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The 30-Day Deployment Mandate

What the Department of War's AI-First Strategy means for contractors in 2026

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Executive Summary

On January 12, 2026, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth released the *Artificial Intelligence Strategy for the Department of War* and two companion memoranda. The strategy directs that frontier AI models be available to warfighters within thirty days of public release. It defines seven Pace-Setting Projects. It redefines "responsible AI" around lawful use rather than ethical abstention. And it declares, in plain terms, that the Department will not field AI models that "won't allow you to fight wars."

For contractors the mandate is not rhetorical. A thirty-day window between model release and operational deployment is impossible in classified and contested environments without air-gapped, on-premises delivery. It is impossible without Impact Level 5 or Impact Level 6 accreditation paths that are already in hand. It is impossible without supply-chain artifacts — AI Bills of Materials, data lineage records, model cards — produced before the solicitation drops, not after.

This brief maps the policy architecture a contractor must understand to propose against the new posture, the compliance gates that will decide award, the vehicles that are actually buying in 2026, and the pain points that a small prime with the right posture can exploit as a differentiator.

1. The Three Memoranda That Reset the Floor

On January 9, 2026, the Department of War released three coordinated memoranda; on January 12, Secretary Hegseth delivered the framing speech. The three documents must be read together.

Artificial Intelligence Strategy for the Department of War. Defines the thirty-day deployment target. Identifies seven Pace-Setting Projects. Redefines responsible AI. Designates six critical technology areas — Applied AI, Biomanufacturing, Contested Logistics, Quantum and Battlefield Information Dominance, Scaled Directed Energy, Scaled Hypersonics.

Transforming the Defense Innovation Ecosystem to Accelerate Warfighting Advantage. Restructures how rapid capability organizations interface with the traditional acquisition system.

Transforming Advana to Accelerate Artificial Intelligence and Enhance Auditability. Signed by Deputy Secretary of War Stephen Feinberg. Recasts the Advana enterprise data platform as an AI substrate with audit-quality data lineage.

Taken together, the three memoranda describe a Department that intends to buy AI faster than it has ever bought software, with lower tolerance for accreditation lag, and with a sharper expectation that vendors will arrive with their own security packages rather than requiring the government to build them.

2. The Policy Stack Contractors Must Know

A contractor responding to a 2026 AI solicitation is evaluated against a stack of authorities, not a single document. The brief below is a working map.

Foundational DoD policy. DoD Directive 3000.09 on Autonomy in Weapon Systems (reissued January 25, 2023) still governs senior review of covered lethal autonomous systems. DoD's Responsible AI Strategy and Implementation Pathway (June 2022) operationalized five DoD AI Ethical Principles across 64 lines of effort.

The January 2026 overlay. The Hegseth AI Strategy supersedes none of the above but layers atop it the thirty-day deployment expectation and the redefinition of responsible AI toward lawful use. Contract language, per the strategy, will permit "any lawful use."

Executive branch posture. Biden EO 14110 was rescinded January 20, 2025. EO 14179 ("Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence") replaced it January 23, 2025. *America's AI Action Plan* was released July 23, 2025 and directed GSA to establish a unified federal AI procurement toolbox, directed DoD to stand up an AI and Autonomous Systems Virtual Proving Ground on six-month development cycles, and prioritized classified compute environments.

FY26 NDAA (P.L. 119-60, signed December 18, 2025). Three provisions warrant proposal-level attention:

- **Section 1532** prohibits DoD acquisition of AI systems from the PRC, DPRK, Russia, and Iran. DeepSeek and High Flyer are named. The prohibition is waivable but the waiver threshold is material.
- **Title XV** mandates a DoD-wide AI/ML Security Policy within 180 days of enactment covering model tampering, prompt injection, and lifecycle security. It directs DFARS updates requiring tailored best practices from covered contractors.
- **Section 347** authorizes two FY26 commercial-AI integration pilots in defense logistics and explicitly prioritizes small and non-traditional contractors.

NIST frameworks. AI RMF 1.0 (January 2023) and the AI 600-1 Generative AI Profile (July 2024) remain the canonical voluntary frameworks and are cited routinely in DoD evaluation language.

3. Accreditation — The Compliance Gate That Decides Award

An AI solution without a credible IL-5 or IL-6 pathway is, in 2026, not a proposal. It is a brochure.

The 2025 accreditation milestones. Microsoft Azure OpenAI Service achieved IL-6 authorization in April 2025. Google Distributed Cloud, including the GDC Air-Gapped Appliance, achieved IL-6 in May 2025. Ask Sage, in partnership with Microsoft, deployed a generative AI capability at IL-5 for Army Enterprise on June 30, 2025 with an IL-6 rollout underway.

The Cloud Computing Security Requirements Guide (CC SRG). Updated May 2025. Transitioned the baseline from NIST SP 800-53 Revision 4 to Revision 5. Any AI vendor's security package must be mapped to the current baseline, not the prior one.

