



A Ranger assigned to the 2nd Ranger Battalion conducts a platoon live-fire exercise at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, June 6–10, 2025. The exercise integrated unmanned aerial systems, snipers, mortars and heavy weapons systems to enhance battlefield awareness and lethality. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Samuel Dreher)

Mission Over Bureaucracy

Special Operations Command's Warrior-Driven Model for Defense Innovation

By Robert D. Seader

The character of war is undergoing a seismic transformation driven by emerging technologies like artificial

intelligence (AI), autonomy, and quantum-enabled capabilities. Meanwhile, the United States Department of War (DOW)

faces a well-documented crisis of speed and innovation in its acquisition system. Decades of peacetime optimization and bureaucratic layering have yielded a process that is “too slow to be competitive and is only incrementally innovative.”¹

Researchers have found that the defense acquisition cycle now takes four times longer than it did in the 1950s,

Commander Robert D. Seader is a Naval Special Warfare (SEAL) officer, currently on duty with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, and is a member of the SEAL officer acquisition pathway. He wrote this article while a student at the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resources Strategy, National Defense University, Washington, DC.

largely attributed to a proliferation of oversight and procedures that impede timely decisionmaking.² In an era of Great Power competition and rapid technological change, this sluggish pace threatens to undermine the U.S. military's edge and U.S. national security. As James F. "Hondo" Geurts—former acquisition executive for the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM or SOCOM) and former Performing the Duties of the Under Secretary of the Navy—puts it, "The Pentagon must focus on outcomes, not processes."³

In search of models for agility, many experts point to USSOCOM—the unified command responsible for Special Operations Forces (SOF)—which has pioneered a faster, more innovative acquisition approach aligned to the needs of its warfighters. This article examines USSOCOM's unique role and evolution in defense acquisition and argues that, where practicable, the military Services should adopt key elements of USSOCOM's model: an outcomes-focused, mission-centric culture that empowers the acquisition workforce; networked teams that tightly integrate warfighters, requirements personnel, acquisition professionals, and industry partners; and an organizational structure that limits bureaucracy and streamlines decisionmaking to best accelerate innovation and rapid capability development for the warfighter.

The analysis in this piece draws on extensive primary-source interviews with key leaders in industry, government, academia, and acquisition who have experience in USSOCOM and traditional Service acquisition environments.⁴

The Special Operations Command Advantage: Evolution of an Agile Acquisition Powerhouse

Origins and Unique Authority

In response to the failed 1980 Iran hostage rescue mission (Operation *Eagle Claw*), USSOCOM was established by the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 and the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to

the National Defense Authorization Act of 1987 to unify and strengthen special operations capabilities across all military branches. The amendment granted unprecedented Service-like authorities to develop and acquire special operations—peculiar equipment and control a dedicated budget through Major Force Program-11 funds. As the only combatant command with "Head of Agency" contracting status, USSOCOM gained the ability to function like a military Service but with remarkably streamlined bureaucracy and a locked-arm connection to the warfighter.⁵

The war on terror became the crucible that forged USSOCOM's innovative acquisition approach. With SOF leading initial operations and playing critical, ever more central roles throughout the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the world over, urgent battlefield demands necessitated the rapid fielding of new capabilities.⁶ Under leaders like Geurts, USSOCOM's acquisition arm—SOF Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics—cultivated the mindset that "acquisition is a warfighting function," recognizing that equipping the force was as critical to the command's mission success as the operations.⁷

USSOCOM pioneered several innovations to accelerate capability development. The creation of the SOFWERX platform in 2015 established a collaborative innovation hub that brought warfighters together with nontraditional partners outside bureaucratic constraints.⁸ This Partnership Intermediary Agreement operates left of requirements, exploring solutions before formal requirements are written.⁹ USSOCOM also distinguished itself by creatively exploiting mature technologies. Eighty-eight percent of its weapon system programs are small, short-cycle projects that modify existing equipment or integrate commercial solutions.¹⁰

Crucially, USSOCOM achieves its speed within the same legal framework governing all defense acquisition. Its advantage stems not from special authorities, but from shared culture and organizational strategy. The combination of an outcomes-focused, unapologetically

warrior-centric culture shared across a command and a flat organizational approach is a built-in advantage.¹¹

USSOCOM maintains a "streamlined procurement system with limited oversight and increased tolerance for technical risk."¹² This approach contrasts sharply with the Services' risk-averse culture and multiple layers of oversight for large programs. At its core, SOF Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics embraces calculated risk when opportunities justify it, encouraging experimentation and tolerating early failures, knowing they lead to faster ultimate success.¹³

The result is a dramatic difference in capability delivery timelines. The average Service acquisition takes 10 to 20 years from concept to fielding. In contrast, USSOCOM regularly delivers new capabilities in 12 to 24 months—a pace essential to meeting the challenges posed by emerging technologies and Great Power competition.¹⁴

Core Elements of SOCOM's Acquisition Success Model

Purpose Over Process: SOCOM's Empowerment Culture

"Culture eats strategy for breakfast."

