

Issue brief

Winning through people: The human capital advantage in great-power competition

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To maintain military readiness, deter conflict, and preserve its technological edge, the United States must prioritize human capital by investing in resilient service members and a skilled civilian workforce.

Bottom lines up front

- The next National Defense Strategy (NDS) must prioritize human capital as one of the United States' enduring strategic advantages, recognizing that highly capable, well-trained personnel—both military and civilian—are essential to deterring conflict and operationalizing any defense strategy. This is especially important as the pool of eligible youth is shrinking and will require intentional efforts to grow the propensity to serve.
- Continued investment in and leadership attention to ongoing resilience initiatives, expanded childcare infrastructure, and family support systems translate into enhanced capability, reduced attrition costs, and strategic advantage through a more stable, experienced force.
- The civilian workforce of the Department of Defense is essential to warfighting capability yet remains undervalued in defense strategy. Rather than pursuing workforce reductions without strategic vision, the next NDS should articulate how civilian expertise in specialized fields augments military lethality and maintains the US technological edge.

Less than a week after Thanksgiving 2023, a CV-22 Osprey helicopter on a routine training mission crashed into the ocean near the southernmost point of mainland Japan. Within hours, it became clear to rescue teams that all eight aboard had perished. The crew—four officers and four enlisted airmen, including one Chinese linguist—comprised members of two separate special operations squadrons. Their mission: to deter aggression and support Japan's self-defense forces in the Indo-Pacific. This presence was both intentional and symbo-

lic, reflecting the US military's pivot from decades of conflict in the Middle East against transnational armed groups toward a rising China and a renewed era of great-power competition.

The crash caused the Air Force Personnel Center's Casualty Operations Division to enter 24/7 crisis response mode, conducting more than fifty next-of-kin notifications—many delivered in person—over the course of several weeks as the remains of the deceased airmen were recovered and

identified.¹ We know this because, in January 2024, one of us visited the Air Force casualty team at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio to highlight their outstanding efforts to keep the families informed—first during the search and rescue operation, and later throughout the recovery and identification process.

During that visit, it became clear that, despite a renewed focus on the Indo-Pacific theater, the reality of what a transition from great-power competition to great-power conflict would mean for the men and women of the US military had not been fully operationalized. The casualty team struggled to envision how their limited, mostly civilian staff could maintain the same level of exceptional service if the United States were to defend Taiwan against a Chinese invasion. They estimated that, in such a scenario, as many as several hundred airmen could be killed each day—a staggering figure that would not even account for exponentially higher losses from the US Navy, Marine Corps, or Army. It was clear that, eighty years since the end of World War II, none of the military departments had developed comprehensive contingency plans for the level of casualty assistance such a conflict might demand. Nor had the US government prepared its citizens for the scale of sacrifice such a “total war” scenario could entail.

This example illustrates the extent to which the changing security environment demands a greater focus on the military and civilian personnel requirements to support shifts in policy. It also underscores the reality that conflict between great powers will necessitate a transformation in how the US military operationalizes and mobilizes its reserve components, takes care of those currently serving to support recruiting and retention efforts, and prioritizes new military construction projects, such as a west coast port mortuary that could accommodate the casualties a large-scale conflict in the Pacific would almost certainly produce.

Despite valiant efforts to focus on the Pacific over the past several National Defense Strategies (NDS), the personnel systems of the Department of Defense (DoD) are still not optimized for the realities of conflict with China. And while effective diplomacy, exquisite sensor platforms, and advanced weapon systems are essential to deterrence, the men and women in uniform—and the DoD civilians who support them—remain the United States’ most enduring strategic advantage. They are highly capable and resilient, rigorously trained and well-educated, and operate within a decision-making structure

in which plans serve as starting points and a commander’s intent guides action.

The next NDS will likely continue to emphasize preventing great-power competition from escalating into great-power conflict; accelerating the development and deployment of new technologies and capabilities; resourcing the United States’ shifting focus from military presence in Europe and the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific; and strengthening the defense industrial base. However, it is long past time for the NDS to give the DoD human capital enterprise the attention it deserves—integrating personnel challenges and opportunities firmly into the strategy and recognizing the robust capabilities of the people behind the platforms.

The next NDS represents the right moment to elevate the “people” component of the US national security enterprise. Since the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)—the NDS’s predecessor—the human capital and personnel elements of the strategy have evolved from managing the strain on the force of ongoing wars to a broader emphasis on cultivating and retaining talent, enhancing resilience, and addressing systemic challenges in an increasingly complex security environment. The 2010 QDR fundamentally reflected a wartime strategy, heavily shaped by the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. It recognized that years of war had significantly strained the all-volunteer force, its personnel, and their families. However, with the drawdown of US forces in the Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility, the 2022 NDS updated its priorities to ensure adequate recruiting in a time of domestic economic recovery and growth, and placed a new focus on “taking care of people”—that is, on support for the health, safety, and welfare of service members, their families, and the DoD’s civilian employees.

Much of this evolution was a direct result of the efforts and voices of a new generation of post-9/11 veterans returning from deployments and recognizing how much they and their families struggled, whether it was with mental health, access to healthcare and childcare, or housing challenges exacerbated by high interest rates. At the same time, several high-profile incidents brought attention to the inadequate structures and resources the department had deployed to investigate, prosecute, care for victims, and ultimately deter crimes like sexual assault and domestic violence.²

1. Tara Copp and Mari Yamaguchi, “Air Force recovers bodies of 6 airmen killed in Osprey crash in Japan,” *Air Force Times*, December 6, 2023, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2023/12/06/air-force-recovers-bodies-of-6-airmen-killed-in-osprey-crash-in-japan/>
2. Johnny Diaz, Maria Cramer, and Christina Morales, “What to Know About the Death of Vanessa Guillen,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/vanessa-guillen-fort-hood.html>; Norah O’Donnell, Kristin Steve, Len Tepper, Adam Verdugo, and Caitlin Yilek, “Military’s domestic violence crisis compounded after 20 years of war,” CBS, September 8, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/militarys-domestic-violence-crisis-investigation-norah-odonnell-cbs-news/>

The next NDS must place even greater emphasis on these human capital issues—not only because recognizing the service and sacrifice of uniformed military personnel and DoD civilians is the right thing to do, but because they represent an essential element of national strategy that gives the United States its most enduring advantage.

