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FY 2026 NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT: AMERICA FIRST PRIORITIES

TOPLINE POINTS

Every year since 1961, Congress has passed the National Defense Authorization Act to support our service members and provide them with the necessary tools to meet today's threats and support our foreign policy objectives.

The following overview builds on the transformational efforts of the Trump-Vance Administration over the last four months, particularly in the eradication of DEI ideology and the elimination of waste from the Department of Defense, and further develops its defense priorities by prioritizing the following areas:

- ★ Restoring Fitness Standards to Rebuild the World's Most Lethal Force
- ★ Revive the U.S. Defense Industrial Base
- ★ Eliminate Waste from the Department

These recommendations are drawn, in part, from recent research by the America First Policy Institute on national security, cited at the end of this paper.

Restore Fitness Standards to Rebuild the World's Most Lethal Force

It is common sense that civilian standards should not apply to the U.S. military, to say nothing of keeping out anti-American ideologies like Marxism and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The Trump-Vance Administration has swiftly reversed this, and recruitment numbers have already jumped to pre-Biden era levels.

Fitness standards, however, should not be the same for every service member. Rather, they should correspond to the specific missions of particular service branches or tasks of different units. Combat divisions, which by their nature require profound tests of



agility and strength from service members, will be different from units whose missions do not involve the same kinds of kinetic physical engagement.

The standards are not specific to males or females. They are about readiness for combat missions and survival under the conditions dictated by those missions. Beyond its clear alignment with the tasks facing service members, history has shown that such a mission-focused approach to fitness standards will have the important ancillary effect of empowering women within the armed forces by establishing a more efficient and precise metric by which to assign both men and women across the vast and diverse branches of the U.S. armed forces in a manner that reflects their talents and comparative advantages, all with the overarching aim of making the U.S. military the most lethal and effective in all theaters of combat.

Military readiness is not only an issue of fitness standards; it is also an issue of mental preparedness. Rather, central components of the readiness of the warfighter are his support structure—his family, community, and faith—as well as his spiritual and moral training, which includes his studies. A robust and well-rounded curriculum, beginning at the elementary school level, is integral to building a service member’s national literacy, ensuring the realization of the saying, “The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him but because he loves what is behind him.” This requires a thorough review of the conditions affecting the service member’s “personal infrastructure”—including family, faith, and support networks.

In his 2024 essay, “There Can Be No America First Without the Shield of the Armed Forces,” the Honorable Robert Wilkie, the former Secretary of Veterans Affairs and former Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, provides the following recommendations to restore fitness standards and rebuild the world’s most lethal force:

- ★ Eliminate older regional contingency mindset and prepare for at least one, possibly two, peer fights on sea, land, air, and space.
- ★ Entrance criteria to military service and specific occupational career fields should be based on the needs of the positions. Exceptions should not be made for individuals already requiring medical treatment for entry.
- ★ Physical fitness requirements should be based on the occupational field without consideration of gender, race, ethnicity, or orientation. One size does *not* fit all.
- ★ Enable commanders to hold troops to the physical standards required by that combat category.
- ★ Strengthen protections for chaplains to carry out their ministry according to the tenets of their faith.
- ★ Codify language to instruct senior military officers (3 and 4 stars) to ensure they understand the primary loyalty is to the Constitution and to ensure the readiness of the armed forces.



- ★ Eliminate Marxist indoctrination and divisive critical race theory programs. Abolish DEI offices and staff and eliminate DEI courses and minors from military academies.
- ★ Enhance military recruiters' access to secondary schools and require all students in schools that receive federal funding to complete the ASVAB, the military entrance exam.
- ★ Restore high school and GED requirements for all recruits.
- ★ Increase the number of Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) programs in secondary schools.
- ★ Tie federal funding to schools to their willingness to allow JROTC, ROTC, and recruiters on campus.
- ★ Improve base housing and consider the military family holistically when considering change of station moves.
- ★ Improve spouse employment opportunities and protections.
- ★ Audit all curricula and health policies in the Department of Defense (DoD) schools for military families. Remove all inappropriate materials and reverse inappropriate policies.
- ★ Improve Morale, Welfare and Recreation facilities across the military for service members and families.
- ★ Expand on the policies of the first term of the Trump Administration regarding the fact that 19th century-based rotation policies do not fit in the 21st century.
 - Give the military family more stability, including by ensuring that tours at major installations are extended. It should be easier for troops to rotate from combat units to the schoolhouse or higher headquarters within the same installation, allowing families to establish roots.