—Peter Drucker¹⁵

Building upon SOCOM's unique authorities and acquisition evolution, the article now examines the first critical element that Services can adopt: SOCOM's distinctive culture. Dan Ward, a retired Air Force acquisition officer and lifelong learner and innovator, provided a concise definition of culture—"shared beliefs and behaviors."¹⁶ SOCOM culture emanates from five foundational principles known as the SOF Truths. Three of these Truths—#1, #2, and #5, respectively—are directly applicable to scaling acquisition to the Services: people are more important than hardware; *when it comes to people*, quality is better than quantity; and most special operations require non-SOF assistance.¹⁷ These shared beliefs and behaviors permeate the command, act as a glue that holds USSOCOM together, and guide the



Rangers assigned to the 2nd Ranger Battalion conduct a platoon live-fire exercise at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, June 6–10, 2025. The exercise integrated unmanned aerial systems, snipers, mortars, and heavy weapons systems to enhance battlefield awareness and lethality. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Samuel Dreher)

actions of individuals and the organization. Critical tenets that follow these warrior-centric SOF Truths include a vigilant mission-centric, outcomes-focused approach that requires empowered individuals, teams that are warrior-inclusive and agile, and a refusal to tolerate unnecessary bureaucracy.

As retired Lieutenant General Christopher C. Bogdan reflected on his time at USSOCOM while Program Executive Officer at the command's Big Safari (named for the Air Force's secretive, streamlined acquisition program): "Big Safari did not have time for the b-----t. Getting things in the hands of the warfighter and ensuring we did right by the taxpayer was paramount. This shared mentality is a built-in advantage."¹⁸ With everyone aligned toward the mission, USSOCOM's culture provides a decisive edge.

At the heart of USSOCOM's acquisition success is a mission-centric, outcomes-focused culture that empowers its acquisition professionals and diverges sharply with the process-driven philosophy prevalent in much of DOW. SOCOM acquisition begins and ends with the warfighter's mission. Essentially, all USSOCOM is focused on what the warfighter needs down range to succeed and make it home alive. In contrast, as Brandon Tseng—former Navy SEAL and the president and co-founder of Shield AI—observed to the House Armed Services Committee in September 2024, the Department of Defense (now DOW) at large often fixates on completing detailed requirements documents rather than actually solving the warfighter's problem.¹⁹ Tseng said that to truly innovate, the Department "needs to shift funding and priorities toward solving problems instead of fulfilling requirements."²⁰ To maintain a mission-focused culture, SOCOM emphasizes outcomes and pushes authority down to empower its workforce.

Being outcomes-focused is critical to agile innovation at SOCOM. This approach manifests in the command's problem-based acquisition process. For example, rather than starting with rigid specifications for a new drone, SOCOM might begin with the problem: "Our

operators need to surveil targets in dense urban terrain without being detected." SOCOM would then encourage creative solutions from its program teams and industry partners by emphasizing the end state: a silent, covert surveillance tool. The system is established to refine problems to be solved and evaluate solutions without dictating the means, focusing everyone on outcomes and potential value delivery to the mission.²¹ In short, the SOCOM culture asks, "What does the operator need to accomplish?," not "Did we follow the process?"—a crucial distinction as overly burdensome processes often lead to highly prescriptive requirements that stifle creative solutions.

At SOCOM, empowerment of the acquisition workforce is understood to be critical to mission accomplishment. The first SOF truth—that people are more important than hardware—is fundamental to this tenet.²² The command's leadership philosophy for more than 20 years has been to clearly communicate intent and risk tolerance, then "empower program managers to make decisions at the appropriate level."²³ Frontline acquisition professionals are treated as trusted warfighters in their domain, not merely bureaucrats. USSOCOM explicitly considers acquisition a warfighting function and getting SOF operators the tools they need critical to mission success.²⁴ To drive this point home, to highlight SOF Truth #5 (that most special operations require non-SOF assistance), and to further embolden its workforce, SOCOM renamed its acquisition professionals "SOF Acquirers."²⁵

Geurts's reflection on successful programs sums it up like this: "I have seen that it is possible to execute an operationally responsive acquisition system when there is a clear understanding of intent, a sense of urgency at all levels of the organization, a close connection between the acquirer and the operator . . . and an empowered and accountable acquisition workforce."²⁶ In practice, this means program managers at SOCOM are expected to understand the mission imperative and are given latitude to use flexible authorities, take calculated risks, and make quick decisions in conjunction

with their operational counterparts. They are expected to treat speed and mission success as top priorities—akin to how a SOCOM field commander trusts a special operations team to execute a mission with autonomy within a commander's intent.

