

# Preface

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*“To be prepared for war is one of the most effective means of preserving peace.”*

—President George Washington

**P***ace Through Strength*: This simple expression has formed the cornerstone of our national security since the founding of our Republic. It is a perspective rooted in a strength that is tempered by humility and maintained through vigilance that protects the American people, our way of life, freedom of commerce, and the republican institutions that guarantee our liberties anchored in faith. Peace comes about by maintaining a robust and lethal U.S. military, fiscally responsible and led by confident and capable leaders who support the defense *and* pursuit of America’s national interests properly understood. It does not seek to impose our values on foreign lands but will defend the interests of our people around the world. We are humble in our overseas ambitions, but we will not accept the imposition of hostile values on the United States or our allies by foreign powers bent on domination.

American conservatives must avoid nation-building projects or efforts to remake the world in America’s image, recognizing that attempts to do so in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and elsewhere spent American blood and treasure and squandered the peace dividend and unipolar moment achieved through American victory in the Cold War. At the same time, American military action to defend American security and prosperity in pursuit of American interests based in realism is both moral and rational. The successful strike on Iran’s nuclear weapons infrastructure, a limited target with a clearly defined end state, is an example of what should be humility in the ambitions of our national security leaders: no endless wars with undefined objectives. As of this writing,

detering Chinese aggression to prevent Chinese hegemony in Asia and combating the narco-terrorist cartels that are destabilizing America’s backyard and eroding sovereignty and borders throughout the Americas are America’s two most pressing national security concerns.

The Heritage Foundation’s *2026 Index of U.S. Military Strength* is anchored in these core values. Its theme—“Restoring Peace Through Strength”—is not simply an expression of our national security priorities, but rather a recognition that after more than a decade of decline, as documented by past editions of the *Index of U.S. Military Strength*, we are starting to turn the corner on restoring our armed forces. The *2026 Index* is a comprehensive diagnostic tool that analyzes the capacity, capabilities, and readiness of our armed forces and their ability to address the threats to vital U.S. national interests in the contemporary operating environment. As I said in my book, *Dawn’s Early Light: Taking Back Washington to Save America*, “A recommitment to the U.S. interest must be matched with a sober assessment of the state of U.S. power today.”

The *Index of U.S. Military Strength* is the yardstick against which we measure how the national security enterprise meets its core obligations of defending the homeland and our interests; its results show that much work remains to be done. As with every great change, this restoration is urgently needed, but it will take years of effort to undo the damage caused by the neglect and misplaced priorities that have long undermined our national security discourse.

## Restoring Peace Through Strength

This past year has seen a serious and comprehensive effort by the Trump Administration and

the U.S. Congress to restore our armed forces, confront uncomfortable truths about national security, and begin the process of reforming and restoring our military. The cornerstones of this restoration are humility in approach, focused accountability, investments in victory, and economy in execution. President Trump set the tone for the nation by calling for “restoring the U.S. military’s mission of lethality and leading with peace through strength.” Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, in his “Message to the Force” issued just a year ago, charged the U.S. Department of War with “achiev[ing] Peace through Strength” by “restoring the warrior ethos, rebuilding our military, and reestablishing deterrence.” He further stated that “[a]ll of this will be done with a focus on lethality, meritocracy, accountability, standards, and readiness.” While much remains to be done, the initial results have been dramatic and encouraging.

The Administration has reasserted a central pillar of our Republic—rewarding individual hard work and merit—by abolishing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and other woke initiatives that had undermined good order and discipline within our military. It has acted aggressively to remove officials, both civilian and uniformed, who promoted this base attack on the strength of our armed forces and has restored winning our wars rather than serving as social science guinea pigs as the central focus of our military. By reasserting meritocracy and removing incompetent officials, it has ensured that our armed forces are on a firmer footing and better able to deter the aggressive actions of our competitors and, if required, win our nation’s wars.

The Administration has also focused on reducing a bloated Pentagon bureaucracy, cancelling unnecessary weapons systems, replacing expensive capabilities with cheaper, more effective technological solutions, and economizing across the Department of War. The insistence on a full audit of the Department is also a necessary reform to bring sanity back to its fiscal house. These initiatives have freed resources to invest in the capabilities needed to deter aggressive actors. The broader dire fiscal condition of our nation’s finances must be taken into account as reform of our military takes place; the taxpayer must be protected and respected, and we must steward our nation’s resources and economic health both continually and responsibly.

