassified* Department of War information that the department requires safeguarding. Some CUI information can be released to your startup. If you get a CRADA with a DoW lab, work with warfighters in the field, and/or when you start working with CPEs your company will need to have access to this type of information.

To do so your company needs to obtain the appropriate CMMC Level 2 certification. And if you store CUI information in the cloud it has to meet FedRAMP Moderate standards (AWS, Microsoft and Google all offer this).

Security Clearances

Most SBIR/STTR grants, hackathons, and pitch events are usually unclassified and don't require a clearance. Your early defense work will likely just require the DD Form 2345 and CUI certification. But at some point you may hit a wall where the DoW can't share specific project/problem details without the individuals working on that project having a security clearance. (It doesn't necessarily have to be the CEO.) You'll need a clearance if:

- Your contract or solicitation specifies classified info access (Secret, Top Secret, SCI, SAP, etc.)

[16] https://www.dla.mil/logistics-operations/services/joint-certification-program/#jcp-certification-us

- You need access to classified facilities (SCIFs), data, or test ranges.
- Your product involves sensitive technologies (e.g., cryptography, advanced sensors, cyber.)
- You are part of a Program of Record that operates in classified domains (e.g., undersea warfare, space control, special operations).

If you see a DD Form 254 (Contract Security Classification Specification) requirement as part of your solicitation/contract, that's the DoW telling you a clearance is required. Clearances are only issued when you have a sponsor (a government agency or prime contractor) although there are some shortcuts.

Types of Clearances Relevant to Startups

- Facility Clearance (FCL): For your company as a whole — required if your company will hold classified material.
- Personnel Clearance (PCL): For you and any employees needing access.
- Levels: Confidential, Secret, Top Secret (TS), TS/SCI.

How to Get a Clearance

1. Win or get down-selected for a contract that requires access to classified info.
    a. Some DoW agencies can put you in for a clearance if you have a CRADA with them.
2. The sponsoring agency (or prime) files the paperwork with the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA).
3. DCSA investigates you: background check, fingerprints, financial/foreign contacts, etc.
4. If approved, you (as an individual) and your company facility (if needed) receive clearances.

Note: Foreign nationals cannot hold U.S. security clearances. A company cannot get a Facility Clearance if it is under Foreign Ownership, Control, or Influence unless it takes special steps. Foreign investment (VC or corporate) triggers a CFIUS review if it involves critical technology, defense, or data. It can kill DoW contracts. Make sure you ask often and early about Foreign Nationals and Foreign investors.

Security Clearance Advice for Startups

- Getting clearances is *slow* (6–18 months) and the higher clearances take more time. The earlier you can get a DoW/prime to sponsor you, the better. (Or a DoW agency or group that can use a CRADA to get you one.)
- Use primes or Tribal/ANC as partners: Sometimes a contractor already has the clearance and can "wrap" your technology inside their classified work until you get your own.
- As soon as you see a DD254 in a solicitation, check if you'll need to get sponsored and who can do so.

Read the DoW Budget and 2025 Reconciliation Bill

If you're a startup, scaleup or venture investor, while it's helpful to know what Portfolio Acquisition Offices exist and who staffs them, it's even better to know where the money is, what it's being spent on, and whether the budget is increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same. In addition, it's important to think through a "go-to-market" strategy of who else you can call on to get early orders and credibility. This will differ depending on the stage of your company. (This section suggests two sample Go-To-Market strategies.)

To get a sense of what specific programs the DoW is spending money on, start by looking through the DoW Comptroller/CFO budget web page. There you can get an overview of the entire defense budget here.[17] Then search for those programs in this Directory. You can get an idea whether that program has $Billions, or $Millions.

Get acquainted with the USA Spending Website. You can search by service, prime awards, subcontract awards, etc. For example, if you're looking at an Army Program, Appendix C lists every 2024 contractor to the Army and the program they're associated with. This allows you to understand the incumbents and/or identify potential partners.