Lieutenant General Bogdan reinforces this mindset with a powerful guiding principle from his career: "It's less about the rules and more about doing what's right for the taxpayer and the warfighter. Keep those as the guiding principles. Anything that is stupid, wastes time, or does not support the warfighter or the taxpayer, we're going to change, fight, or ignore. As a leader, my job was to have [my workforce's] back when they did that."²⁷

In contrast, the broader DOW's "acquisition culture prioritizes avoiding failure over embracing innovation—disincentivizing bold decisions and stifling transformative efforts."²⁸ Additionally, many in DOW often view acquisition as a back-office process that is a distant, non-attached subset of the mission. Empowering individuals will be essential if the Services hope to emulate SOCOM's speed. Indeed, many flexible tools exist "on the books" in DOW today, but as Geurts observed, implementation is key—acquisition officers must be trained and encouraged to use them.²⁹ Without the impetus of a mission-centric, outcomes-focused culture, new authorities or reforms may languish unused, or worse yet, allow risk aversion to win the day.

When asked why this empowered, mission-focused approach is not standard in Major Defense Acquisition Programs (MDAPs), Lieutenant General Bogdan explained the institutional barriers: "People have been burned too many times, so most MDAPs are not like that. Everyone is gun-shy, contractors are not willing to try anything new, finance folks are worried about being audited, lawyers fear being sued, and engineers believe the new thing is too risky. That all accumulates like bricks in a rucksack. You can't get up the mountain with all those bricks!"³⁰

This "purpose over process" culture, where empowerment and outcomes take precedence over procedural adherence, creates the foundation for SOCOM's acquisition success. With this cultural



A second B-21 Raider, the nation's sixth-generation stealth bomber, joins flight testing at Edwards Air Force Base, California, September 11, 2025. The program is a cornerstone of the Department of the Air Force's nuclear modernization strategy, designed to deliver both conventional and nuclear payloads. (U.S. Air Force Photo)

foundation in place, SOCOM builds upon it with a distinctive approach to team composition that further accelerates innovation through cross-functional integration, as this article will examine next.

Integrating Warfighters: Cross-Functional Teams That Deliver

“Velocity is my combat advantage. Iteration speed is what I’m after because if I can go five times faster, I can fail four times and still beat you to the target.”

—James “Hondo” Geurts’s
*Principle of Velocity*³¹

Building upon the mission-centric, outcomes-focused culture that empowers SOCOM’s acquisition workforce, the command’s approach to team composition and interaction represents another critical element of its success. A cornerstone of SOCOM’s acquisition approach that has proven scalable even to the largest and most complex MDAPs is the concept of warrior-inclusive agile teams. Where traditional acquisition processes

often isolate operators from developers through layers of requirements documents and formal feedback channels, SOCOM deliberately creates tightly integrated teams that embed warfighters with acquisition professionals, engineers, testers, and industry partners throughout the entire lifecycle of a project or program. This networked teaming approach—akin to the cross-functional integration of an elite special operations unit—breaks down the traditional silos that plague conventional acquisition.

When asked about this practice, professor—and former AC-130 program manager—Jeffrey “Shady” LaFleur explained how this warrior-centric approach fundamentally transformed the development of the AC-130 gunship: “Those warfighters lived with us . . . they lived with the engineers every minute to ensure real-time feedback and alignment of the product with operational needs.”³² This co-location and continuous interaction create an environment in which feedback loops are measured in hours rather than months or years, enabling rapid design iterations and preventing

disconnects between operational requirements and engineering solutions. The operators essentially become part of the development team, bringing their real-world experience and tactical knowledge into the design process—directly contributing to tailored needs at the speed of relevance. This increases velocity and keeps programs on track to produce effective systems for the warfighter.

Lieutenant General Bogdan identified this integrated teaming approach as a critical lesson from his time at USSOCOM’s Big Safari that he deliberately carried forward throughout his career, including to the F-35 program: “Another thing SOCOM was good at, you have to interact with the warfighter and industry, and it is always best to have that interaction together. Contractors, lawyers, and engineers hated it!”³³ This resistance highlights the cultural shift required to implement SOCOM’s model—traditional acquisition stakeholders often prefer to work within their separate domains rather than in the collaborative, sometimes chaotic environment that warrior-inclusive teams create.

Lieutenant General Bogdan further emphasized the immense value derived from this approach: “Every opportunity to put technology in the hands of the warfighter and get feedback sooner rather than later—it’s worth its weight in gold.”³⁴ This insight reflects SOCOM’s understanding that early and frequent operational testing with actual users provides intelligence no requirements document can capture. By identifying usability issues, tactical limitations, or unexpected capabilities early in development, the team can pivot or refine the solution before significant resources are committed to a flawed approach.

