

AFPI PRIORITIES IN THE FY26 NDAA



December 22, 2025

On December 18, 2025, President Donald J. Trump signed into law the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2026. The NDAA, which Congress has passed every year since 1961, plays an important role in the defense of the homeland, reauthorizing budget priorities that support our military and provide them with the tools necessary for the fulfillment of the United States' foreign policy objectives. The following are provisions in the legislation that have been the focus of the America First Policy Institute (AFPI) over the course of 2025, as reflected in AFPI publications and policy engagements. These include policies with direct impacts on military readiness and defense acquisition, as well as those that concern the overall security and prosperity of the American people.

AMERICAN SECURITY:

Fitness Standards

- Eliminates the old regional contingency mindset better preparing the United States for at least one, possibly two, fights on sea, land, air, and space through a mandated report on critical munitions required for simultaneous conflict.
- Enhances the criteria for military service and specific occupational career fields, creating uniform medical standards for entry into the armed forces.
- Creates a uniform standard for combat emphasizing a merit-based standards system.

Recruitment

- Creates a requirement mandating that schools grant military recruiters, JROTC candidates, and ROTC candidates access to campuses equal to that of other prospective employers.
- Raises the acceptable range of JROTC programs from 3400-4000 to 3600-4200 and eliminated the ability of the Secretary of War to require that JROTC instructors have more than 8 years of service.

Defense of the Family and Community

- Creates several different initiatives to address housing shortages by increasing reporting on waivers, bringing in private housing inspectors, and relaxing restrictions on modifying base properties previously deemed historical.
- Increases the allowance for family separation, travel, subsistence, and housing.
- Establishes a reporting requirement for the suspected child abuse of children in the care of DoWEA child development centers.
- Moves up the date for required assistance in station changes, increasing the provision of information and station adjustment assistance.
- Enacts President Trump's Eos on DEI including the ban on men competing in women's sports at the service academies.

Defense Industrial Base

- Creates new authorities to accelerate the acquisition pipeline.
- Establishes an alternative test and evaluation pathway during research and development for covered programs to accelerate the delivery of such capabilities.

- Supports the development of the Golden Dome, a next-generation missile defense shield.
- Requires the Secretary of War to enter multi-year procurement contracts on high-demand systems and munitions.
- Supports investments into small and medium entities in the defense industry.
- Eliminates procedural barriers that disproportionately affect small businesses' ability to compete for contracts.

FARMERS FIRST:

- Limits the executive agencies' ability to contract with or buy goods/services from companies that are affiliated with Chinese biotechnology, chemical, or similar sectors.
- Increases the rigor of processes meant to protect military installations by requiring repeated evaluations of installation lists and reports to Congress, so that real estate purchases in their proximity can be assessed for security reasons.
- Mandates a report by the State and Agriculture departments into China's growing involvement with agriculture in Brazil, who is a primary competitor for U.S. farmers.

VALUES:

- (Sec 581): The National Defense Authorization Act strengthens protections for military children by requiring prompt notice when abuse or neglect is suspected in DOD childcare centers. It also ensures parity for military families by extending leave to U.S. Coast Guard members when their family welcomes a child for long-term foster care.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGY:

American Leadership

- Authorizes the Department of War to establish National Security and Defense Artificial Institutes to expand AI partnerships, workforce development, and translation of research into operational defense capabilities, which includes providing curated datasets, AI testbeds, and shared compute access.
- Advances energy initiatives for defense installations (including pilots for advanced nuclear energy options) that can support energy-intensive emerging technology and secure compute missions.
- Reduces acquisition barriers and expands support for small and medium entities and non-traditional contractors, which strengthens a "Little Tech" pipeline for AI innovation.

Human Dignity and Trust

- Requires a defense-wide AI and machine learning governance policy to standardize oversight, accountability, and risk management across the Department of War.
- Establishes an AI model assessment and oversight function and directs the DoW to develop AI sandbox environments to safely test, evaluate, and validate systems prior to deployment.

American Security

- Directs the DoW to develop cybersecurity procurement requirements tailored to AI systems and update cybersecurity training to address AI-enabled threats and vulnerabilities.
- Restricts the use of certain foreign-developed AI tools and systems within the DoW to reduce exposure to adversary influence, data leakage, and security risks.

- Strengthens Intelligence Community authorities to defend against AI technology theft by adversaries; identify AI vulnerabilities; and secure AI supply chains against compromise.
- Establishes and clarifies Intelligence Community guidelines for the use of AI, including requirements for applying IC AI policies to publicly available models hosted in classified environments.

Government Efficiency and Readiness

- Accelerates adoption by requiring the DoW to integrate suitable commercial AI tools for logistics tracking, planning, operations, and analytics into relevant exercises.
- Establishes a pilot program using generative AI and spatial computing for performance training and proficiency assessment.
- Creates an Artificial Intelligence Futures Steering Committee to evaluate, adopt, govern, and mitigate risk from advanced AI capabilities and forecast emerging model trajectories.
- Establishes a test and evaluation pathway during research and development to enhance agility, accelerate delivery, and enable data-driven decision-making critical for rapid iteration of software- and AI-enabled capabilities.