Although the challenges facing DoD personnel and their families are vast in this era of great-power competition, three specific priorities—recruiting, service member resilience and quality of life, and strengthening the civilian workforce—stand out as critical for inclusion in the next NDS. While this list is by no means exhaustive, these issues demand urgent attention and investment if the current administration hopes to fulfill its promise of “peace through strength.”

■ It all starts with recruiting

Perhaps no personnel issue garners as much public attention as military recruiting. Ensuring the force is adequately manned is essential to fulfilling any objectives announced in a new defense strategy. In January 2025, the incoming Donald Trump administration inherited a revitalized recruiting enterprise that had transformed to adapt to three significant challenges:

1. an economy with historically low unemployment paired with high private-sector wage growth;³
2. diminished access to high school students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; and, most importantly,
3. declining public familiarity with military service.⁴

The strong post-COVID-19 economic recovery created challenges for all military services’ recruiting efforts in 2022 and 2023, as private-sector companies increased hiring and offered more flexibility in where work could be done, augmented by generous education benefits—largely offered only by the military before.⁵

To overcome these headwinds, from 2022 to January 2025, each service sought to modernize and update its recruiting strategies while reviewing existing policies that no longer served their initial objectives.⁶ Through efforts like the Air Force’s holistic “barriers to service” policy review and the Army’s and Navy’s Future Soldier and Sailor Preparatory Courses, all services met or exceeded their 2024 active-duty enlisted recruiting goals, including the Air Force hitting its objectives a full quarter early, even after increasing its goal mid-year.⁷ Even more notable, much of the increase in the Army’s recruiting success was a result of bringing in 18 percent more women in 2024—nearly double the increase in male recruits.⁸ The impact of all of these changes appears enduring: as of June 2025, the Army, Navy, and Air Force have already announced they are set to meet their 2025 enlisted recruiting goals months ahead of schedule, and the Marine Corps and Space Force are also on track.⁹

3. Evan Hydock, “Is the Military Recruiting Crisis Over? Not quite,” Georgetown Security Studies Review, April 27, 2025, <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2025/04/27/is-the-military-recruiting-crisis-over-not-quite>.
4. “Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Recruiting Media Roundtable With Service Leaders,” US Department of Defense, October 30, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3952493/fiscal-year-2024-2025-recruiting-media-roundtable-with-service-leaders>.
5. Ben Kessler, “Amazon, Disney, Starbucks and 5 other big companies that help pay for employees to go to college,” Quartz, February 19, 2025, <https://qz.com/employers-college-tuition-amazon-disney-starbucks-1851759730>.
6. Konstantin Toropin, Steve Beynon, Drew F. Lawrence and Thomas Novelty, “Prep Courses, Policy Tweaks Largely Drove the Military’s Recruiting Success in 2024,” Military.com, October 10, 2024, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2024/10/10/prep-courses-policy-tweaks-largely-drove-militarys-recruiting-success-2024.html>.
7. Greg Hadley, “10,000 More Recruits in 18 Months: How Easing Rules Made the Difference,” *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, October 30, 2024, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/air-force-recruiting-barriers-prep-course>; Alex Wagner and Christopher R. Amrhein, “US Air Force hit 2024 recruiting goal by meeting Americans where they are, not lowering standards,” November 7, 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/11/us-air-force-hit-2024-recruiting-goal-by-meeting-americans-where-they-are-not-lowering-standards>; C. Todd Lopez, “Military Met 2024 Recruit Contracting Goals, Plans for Repeat,” Department of Defense, April 10, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4151948/military-met-2024-recruit-contracting-goals-plans-for-repeat>.
8. Steve Beynon, “Surge of Female Enlistments Helped Drive Army Success in Reaching 2024 Recruiting Goal,” Military.com, January 09, 2025, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/01/09/surge-of-female-enlistments-helped-drive-army-success-reaching-2024-recruiting-goal.html>.
9. Army Public Affairs, “Army meets fiscal year 2025 recruiting goals four months early,” US Army, June 3, 2025, https://www.army.mil/article/286027/army_meets_fiscal_year_2025_recruiting_goals_four_months_early; “U.S. Navy Achieves FY25 Recruiting Goal 3 Months Early,” America’s Navy, June 18, 2025, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Press-Releases/display-pressreleases/Article/4221132/us-navy-achieves-fy25-recruiting-goal-3-months-early>; Thomas Novelty, “Air Force Lowered Annual Recruiting Goal Due to Budget Woes, But Still on Track to Hit Target This Month,” Military.com, June 18, 2025, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/06/17/air-force-lowered-annual-recruiting-goal-due-budget-woes-still-track-hit-target-month.html>.

These gains, however, may be short-lived if the new DoD leadership is serious about only appealing to certain segments of the US population.¹⁰ It is undeniable that the United States cannot sustain its all-volunteer force without women, especially given that only 23 percent of American youth are eligible for military service due to criminal history, controlled substance use, low academic scores, or health factors.¹¹ Of course, more women than men are qualified for service, due to substantially lower juvenile arrest rates and higher test scores, but their interest in service remains lower. To bridge this “propensity gap,” the Air Force in 2021 launched “Origin Story,” a website focused on its history of female pilots, and in 2024 announced a “women in sports” campaign designed to help athletic young women associate the Air Force brand with the camaraderie and mission of sports.¹² The Army’s recruiting success with young women in 2024 also relied on advertisements highlighting female soldiers: the two most-watched videos on the Army recruiting YouTube page—“Fixer” and “Everyone”—both prominently feature women.¹³

An important start is Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth’s creation of a DoD-wide “Military Service Recruitment Task Force,” which ideally will synchronize recruiting efforts across the services, integrate service anniversaries into the “America 250” celebrations, and address the communication gaps presented by five distinct services seeking to recruit different segments of the population.¹⁴ However, given that Hegseth has repeatedly questioned the suitability of women for important combat roles in the military, it remains unclear how the task force will structure its work around recruiting women.¹⁵ If performed objectively, the review should conclude that service should be open to any American who meets the military’s high standards, that fitness standards are rationally related to the job requirements and the important objective of maintaining a

healthy force, and that meaningful distinctions exist between the military services and the standards required to serve in certain roles. In other words, finding the most capable signals intelligence analysts and acquisition managers might necessitate different fitness standards than those used to identify special forces operators and infantry. It is our hope that the task force will endorse and expand campaigns that include appeals to young women, emphasizing the data and opportunities that intentionally growing propensity to serve among women presents.