The integration of warfighters is not without challenges. As Bogdan candidly observed, “it’s going to be painful, because you have to figure out when they’re giving you wants or needs,” adding that “you have to educate them to understand the difference and impact to cost, schedule, and performance. We’re in the business of delivering needs, not wants.”³⁵ His point reveals a critical nuance to successful implementation—warrior inclusion does not mean blindly implementing every operator request. Rather, it requires a balanced dialogue in which acquisition professionals help operators understand tradeoffs while operators help acquisition teams understand operational context. It is important to note that an overemphasis on the operator has its drawbacks. Just as tacticians may not understand the impact of requested changes to an existing program, they may also not have the insight or vision to understand how emergent technologies can or are changing the character of war.

The power of this approach lies in its deliberate disruption of traditional acquisition roles and boundaries. Rather than treating warfighters as occasional stakeholders who provide input at predetermined milestones, SOCOM elevates them to core team members with continuous input throughout development. This integration challenges the conventional wisdom that complex acquisition requires strict separation between the requirements, development, and testing communities. Instead, SOCOM

demonstrates that bringing these perspectives together actually accelerates innovation by enabling rapid learning cycles and preventing miscommunication. Warrior-inclusive teaming, while powerful on its own, becomes even more effective when paired with SOCOM’s streamlined bureaucracy and organizational structure approach, which further removes barriers to rapid decisionmaking and innovation, as we will examine next.

Organizational Agility: Decision Speed as a Combat Advantage

“Fundamentally, acquisition organizations don’t build; they make decisions, so the most important thing they can do is make the right decision at the right time. We’re in the decision-making business.”

—Lieutenant General
Christopher C. Bogdan³⁶

Building upon SOCOM’s mission-focused culture and warrior-inclusive teams, the command’s organizational structure forms the third critical element of its acquisition advantage. This insight drives SOCOM’s deliberate design of flatter, more responsive organizational structures that enable agile decisionmaking.

This streamlined bureaucracy is the most immediately transferable aspect of USSOCOM’s acquisition practice. In stark contrast to the layered approval chains typical in Service acquisition, the command has deliberately designed a flatter, horizontal organizational structure. It maintains decision authority at the lowest possible level and provides program managers unimpeded access to milestone decision authorities, increasing the velocity of acquiring combat capabilities.³⁷ This approach reflects James Geurts’s Principle of Velocity.

In practice, streamlining means if a SOCOM project manager needs approval from their program executive officer for a project decision, that coordination can be arranged within hours. If a program executive officer or project manager needs the acquisition executive to decide on something, they can secure a decision

from the acquisition executive within days—not the weeks or months common in Service bureaucracies. This rapid access is possible because SOF Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics has maintained smaller, more agile teams and flatter organizational structures, and because mission-centric, outcomes-focused leadership is culturally inclined to expedite requests. In contrast to a Services-style bureaucracy, SOCOM facilitates an environment where tailored acquisition strategies thrive, and senior leaders know the difference in risks between rapid and deliberate processes.³⁸ By keeping decision cycles short, SOCOM can iterate quickly, much like a Silicon Valley tech company doing weekly sprints instead of annual reviews.

When scaling this concept to major programs, Lieutenant General Bogdan—who took and rescued the F-35 program following a Nunn-McCurdy breach—emphasized organizational structure as a cornerstone principle he carried from his SOCOM experience. He further explained, “Organizationally, when you are running an acquisition-to-development program, it is really, really important to organize in a way where you can make rapid decisions. Operational tempo was my number-one focus—build the organization around that. Do that before you lay out the boxes and lines.”³⁹ He warns against excessive vertical structure: “If you’re too vertically structured, it will take you forever to make decisions. Organize your team horizontally.”⁴⁰ While acknowledging span of control limitations, he advocates for streamlined processes: “Now, you don’t want 40 people reporting to you, but you can have a reasonable span of control. Streamline the process and ensure the correct information gets to the right people at the right time. To do this, people must know what their responsibilities are and are not. Again, this is all built around the operational tempo you need to maintain.”⁴¹

Beyond organizational structure, SOCOM reduces bureaucracy by tailoring documentation and oversight to the minimum needed for effective program control. Its Directive 70-1 (Acquisition Management System) explicitly tailors

DOW 5000-series processes using flexibility already allowed in DOW policy to fit SOCOM's needs and streamline procurement.⁴² As a result, SOCOM can combine or waive milestone documents that add minimal value, use nontraditional methods that bypass the slowest acquisition steps where prudent, and keep internal boards and external reviews lean but effective.