Next, take a look at the budget documents released by the DoW Comptroller – particularly the P-1 (Procurement) and R-1 (R&D) budget documents. The Army, Navy and Air Force each have their own detailed budget breakouts. Also look at the SOCOM acquisition budget. This year Congress added an additional $156billion in Defense Funding in the 2025 Reconciliation Bill. Read it here.[18]

Combining the budget document and the Reconciliation Bill with this PEO directory helps you narrow down which of the 70 Program Executive Offices and 500+ program managers to call on.

With some practice you can translate the topline, account, or Program Element (PE) Line changes into a sales Go-To-Market strategy, or at least a hypothesis of who to call on.

Armed with the program description (it's full of jargon and 9-12 months out of date) and the Excel download here[19] and the RDT&E budget here[20] — you can identify targets for sales calls with DoW where your product has the best chance of fitting in.

The people and organizations in this list change more frequently than the money. Knowing the people is helpful only after you understand their priorities -- and money is the best proxy for that.

[17] https://comptroller.war.gov/Budget-Materials/
[18] https://www.congress.gov/119/plaws/publ21/PLAW-119publ21.pdf
[19] https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2026/p1_display.xlsx
[20] https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/p1_display.xlsx

Startups Are A Nontraditional Defense Contractor

In many defense websites and blogs, you'll see references to “nontraditional defense contractors.” If you're a startup that’s you – If you haven't had a contract with the DoW in the past year.

Read Defense Blogs and Attend Defense Trade Shows

Defense is an ecosystem unto itself, with its own culture, language, processes, people networks, etc. If you haven't already, the best way to get a feel of the rhythm of the DoW is to start reading the blogs that cover it. Start making a list of the reporters/bloggers who cover your area. If you have something of interest, reach out to them. Start following Program Offices on LinkedIn and other social media.
See Appendix D for a list.

Next, attend AI summits, and industry days, the relevant defense tradeshows to immerse yourself and meet the people you’ll be selling to. Engage with panelists and learn what commands/labs/PAEs/CPEs. Use this directory to find program managers, requirement officers, or Fleet experimentation leads and ask questions. See Appendix E for a list of blogs and trade shows..

Be Where Your Business Is

If your customer is in D.C. but you're headquartered elsewhere the odds are you’ll hire a business development person in Washington and most of your executive staff will fly in for meetings, stay in a hotel for a few days and go home. Now imagine you’re competing with a company that lives in that city. Their CEO can have coffee at the drop of a hat with an influencer or decision maker in the DoW or Congress.

If your defense customers are concentrated in a city or region, for the first year, the CEO/Co-founder (whoever can make product and priority decisions) needs to be where your potential customers are. Get an apartment in D.C. or Austin, or San Diego - wherever your early customers are - and stay for extended periods. A business development hire is not a replacement for the founder deeply involved in understanding and selling to the DoW.

An extension of this philosophy is to forward deploy to where the warfighters are. As early as possible find ways to embed with the labs/warfighters/operators to collaboratively work on problems and build solutions.

Department of War (DoW) Glossary

Common "Assistant/Deputy/Principal" Titles

- **Principal** - "Top" or primary (e.g., Principal Staff Assistant; Principal Deputy).
- **Deputy** - The #2 to a specific principal (e.g., Deputy ASD).
- **Assistant** - A titled role under a higher official (e.g., Assistant Secretary; Deputy Assistant Secretary).
- **Acting / PTDO** - Temporary stewardship; see rules below.
- **PTDO -** Performing the Duties Of (see below)

Appointment & Status

- **Nominated (Nominee)** - The President has sent a name to the Senate for a job that requires confirmation. These names are called PAS roles (Presidential Appointment with Senate confirmation). Until confirmed, nominees generally don't exercise the job's legal authorities.
- **Confirmed** - The Senate has given advice and consent; the person can exercise the office's full statutory authorities.
- **Appointed (non-PAS)** - Hires that do not require Senate confirmation (e.g., many deputies, directors, and SES executives).
- **Acting** - A temporary official filling a Presidential Appointment with Senate confirmation role. "Acting" service is time-limited (e.g., typically 210 days, with extensions in specific circumstances).
- **PTDO** ("Performing the Duties of…") - A common DoW label for someone delegated to run day-to-day matters when the seat is vacant. Non-delegable "functions and duties" still require a lawful Acting official (or the Secretary/agency head).
- **Designate / Designate** - Informal label for someone publicly announced for a role but not yet sworn/confirmed (e.g., "Under Secretary-designate")

