



Military 101: Understanding the U.S. Armed Forces

A Practical Primer for Policy and Legislative Professionals

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Course Objectives

- Understand the basic structure and purpose of the U.S. military
- Learn how the services are organized, funded, and commanded
- Gain insight into military culture and operations
- Recognize the role of civilian leadership and congressional oversight
- Build practical tools for engaging with military institutions

Why This Matters

- Military spending = half of discretionary budget
- Congress plays key role in authorizing, appropriating, and overseeing the force
- National security decisions increasingly involve military input
- Better understanding = better legislation, oversight, and engagement



The U.S. Military at a Glance

- Six branches: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Space Force, Coast Guard
- ~1.3 million active duty, ~800k Reserve/Guard
- Global presence: 750+ bases in 80+ countries



Active Duty, Reserve, and Guard

- Active Duty: Full-time warfighters and support
- Reserves: Part-time, augment active force in times of need
- National Guard: State-controlled, federally deployable
- Total Force Concept

Combatant Commands (COCOMs)

- Geographic and functional commands (e.g. CENTCOM, AFRICOM, CYBERCOM)
- Unified structure for joint operations
- Map of COCOM regions



What the Military Does

- Primary missions: Warfighting, deterrence, presence, humanitarian aid, domestic response
- Examples of recent operations
- Civil-military support (COVID, hurricane response, embassy security)



Service Cultures and Identity

- Differences in culture and doctrine across services
- Values: “Semper Fi,” “This We’ll Defend,” “Aim High,” etc.
- Understanding service pride, traditions, and norms



Civilian Control and Chain of Command

- Constitutional structure (President → SECDEF → Combatant Commands)
- Role of Joint Chiefs and Service Secretaries
- Goldwater-Nichols Act and Title 10 authority

Congressional Oversight

- Authorization (NDAA) vs. Appropriations (Defense Subcommittees)
- Key committees: HASC, SASC, HAC-D, SAC-D
- Oversight tools: hearings, letters, IGs, site visits





Military Budget Basics

- Function 050 (National Defense)
- Major accounts: O&M, MILPERS, RDT&E, Procurement, MILCON
- The PPBE system and timing of influence

Challenges Facing the Force

- Recruiting and retention issues
- Suicide and mental health
- Modernization and readiness gaps
- Civil-military trust and politicization concerns



Engaging with the Military

- How to work with installations and commanders
- Understand base structure: host vs. tenant units
- Tips for briefings, CODELs, and respecting protocol
- Best practices for staffers and advocates

Questions & Next Steps

- Open Q&A
- Encourage you to approach members of the military and engage them in discussion.
- Invitation to take other related modules (Investigations & Oversight, Defense Industrial Base)