This is not to say oversight is absent; rather, it is right-sized. SOCOM provides transparency through frequent stakeholder engagement—SOF operators and combatant commanders have insight into progress, and Congress receives regular briefings—but it avoids redundant reviews. Notably, when asked what regulatory reforms he requested from Congress during his tenure as SOCOM acquisition executive, Geurts responded, “We never needed more authority to do our job and do it quickly; we had everything we needed.”⁴³ Instead, he emphasized streamlining bureaucratic obstacles while ensuring program

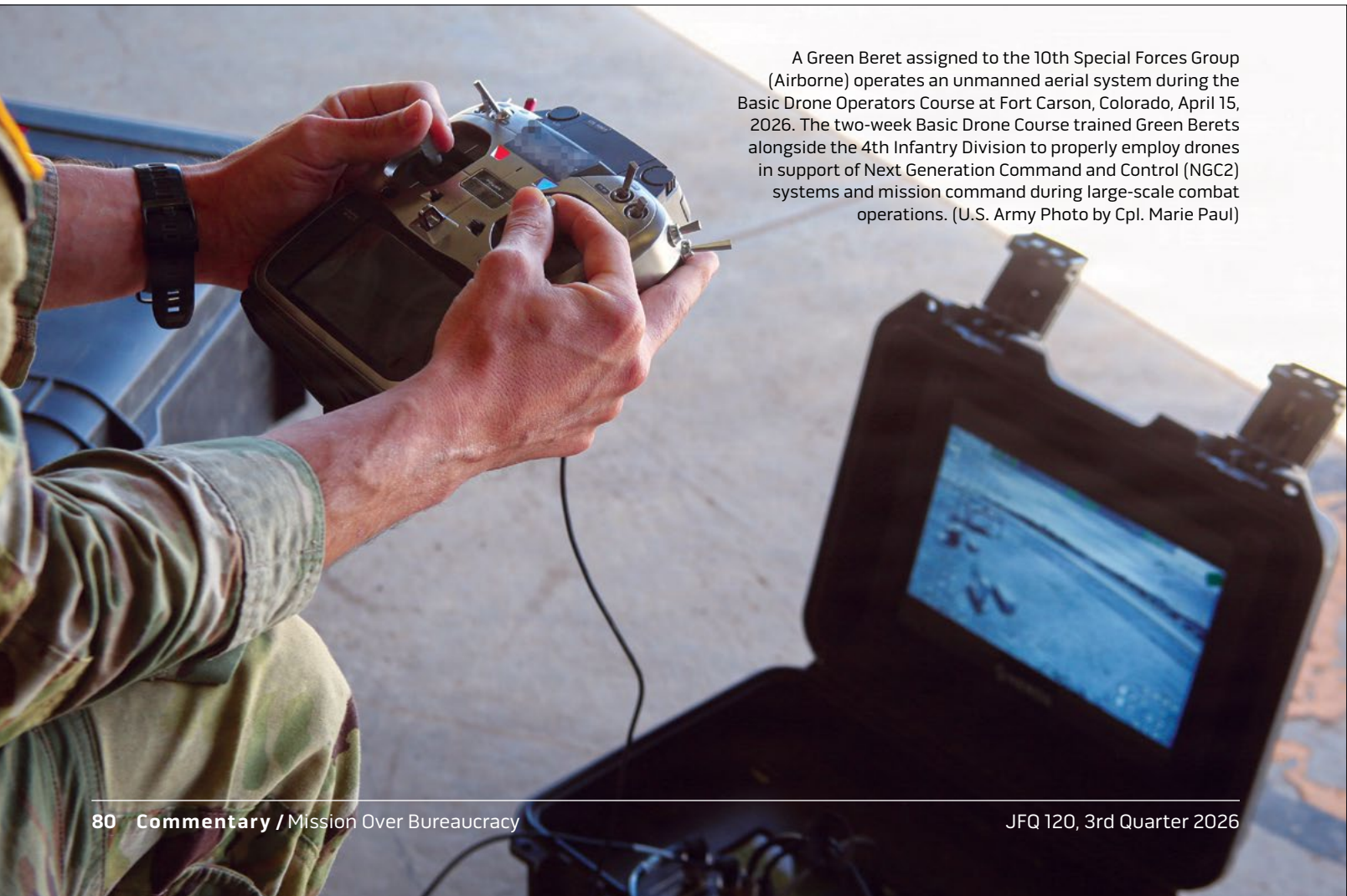
managers had direct access to decisionmakers—creating an environment where acquisition professionals were empowered to innovate with purpose and deliver results.⁴⁴ In his January 2025 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee at its hearing on defense innovation and acquisition reform, Geurts continued to highlight the need in defense acquisition at large to “rebalance the reviewer-to-doer ratio” because, currently, “too many bureaucrats slow decision-making.”⁴⁵

This balance at SOCOM tilts decisively toward doers: a 450-person acquisition workforce manages dozens of programs efficiently, providing SOF with an average of 700 tactical vehicles; 4,000 weapons; 20 million munitions; 3,000 radios; 2,000 command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I) items; and 600 intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) kits every year. By comparison, a Service might employ thousands of staff to manage a similar portfolio, with each

layer reviewing the work of the other.⁴⁶ If the Services can empower more doers and trim the number of overseers, they can start matching SOCOM's agility. Expressly, fewer approval gates and shorter approval timelines translate directly to faster capability delivery.