President Trump has also pushed our allies to take on more of the financial burden of their own defense and reduce the overseas footprint of our armed forces given the range of global challenges the United States uniquely faces. These necessary reductions further relieve the Department of War of costs that those who are defended should rightfully be footing.

The signing into law of H.R.1, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, by President Trump on July 4, 2025, represents the America First investment in our armed forces that does not seek to manage our military’s decline but instead seeks to arrest it and focus on building capabilities for the future. The bill unleashed a \$150 billion cash infusion in our military that is starting to turn the tide of a decade of decline. This sum supports investments in the shipbuilding maritime industrial base (\$29 billion); munitions (\$25 billion); nuclear deterrence (\$15 billion); Golden Dome missile defense (\$25 billion); air superiority (\$9 billion); and Pacific deterrence (\$12 billion), among many other critical projects. These topline additions need to be reflected in future budgets to continue the process of building greater capacity, capabilities, and readiness to defend the homeland and protect American interests abroad effectively. The President’s January 7, 2026, statement calling for a \$1.5 trillion defense budget—\$500 billion above the existing budget—in order to build the “Dream Military” is further evidence that “Peace Through Strength” is the cornerstone of conservative defense policy.

### **Detering and Defeating China**

The central national security challenge for the United States is the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as it seeks to impose its will on other nations and push the United States out of the Indo-Pacific region. It competes with the United States from nanobytes to space, and its imperial ambitions are a direct threat to U.S. safety, interests, and values. The challenge is comprehensive and long-term and requires our leaders to prioritize the capabilities that will deter the PRC’s aggressive and malign activities. Secretary Hegseth made this challenge very clear when he said that, while the United States does not seek conflict with Communist China, “we will not be pushed out of this critical region” and “will not let our allies and partners be subordinated and intimidated.” He further said that China is

“credibly preparing to use military force to alter the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific” and that any conflict over Taiwan would have “devastating consequences.”

As focused as our leaders must be on deterring the threats from China, we must also understand what a protracted conflict with Communist China would look like. In a first-of-its-kind effort, the Allison Center for National Security at Heritage conducted an artificial intelligence simulation of a protracted conflict between the United States and the People’s Republic of China. Called TIDALWAVE, it simulated a series of conflict scenarios centered on a Taiwan invasion. Its results, published this year, dramatically underscore that we must grow the force; reinvigorate our defense industrial base; build more munitions, ships, and planes; and invest in logistical support and fuel delivery capabilities while harnessing the creative power of the American people.

The national security challenge of an aggressive People’s Republic of China will be the dominant threat our nation faces in the future. More must be done to deter its aggressive actions, and America must be ready for a conflict with China if the PRC’s leaders choose war.

### **The American Way of War**

Article I, Section 8, Clause 1 of the U.S. Constitution, the founding document of our Republic, says that the Congress of the United States “shall... provide for the common Defence and general Welfare of the United States.” For far too long, however, our elites went in search of dragons to slay overseas while neglecting the basic security needs and welfare of the American people. The efforts by

Republicans and Democrats alike to remake the world in America’s image by spreading democracy through force resulted in suboptimal regional outcomes even as they drained American blood and treasure and distracted the United States from the rise of China and the return of great-power competition.

The analysis in the *2026 Index of U.S. Military Strength* makes clear that these distractions undermined our military readiness to the point where we now lack the capacity and capabilities to deter the People’s Republic of China and, if needed, defeat it in a conflict. Further, our fiscal house is in total disarray, and our debt burden has exploded as protracted conflicts have become the norm. We must have a strong national defense, and it must be rooted in prudence, guided by justice, oriented to peace, and anchored in the reality of the lives of the American people.

We are beginning to turn the corner on military readiness as our nation’s leaders make the investments that our armed forces require, but more remains to be done. We must always remember to live up to the sacrifices of our servicemembers and make clear that a defense and foreign policy rooted in peace through strength is the greatest guarantor of freedom. As President Ronald Reagan said in his March 1983 address to the nation on defense and national security, “We maintain the peace through our strength; weakness only invites aggression.”

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