Revive the Defense Industrial Base

Support for two partners amid hot conflicts in two theaters over the last three years has revealed the gaps and inefficiencies in the ability to field and scale various military platforms in a timely manner. Much of this is due to the cumulative bureaucratic inertia within DoD, a defense industrial base designed during the last century, as well as a congressional appropriations process that privileges legacy companies and platforms. The revival of the U.S. defense industrial base, therefore, depends on its redesign to align better with today's combat needs, particularly with an eye toward speed, scale, and strategic effect, and be adaptable to the changing nature of warfare.

The redesign of the defense industrial base depends on three core areas of change: 1) how DoD procures its capabilities, 2) how we improve coordination with our allies on common defense needs, and 3) how DoD interacts with industry. It also requires that the United States incrementally return defense spending to the post-World War II average of 6% of the GDP by the end of 2028.



In their forthcoming paper, “Reviving the Arsenal of Democracy: Great Power Competition Requires Great Industry,” Secretary Wilkie and Morgan Murphy¹ offer the following recommendations to revive the U.S. defense industrial base:

Procurement

- ★ DoD should realign incentives and procedures to value ingenuity and speed over compliance and risk aversion.
- ★ Golden Dome: As part of the process of adapting Israel’s Iron Dome and Arrow air and missile defense systems, the United States should consider a review of how U.S. military services have adapted those capabilities already and the lessons learned about creating greater interoperability.
- ★ Build the systems into which DoD has already invested research and development (R&D) resources.
- ★ Increase procurement for aircraft at a sustainable pace, and refrain from investing as much in R&D when we are behind on procurement.
- ★ Clear and consistent guidance from the U.S. government regarding its procurement process and goals, with an eye toward increasing participation by smaller and newer entrants.

Allied Relationships

- ★ Exempt Five Eyes countries from manufacturing quotas, such as the Biden Administration’s Executive Order 14005, “Ensuring the Future is Made in All of America by All of America’s Workers.”
- ★ Secure the supply chain for the industrial base by utilizing the Export-Import Bank to lend to nations that wish to use American rare earths and critical minerals.
- ★ The United States should immediately waive the review period and value thresholds for Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. It should also drastically reduce the burdens of exporting arms to Japan, Israel, and NATO allies in order to streamline foreign military sales. All other thresholds should be indexed to inflation.
- ★ Break into the lower-end and less expensive arms market that has traditionally been dominated by Russia.

Interaction with Industry

- ★ Seek favorable tax rates and priority lending to re-shore America’s domestic manufacturing industry. Five key areas should be closely guarded:
 - Energetics and explosives
 - Castings and forgings
 - Energy storage and batteries

¹ Secretary Wilkie and Mr. Murphy wrote the paper in 2024, when Mr. Murphy was a senior fellow in the Center for American Security at the America First Policy Institute.



- Mining and critical minerals
- Microelectronics
- ★ Adopt the accelerated depreciation model pioneered by the 2018 Trump White House, targeting small businesses procuring manufacturing assets.
- ★ While worthwhile, programs that target small business entry into the defense manufacturing base should be supplemented by programs that increase new entrants in areas most critical to national defense, such as energetics and explosives, castings and forgings, energy storage and batteries, mining and critical minerals, and microelectronics.
- ★ Reform DoD's small business efforts through two primary objectives: 1) harnessing the ingenuity of America's small business community and 2) strengthening the defense industrial base by attracting new entrants.
- ★ To increase the ease with which small businesses can partner with DoD, it should 1) reduce barriers to entry for any business to approach DoD and have their capabilities evaluated; 2) reduce duplicative and wasteful overlap of small-business lines of effort; 3) reward small businesses based on their productivity and creativity; 4) speed up payment procedures for small business; and 5) provide cyber-security protection to small businesses.

Eliminate Waste from the Department

The Trump Administration, through DoD and the Department of Government Efficiency, has begun the necessary steps to address waste and inefficiency within DoD. America First Policy Institute encourages Congress to consider supporting Deputy Secretary of Defense Steve Feinberg's April 7, 2025, memorandum, "[Workforce Acceleration & Recapitalization Initiative Organizational Review](#)," as well as the findings of all DoD Components and Service branches as directed by this memorandum.

In parallel, outside of workforce optimization within components, Congress should consider authorizing DoD to offer non-government healthcare options for military spouses and families. Contracting services that provide logistical functions to DoD personnel (e.g., Washington Headquarters Services), as well as military housing, should be considered for annual review, with recommendations regarding the quality and efficiency of the services provided, as well as for changing the contracting process to address those needs.



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