



No Sputnik, No Reform: Why DoD Acquisition Is Stuck in Bureaucratic Purgatory

Introduction: The Illusion of Acquisition Reform

For over 40 years, the Department of Defense (DoD) has been trapped in an endless cycle of acquisition reform efforts—each promising transformative change, yet ultimately yielding only incremental adjustments. Every few years, a new wave of policymakers, industry leaders, and military strategists declare that this time will be different. The latest of these efforts comes from Michael Bloomberg and the Defense Innovation Board (DIB), whose recent report, *A Blueprint for Breakthroughs in Defense Innovation*, calls for divesting from legacy systems, streamlining procurement, and creating alternative pipelines for nontraditional defense companies. These recommendations—like those before them—are well-intentioned. And yet, history suggests they are unlikely to succeed.

The harsh reality is that true acquisition reform does not happen absent a crisis—an external shock so profound that it forces change upon an otherwise inert system. Major shifts in U.S. military acquisition have only occurred in response to seismic, existential events. The attack on Pearl Harbor spurred the rapid industrial mobilization of World War II, shifting the U.S. defense sector from peacetime stagnation to wartime innovation. The launch of Sputnik in 1957 triggered the Space Race, leading to the creation of DARPA, NASA, and a complete overhaul of U.S. technology and R&D priorities. The Cold War and the Reagan-era defense buildup revitalized Pentagon procurement processes after years of stagnation.

More recently, the post-9/11 wars forced rapid procurement of urgent capabilities such as the Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle, but these were temporary wartime measures, not systemic reforms. In the absence of a similar galvanizing event—one that forces the Pentagon, Congress, and the American public into alignment—the bureaucratic and political roadblocks to reform remain too entrenched to overcome.

I want to believe that we are on the verge of meaningful change. A 33-year-old colleague of mine is convinced that the forces of Donald Trump, Elon Musk, Michael Bloomberg, DOGE, and private-sector disruption are enough to push DoD acquisition into a new era. And yet, after 17 years in the Army Acquisition Corps, serving as Project Manager for the ACAT I Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV) program, and later spending six years as the CEO of a Defense Industrial Base (DIB) company, I remain deeply skeptical. The roadblocks to real reform—legal constraints, bureaucratic inertia, congressional politics, and outdated requirements processes—are simply too deeply embedded. Without a Sputnik-level event that forces systemic change, acquisition reform will remain what it has been for four decades: Washington's second-oldest profession—constantly discussed, never fully realized.

Why Even Trump, Musk, and Bloomberg Unlikely to Fix It

Reformers often believe that strong leadership, private-sector innovation, or political disruption can break the Pentagon’s acquisition logjam. But even high-profile figures with the power to push change have failed. Donald Trump, for instance, expanded Other Transaction Authorities (OTAs) and pushed for nontraditional defense companies, but was constrained by Title 10 regulations, the PPBE system, and congressional oversight. Elon Musk successfully disrupted military space launches with SpaceX, yet his model does not translate to broader DoD procurement, where there is often no commercial market for extreme-environment warfighting systems. Michael Bloomberg and the Defense Innovation Board advocated for nontraditional vendor engagement, but lacked the authority to enact real structural changes.

Even executive power, private-sector disruption, and policy-driven reform efforts have failed due to deeply embedded systemic barriers.

Legal Barriers to Acquisition Reform

Many well-intentioned reforms fail due to legal constraints embedded in acquisition law, funding mechanisms, and congressional oversight. Title 10 of the U.S. Code governs the Defense Acquisition System, creating statutory requirements that dictate rigid procurement processes, limiting flexibility and innovation. The Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) system locks in funding years in advance, making it difficult to allocate resources to emerging needs. Similarly, the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) and its defense supplement, DFARS, prioritize compliance over speed, requiring lengthy competition processes that slow down procurement. Congressional oversight and budget politics further reinforce the status quo, with lawmakers resisting efforts to cut legacy systems due to job preservation in key districts, making “divest to invest” politically impossible.

These legal constraints prevent DoD from adapting to rapidly evolving threats and technologies, trapping the system in an outdated, bureaucratic model.

