Conference Program

Defense Investment Forum (DIF) '26

Ensuring Maritime Supremacy Through Innovation



October 27-28, 2026

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Welcome

Defense Investment Forum (DIF) ’26

Ensuring Maritime Supremacy Through Innovation

The Defense Investment Forum (DIF) ’26 is dedicated to exploring geopolitical developments, emerging technologies, and capital trends shaping the future of maritime defense. Bringing together investors, naval and maritime industry leaders, government stakeholders, founders, and strategic partners, the forum serves as a platform for high-level discussion on emerging opportunities across autonomous systems, subsea technologies, maritime cybersecurity, dual-use innovation, ocean surveillance, resilient supply chains, and next-generation defense infrastructure.

We look forward to seeing you!

Tobias (Toby) Stapleton, PhD, Co-Founder

Agenda

DIF '26 Opening Event and Welcome Reception

October 27, 2:00 PM - 6:00 PM
University of Rhode Island (URI) Bay Campus
215 South Ferry Road, Narragansett, RI

The URI Bay Campus is home to URI's highly acclaimed Department of Ocean Engineering and the Graduate School of Oceanography providing multiple opportunities to partner with faculty and students. The newly opened 32,000-square foot Ocean Robotics Laboratory (ORL) is a shared facility designed to develop, test and deploy next-generation maritime technologies while the recently renovated Pier provides access for in-water field testing and validation.

The campus is also home to the Ocean Technology Center, a 10,000- square foot business incubator and entrepreneurship hub.

Join us for a fireside chat, take a tour and wrap up the afternoon with a networking reception all while exploring ways to collaborate with the University of Rhode Island's research and innovation community—from research partnerships and technology licensing to access to specialized facilities.

Agenda

2:00 PM – **2:15** PM	**Networking**
2:15 PM – **2:30** PM	**Welcome Remarks** Pete Rumsey, Executive Director, URI Research Foundation
2:30 PM – **3:30** PM	**Fireside Chat, tech commercialization at URI.**
3:30 PM – **4:30** PM	**Tour of URI Marine Robotics Laboratory and the Ocean Technology Center**
4:30 PM – **6:00** PM	**Networking Reception**

Defense Investment Forum (DIF) '26

October 28, 2026, 8:00 AM - 6:30 PM
Wyndham Newport Hotel
240 Aquidneck Avenue, Middletown, RI

Agenda

8:00 AM – **9:0** AM	**Registration & Networking Breakfast**
9:00 AM – **9:10** AM	**Welcome Remarks & Conference Overview** Toby Stapleton, PhD, Director, Blue Venture Forum, Inc. Molly Magee, CEO, Undersea Technology Innovation Consortium (UTIC)
9:10 AM – **9:30** AM	**Opening Keynote** US Senator Jack Reed, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Armed Services
9:30 AM – **10:00** AM	**Speaker: The New Era of Maritime Competition** This talk will explore how geopolitical rivalry, contested sea lanes, and rapid technological change are reshaping naval strategy and investment priorities. **Speaker:** Gloria Berlanga, Associate Vice President, Business Development, Defense Sector, Rhode Island Commerce

10:00 AM **– 10:45** AM **Panel Discussion: Below the Surface and Beyond the Norm: How Evolving Maritime Threats are Accelerating Ocean Tech Innovation**

Panel Description:

National security challenges in the global commons are shifting faster than traditional naval procurement can handle. This panel explores the urgent geopolitical pressures that are forcing a new era of maritime defense. Panelists will discuss how these acute threats are driving rapid dual-use innovation and attendees will learn how military-industry partnerships are pivoting to deploy scalable, attritable tech before adversarial capabilities outpace our situational awareness.

Moderator:

- Gloria Berlanga, Associate Vice President, Business Development, Defense Sector, Rhode Island Commerce Corporation

Panelists:

- Commander David Brannighan, Royal Navy, British Defence Staff USA
- James R. Holmes, PhD, Wylie Chair of Maritime Strategy, US Naval War College
- Vic Ricci, Principal Director, USW Innovation and Strategic Alliances, Naval Undersea Warfare Center (NUWC) Newport
- Chris Weeks, Director of Programs, Saab, Inc.

10:45 AM **– 11:15** AM **Networking Break & Exhibit Hall Demos**

11:15 AM **– 12:00** PM **Panel Discussion: Rebuilding the Naval Industrial Base**

Panel Description

Naval readiness increasingly depends on the resilience and scalability of the industrial base. This panel examines how our Navy can modernize maritime production capabilities while addressing workforce shortages, supply chain vulnerabilities, and aging infrastructure.