The worst-case scenario is that the task force will adopt rigid, one-size-fits-all accession and retention standards for the total force (active duty, National Guard, and Reserve) that prioritize pull-ups over the skills and fitness actually required to succeed on the digital battlefields of the future or across the military’s incredibly diverse roles and mission sets.

However, the recent changes made to military recruiting, including a greater focus on women, are unlikely to suffice in countering the intensifying recruiting headwinds anticipated in the years ahead. Colleges and universities have been sounding the alarm about the looming “enrollment cliff,” a term referring to the dramatic drop in college-age youth projected to begin in the fall of 2025. During the Great Recession between 2008 and 2011, the number of children born in the United States dropped dramatically. Over the next four years, the overall number of eighteen-year-olds is expected to drop by 7.3 percent, and between 2026 and 2039 that number is expected to fall by a total of 15 percent.¹⁶ One demographic, however, will buck this trend: the share of Hispanic youth among high school graduates is expected to grow from 26 to 36 percent by 2041.¹⁷

While the immediate impact of this shift will be felt more acutely in higher education, the military will not be immune. A shrinking

10. Bill Chappell, “Military’s DEI purge seen putting its future — and its history — at risk,” NPR, March 21, 202, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/21/nx-s1-5333324/pentagon-military-dei-purge-recruiting>.
11. “The Target Population for Military Recruitment,” Office of People Analytics, May 2023, <https://dacowits.defense.gov/Portals/48/Documents/General%20Documents/RFI%20Docs/June2023/OPA%20RFI%201.pdf>.
12. “Every Hero has an Origin Story,” Air Force, accessed, July 18, 2025, <https://www.airforce.com/origin-story>; Roastbrief, “U.S. Air Force newest spot empowers women and girls in sports and uniform, by GSD&M,” Roastbrief US, April 8, 2024, <https://roastbrief.us/u-s-air-force-newest-spot-empowers-women-and-girls-in-sports-and-uniform-by-gsdm>.
13. “Army Reserve | It’s Your Time | Fixer,” GoArmy, May 16, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2heLpsU_hRw; “Everyone | Decide To Lead | Army Officer,” GoArmy, August 9, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7UzA-g6HwQ>.
14. Secretary of Defense, “Establishment of the Military Service Recruitment Task Force,” Department of Defense, June 13, 2025, <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Jun/18/2003740994/-1/-1/ESTABLISHMENT-OF-THE-MILITARY-SERVICE-RECRUITMENT-TASK-FORCE.PDF>.
15. Missy Ryan, “The Backdoor Way That Pete Hegseth Could Keep Women Out of Combat,” *The Atlantic*, July 10, 2025 <https://www.theatlantic.com/national-security/archive/2025/07/pete-hegseth-women-combat-troops/683454>.
16. Scott Jeffe, “Two Demographic Cliffs? How and Why to Diversify Revenue Streams,” RNL, September 24, 2024, <https://www.ruffalonl.com/blog/enrollment/two-demographic-cliffs-the-enrollment-case-for-diversifying-revenue-streams>.
17. Jon Marcus, “A looming ‘demographic cliff’: Fewer college students and ultimately fewer graduates,” NPR, January 8, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/01/08/nx-s1-5246200/demographic-cliff-fewer-college-students-mean-fewer-graduates>.

pool of recruiting-age youth—already limited by eligibility factors—will undoubtedly present new challenges. To weather this environment, the next NDS should commit to building on the successful modernization efforts launched since the 2022 NDS and pursue additional reforms in the following areas:

- **Leverage new methods of engaging Americans:** Reaching all Americans where they are today requires a willingness to embrace communication platforms more frequently used by Generation Alpha (those born between 2010 and 2024)—whether digital spaces like esports, interactive gaming, and online competitions, or in-person, relationship-building settings involving influencers such as parents, coaches, and even social media creators. DoD leadership appears oriented in this direction, having already introduced short weekly videos explaining what the department does and why it matters.¹⁸ Of course, maintaining more traditional means of communication—press conferences, print media, and the like—remains critical to maintaining an open and transparent department. But the DoD should go further, dedicating budget, training, and contractor support to authentically and effectively leverage TikTok as a primary communication channel—should the Chinese government agree to the sale of the social media platform and the DoD lift its ban on TikTok—as it remains the most widely used social media platform among teenagers today.¹⁹
- **Dynamic review of medical accession standards:** One long-overdue element the NDS should highlight is that building a force that provides opportunities for all qualified Americans requires a continued, comprehensive review of medical accession standards to ensure policies keep pace with science. Too many young people are disqualified for medical conditions that are increasingly diagnosed and easily managed—including

in deployed environments. The department has made some progress in this area: in 2024, the DoD finally removed waiver requirements for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), allowing individuals with a history of ADHD to enlist without a waiver if they received treatment in the past twelve months.²⁰ After a thorough assessment, the Air Force also expanded its medical waiver policy to allow more individuals with a history of childhood asthma, manageable food allergies, and minor hearing loss.²¹ But these limited steps don't go nearly far enough. The DoD still maintains overly stringent accession standards for recruits with a history of minor, treatable mental health challenges—despite encouraging its own personnel to seek help when needed. Generation Z has demonstrated more openness toward seeking mental health treatment than previous generations.²² These recruits should not be punished for doing exactly what the department encourages. While caution is important in pursuing reform, studies have shown that service members granted behavioral health waivers have performed as well as—or even better than—their peers.²³ Medical accession standards must continue to reflect the realities of a changing recruiting population.

- **Focus on recruiting, growing, and retaining technical talent:** Beyond simply meeting the end-strength numbers required to fulfill force needs, the next NDS should highlight that accessing and developing the right talent to deter—and, if necessary, defeat—US adversaries in future conflicts must be a strategic recruiting priority. This means a renewed focus on identifying, accessing, training, and retaining skilled digital talent across both the military and civilian workforce. Future conflicts will still involve projecting power in the air, ground, and sea domains; however, they will also feature blistering attacks on US cyber and space capabilities and assets.

