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Former U.S. Army secretary: What America cannot win wars without

di Ryan D. McCarthy

Ryan D. McCarthy served as the 24th secretary of the Army.

Over the past 10 years, the U.S. Army has seen many of its conventional modernization programs curtailed or even canceled. After prolonged ground wars in the Middle East, recovery ate up Army funding — at the same time the service needed to prepare to confront increasingly technologically advanced adversaries.

Supporting the Army remains indispensable. The service has a crucial role in setting the theater: It provides the majority of the Joint Force's logistics, fuel distribution and communication networks. The Army also helps secure airspace and sea-lanes for other military services to operate.

The service proved its importance during Operation Epic Fury, when its ground-based [Precision Strike Missile](#) made its combat debut with devastating effects. By hitting targets — including enemy air defenses and command nodes — hundreds of miles away, the Army demonstrated strike capabilities once reserved for carrier-based aircraft or Navy-launched cruise missiles.

But with the past decade's budget cuts, the Army has had to innovate as it adapts to today's warfare. In its weapons development and training exercises, the service has embraced unmanned systems that can replace personnel at the tactical edge. Learning from the Ukraine war and its so-called [kamikaze drones](#), the Army is working to deploy such loitering munitions and reconnaissance tools to even its smallest units. In recent exercises, such as [Lightning Surge and Ivy Sting](#) earlier this year, Army divisions have used groups of autonomous drones to map enemy positions and strike

with precision. The new technology, tested through the Army's [Transforming in Contact](#) modernization initiative, ensures that every Army company will be able to employ weapons systems that can compete on the modern battlefield.

Without the Army's capacity for theater-wide logistics, long-range fires, and command and control for distributed forces, the U.S. military cannot sustain a major combat operation, let alone win one. Though Iraq- and Afghanistan-scale deployments have wound down, Army units have [taken on additional missions](#) at the nation's southern border; [trained and equipped Ukrainians](#) to defend Europe's eastern flank; and, most recently, [generated a steady volume of fire](#) supporting the U.S. campaign in Iran. These operations continue, even as the Army is transforming its major weapons systems and fighting formations to reflect new technological and geopolitical realities.

Resource limitations continue to impede what the Army can do, how well and how quickly. During the Biden administration, [the Army's base budget](#) fell by about 10 percent in real terms, and the service [missed recruiting targets](#) multiple years in a row. Even with the welcome funding relief after President Donald Trump's return to office, the Army has lagged behind other military services in the scale relative to budget baselines — especially in the crucial areas of weapons procurement and modernization.

Still, Army leadership — helmed by Secretary Dan Driscoll and Undersecretary Mike Obadal — is making optimal use of the resources it does have to reshape the Army's operating model and signature weapons systems. Modernization priorities originating in Trump's first term are now reaching operational maturity. Land-based variants of Tomahawk and SM-series missiles will give commanders strike options that do not depend on total control of air or sea. Of all U.S. military exercises, it was the Army's [firing of these missiles](#) in the Philippines that prompted the most energetic Chinese government protests.

Another success story is a tank prototype unveiled earlier this year. Called the [M-1E3 Abrams](#), it may look, move and fire like a traditional main battle tank. But its guts and brains are fully digital: an open-systems architecture that allows for rapid insertion of

new capabilities — hardware and software — to account for changing conditions, technologies and adversary weapons. The M-1E3, with an unmanned gun turret and a hybrid engine, will weigh up to 30 percent less than the venerable Cold War-era Abrams tank it will replace.

As the Army develops combat systems, the whole must be greater than the sum of the parts. The Next Generation Command and Control, or NGC2, is the connective tissue of this effort. Developed alongside the commercial software sector, NGC2 is a hardware-agnostic, AI-powered data layer that allows a division commander to see a battlefield on a single pane of glass, integrating drone feeds, electronic warfare actions and logistics in real time.

The character of warfare is changing through technology. But its fundamental nature is not. Borders and populations still matter, as do synchronized fire, maneuvering and logistics. To realize the potential of the Army's initiatives, the Defense Department and Congress must prioritize Army investments and support its service leaders as they confront obstacles, whether budgetary, bureaucratic or political.

Because the history is clear: Time and again, the United States has declared "never again" to large-scale land wars — only to find itself unprepared for the next ground campaign.