Senior civilian titles (OSD = Office of the Secretary of Defense)

- **Secretary of War** (SecWar) - Cabinet official in charge of DoW (previously called the Secretary of Defense)
- **Deputy Secretary of War** (DepSecWar) - Second-in-command and head of the OSW component
    - **Secretary of Defense** (SecDef) - prior name of Secretary of War
    - **Deputy Secretary of Defense** (DepSecDef) - prior name of Deputy Secretary of War
- **Under Secretary of War** (USW) - Senior leaders heading major portfolios (e.g., Policy; Acquisition & Sustainment; Research & Engineering). They are Principal Staff Assistants (see PSA below).
- **Assistant Secretary of War** (ASD) - Senior civilian sub-cabinet leaders under a USW; also classed as PSAs.
- **Principal Staff Assistant** (PSA) - Collective term for OSW's top civilian staff: USWs, ASWs, DoD CIO, and a few others. You'll see "PSA" in charters and org charts.

- **Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary** of War (PDASW) - The #2 to an ASD; the first-among-deputies. Often the day-to-day driver; commonly career SES.
- **Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense** (DASW) - Senior leaders reporting to an ASD, usually aligned to a sub-portfolio (e.g., Industrial Policy; Cyber Policy).
- **Principal Director** (PD) - Senior executive (often SES) leading a major directorate (common in USW(R&E) and elsewhere). Example: "Principal Director for Space."
- **Director / Office Director** - Leads an office under a DASD/PD; may be SES or GS-15.
- **Chief of Staff** (CoS) - Manages the front office; controls access and tasking-critical for meeting flow.

Service Department conventions (Army, Navy, Air Force/DAF)

- **Assistant Secretary of the Army/Navy/Air Force** (ASA/ASN/SAF A/S) - Civilian leaders analogous to Assistant Secretary of Defense but inside a Military Department.
- **Principal Military Deputy** (PMILDEP) - Statutory "principal military deputy" to ASA(ALT) (Army's acquisition chief); similar "principal military deputy" constructs appear across acquisition organizations.
- **Service Acquisition Executives (SAEs) -** the senior person in each military service for Acquisition. In the Navy it's the ASN(RDA), In the Army it's ASA(ALT), SAF/AQ for Air Force — or in joint cases, to the Defense Acquisition Executive (USD(A&S)).

Career service categories

- **SES (Senior Executive Service)** - The government's senior career executives; the major link between political appointees and the workforce. Many PDASDs/DASDs/Directors are SES.
- **NH-04** is a government pay band for senior professional and managerial positions, equivalent to a General Schedule GS-14 or GS-15 level
- **PMP** is a Project Management Professional. It is a certification offered by the Project Management Institute (PMI) to lead and direct complex projects.
- **SL / ST -** Senior-Level (SL) and Scientific/Professional (ST) positions: senior experts who are not SES executives.
- **Materiel Leader** (usually a Lieutenant Colonel or Colonel) **and Senior Materiel Leader** Colonel or equivalent civilian leader (e.g., in the Senior Executive Service (SES) or GS-15 level) are titles that denote leadership and command responsibility within logistics, acquisition, and sustainment career fields. Primarily associated with the Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC)

Why these matter when you're selling

- **Authority to decide** lives with the PAS's (Presidential Appointment with Senate confirmation (USD/ASD) and their chains (PDASD/DASD/Directors).
- **Continuity and speed**: A confirmed ASD/USD can set policy and commit; a long-term PTDO/Acting may move more cautiously (or be constrained) on non-delegable actions.
- **Execution and budget owners** are often in the Services (ASA/ASN/SAF staffs, PEOs/PMs) and career SES lanes; they shape requirements and buy.