The duplicate-accreditation problem. FedRAMP High and IL-5 are separate authorizations requiring separate audits. A March 15, 2025 submission to the Networking and Information Technology Research and Development program flagged that "smaller AI vendors cannot afford these costs" and proposed a consolidated FedRAMP-plus-IL-5 standard. That consolidation has not occurred. For now, plan the budget and the timeline for both.

The Cybersecurity Maturity Model Certification baseline. CMMC, layered atop NIST SP 800-171, remains the floor for contractors handling controlled unclassified information. FY26 NDAA Title XV ties the forthcoming AI/ML security framework to the CMMC pathway explicitly.

Air-gapped delivery as a first-class requirement. The combination of the thirty-day deployment mandate, the push to classified compute environments in the AI Action Plan, and the IL-6 accreditations now held by major cloud providers has moved on-premises and air-gapped AI from a niche capability to an expected deliverable for many mission contexts.

4. Supply Chain — The AI Bill of Materials

The Army Program Executive Office Intelligence, Electronic Warfare and Sensors (PEO IEW&S) introduced the concept of an AI Bill of Materials under Project Linchpin. The minimum components are three — a software bill of materials for the codebase, a model bill of materials describing architecture and training data, and a data bill of materials describing data lineage.

The AI-BOM concept is not yet a universally required deliverable. It is, however, the template against which FY26 NDAA Section 1532 foreign-AI diligence, Title XV security-framework compliance, and service-level data-governance reviews will increasingly be executed.

A contractor that arrives with an AI-BOM already in hand is ahead. A contractor that has to assemble one mid-source-selection is behind in a way that does not recover.

5. Vehicles That Are Actually Buying AI in 2026

The vehicles below are buying. Contractors without access should either pursue awardable status, pursue a team that holds access, or choose a different proposal.

Tradewinds (Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office). A CDAO acquisition ecosystem including the Tradewinds Solutions Marketplace (a digital repository of awardable pitch videos), the Data Readiness for AI Development Basic Ordering Agreement, the AI Talent 2.0 BOA, and the Test and Evaluation Blanket Purchase Agreement. As of early 2026, Tradewinds reports over \$3.26 billion in contract awards with an average procurement administrative lead time of 51 days. The contracting activity is Army Contracting Command – Rock Island.

DIU Thunderforge (Defense Innovation Unit). Prototype AI-powered operational planning tool awarded to Scale AI on March 5, 2025. Initial deployment at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and U.S. European Command. Partners include Anduril, Microsoft, and Google.

CDAO frontier AI contracts. Four individual \$200 million-ceiling prototype contracts awarded in summer 2025 — OpenAI (June 17), followed by Anthropic, Google, and xAI (July 14). Scope: agentic AI workflows across DoD mission areas.

JWCC (Joint Warfighting Cloud Capability). The \$9 billion multi-award IDIQ awarded December 2022 to AWS, Microsoft, Google, and Oracle. Covers IL-2 through Top Secret. Estimated completion June 2028.

DISA SETI (Systems Engineering, Technology and Innovation). Performance-based services vehicle supporting rapid prototyping, staged contracts, and milestone competitions. Particularly relevant for emerging AI technology.

Army Project Linchpin. AI/ML operations pipeline under PEO IEW&S. FY25 Small Business Innovation Research allocations of approximately \$45 million within a \$114 million Army AI/ML SBIR portfolio. Formal program-of-record funding begins FY2026.

Replicator 2 / Joint Interagency Task Force 401. Consolidated August 27, 2025 under Secretary Hegseth. First Replicator 2 acquisition closed January 11, 2026.

6. The Pain Points a Small Prime Can Actually Exploit

The constraints below are not secret. They are the friction points where a well-positioned small prime can win.

ATO velocity. The Task Force Lima final report (December 2024) recommended using generative AI itself to accelerate Authority to Operate procedures. An accreditation-literate contractor that arrives with a draft ATO package, a crosswalk to NIST SP 800-53 Revision 5, and documented IL-5 or IL-6 inheritances cuts the government's risk and its own PALT.

Inter-service trust. In April 2025 the Army blocked the Air Force's NIPRGPT from Army networks over cybersecurity and data-governance concerns. NIPRGPT itself was sunset December 31, 2025. A contractor whose AI package includes service-portable data-governance documentation — not just "it works in our lab" — differentiates.

Foreign-AI diligence. FY26 NDAA Section 1532 bans DeepSeek, High Flyer, and any AI from the PRC, DPRK, Russia, or Iran. A contractor that produces, unprompted, a written diligence memorandum affirming the absence of prohibited components across the stack — training data, base model, fine-tuning, inference serving, observability — arrives with a compliance artifact the government must otherwise generate itself.

Lifecycle cost opacity. GAO-26-107859 (April 2026) found that four agencies (DoD, DHS, VA, GSA) do not systematically collect AI acquisition lessons learned. It cited Army XM-30 license costs of approximately \$300,000 per vehicle per year, and warned that Project Linchpin officials routinely see sustainment costs underestimated. A contractor that surfaces lifecycle costs transparently — license, compute, data pipeline, retraining, decommissioning — wins on the cost-realism evaluation factor that large integrators routinely lose on.

