



Fact Sheet: Cuts to DOT&E Weapons Testing Put Troops at Risk

Background

The Defense Department's Office of the Director, Operational Test and Evaluation (DOT&E) was created by Congress in 1983 in response to horror stories of M16 rifle malfunctions in Vietnam and embarrassing test failures of the Sergeant York Divisional Air Defense (DIVAD) gun.¹ Its purpose was to protect the lives of American military personnel by providing independent assessments of whether weapons actually work.² Congress strengthened the DOT&E law in 1986 to include live fire testing following unrealistic survivability tests of the M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle. The controversy over the M2 was so sensational it inspired the HBO feature-length comedy, *The Pentagon Wars*.

DOT&E oversees three types of weapons testing: developmental, operational, and live fire. The types of tests DOT&E will oversee for each program are indicated in the Oversight List maintained by the office.³ Operational testing is especially important because it is designed to assess whether a weapon will actually be useful in combat, not just whether it meets technical specifications.

The Problem

On May 27, 2025, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth issued a memorandum cutting DOT&E staffing by more than half and terminating the office's authorization to hire contractors who have historically filled gaps in staff expertise.⁴ This calls into question how DOT&E will fulfill its statutory duty to oversee operational testing for all major defense acquisition programs, which are programs above certain cost thresholds, and any programs otherwise designated as major acquisitions by the DOT&E or secretary of defense.⁵

¹ "About DOT&E," Director, Operational Test and Evaluation, accessed August 22, 2025, <https://www.dote.osd.mil/About/>; James Fallows, "M-16: A Bureaucratic Horror Story," *Atlantic*, June 1981, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1981/06/m-16-a-bureaucratic-horror-story/545153/>; Gregg Easterbrook, "Divad," *Atlantic*, October 1982, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/10/divad/546278/>.

² 141 Cong. Rec. S18055 (daily ed. December 6, 1995) (statement of Senator David Pryor), <https://www.congress.gov/104/crec/1995/12/06/141/193/CREC-1995-12-06-pt1-PgS18055.pdf>.

³ *DoD Manual 5000.100: Test and Evaluation Master Plans and Test and Evaluation Strategies*, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/5000100m.PDF?ver=ljPHJcRjzTogh9jxrHh9IA%3D%3D#page=5>.

⁴ Brandi Vincent, "Pentagon to Restructure Weapons Testing Office, Cut Personnel as Part of Hegseth-Directed Shakeup," *DefenseScoop*, May 28, 2025, [Pentagon to restructure weapons testing office, cut personnel as part of Hegseth-directed shakeup | DefenseScoop](https://www.defensescoop.com/2025/05/28/pentagon-to-restructure-weapons-testing-office-cut-personnel-as-part-of-hegseth-directed-shakeup/); "Advanced Search," USASpending, data for awards by Department of Defense to Institute for Defense Analysis, Delivery Order HQ003424F0002, as of August 26, 2025, https://www.usaspending.gov/award/CONT_AWD_HQ003424F0002_9700_HQ003419D0001_9700.

⁵ 10 U.S.C. § 139 (2025), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/139#:~:text=or%20that%20is%20designated%20as%20such%20a%20program%20by%20the%20Director%20for%20purposes%20of%20this%20section.>

When DOT&E nominee Dr. Amy Henninger was asked during her confirmation hearing to commit to continuing to honor congressional requests to oversee select programs, she declined to make that commitment.⁶

The day of Henninger's confirmation hearing and before she was confirmed, DOT&E reduced the number of weapons programs for which it will oversee operational testing from 251 to 152 — a 39% decrease.⁷

One of the programs for which operational testing was removed from the Oversight List is the Next Generation Squad Weapon, a pair of weapons which includes the XM7, the first wholly new standard issue rifle the Army has fielded since the M16/M4 family.⁸

The Solutions

Insist that DOT&E honor Congress's requests for oversight. Henninger should not be confirmed as DOT&E unless, as requested by Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), she commits to honor requests from committees of jurisdiction to oversee operational or live fire testing for specific programs.

Ensure that DOT&E has access to necessary resources. Congress should ensure access to the funding, personnel, and contractors needed for DOT&E to fulfill its statutory mission. For example, Representative Donald Norcross's (D-NJ) amendment to empower DOT&E to hire contractors should be preserved in the final version of the fiscal year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act.⁹

For more information, see our analysis, "Pentagon Cuts to DOT&E Could Endanger Troops."¹⁰

Contact

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⁶ Office of Senator Elizabeth Warren, "ICYMI: At Hearing, Nominee to Lead Weapons Testing Office Commits to Exposing the Truth About Whether Weapons Work and Are Safe, But Won't Commit to Reviewing Weapons and Programs Flagged by Congress," accessed August 22, 2025, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/icymi-at-hearing-nominee-to-lead-weapons-testing-office-commits-to-exposing-the-truth-about-whether-weapons-work-and-are-safe-but-wont-commit-to-reviewing-weapons-and-programs-flagged-by-congress>

⁷ "T&E Oversight List 20250731," Director, Operational Test and Evaluation, accessed August 22, 2025, <https://www.dote.osd.mil/Portals/97/pub/reports/oversight/TE%20Oversight%20List%2020250731%20www%20extract.pdf?ver=5PIRYK33BemL7uAeKNbnWQ%3d%3d>; "T&E Oversight List 20250508," The Office of the Director, Operational Test and Evaluation, accessed August 22, 2025, <https://www.dote.osd.mil/Portals/97/pub/reports/oversight/TE%20Oversight%20List%2020250508%20www%20extract.pdf?ver=bHqXPIwUZyJ0oB4QXWdfuw%3d%3d>; "T&E Oversight List 20250508," The Office of the Director, Operational Test and Evaluation, accessed August 22, 2025, <https://www.dote.osd.mil/Portals/97/pub/reports/oversight/TE%20Oversight%20List%2020250508%20www%20extract.pdf?ver=bHqXPIwUZyJ0oB4QXWdfuw%3d%3d>.

⁸ "T&E Oversight List 20250731," Director, Operational Test and Evaluation [see note 7]; "T&E Oversight List 20250508," Director, Operational Test and Evaluation [see note 7]; C. Todd Lopez, "Army Announces 2 New Rifles for Close-Combat Soldiers," *DOD News*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3005746/army-announces-2-new-rifles-for-close-combat-soldiers/#:~:text=%22We%20should%20note,Team%20director%2C%20said.>

⁹ Amendment to H.R. 3838 Offered by Mr. Norcross of New Jersey, 2025, https://armedservices.house.gov/uploadedfiles/chm_en_bloc_3.pdf#page112.

¹⁰ Greg Williams, "Pentagon Cuts to DOT&E Could Endanger Troops," accessed August 28, 2025, <https://www.pogo.org/analysis/pentagon-cuts-to-dot-e-could-endanger-troops>.