SOCOM's agile funding mechanisms also contribute to its speed advantage. With control over its SOF-peculiar budget and relative ease in reprogramming within Major Force Program-11, the command can rapidly initiate new projects when operational needs emerge. Shield AI's Brandon Tseng has recommended that Congress create similar flexible budgeting mechanisms for problem-solving Service acquisitions, allowing the Services to focus on value delivered rather than cost control.⁴⁷ SOCOM's experience validates this approach, particularly through “jumpstart” funds and contingency reprogramming authority that allow rapid responses to emerging requirements.

The combination of streamlined organizational structure, tailored processes,

A close-up photograph of a person's hands operating a drone. The person is wearing a camouflage uniform and a black wristwatch. They are holding a silver and black remote control with multiple joysticks and buttons. In the foreground, a black carrying case for the drone is open, revealing a screen that displays a first-person view from the drone, showing a body of water and a shoreline. The background is a bright, outdoor setting, possibly a tarmac or training area.

A Green Beret assigned to the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) operates an unmanned aerial system during the Basic Drone Operators Course at Fort Carson, Colorado, April 15, 2026. The two-week Basic Drone Course trained Green Berets alongside the 4th Infantry Division to properly employ drones in support of Next Generation Command and Control (NGC2) systems and mission command during large-scale combat operations. (U.S. Army Photo by Cpl. Marie Paul)

right-sized oversight, and flexible funding creates an acquisition system optimized for speed and agile innovation. These core principles offer valuable lessons for reducing unnecessary bureaucracy across defense acquisition.

Proof of Concept: SOCOM Practices in Large-Scale Programs

Adopting USSOCOM's agile acquisition practices across the Services has unique challenges. At first glance, one might not believe that SOCOM's practices can scale to such hefty endeavors, but they can. In addition to the SOCOM characteristics that Lieutenant General Bogdan scaled throughout his career and eventually applied to the F-35 program, Professor LaFleur provided examples from USSOCOM and the Rapid Capabilities Office.

For over a decade, the Air Force struggled to define its next-generation gunship without results. In 2007, USSOCOM's James Geurts proposed rapidly converting existing C-130H transports into AC-130 gunships using off-the-shelf components.⁴⁸ The result, Project Dragon Spear, "fielded 12 gunships in 15 months from scratch" compared to the Air Force's "10 years of nothing."⁴⁹ The program came in under budget and was enthusiastically received by operators.

When SOCOM attempted to upgrade 36 AC-130J models with the same weapons package, responsibility shifted to the Air Force acquisition system. What should have been a rapid development program that quickly moved into production ballooned into a "multiyear quagmire" under the traditional bureaucracy.⁵⁰ A 300-person test organization created an "absurd" test program to verify even obvious capabilities.⁵¹ Because of schedule slips, the program nearly faced cancellation until a SOCOM-trained project manager was put back in charge.

The new project manager obtained leadership backing to fire the test organization that had encumbered the effort and replaced the 300-person bureaucracy with a lean "10-person organization to go and make it happen."⁵² This small,

empowered team co-located warfighter representatives with engineers to ensure critical warfighter needs were met.⁵³

Rather than focusing solely on eliminating technical risk, the new team balanced safety with urgency and opportunity. They shifted from managing stateside program risks to weighing operational realities, recognizing that delays meant lives lost in theater: "We recognized that every day we didn't have the airplane downrange, warfighters were dying."⁵⁴ To this end, the acquisition team prioritized only essential testing to verify airworthiness, then quickly validated weapons in combat-like conditions.

The results were stunning: "In 4 months, it was done."⁵⁵ The rebooted program delivered the AC-130J fleet on schedule and under budget, with performance exceeding expectations. This demonstrated that SOCOM's acquisition model—empowered, decentralized decisionmaking; cross-functional teams with embedded operators; and streamlined bureaucracy—could succeed even on larger programs traditionally deemed too complex for rapid methods.

