



DIRECT AWARDS PLAYBOOK



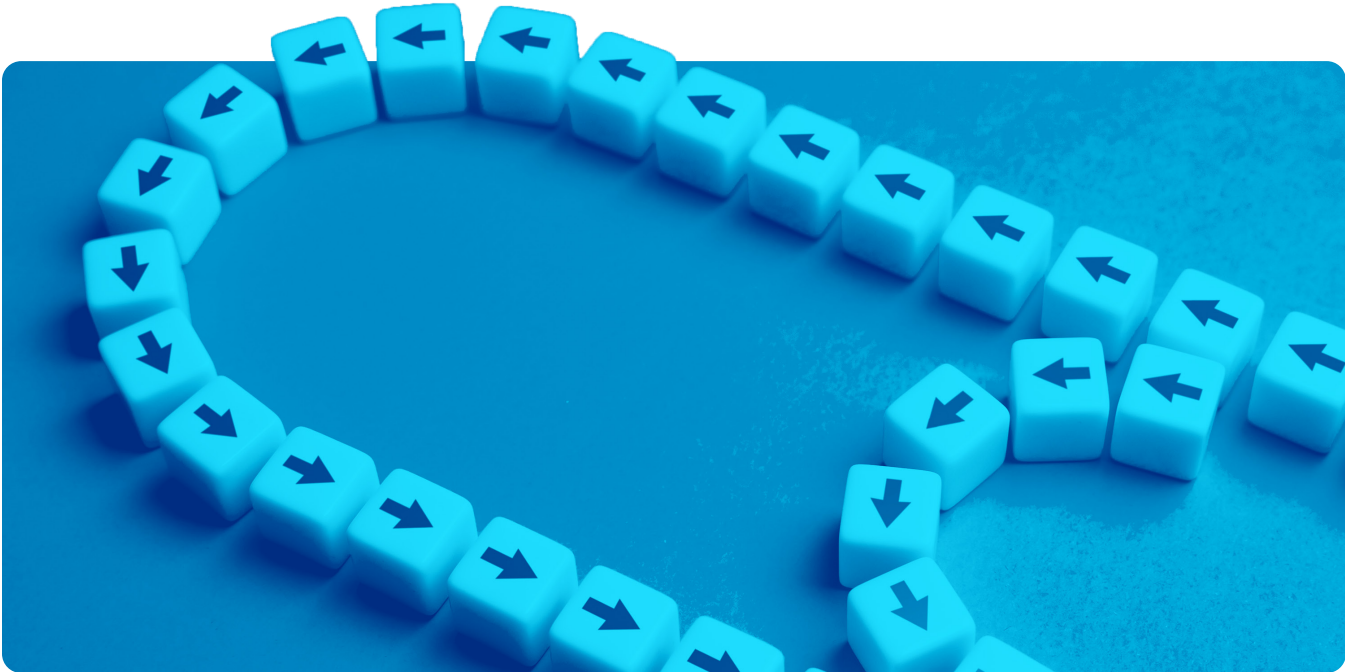
Defense Unicorns

DEFENSE UNICORNS ACQUISITION STRATEGY GUIDE

ACCELERATING TIME-TO-VALUE THROUGH SMART USE OF EXISTING AUTHORITIES

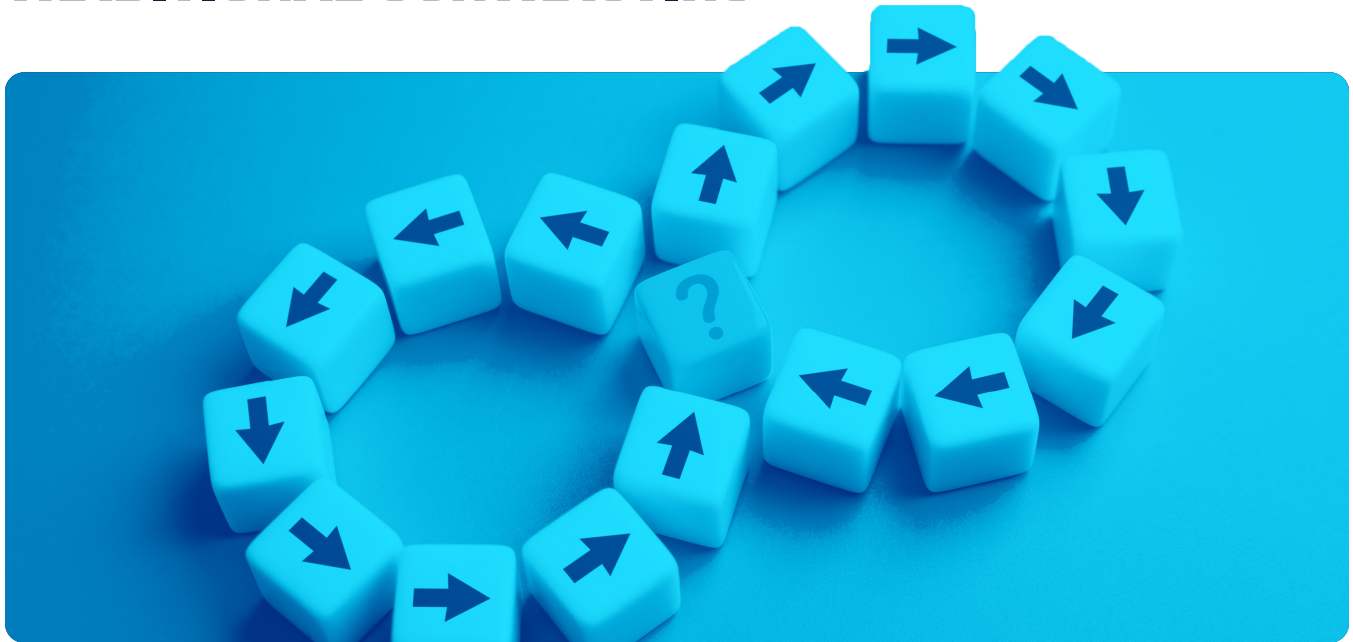
The government acquisition system has powerful tools for rapid, competitive procurement. Most programs simply don't use them. This playbook provides the knowledge to help bypass slow traditional processes and move at the speed of mission.

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SECTION 1:

THE PROBLEM WITH TRADITIONAL CONTRACTING



WHY THE DEFAULT PATH FAILS

The defense acquisition ecosystem defaults to lengthy, familiar processes, even when faster, legally sound alternatives exist. The result is a procurement system that consistently works against the mission it's designed to support.



18 MONTHS: Average time to award contracts

ROOT CAUSES OF ACQUISITION DELAY

Unfamiliarity, not illegality, drives acquisition delay. Most programs can't explain why they're not using faster authorities, they've simply never done it before.

- No one is giving permission. Without internal champions, inertia wins.
- Recreating the wheel. Every program tries to build a unique acquisition path rather than leveraging proven vehicles and strategies.
- Risk aversion culture. The industry has a reputation for always saying no. Some COs actively push back, but they're the exception.

SECTION 2:

DIRECT AWARD AUTHORITIES



YOUR ACQUISITION TOOLKIT

The [Federal Acquisition Regulation \(FAR\)](#) tells you what you CAN do, and critically, if it doesn't say you can't do something, creative interpretation is often permissible. The following authorities provide legitimate, competition-satisfying pathways to faster procurement.



FAR PART 13 SIMPLIFIED ACQUISITION | (FAST TRACK)

Simplified acquisition procedures under [FAR Part 13](#) can move quickly when executed properly. Often underutilized, many programs default to full competition when simplified procedures would suffice, cutting months off the timeline.

- Lower administrative burden
- Faster award timelines
- Works for purchases under \$350K (up to \$9M for commercial)
- Can be combined with existing IDIQ vehicles



OTHER TRANSACTION (OT) AUTHORITY I (PROTOTYPING)

OT prototyping authority allows agreements that bypass many FAR requirements. Designed for cutting-edge technology acquisition where traditional contracting would slow or block adoption. This is particularly powerful for dual-use commercial technology.

