

Course Handout: Military 101 – Understanding the U.S. Armed Forces

Overview:

This course provides a foundational understanding of how the U.S. military is structured, what it does, and how it interacts with policymakers. Designed for congressional staffers and policy professionals, it equips you to engage confidently with military institutions and decisions.

Key Facts:

- 6 branches: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Space Force, Coast Guard
- ~1.3 million Active Duty personnel; ~800k Reserve and National Guard
- 11 Combatant Commands (e.g., CENTCOM, AFRICOM, CYBERCOM)
- Over 750 U.S. military installations globally

Force Composition:

- **Active Duty:** Full-time military members
- **Reserve:** Trained personnel activated during need
- **National Guard:** Dual state-federal force; domestic and overseas missions

Rank & Organization:

- **Officer Corps:** Strategic leadership (e.g., O-3 Captain, O-6 Colonel, O-10 General)
- **Enlisted:** Core of operations and technical execution (e.g., E-4 Specialist, E-9 Sergeant Major)
- **Units:** Squad → Platoon → Company → Battalion → Brigade → Division (Army/Marines); similar in Air Force and Navy with flights, squadrons, and ships

What the Military Does:

- Warfighting and deterrence
- Peacekeeping, disaster relief, and humanitarian assistance
- Domestic emergency response (Guard), cyber operations, space security

Military Culture Highlights:

- Strong emphasis on values, discipline, and hierarchy
- Deep service identities (e.g., "The Few, The Proud")
- Respect for rank, custom, and tradition is critical

Civilian Control & Oversight:

- President → Secretary of Defense → Combatant Commands
- Congress controls authorizations (NDAA), appropriations, and oversight
- Major oversight bodies: HASC, SASC, HAC-D, SAC-D

Budgeting Basics:

- Function 050: National Defense (~\$850B annually)
- Major accounts: O&M, MILPERS, RDT&E, Procurement, MILCON
- Key budgeting system: PPBE (Planning, Programming, Budgeting, Execution)

Current Challenges:

- Recruiting shortfalls and force size debates
- Mental health, suicide prevention, and military family support
- Readiness and modernization for near-peer competition
- Civil-military trust and politicization concerns

How to Engage Effectively:

- Learn the chain of command and local installation structure
- Use briefings, CODELs, or base visits to build relationships
- Respect customs and military culture—be prepared and concise

Key Takeaway:

Understanding the military's structure, culture, and civilian oversight role empowers you to shape better policy, funding, and engagement strategies.