SOCOM's acquisition culture has begun seeping into the broader U.S. military. The Air Force's Rapid Capabilities Office (RCO) was explicitly modeled on SOCOM's way of doing business, often staffed with personnel who learned their craft in SOCOM programs.⁵⁶ The payoff is evident: the RCO-managed B-21 Raider stealth bomber program—a massive ACAT I effort—has stayed on track and on budget by all accounts, a feat virtually unheard of in modern defense acquisition. "I firmly believe if that was being run by the [general Service acquisition] culture, it would be a decade later and 10 times higher in cost, but because the RCO culture—which matches SOCOM's culture—is running it, it's on track, it's on cost," LaFleur observed.⁵⁷ By streamlining bureaucracy and empowering small, cross-functional teams, the RCO achieved what many thought impossible: mirroring SOCOM's success at speed. This cross-pollination suggests that when small, empowered teams with clear purpose and authority are allowed to work directly with end

users and focus on outcomes rather than process, extraordinary results are possible, even in complex defense programs, thus proving SOCOM's model.

Imperative for Change: Adopting SOCOM's Model to Maintain Military Dominance

The stark reality is that those who cannot adapt at the speed of today's technological change face catastrophe on tomorrow's battlefield. As early airpower theorist Giulio Douhet warned, "Victory smiles upon those who anticipate the change in the character of war, not upon those who wait to adapt after the changes occur."⁵⁸ The fate of America's military dominance hangs in the balance of our ability to innovate and acquire faster, and USSOCOM's model offers a vital path forward.

USSOCOM's track record over the past two decades demonstrates that a faster, more innovative acquisition system is not only possible within the U.S. defense establishment, but that such a system can thrive in a joint environment even under the pressure of continuous combat operations. By fostering an outcomes-focused, mission-centric culture that empowers the acquisition workforce to take prudent risks; by building tight-knit teams that integrate warfighters, requirements personnel, acquisition professionals, and industry partners; and by organizing to slash unnecessary bureaucratic delay, SOCOM has delivered timely and often game-changing capabilities to America's special operators and forces downrange.

The broader U.S. military, facing rapid technological revolutions and strategic threats from China and others, has strong incentives to learn from and institutionalize these practices. As Geurts put it, "The challenges facing the Department are many. . . . The Nation needs to be innovative, productive, and agile."⁵⁹ Yet achieving this requires more than policy reforms; it demands cultural transformation. SOCOM succeeds not through special authorities but by cultivating a fundamentally different mindset about risk, speed, and mission accomplishment. The Services must likewise break the stranglehold of risk-averse,

compliance-driven processes and embrace an outcomes-focused approach. It means empowering acquisition professionals as force multipliers, not compliance managers. It means building networked teams that tightly integrate warfighters with acquirers to increase the velocity and relevance of capability delivery. It means organizing for speed and collaboration, not siloed rigidity. JFQ

Notes

¹ *Hearing to Receive Testimony on an Update on the State of the Department of Defense Acquisition System Before the Senate Armed Services Comm., Subcomm. on Readiness and Management Support*, March 20, 2024 (statement of William C. Greenwalt, Nonresident Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute), <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/to-receive-testimony-on-an-update-on-the-state-of-the-department-of-defense-acquisition-system>.

² Roger F. Wicker, *Restoring Freedom's Forge: America's Innovation Unleashed* (Washington, DC: Office of Senator Roger F. Wicker, 2024), https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GOVPUB-Y1_3-PURL-gpo244599.

³ James F. "Hondo" Geurts (described below in endnote 4), interview by author, February 19, 2025.

⁴ These leaders include Shield AI cofounder Brandon Tseng (former Navy Surface Warfare Officer and Navy SEAL); MITRE's innovation expert Dan Ward (retired Air Force acquisition officer); Jeffrey "Shady" LaFleur, Director of the Senior Acquisition Course and Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Defense Acquisition at the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resources Strategy, National Defense University (former Air Force Acquisition Officer with extensive experience at Socom and the Rapid Capability Office); James Geurts, former Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development, and Acquisition, 2017–2021, including Performing the Duties of Under Secretary of the Navy in 2021, and former Acquisition Executive, United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM or Socom); and retired Lieutenant General Christopher C. Bogdan, former Program Executive Officer for USSOCOM's Big Safari, the Boeing KC-46 Pegasus program, and (from 2012 to 2017) the F-35 Joint Program Office.

⁵ Interviews conducted with the leaders described above in endnote 4.

⁶ Bryan D. "Doug" Brown, "U.S. Special Operations Command: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century," *Joint Force Quarterly* 40 (1st Quarter 2006): 38–43, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-40.pdf>.

⁷ Geurts, interview by author.

⁸ Sam Lisbonne, *Sharpening the Tip of the Spear: Evaluating Technology Integration in Special Operations Forces* (undergraduate honors thesis, Stanford University, Center for International Security and Cooperation, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, 2017), https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:qk949kk4731/Lisbonne_Sharpening%20the%20Tip%20of%20the%20Spear_FINAL.pdf.

⁹ Lisbonne, *Sharpening the Tip of the Spear*.

¹⁰ Lisbonne, *Sharpening the Tip of the Spear*.