- Not bound by standard FAR clauses
- Faster negotiation cycles
- Supports prototype-to-production pathways
- Requires OT-qualified legal support

Department of War-specific OT authorities are [codified at 10 U.S.C. §§ 4021 and 4022](#).

- Section 4021 authorizes DoD to use OTs to carry out basic, applied, and advanced research projects.
- Section 4022 empowers DOW to use OTs for certain prototype projects of \$500 million or less and certain follow-on production projects of \$100 million or less, with exceptions for critical national security objectives made in writing and reported to Congress. Unlike Prototype OTs (under § 4022), Research OTs under § 4021 do not include authority for transition to follow-on production contracts or transactions.

[Section 4022 was updated on June 3, 2026](#) to expand the justification for using OT authority to include when:

- Innovative business arrangements or structures would not be practical or feasible under a FAR contract.
- An innovative or novel product, service, or business practice is offered that is more practicable to acquire under an OT.
- It is expected to accelerate delivery of capability compared to other procurement methods.
- It works to expand or strengthen the defense industrial base in a manner not practicable under a FAR contract.
- It would expand participation by one or more nontraditional defense contractors or small business.
- It would reduce technical, schedule, or performance risk, or accelerate transition to production
- It would permit fielding through use of non-federal cost sharing arrangements



COMMERCIAL SOLUTIONS OPENINGS (CSO) | (COMPETITIVE)

CSOs provide a streamlined path for acquiring innovative commercial solutions. They satisfy competition requirements while allowing for more flexible evaluation criteria than traditional RFPs, focusing on technical merit and mission fit.

- Satisfies competition requirements
- Flexible evaluation criteria
- Faster than the full RFP process
- Well-suited for commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) solutions

A Commercial Solutions Opening is authorized by [10 U.S.C. § 3458](#) and implemented in [DFARS Subpart 212.70](#). CSOs are intended to streamline processes for acquiring innovative solutions by enabling flexibility in evaluation and selection, distinct from standard DFARS source selection procedures.



SBIR PHASE II | (SOLE SOURCE)

Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) Phase II authority allows sole-source contracts without additional competition. Competition requirements were already satisfied during Phase I. The SBIR has existed since the 1980s and became strategically valuable in the early 2000s when the focus shifted to getting innovative solutions to warfighters faster.

- No new competition required
- Sole source justification built in
- Familiar to innovation-focused programs
- Often unknown to traditional contracting shops

SECTION 3:

THE DIRECT AWARD CONVERSATION



STEPS TO MAKE DIRECT AWARD POSSIBLE

1. Ask “Why Not?”
Is there a reason for not using existing authorities? Most programs can’t provide a real answer beyond “we’ve never done it that way.” The goal is to surface the real barrier, which is often unfamiliarity rather than legal restriction.
2. Understand the Cost of the Traditional Path
The status quo has a cost. An 18-month acquisition timeline for a capability available today is a mission failure, not a process success. Inaction is itself a risk. Every month spent on an RFI is a month the adversary has the advantage. The timeline IS the risk.

WORKING WITH DEFENSE UNICORNS

AVAILABLE CONTRACT VEHICLES

Defense Unicorns have done the hard work of getting on contract, so you don’t have to start from scratch. The following vehicles provide ready, legally sound pathways to award, many of which satisfy competition requirements that have already been met.



IDIQ FOR SBIR PHASE III ORDERS

Issuing Agency: GSA

Eligible: Department of War (DoW), DHS, CISA

Defense Unicorns holds a GSA-issued IDIQ that accepts task order awards from the Department of War, DHS, and CISA. Under SBIR Phase III authority, this vehicle can be used as a sole-source mechanism, so no new competition is required. If your agency is one of the three eligible customers, this is often the fastest path to award.

SBIR Phase III rules (under [15 U.S.C. 638](#)) satisfy all federal competition requirements. The IDIQ for SBIR Phase III orders does include contracting support.

BEST FOR: Agencies needing a direct, sole-source path with minimal administrative overhead.