Classified environments. The demand signal is sustained — *America's AI Action Plan* calls for secure-by-design defense data centers, the DoW AI Strategy pushes classified compute explicitly, and Google's GDC Air-Gapped Appliance achieved IL-6 in May 2025 as a live proof the pattern is real. A small prime that arrives with a credible air-gapped reference architecture and known-good hardware lineage is, for many mission sets, the only competitive offer.

7. The Workforce Problem Behind a 30-Day Mandate

A thirty-day deployment target sounds like a technology problem. It is not. It is an acquisition-workforce problem, and practitioner literature makes that clear in a way agency policy documents will not.

Thomas Bruneau's *Outsourcing National Defense* documents the gap directly. The 2018 National Defense Strategy mandated Defense Acquisition University training on Other Transaction Authorities; what the workforce got, Bruneau reports, was a "1.5-hour web-based continuous learning module." The predictable result: a career acquisition corps that has been told, in legislation, to use flexible authorities, and in practice, to default to the FAR — "the bible" — because that is where the documentary safety is. In Bruneau's account, every Impact Level 5 or Impact Level 6 contracting officer has, for a decade, been trained to treat compliance security as mission success. A 30-day cycle demands the opposite posture.

Bruneau identifies two institutional exceptions — "pockets of excellence" at DARPA and at U.S. Special Operations Command — where personnel are "well versed in the use of OTAs and have invested in having senior advisors." The pattern is consistent with DIU, CDAO, and the Tradewinds contracting activity at Army Rock Island. Every vehicle on the January-2026 critical list is, in effect, a pocket of excellence trying to scale to Department size under a policy deadline that assumes the rest of the workforce is ready.

The Danaher pattern described in Leinwand and Mainardi's *Strategy That Works* offers the operational frame. Danaher succeeded not by acquiring capabilities but by applying what it called the Danaher Business System — a disciplined operating cadence — across every acquired company. Senior managers were rated annually on their proficiency with the toolkit. The parallel holds: OTAs, Section 804 Middle Tier of Acquisition, and Commercial Solutions Openings are the authorities. Proficiency with the authorities is the bottleneck. Until acquisition leaders are evaluated on the speed, cost outcome, and capability delivered under those authorities rather than the avoidance of audit findings under the FAR, the thirty-day mandate will move contracts, not capability.

The contractor takeaway is directional. A small prime whose capture and proposal narratives explicitly help the contracting officer use a flexible authority — with a pre-built security package, a pre-mapped inheritance diagram, and a draft ATO — is not just answering the solicitation. It is relieving the workforce bottleneck that makes the solicitation hard to execute. That relief is measurable, and it shows up in procurement administrative lead time statistics that source-selection authorities can cite in defense of their awards.

8. What "Responsible AI" Means After January 2026

Secretary Hegseth's speech of January 12, 2026 and the AI Strategy memorandum tightened the framing of responsible AI. The practical effect for contract language, per the strategy, is that the Department will permit "any lawful use" of AI capabilities. Models that cannot be operated in combat contexts will not be fielded.

The five DoD AI Ethical Principles (Responsible, Equitable, Traceable, Reliable, Governable, adopted 2020) remain formally in place. DoD Directive 3000.09 remains the governing directive for senior review of lethal autonomous systems. The CDAO Responsible AI Toolkit, hosted on the Tradewinds platform, remains in use.

What has changed is the center of gravity. "Responsible AI" in 2026 is framed less as a brake on capability and more as the demonstrable security, auditability, and lawful-use posture that earns the Department the right to field the capability. Contractors writing past-performance and technical-approach narratives should adjust vocabulary accordingly.

9. A Contractor Readiness Checklist

The following is a minimum artifact list a small prime should have in hand, in writing, before pursuing a 2026 AI opportunity. Every item should be a document, not an intention.

1. IL-5 or IL-6 pathway statement — either held, under sponsor, or via inheritance from a cloud provider already accredited.
2. CC SRG Revision 5 mapping of the security package.
3. FedRAMP High pathway statement, where commercial-model inheritance is intended.
4. AI Bill of Materials covering code, model, and data lineage.
5. Foreign-AI diligence memorandum affirming Section 1532 compliance across the stack.
6. Draft ATO package or crosswalk to NIST SP 800-53 Revision 5.
7. Lifecycle cost model disclosing license, compute, pipeline, retraining, and decommissioning costs.
8. Air-gap and degraded-connectivity operating mode specification, with test evidence.
9. CMMC level statement consistent with the anticipated CUI exposure of the work.
10. Responsible-AI posture narrative framed around lawful-use and auditability, not refusal-by-design.

Contractors that cannot produce seven of the ten in writing should not pursue the opportunity. Contractors that can produce ten are in a small field.

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About Alpha Zulu Solutions. Alpha Zulu Solutions is a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (CAGE 18L45) headquartered in the Commonwealth of Virginia. We operate an on-premises AI analysis stack used for competitor ghost teams, NDAA impact briefs, and capture-grade advisory work. Brief prepared by Alpha Zulu Solutions, April 2026.

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