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18. Matthew Olay, "DOD Launches Weekly Video Update to Keep Public, Warfighters Informed," Department of Defense, February 27, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4081233/dod-launches-weekly-video-update-to-keep-public-warfighters-informed>.
 19. Dylan Butts, "Trump says he has group of 'very wealthy people' ready to buy TikTok," CNBC, June 30, 2025, <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/06/30/trump-says-he-has-group-of-very-wealthy-people-ready-to-buy-tiktok.html>; Michelle Faverio and Olivia Si-doti, "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024," Pew Research, December 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/12/12/teens-social-media-and-technology-2024>.
 20. Todd South, "Pentagon drops 51 disqualifying conditions as part of recruiting push," Military Times, October 31, 2024, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2024/10/31/pentagon-drops-51-disqualifying-conditions-as-part-of-recruiting-push/>.
 21. Air Force Accessions Center, "DAF updates waiver policies for asthma, hearing loss, food allergies," Air Force, December 23, 2024, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/4015908/daf-updates-waiver-policies-for-asthma-hearing-loss-food-allergies/>.
 22. Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Generation Z and Mental Health," Annie E. Casey Foundation, May 12, 2024, <https://www.aecf.org/blog/generation-z-and-mental-health>.
 23. Beth J. Asch, Michael L. Hansen, Rosanna Smart, David Knapp, Daniel Schwam, "An Empirical Assessment of the U.S. Army's Enlistment Waiver Policies," RAND, March 11, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4431.html.

These attacks are likely to precede adversary efforts to degrade freedom of action in traditional domains, sow domestic chaos and division to distract national resolve, and are likely to continue throughout the duration of any kinetic conflict.

Specific talent efforts over the last few years sought to ensure the DoD had the right technical talent in place to better address this new form of warfare:

- In June 2025, the Army established an Executive Innovation Corps, known as “Detachment 201,” aiming “to recruit senior tech executives to serve part-time in the Army Reserve as senior advisors.”²⁴ These new reserve officers will enter at the rank of lieutenant colonel, although it remains unclear how they will fit into the Army’s chain of command or culture—particularly if they are not required to meet physical fitness standards for accession or retention, or if they bypass the standard basic training course for new officers.
- Similarly, the Air Force launched a “Cyber Direct Commissioning” program in 2023 to acquire experienced private-sector talent as cyber reserve or guard officers. Unlike the Army’s approach, these candidates must still meet all accession requirements and complete the Air Force’s standard nine-week officer training school.
- The Air Force also reintroduced warrant officers in 2024—exclusively in cyber and information technology career fields—offering specialized pathways to invest in and retain personnel with these highly perishable skills.²⁵
- To better attract and retain individuals with expertise in the space domain, the Space Force secured special authorization from Congress in 2023 to integrate active-duty and reserve component members into a unified force with both full-time and part-time service options—the first arrangement of its kind. This structure enables more tailored talent management and promotes greater permeability with the private sector.²⁶

The next NDS should enhance and expand upon these pilot efforts to attract technologically inclined recruits to work on some of the toughest problems in the field. While the Army’s Detachment 201 seems little more than a gimmicky public relations effort, ensuring the military stays at the leading edge of technology will require a deeper and more concerted series of initiatives to recruit and retain the right mix of military and civilian tech talent for the increasingly digitized battlefields of modern warfare.

A resilient and supported force enhances readiness

Operationalizing the next NDS will not only require recruiting the right people but also maintaining individual and unit readiness by retaining that talent. Our experience serving under five secretaries of defense, across two presidential administrations, shows that cohesive teams supported by strong leadership and accountability translate into a more ready, lethal force. While there are myriad factors that contribute to readiness, bolstering force resilience is among the most important means of ensuring a credible deterrent. Investments in this area can yield enhanced capability (through reduced attrition and improved performance), cost savings (via lower training-replacement expenditures), and strategic advantage (by cultivating a more stable, experienced force).

While continued research is needed, the data on the connections between high quality of life and resilience with respect to performance, readiness, and retention has been well-documented. For example, incompatibility between family life and military life is often highly ranked as a reason for leaving military service.²⁷ This often manifests in high rates of military spouse unemployment and underemployment, and long waitlists for subsidized childcare—all stressors that may lead not only to early separation from service but also to stress, which may lead to interpersonal or self-directed harmful behaviors.²⁸ These behaviors are also known to degrade readiness. Units with higher rates of sexual assault and harassment report lower morale, diminished trust in leadership, and reduced mis-

24. U.S. Army Public Affairs, “Army Launches Detachment 201: Executive Innovation Corps to Drive Tech Transformation,” U.S. Army, June 13, 2025, https://www.army.mil/article-amp/286317/army_launches_detachment_201_executive_innovation_corps_to_drive_tech_transformation.

25. Emmeline James, “First Air Force warrant officers graduate, prepare to enter force,” Air Force, December 6, 2024, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3987738/first-air-force-warrant-officers-graduate-prepare-to-enter-force/>.

26. Emmeline James, “USSF leaders discuss future full-time, part-time service model,” Air Force, September 18, 2024, <https://www.spaceforce.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3910426/ussf-leaders-discuss-future-full-time-part-time-service-model/>.

27. Davis Winkie, “Unprecedented survey: Why do soldiers leave or stay in the Army?,” *Army Times*, December 6, 2021, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2021/12/06/unprecedented-survey-why-do-soldiers-leave-or-stay-in-the-army/>.

28. Kristy N. Kamarck, Barbara L. Schwemle, and Sofia Plagakis, “Military Spouse Employment,” Congressional Research Service, August 27, 2020, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R46498/R46498.2.pdf.

sion readiness, while sexual assault victims experience higher rates of separation or demotion.²⁹ High-profile sexual assault cases involving female victims often get the most attention, but it is important to remember that this is a crime that affects both women and men in the military in significant numbers. In fiscal year 2023 (the last year the DoD measured sexual assault prevalence), the department estimates that 15,201 active-duty women and 13,860 active-duty men experienced sexual assault. Further, a suicide in a unit can trigger issues of grief, guilt, and fear among peers—not to mention the mission disruption that often (appropriately) results from temporary stand-downs and death investigations. Young, enlisted males continue to account for the largest number of suicide deaths. Because of this data and the political attention these issues can elicit, resiliency and quality-of-life issues often receive significant rhetorical support, but rarely the level of investment necessary to realize the readiness benefits they merit.