Structural and Scale Challenges to Reform

Beyond legal constraints, the sheer size and complexity of the Armed Services further complicate acquisition reform. Most defense systems lack a dual-use commercial market, meaning that unlike private-sector technology, they do not benefit from rapid development cycles or economies of scale. The extreme operating conditions required for military systems—ranging from temperatures of -50°F to +130°F, to NBC (nuclear, biological, chemical) exposure, and EMP (electromagnetic pulse) survivability—demand customized solutions, further limiting opportunities to leverage commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) technologies.

The result is that DoD development cycles remain slow and costly, exacerbated by a risk-averse bureaucratic oversight system that prioritizes compliance over innovation. Strict annual R&D and



procurement budgets create further prioritization challenges, leading to a “peanut butter spread” approach in which funding is distributed across hundreds of systems simultaneously, ensuring broad readiness but preventing procurement optimization for any single platform.

At the core of these inefficiencies is the broken requirements process. The Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS) governs how warfighter needs are defined, and it is a major bottleneck for acquisition reform. Requirements are often written by personnel with limited expertise, developed by military personnel on temporary assignment rather than trained professionals, leading to inconsistent quality and misaligned priorities. The process is also overly prescriptive, restricting industry’s ability to propose innovative solutions, while each Service develops requirements independently, leading to duplication, inefficiencies, and interoperability challenges. Even when valid requirements are identified, the approval process is slow, meaning that by the time a requirement is validated, technology may have already outpaced the original need.

Without fixing the requirements process, procurement and budgeting reforms will continue to be undermined by outdated, overly rigid, and unrealistic specifications.

What Would Real Reform Require?

For acquisition reform to succeed, all three legs of the acquisition stool must be addressed: requirements reform, program management reform, and budgeting reform.

First, the DoD must professionalize requirements writing, establishing a dedicated career field for trained officers rather than assigning requirements development as an additional duty. Shifting to outcome-based requirements would allow industry greater flexibility in solving operational needs, while streamlining the JCIDS process would ensure that requirements development keeps pace with technological advancements.

Second, program management reform is essential. Expanding rapid prototyping and Middle-Tier Acquisition (MTA) pathways would accelerate transitions from R&D to procurement. Additionally, reducing excessive oversight and ensuring a seamless transition between R&D and procurement funding would help prevent technologies from being stranded in the “valley of death.”

Finally, the PPBE system must be overhauled. Creating flexible acquisition funds outside the PPBE cycle would allow for faster adoption of emerging technologies, while empowering Combatant Commands with discretionary procurement authority could ensure that urgent operational needs are met without excessive bureaucratic delays. Reducing political interference in funding allocations would also help ensure that procurement decisions are based on actual capability needs rather than congressional district job protection.



Conclusion: The Second-Oldest Profession in Washington

Until another existential crisis forces systemic change, the Pentagon will continue trudging forward under the weight of its own inefficiencies. The cycle of reform initiatives, new legislative mandates, and reorganized acquisition offices will continue to play out as they have for decades, offering the illusion of progress while leaving the core problems untouched.

The truth is, Washington has no incentive to truly fix DoD acquisition. The bureaucracy that slows procurement also protects careers. The congressional funding mechanisms that strangle innovation also guarantee jobs and defense contracts in key districts. The risk-averse culture that prevents disruptive change also ensures that no one is blamed for failure. The system is perfectly designed to sustain itself—just functional enough to keep moving, but too cumbersome to move quickly.

I would love to be wrong. I would love to see real acquisition reform driven by visionary leadership, private-sector disruption, and a sense of urgency from policymakers. But history suggests that real change in DoD acquisition doesn't come from policy papers, executive orders, or well-meaning defense innovation boards. It comes when the nation no longer has a choice—when an external shock forces action, when failure is no longer an option, when the system is finally exposed as unworkable in the face of a true crisis.

Until that moment arrives, DoD acquisition reform will remain what it has been for the last 40 years—**Washington's second-oldest profession: constantly discussed, never fully realized.**