¹¹ Christopher C. Bogdan (described above in endnote 4), interview by author, April 21, 2025.

¹² Jonathan P. Wong et al., *Improving Defense Acquisition: Insights From Three Decades of RAND Research* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1670-1.html.

¹³ Joseph Capobianco and David Phillips, "Strengths and Myths of What Makes Special Operations Forces Acquisition Special," U.S. Army, May 14, 2018, https://www.army.mil/article/205259/strengths_and_myths_of_what_makes_special_operations_forces_acquisition_special; Geurts, interview by author.

¹⁴ Wong et al., *Improving Defense Acquisition*; Jeffrey "Shady" LaFleur (described above in endnote 4), interview by author, May 1, 2025.

¹⁵ Vince Molinaro, "What Really Eats Strategy for Breakfast? Leadership Culture," *Forbes*, October 2, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesbusinesscouncil/2024/10/02/what-really-eats-strategy-for-breakfast-leadership-culture/>.

¹⁶ Dan Ward (described above in endnote 4), interview by author, February 28, 2025.

¹⁷ "SOF Truths," U.S. Special Operations Command, accessed June 8, 2026, <https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths>.

¹⁸ Bogdan, interview by author.

¹⁹ *Hearing, Fielding Technology and Innovation: Industry Views on Department of Defense Acquisition*, Before the House Armed Services Comm., September 16, 2024 (statement of Brandon Tseng, Co-Founder, President, and Chief Growth Officer, Shield AI), <https://armedservices.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=3531>.

²⁰ *Hearing, Industry Views on Department of Defense Acquisition* (statement of Tseng).

²¹ Geurts, interview by author.

²² "SOF Truths."

²³ Geurts, interview by author.

²⁴ Geurts, interview by author.

²⁵ Geurts, interview by author.

²⁶ *Hearing to Receive Testimony on Defense Innovation and Acquisition Reform Before the Senate Comm. on Armed Services*, January 28, 2025 (statement of James F. Geurts, former Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition), <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/to-receive-testimony-on-defense-innovation-and-acquisition-reform>.

²⁷ Bogdan, interview by author.

²⁸ David H. Berger et al., *Strategic Edge: A Blueprint for Breakthroughs in Defense Innovation* (Washington, DC: Bloomberg New Economy Forum Report, January 2025), https://assets.bbbhub.io/dotorg/sites/56/2025/01/Strategic-Edge_A-Blueprint-for-Breakthroughs-in-Defense-Innovation.pdf.

²⁹ *Hearing, Defense Innovation and Acquisition Reform* (statement of Geurts).

³⁰ Bogdan, interview by author.

³¹ Geurts, interview by author.

³² LaFleur, interview by author.

³³ Bogdan, interview by author.

³⁴ Bogdan, interview by author.

³⁵ Bogdan, interview by author.

³⁶ Bogdan, interview by author.

³⁷ Patrick Horvat (Program Manager, USSOCOM SOF Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics; Program Executive Officer SOF Warrior), interview by author, January 21, 2025; Capobianco and Phillips, "Strengths and Myths of What Makes Special Operations Forces Acquisition Special."

³⁸ Capobianco and Phillips, "Strengths and Myths of What Makes Special Operations Forces Acquisition Special."

³⁹ Bogdan, interview by author.

⁴⁰ Bogdan, interview by author.

⁴¹ Bogdan, interview by author.

⁴² USSOCOM Directive 70-1, *Acquisition Management System* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: USSOCOM, September 27, 2023), https://www.waru.edu/sites/default/files/2024-05/USSOCOM%20Directive%2070-1_27%20Sep%202023.pdf.

⁴³ Geurts, interview by author.

⁴⁴ Geurts, interview by author.

⁴⁵ *Hearing, Defense Innovation and Acquisition Reform* (statement of Geurts).

⁴⁶ "About Us," Special Operations Forces Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, accessed 24 June 2026, <https://www.socom.mil/SOF-ATL/Pages/AboutUs.aspx>; Lisbonne, *Sharpening the Tip of the Spear*.

⁴⁷ Brandon Tseng (described above in endnote 4), interview by author, September 26, 2024.

⁴⁸ LaFleur, interview by author.

⁴⁹ LaFleur, interview by author.

⁵⁰ LaFleur, interview by author.

⁵¹ LaFleur, interview by author.

⁵² LaFleur, interview by author.

⁵³ LaFleur, interview by author.

⁵⁴ LaFleur, interview by author.

⁵⁵ LaFleur, interview by author.

⁵⁶ LaFleur, interview by author.

⁵⁷ LaFleur, interview by author.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Arsenio T. Gumahad II, "The Profession of Arms in the Information Age," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 15 (Spring 1997): 14, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-15.pdf>.

⁵⁹ *Hearing, Defense Innovation and Acquisition Reform* (statement of Geurts).