SOLE SOURCE SBIR PHASE III AUTHORITY

Type: Non-Competitive

Basis: Prior Phase I & II Performance

Building on Defense Unicorns' SBIR/STTR Phase I and Phase II contract history, the government may award non-competitive Phase III contracts across several technology areas. The prior competition that satisfied FAR requirements has already occurred; this authority simply allows the government to move directly to award without re-competing.

Under 15 U.S.C. § 638 and [FAR 6.302-5](#), a federal agency can award a contract to any company that has successfully completed SBIR Phase I and Phase II work. No competition is required, and no sole-source justification is needed.

BEST FOR: Program offices already familiar with Defense Unicorns' technology who want to expand or continue capability delivery without a new competitive action.



TRADEWINDS SOLUTIONS MARKETPLACE

Domain: AI/ML, Data & Analytics

Status: Assessed “Awardable”

UDS has been assessed as awardable through the [Tradewinds Solutions Marketplace](#), a DOW-managed digital repository of post-competition, readily awardable solutions addressing the Department’s most significant AI/ML, data, and analytics challenges. Pitch assessments are already complete, so ordering agencies can move directly to award.

Buyers work with their own contracting officials, and the marketplace provides an Acquisition Support team to help guide government buyers in executing the procurement process. [This video from the Warfighting Acquisition University provides helpful information.](#) More details are available on [SAM.gov](#).

BEST FOR: Department of War customers with AI/ML or data requirements looking for a fast, already-vetted path.



AWS MARKETPLACE

Environment: Any

Focus: Cloud Infrastructure

Defense Unicorns is listed on the [AWS Marketplace](#) and works directly with AWS to deliver scalable, secure cloud infrastructure for mission-critical applications across any environment, including classified and air-gapped. Procurement through AWS Marketplace can leverage existing AWS agreements your agency may already hold.

Contracting support is not included.

BEST FOR: Programs needing rapid cloud infrastructure delivery, especially those with existing AWS procurement relationships.



P1 SOLUTIONS MARKETPLACE

Domain: Hardware, Software & Services

Status: Assessed “Awardable”

UDS is assessed as awardable through the [P1 Solutions Marketplace](#), a digital repository of post-competition solutions addressing government requirements across hardware, software, and services. Like Tradewinds, the competitive assessment has been completed — agencies can proceed directly to ordering.

Contracting support is not included.

BEST FOR: Broader government customers outside the DoW AI/ML space who need a streamlined, competition-satisfied vehicle.



SEAPORT NEXTGEN IDIQ

Issuing Agency: Department of the Navy

Defense Unicorns is available on the [Navy's SeaPort Next Generation](#) (SeaPort NxG) contract vehicle, providing naval and Marine Corps customers a streamlined path to acquire mission-focused software and services. SeaPort NxG is a well-established, widely understood vehicle in the Navy acquisition community.

BEST FOR: Navy and Marine Corps program offices already familiar with SeaPort NxG who want a known, low-friction path to award.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT VEHICLE



VEHICLE	BEST FOR	SOLE SOURCE	KEY AGENCIES
IDIQ (SBIR Phase III)	Fastest Path to Award	Yes	DoW, DHS, CISA
SBIR Phase III Authority	Expanding Existing Work	Yes	Any Eligible Agency
Tradewinds	AI/ML, Data & Analytics	Yes (Post-Assessment)	DoW
AWS Marketplace	Cloud Infrastructure	Varies	DoW + Others
P1 Solutions	Hardware, Software, Services	Yes (Post-Assessment)	Broad Government
SeaPort NxG	Navy/USMC Software & Services	No	Dept. of the Navy

ABOUT US

Defense Unicorns is a veteran-owned defense technology company founded in 2021 by Rob Slaughter, Jeff McCoy, and Andrew Greene to make software a strategic deterrent for the U.S. Department of War. The company builds open-source, airgap-native technologies that enable the secure development, delivery, and sustainment of mission software across cloud, on-premises, and tactical edge environments. Defense Unicorns' technology is trusted by the operators of some of the most critical systems in the world, including the U.S. Navy, Army, Air Force, and Space Force. Learn more at <https://defenseunicorns.com>.

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