In previous defense strategies, investment and prioritization of resiliency was linked to the impact of service following the onset of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as leaders confronted unprecedented rates of post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injuries, and suicide among service members.³⁰ Early programming largely focused on individual psychological resilience through cognitive-behavioral interventions. These initial efforts emphasized “mental toughness” training, stress coping techniques, and post-deployment screenings, reflecting a model that treated resilience as a personal trait to be cultivated through training, akin to physical fitness. Programs like the Army’s “Master Resilience Training” attempted to teach soldiers cognitive skills to “bounce back” from adversity and emphasized reintegration after deployment³¹, or resiliency efforts largely focused on reintegration when returning from deployment. As deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan declined

and the department made the shift toward great-power competition, the term “resiliency” at the DoD evolved to largely mean the absence of harmful behaviors, specifically sexual assault and harassment, suicide, and domestic violence. Unsurprisingly, the offices responsible for resiliency in both the services and the Office of the Secretary of Defense have historically been organized along these lines.

However, recent years have seen a fundamental transformation in this space. As research has evolved from individual-level interventions to embrace a social-ecological model that recognizes resilience as a dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments, so too has the DoD’s approach.³² This shift reflects mounting research demonstrating that resilience emerges not just from individual training programs (though individual interventions continue to be important) but from comprehensive approaches addressing the interconnected systems that shape the military community.³³ For example, the 2021 Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military (IRC-SAM) and the 2022 Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee (SPRIRC), building on public health research, clearly demonstrated the interconnectedness of protective and risk factors with broader command climate, economic, environmental, and quality of life factors.³⁴ When addressed comprehensively and proactively, these factors not only prevent harmful behaviors but promote human performance, greater resiliency and well-being, a stronger command climate, and broader military community support. Put simply, a service member living in substandard housing who may not have access to childcare and is working for a toxic leader cannot just be “trained” to be more resilient. And even if this member’s unit maintains high levels of readiness for a time, if these conditions persist, readiness will likely degrade.

29. Andrew R. Morral, Miriam Matthews, Matthew Cefalu, Terry L. Schell, and Linda Cottrell, “Effects of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment on Separation from the U.S. Military,” RAND, February 8, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR870z10.html.
30. Terri Tanielian and Lisa H. Jaycox, eds., *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG720.html>.
31. Karen J. Reivich, Martin E. P. Seligman, and Sharon McBride, “Master Resilience Training in the U.S. Army,” *American Psychologist*, (January 2011): 25–34, <https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/mrtinarmyjan2011.pdf>.
32. Michael Ungar, “Systemic Resilience: Principles and Processes for a Science of Change in Contexts of Adversity,” *Ecology and Society* 23, no. 4 (December 2018): Art. 34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26796886>.
33. “2023 On-Site Installation Evaluation Summary,” Department of Defense, August 4, 2023, <https://www.prevention.mil/Portals/130/Documents/OSIE%20Summary%202023.pdf?ver=x7gr90xEjklj2naFFTCFQ%3D%3D>.
34. The Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military, “Hard Truths and the Duty to Change: Recommendations from the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military,” Department of Defense, July 2, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jul/02/2002755437/-1/-1/0/IRC-FULL-REPORT-FINAL-1923-7-1-21.PDF/IRC-FULL-REPORT-FINAL-1923-7-1-21.PDF>; Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee, “Preventing Suicide in the U.S. Military: Recommendations from the Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee,” Department of Defense, January 4, 2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Feb/24/2003167430/-1/-1/0/SPRIRC-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

The DoD's policy, infrastructure, and investment have slowly evolved to keep up with this emerging approach, although considerable work remains to fully realize the effort. With the promulgation of new policy in 2019 and then expanded in 2022, the department began taking an integrated approach toward the prevention of harmful behaviors and recognized that issues like sexual assault, harassment, suicide, and domestic violence share common risk and protective factors that often occur far upstream of the event.³⁵

Importantly, this focus was also specifically articulated in the 2022 NDS.³⁶ Although the language remained more narrowly focused on the prevention of sexual assault and harassment and the implementation of the recommendations of the IRC-SAM, this language enabled DoD senior leaders to exercise stronger oversight of service-level implementation plans—which ultimately proved fruitful: In 2023, the department saw the first decline in sexual assault prevalence in the military in nearly ten years.³⁷

These efforts were bolstered by a substantial resource investment to advance a stronger, more cohesive command climate, in particular including the establishment of a new Integrated Primary Prevention Workforce: DoD civilians focused on supporting commanders by assisting them with upstream prevention of these behaviors and promoting well-being. The department also enhanced its data analysis and tools in this space, giving organization leaders more immediate access, understanding, and metrics related to their own command climate.³⁸ While important progress has been made, any loss of leadership focus risks significant backsliding. Continued momentum requires the next NDS to emphasize resilience and quality of life—not just as surface-level talking points, but through concrete action, specifically to include:

- **Development of a larger resiliency policy:** The DoD needs a comprehensive policy that effectively joins the integrated primary prevention framework and the Total Force Fitness framework.³⁹ This policy must take a whole-of-person and whole-of-community approach centered on boosting resilience, improving quality of life, and enhancing human performance, with clear benchmarks for evaluation. The strategy should elevate these efforts by defining clear lanes, roles, and responsibilities at the installation and unit level.
- **Continued implementation of the recommendations of the IRC-SAM and the SPRIRC:** As detailed above, the recommendations of the IRC-SAM and the SPRIRC represented a paradigm shift in how the department prevents and responds not only to sexual assault, harassment, and suicide, but also to issues of domestic violence, child abuse, and comprehensive well-being. Collectively, these nearly two hundred recommendations called for the establishment of a first-of-its-kind public health workforce, an overhaul of the department's Sexual Assault Response workforce, the most significant reform of the Uniform Code of Military Justice in over seventy years, called for a dramatic shift in resiliency and suicide prevention training, and detailed necessary investments and shifts in non-medical counseling and behavioral health care. The early data indicates that these efforts are having success, although continued evaluation will be necessary. Earlier this year, Hegseth's team conveyed an interest to Congress in continued implementation—an encouraging sign—but expedient implementation in these areas is unlikely to happen absent continued senior leader communica-

35. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, "DOD Integrated Primary Prevention Policy for Prevention Workforce and Leader," Department of Defense, December 20, 2022, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/640011p.PDF?ver=_-WRNG-g78mHPx4gQwkeaQ%3d%3d; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, "DOD Policy On Integrated Primary Prevention of Self-Directed Harm and Prohibited Abuse or Harm," December 20, 2022, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/640011p.PDF?ver=_-WRNG-g78mHPx4gQwkeaQ%3d%3d.

