THE DEFENSE-READY SERIES · SPECIAL FEATURE

The Hollow Middle

The defense industrial base has built a mature market for getting compliant — and left a void where the decision to enter should be.

By Jerold Hawkins — Founder & Principal Advisor, Summit Line Federal Solutions, LLC

The defense industrial base is contracting at exactly the moment the country is trying to grow it. By analyses tied to the National Defense Industrial Strategy, the number of small businesses in the defense industrial base has fallen by roughly 43 percent over the past decade — even as national policy works to pull commercial manufacturers in. Small firms are 99.9 percent of American businesses but win only about a quarter of the Department's prime contracts. The doorway is wide. Remarkably few walk through it and stay.

For a commercial manufacturer weighing that doorway, the decision is enormous and largely irreversible — capital, certifications, cultural change, years of runway. And yet it is the one part of the journey almost no one is built to advise. The moment a company decides to enter, an entire market appears to help it. Before it decides, there is mostly silence.

The market that forms after you say yes

Once a manufacturer commits to defense, a mature, well-capitalized services market is waiting. Cybersecurity compliance alone is a case study: by industry estimates, the market for CMMC consulting was worth roughly $1.94 billion in 2025 and is projected near $2.04 billion in 2026, served by a crowded field of assessors, registered practitioners, and platform vendors reaching a base of hundreds of thousands of affected firms. Certification has its own formal accreditation ecosystem. Supplier-risk and performance monitoring has grown into a category of enterprise platforms. It is a real, functioning market — and every dollar of it assumes the decision has already been made. These are services for companies that are in, not for companies deciding whether to be.

Two doors, and a gap between them

Upstream — before the commitment — help does exist, but only at the two extremes.

At one end is genuinely good free counsel. The APEX Accelerators, a Department of Defense–funded network of roughly ninety-five centers formerly known as PTACs, will help any business navigate registration, certifications, and bid opportunities at no cost — including companies still deciding whether government work makes sense at all. It is a real public good. It is also, by design, generalist: it teaches a company how to transact with the government, not whether its shop floor, its books, and its quality system are ready to survive a prime's scrutiny in defense specifically.

At the other end is elite strategy. Firms like Strategy& will size a defense market, map its value chain, and identify entry avenues; the broader aerospace-and-defense consulting field is led by names like McKinsey, Bain, Deloitte, and Accenture. That work is rigorous — and it is built for primes, corporates, and private-equity sponsors, priced accordingly. A single-plant manufacturer in Michigan is not the client.

Between the free generalist and the six-figure strategist sits the company that actually needs the answer — and almost nothing built to give it one.

Why the middle stays hollow

The reason is incentives. Nearly every party a manufacturer meets on the way into defense is paid *after* the commitment: the compliance consultant, the certification body, the capture shop, the parts supplier hoping to sell it something. None of them profits from saying “not yet,” or “not you.” The structural bias of the entire ecosystem points one direction — toward yes. One new entrant recently described the defense-buying process as surprisingly difficult, saying they couldn’t imagine a company surviving it without an expert holding their hand. The hand-holding that exists mostly begins after the check is written. An honest read on whether to write that check has almost no natural seller.

What the decision actually deserves

The decision is not a leap of faith; it is a diagnosable question. A manufacturer can be measured, before it invests, against the very gates a prime or program office will later apply — cost accounting and proposal readiness, cybersecurity posture, traceability and configuration control, program execution, financial capacity, purchasing-system discipline, regulatory compliance, and visibility into its own supply base. Those fronts are knowable. What they require is someone willing to assess them early, honestly, and against the real standard — with nothing to sell but the answer.

That is the entire premise of the Defense Expansion Pathway™: a structured, scored read on defense readiness, delivered before the capital is committed, by a firm that does not supply parts and does not certify compliance. We are not paid to move a company toward yes. We are paid to tell it the truth while the truth can still change the decision.

The market is crowded on one side of the decision and empty on the other. The empty side is where the money is actually won or lost.

Jerold Hawkins is a U.S. Army veteran with 16 years of automotive industry experience, culminating as an Executive Director of Global Supply Chain Management before founding Summit Line Federal Solutions, LLC, an SBA-certified Veteran-Owned Small Business and Michigan-based defense and aerospace industrial-base advisory firm where he serves as Principal Advisor. He developed the Defense Expansion Pathway™ (DXP™), an AI-powered, eight-domain supplier-readiness assessment built to help manufacturers honestly measure — and close — the gap between commercial and defense work. He is completing MIT’s executive program in AI Strategy and Leadership.

Michigan manufacturers can take the complimentary DXP™ readiness screener and get an instant eight-domain snapshot at summitlinefederal.com.