Agentic Warfare—Getting AI in the Force

The Problem: Over the past year, landmark reforms to how the Department of War (DOW) buys AI hardware and tools broke cleanly with decades of tradition. The use of Commercial Solutions Openings (CSOs), the new authorities in Budget Activity 6.8, which provides "colorless money," and Section 1825 of the FY2026 NDAA, which introduces consumption-based pricing, have collectively introduced commercial-style flexibility across the development lifecycle. Yet according to Scale's recent assessment, only about 100 out of thousands of the Department's AI and software programs are moving at the full speed these new pathways enable. Even as the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS) requirements process is no more, a JCIDS-like culture of overspecification continues in practice. The Mission Engineering and Integration Activity, which is meant to replace the JCIDS specification of solutions, is still a work in progress. There are also fewer contracting officers on hand, with over 3,000 contracting officers and associated staff having departed in the past 18 months as the DOW implements reforms. A clearer plan is needed to move legacy programs into the new fast lane. With greater leadership focus, this once-in-a-generation opportunity to rethink how the DOW acquires cutting-edge technologies it needs to defend the United States will realize its transformational potential.

Why It Matters Now: The U.S. military is in a race to deploy AI technologies—a race that its adversaries, especially China, are equally intent on winning. The quicker the Department is able to acquire and scale new technologies, the more rapidly it will generate decisive combat power at the front.

Next Steps: After the breathtaking reforms of the past year, a focus on implementation now matters most.

1 - Make Public the Extent to which CSOs and the Software Acquisition Pathway (SWP) are Being Used vs. How Many Programs Remain in Traditional Processes: Implementing the use of CSOs to buy AI and software is among the most important things we can do to generate future combat power. Yet a recent estimate found that only one hundred programs out of thousands were presently using the SWP. It is key that the Department give a clear accounting of the unfolding transformation from old process to new. What is the new average time from contract to field deployment? What is the ratio of SWP utilization compared to traditional acquisition? How will the DOW identify and track programs put through traditional processes that should be recompeted under CSOs? And, most critically, how quickly can the DOW transition the backlog of billions of dollars of existing programming that remains subject to the Federal Acquisition Regulation?

2 - Develop a Readiness System to Monitor Acquisition as a Warfighting Function: Just as we measure the readiness of the Joint Force to engage in combat operations, so too must we establish metrics that measure how prepared our acquisition workforce is to carry

out its new and urgent missions. The traditional readiness metrics of personnel (P), equipment availability (S), equipment readiness (R), and training (T) could apply. For P, the Department might track the overall billet fill rate, tenure and vacancy rates for key leadership positions, or an index of the experience mix within an office. For S, the DOW could track the pipeline replenishment rate, i.e., the ratio of new hires to departing personnel, and the risk of attrition or burnout through data such as unused leave balances, overtime hours, and climate survey data. For R, new metrics might be the software and tool availability rate, tracking up-time and accessibility metrics for critical acquisition systems, and process cycle time efficiency, e.g., average days from a procurement request to contract award. Finally, for T, they could track the percentage of the workforce that is fully certified for their specific career field and rank, as well as how many are trained in modern, high-priority acquisition methodologies, such as the SWP, agile software procurement, Middle Tier of Acquisition (MTA), intellectual property valuation, and AI integration.

3 - Use AI to Orchestrate Program Management: With the advent of AI and autonomous platforms and the new ways of fighting wars they enable, urgency exists around rebuilding the arsenal to confront the battlefields our forces will face in the future. Leaving in place legacy processes and tools for acquisition and program management will only constrain us, resulting in schedule risks that accumulate faster than leaders can respond. Too many program management teams are mired in manual document reviews and using outdated management systems, leading to slower decisions, higher cost growth, and weaker mission continuity. A new class of cutting-edge tools can change this—agentic AI systems designed to help orchestrate acquisition and portfolio management. With these powerful tools that see and can act across legacy databases and systems, agentic portfolio orchestration can replace the sprawl of dashboards, reports, and tickets with a fleet of hyper-intelligent, always-on digital managers that learn, anticipate, and act in real time. Agentic portfolio orchestration can be a unique U.S. strategic advantage that, if deployed at scale, will rebuild the arsenal that provides decisive advantage on the battlefield.

4 - Build a Robust Third-Party Testing and Evaluation Capacity: AI systems have limits. Understanding what they are and how to correct for them is crucial if they are to become central to how we fight and win wars. The Director of Operational Test and Evaluation (DOT&E) has begun to build out continuous testing and evaluation capacity that will be necessary to understand the performance of AI systems that learn and change after they are acquired. The Test Resource Management Center, a DOW field activity, is also making meaningful contributions on this front. But much more remains to be done. Following on provisions for AI test and evaluation in the FY2024 NDAA, the FY2026 NDAA set out requirements to develop a new model testing and oversight framework (Section 1533), establish an AI sandbox (Section 1534), and create a framework for evaluating cyber and physical security standards for AI systems (Section 1513). These will all take time to develop—particularly as the DOW's hardware-centric test and evaluation function evolves to grapple with systems that are software- and AI-first. Yet doing so is crucial to ensuring

we have reliable AI that performs as intended.