36. "2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States," US Department of Defense, October 27, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf>.

37. Oren Lieberman, "Reports of sexual assaults in US military drop for first time in nearly a decade," CNN, May 16, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/16/politics/reports-of-sexual-assaults-in-us-military-drop-for-first-time-in-nearly-a-decade>.

38. "2023 On-Site Installation Evaluation Summary," Sela Harcey et al., *Defense Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS) 5.1 Streamlining Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, Office of People Analytics, October 2023), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/html/trecms/AD1214590/index.html>.

39. Patricia A. Deuster, Vanessa M. Meyer, and Helene M. Langevin, "Total Force Fitness: Making Holistic, Integrated Whole-Person Research a DoD Priority," *Military Medicine* 188, no. 5 (September 4, 2023): 8–11, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10666955/>.

tions underscoring its urgency as well as additional investments of time, resources, and oversight.⁴⁰

- **Investments in DoD childcare:** Put bluntly, if a service member or spouse cannot find affordable and convenient childcare, it will be hard to stay focused on their mission. Coming out of the pandemic, all of US society was faced with a shortage of childcare providers, and the military was no different.⁴¹ Despite generally paying higher entry-level wages than private sector childcare employers, getting hired as a military childcare provider meant navigating lengthy Office of Personnel Management (OPM) hiring processes, extensive background checks, and commutes to military installations that for obvious reasons were often far from metropolitan areas. Only through significant attention by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin was the DoD able to turn the tide by offering significant recruiting and retention bonuses, other financial incentives, direct hiring authority, and flexibility through fee assistance programs.⁴² For example, from summer 2022 to January 2025, the Air Force was able to increase staffing at its child development centers from 65 percent to 86 percent—and maintain that increase over time—resulting in an overall reduction in waiting list time by over one-third.⁴³

However, the Trump administration's civilian workforce reduction efforts are actively undermining the department's ability to prioritize staffing, particularly during the high-turnover summer months when military family moves occur (along with those

childcare providers who are military spouses).⁴⁴ In addition, Trump's civilian hiring freeze initially prohibited the services from backfilling vacancies in these critical roles.⁴⁵ Although this workforce eventually received an exemption from the freeze, the murky bureaucratic requirements to justify exemptions continue to undercut the sort of rapid hiring actions necessary to be competitive in attracting and onboarding this workforce.⁴⁶ The next NDS should specifically highlight the importance of affordable and convenient childcare as essential to unit and family readiness and remove all self-inflicted bureaucratic red tape the administration carelessly imposed to ensure a responsive, well-compensated, and effective childcare enterprise.

Finally, the NDS should take the bold step of recommending opening up all military commissaries, beyond those installations included in the current pilot, to child and youth program civilian employees to further incentivize working within the DoD childcare enterprise.⁴⁷

An experienced DoD civilian workforce augments lethality

The DoD employs approximately 900,000 civilians across 650 different occupations who work in ninety-four countries around the world. These professionals include nuclear engineers designing submarine propulsion systems, childcare providers who make it possible for military personnel to focus on their mission, cybersecurity analysts defending military networks from attacks, acquisition specialists negotiating billion-dollar

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40. Jules W. Hurst III, "Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military," Department of Defense, April 30, 2025, https://www.sapr.mil/Portals/156/FY24_Annual_Report.pdf.
 41. "Five Years After COVID-19 Began, A Struggling Child Care Workforce Faces New Threats," Center for the Study of Childcare Employment, March 12, 2025, <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/press-release/five-years-after-covid-19-a-struggling-child-care-workforce-faces-new-threats/>.
 42. Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, "DAF adds additional financial incentives to recruit Child and Youth Program employees," Air Force, September 30, 2022, <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3176362/daf-adds-additional-financial-incentives-to-recruit-child-and-youth-program-emp/>.
 43. Jared Serbu, "Air Force discovers higher salaries aren't the only answer to its child care shortage," Federal News Network, October 9, 2023, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/federal-report/2023/10/air-force-discovers-higher-salaries-arent-the-only-answer-to-its-child-care-shortage/>.
 44. Drew Friedman, "Agencies will still see strict limits on recruitment once hiring freeze expires in July," Federal News Network, April 18, 2025, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/hiring-retention/2025/04/agencies-will-still-see-strict-limits-on-recruitment-once-hiring-freeze-expires-in-july/>; Rob King, "Fairchild Air Force Base axes child care for two dozen families due to federal funding cuts," KXLY, June 28, 2025, https://www.kxly.com/news/fairchild-air-force-base-axes-child-care-for-two-dozen-families-due-to-federal-funding/article_bf445f69-b978-4aed-8e3e-8d75e99f1932.html.
 45. David Roza, "Hiring Freeze Has Had 'Severe' Impact on Child Care: Air Force Personnel Boss," Air and Space Forces Magazine, April 10, 2025, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/air-force-child-care-hiring-freeze/>.
 46. Jules W. Hurst III, "Guidance on Hiring Freeze Exemptions for the Civilian Workforce," Department of Defense, March 18, 2025, <https://www.dcpas.osd.mil/sites/default/files/2025-03/Guidance%20on%20Hiring%20Freeze%20Exemptions%20for%20the%20Civilian%20Workforce%203-18-2025.pdf>.
 47. "DOD Civilian Expansion," Corp Commissary, accessed July 18, 2025, <https://corp.commissaries.com/civilian-expansion>.

weapons contracts, meteorologists providing weather intelligence for combat operations, and social workers who help military families navigate the unique stressors of military life. They work in shipyards welding the hulls of destroyer fleets, in laboratories developing hypersonic technologies, in commissaries overseas ensuring access to healthy groceries, in hospitals treating wounded warriors, and in classrooms educating military kids. Over 200,000 military personnel transition to civilian life each year, and many remain working for the department. Without DoD civilians, the department would lack the technical depth, institutional knowledge, and specialized skills required to maintain readiness and preserve the United States' edge. However, despite the essential nature of the civilian workforce to the department's mission, past defense strategies have only mentioned the civilian workforce in passing.

The Trump administration is currently undertaking a once-in-a-generation effort to overhaul the federal workforce more broadly, and at the DoD, Hegseth is pursuing a "Workforce Acceleration and Recapitalization" initiative to realign and restructure the DoD civilian workforce.⁴⁸ The aim of the strategy, however, appears to focus exclusively on reducing the size of the civilian workforce rather than sharpening its efficiency. Efficiency improvements are certainly necessary, and reforms to ensure the department can move more quickly to hire, recruit, and retain expertise, and hold poor performers accountable are long overdue. But the current strategy of merely taking a machete to the DoD civilian workforce threatens to undermine the very warfighter ethos the administration seeks to strengthen—and may ultimately increase costs. Past efforts to downsize elements of the DoD workforce without an overarching strategy have led to mission-critical skills gaps.⁴⁹ The next NDS creates an opportunity for the administration to correct this. It is not enough to just state a desire for a "leaner" force more focused on lethality. Instead, the NDS should clearly articulate what kind of military talent is necessary to counter the pacing threat, how DoD civilians can bolster warfighting efforts and fill gaps, how to source such talent, and how to ensure that it retains the right civilian talent to maintain readiness for the future fight.

DoD civilians alone account for 36 percent of the federal workforce—the largest share of any other federal agency. While the (in some cases, unlawful) reductions in size of the federal workforce have rightfully grabbed headlines, the administration—particularly the OPM—has announced a number of long-sought reforms to improve the federal workforce.⁵⁰ New guidance on federal resume reform, improvements to the dated USAJobs website, requirements for increased communication with job candidates, increased integration of commercial technology, and pooled hiring across federal agencies are noteworthy—although it remains to be seen how these efforts will be resourced. If the administration wants to truly strengthen the civilian workforce, however, it needs to expand these efforts and go deeper. To truly effect change and strengthen—rather than merely shrink—the civilian workforce, the next NDS should include requirements to:

- **Develop a comprehensive, DoD-wide workforce strategy:** The department urgently needs a comprehensive civilian workforce strategy to avoid the catastrophic skills gaps that result from unfocused personnel reductions and to ensure the department has the right mix of civilian talent to support national security objectives. This strategy must include workforce planning that identifies critical competencies by mission area, maps current capabilities against future requirements, provides a data-driven skills gap analysis, lays out a pathway to track civilian readiness in similar ways to military readiness, and provides an implementation plan that is enhanced by rigorous senior-leader oversight. Importantly, this strategy cannot be created in a vacuum by only the DoD's human resources (HR) professionals. This has been the department's historic approach to workforce planning, and while good work has been done, the documents rarely received the buy-in from senior leaders necessary to ensure they are recognized as a priority in the service's annual budget development processes. Further, the strategy cannot focus only on specific skills or careers, or continue to view the department's workforce in silos.⁵¹ The DoD has had significant

48. "Initiating the Workforce Acceleration & Recapitalization Initiative," Department of Defense, March 28, 2025, https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Spotlight/2025/Guidance_For_Federal_Policies/Additional-OSD-Guidance-Initiating-the-Workforce-Acceleration-and-Recapitalization-Initiative.pdf.

49. "Human Capital: Additional Steps Needed to Help Determine the Right Size and Composition of DOD's Total Workforce," Government Accountability Office, May 29, 2013, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-13-470>.

50. Vince Haley and Charles Ezell, "Merit Hiring Plan," United States Office of Personnel Management, May 29, 2025, <https://chcoc.gov/sites/default/files/Merit%20Hiring%20Plan%2005-29-2025%20FINAL.pdf>.

51. "Strengthening Defense Department Civilian Talent Management," Defense Business Board, May 12, 2022, <https://dbb.defense.gov/Portals/35/Documents/Reports/2022/DBB%20FY22-03%20Talent%20Management%20Study%20Report%2018%20Aug%202022%20-%20Cleared.pdf>.

success with detailed civilian workforce planning for certain technical areas—the Cyber Excepted Service is an excellent example where such intentional planning resolved major gaps in a critical field—but has historically failed to take a comprehensive approach, letting each service adopt the best approach it can afford given higher, competing priorities.⁵² This can lead to improvements in certain highly technical areas but cause detrimental impacts in others. These aren't trade-offs, but a failure to look at the bigger picture. This strategy should also look at how the department can reduce its reliance on contractors, even if this means ultimately increasing the size of the civilian workforce. Unfortunately, the current focus on cutting civilians and incentivizing resignations will require backfills either by less experienced and more expensive military members on Military Personnel Appropriation (MPA) "man days" or contractor replacements.⁵³ Studies have shown that contractors can cost anywhere from two to three times more than equivalent civilian employees.⁵⁴

- **Elevate civilian workforce initiatives:** All too often, human capital-focused initiatives are some of the first areas to be cut when trying to develop a balanced DoD budget submission—and that is particularly true of civilian workforce requirements as they don't have the same constituency in Congress as military personnel initiatives. The Biden administration established several new initiatives to integrate human capital issues as part of larger strategic and operational discussions. Whether it be the creation of the "Deputy's Workforce Council," elevating workforce issues to the deputy secretary level or creating a new Chief Talent Management Officer (CTMO) position within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Biden administration sought to ensure the whole-of-DoD governance recognized civilian talent as a strategic asset. While these changes laid an important

foundation, they must now be sustained, resourced, and scaled to ensure workforce initiatives are integrated at the highest levels of the department.

Invest in civilian recruiting: The civilian workforce makes up one-third of the department's personnel. However, at any given time there are over fourteen thousand recruiters across the military services engaging with young people nationwide and abroad, encouraging them to join the military.⁵⁵ On the civilian side, that recruitment is largely ad-hoc and executed by only a limited number of personnel (dozens at best). Of course, there are obvious reasons for this—the military accesses and separates hundreds of thousands of uniformed personnel every year—but the disparity is still striking. The DoD cannot expect to bring in new talent without building propensity among young people and other sought-after skill sets—particularly in areas that require continuity and deep institutional knowledge.

- **Expand entry-level pathways:** The DoD also needs to expand and restore pathways focused on bringing new talent into public service. Just over 7 percent of the federal workforce is under thirty years old, yet the Trump administration recently cancelled the prestigious Presidential Management Fellows Program.⁵⁶ This competitive program placed more than four hundred promising young professionals in federal jobs each year. The department should also consider expanding the "Defense Civilian Training Corps," which is modeled as a civilian version of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) that aims to bring young science, technology, engineering, and math talent into the military departments. In the program, college students commit to working two years in DoD after graduation as a civilian in exchange for two years of full scholarship, a paid summer internship, and classroom-based experiences along the way. The DoD also launched a pilot program in 2024 seeking to attract three hundred cybersecu-

52. Jared Serbu, "Upswing in direct hire helps DoD fill cyber workforce gaps," Federal News Network, November 11, 2024, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/federal-insights/2024/11/upswing-in-direct-hire-helps-dod-fill-cyber-workforce-gaps/>.

53. Meghann Myers, "Pentagon won't say how many civilians have left since February," Defense One, June 2, 2025, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2025/06/pentagon-wont-say-how-many-civilians-have-left-february/405742/>; C. Todd Lopez, "DOD Uses Voluntary Reductions as Path to Civilian Workforce Goals," Department of Defense, May 16, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4189049/dod-uses-voluntary-reductions-as-path-to-civilian-workforce-goals/>.

54. Scott Amey, "DoD Contractors Cost Nearly 3 Times More than DoD Civilians," Project on Government Oversight, Nov 30, 2012, <https://www.pogo.org/analysis/dod-contractors-cost-nearly-3-times-more-than-dod-civilians#:~:text=POGO%E2%80%99s%20review%20of%20DoD%20service%20contracting%20budget%20and,average%20DoD%20civilian%20employee%20performing%20the%20same%20job.>

55. U.S. Army Recruiting Command, "About USAREC," U.S. Army Recruiting Command Official Website, accessed July 18, 2025, <https://recruiting.army.mil/aboutUSAREC/>.

56. FEDweek Staff, "Under-30 Share of Federal Workforce Remains Low, Says MSPB," FED Week, January 23, 2023, <https://www.fedweek.com/federal-managers-daily-report/under-30-share-of-federal-workforce-not-notably-lower-than-usual-says-mspb/>.

city civilian professionals.⁵⁷ As part of the program, the department's new CTMO established first-of-its-kind partnerships with workforce development intermediaries, civilian companies, nonprofits, and universities. These programs are ripe for expansion, and as artificial intelligence (AI) literacy and other skillsets become national security imperatives, bringing these digital natives into government is increasingly important.

- **Reduce redundant requirements rather than personnel:** While the department's ongoing effort to more clearly tie civilian positions to enable force lethality is important, this endeavor should first start with a requirements analysis and then look at the personnel necessary to address those requirements. Just because a position is eliminated doesn't mean the requirement that person was focused on completing is eliminated. For example, the department was required to complete 1,429 congressional reports in fiscal year 2020.⁵⁸ While such oversight can be important, these reports demand significant time to complete, review, transmit, and then respond to the eventual follow-up questions. By eliminating the position without eliminating the requirement, the department undermines efficiency, creating additional burdens that ultimately detract from readiness—and consequently, lethality.
- **Maximize existing hiring authorities.** As DoD seeks to bring on the right talent to rebuild the workforce, it must make better use of existing direct hire authorities (DHAs). Integrating DHA usage into the department's broader workforce planning efforts would strengthen DoD's ability to proactively address talent gaps. By tracking DHA metrics and utilizing more effective oversight DoD could not only accelerate hiring but also enhance the department's capacity to attract, retain, and deploy top civilian talent.
- **Reimagine the DoD's HR workforce and information technology infrastructure:** Many of the department's civilian workforce challenges are compounded by outdated HR management systems and an underinvestment in the development of the HR workforce. According to a June 2025 RAND report, the DoD's current HR

systems are fragmented, inefficient, and ill-equipped to support strategic workforce management at scale.⁵⁹ The next NDS should follow the private sector's lead in emphasizing adoption of AI-enabled tools for job classification, talent acquisition, and workforce analytics.

- **Avoid further politicization of the civilian workforce:** The non-partisan professionalism of the DoD's civilian workforce has long been a cornerstone of national security and good governance. This has ensured that decisions are driven by expertise, continuity, and allegiance to the Constitution rather than partisan agendas. For decades, this merit-based system has safeguarded the integrity of federal service by insulating career professionals from political coercion. However, recent provisions in the Trump administration's "Merit Hiring Plan"—such as requiring applicants to write essays on how they would advance the current president's priorities—risk eroding that foundational neutrality.⁶⁰ By introducing ideological litmus tests into the hiring process, the plan seeks to blur the line between political appointees and career civil servants, undermining public trust in a nonpartisan career workforce that transcends administrations. The NDS should unequivocally establish the importance of building a civilian workforce that possesses the expertise to counter the significant national security threats this country faces rather than one focused on advancing a partisan agenda.

Conclusion

As the DoD prepares the next NDS, the United States faces a fundamental choice: either continue to treat personnel issues as secondary concerns or recognize that its people represent its most decisive advantage in strategic competition. The challenges outlined in this analysis—from demographic headwinds in military recruiting to the critical need for resilient service members and a skilled civilian workforce—are not merely administrative problems to be managed, but imperatives that will determine the success or failure of any defense strategy.

The next NDS represents an important opportunity to elevate human capital as the cornerstone of US military power. This

57. Wes Shinego, "DOD Talent Chief Aims to Reform Hiring to Attract Gen Z," Department of Defense, January 17, 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4033580/dod-talent-chief-aims-to-reform-hiring-to-attract-gen-z/>.

58. Government Accountability Office, Defense Management: DOD Should Collect More Stakeholder Input and Performance Data on Its Congressional Reporting Process, United States Government Accountability Office, February 2022, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-105183.pdf>.

59. Brandon Crosby, Nathan Thompson, Lisa M. Harrington, and Daniel B. Ginsberg, "Modernizing Department of Defense Civilian Human Resources," RAND, June 24, 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3462-1.html.

60. "Merit Hiring Plan."

requires building on commitments to “taking care of people” through concrete investments in recruiting infrastructure, servicemember resilience and family support systems, and civilian workforce development.

By prioritizing human capital as a strategic imperative, the next NDS can ensure that the US military remains not just technologically superior but fundamentally more capable, adaptable, and resilient than any potential adversary. Achieving this will require the courage to make difficult decisions, the wisdom to prioritize long-term human capital investments over short-term efficiencies, and the recognition that the United States’ greatest strategic advantage has always been its people.

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