Moderator: Nate Walton, Principal, Sachem Strategies & Chair, Blue Venture Forum Board of Directors

Panelists:

- Dr. Aaron Birt, CEO, Solvus Global
- Andrew Bond, Executive Director, Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology (CCAT)
- John Griffin, VP Defense Strategy and Growth, Edison Chouset Offshore Companies

12:00 PM **– 1:00** PM **Networking Lunch**

1:00 PM **– 1:15** PM **Keynote**

US Congressman Gabe Amo, Vice Ranking Member, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, House Committee on the Budget

1:15 PM **– 2:00** PM **Panel Discussion: Dual-Use Innovation: Bridging Commercial and Defense**

Panel Description

Commercial technology companies are increasingly shaping the future of defense capability. This conversation explores how startups can successfully transition from commercial markets into national security applications while navigating procurement complexity, regulatory constraints, and operational requirements.

Moderator: Abbey Fabian, Strategic Technology Teaming and Transitions Lead, Raytheon, an RTX Company

Panelists:

- Leslie-Ann McGee, Chief Innovation Officer, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI)
- Nick Rotker, Chief BlueTech Strategist, MITRE
- Pete Rumsey, Associate Vice President, Economic Development Innovation & Entrepreneurship

2:00 PM **— 2:40** PM — **Flashtalk Presentations**

Select startups will present their breakthrough technologies addressing naval operations, logistics, ISR, cyber defense, and autonomous systems.

2:40 PM **— 3:00** PM — **Networking Break**

3:00 PM **— 3:45** PM — **Panel Discussion: Where Defense Capital Is Moving**

Panel Description

Investors across venture capital, private equity, sovereign wealth, and institutional finance are rapidly increasing exposure to defense and strategic technologies. This session provides a market-level view of where capital is flowing, valuation trends, and which sectors are attracting the strongest interest.

Moderator: Hope Hopkins, Executive Director, New England Venture Capital Association & Vice Chair, Blue Venture Forum Board of Directors

Panelists:

- Kyle Asman, Managing Partner, Backswing Ventures
- Max Conway, Partner, Dyne Ventures
- Ryan Musto, Principal, 8090 Ventures

3:45 PM **— 4:30** PM — **Winning the Innovation Race at Sea**

Session Description

This discussion will synthesize the day's themes into a roadmap for maintaining maritime superiority through technology, industrial strength, and strategic capital deployment.

It will focus on accelerating defense adoption cycles, strengthening allied innovation ecosystems, and building resilient maritime capabilities for the next decade.

Moderator: Lee Silvestre, Senior Principal, Venture Frontiers

Panelists:

- Michelle Estaphan Owen, Ocean Engineer, Naval Undersea Warfare Center (NUWC) Newport
- Trevor Kelly-Bissonnette, Director, International Cooperation at NAVSEA Warfare Centers (NSWC/NUWC) (Ret.)

4:30 PM **— 5:15** PM — **The Importance of Innovation to the Fleet**

The closing remarks will highlight the importance and power of innovation from the submarine fleet perspective and why it matters.

Speaker: Captain Kevin Behm, Commanding Officer, Naval Undersea Warfare Center (NUWC) Division Newport

5:15 PM **— 6:30** PM — **Cocktail Reception & Tech Mixer**

Thank You
To Our Speakers and Moderators



Congressman Gabe Amo has spent most of his career in public service in Rhode Island and Washington, D.C. In the Biden White House, he served as Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, where he worked as the principal liaison to mayors and local elected officials. In that role, he connected state and local leaders across the country with the federal resources made available to them through historic legislation like the American Rescue Plan, Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and Inflation Reduction Act. He also coordinated responses to major national crises including gun violence, extreme weather, and public health emergencies.

Previously, Congressman Amo was the Director of Public Engagement and Community Affairs for former Governor Gina Raimondo. He served as Raimondo's principal advisor to Rhode Island's cities and towns, business, labor, advocacy, and faith communities. Earlier in his career, he served in the Office of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs for President Barack Obama as a liaison to governors and state government officials.

Congressman Amo is a native of Pawtucket, Rhode Island and the son of two parents from West Africa – his mother is originally from Liberia and father is originally from Ghana. As the son of a mother who is a nurse and a father who owns a liquor store, he understands what it is like to grow up in a working class family. His story is one that is familiar to many in Rhode Island: one of hard work, resilience, grit, and determination.

Congressman Amo graduated from Moses Brown School in Providence, Rhode Island. He later graduated with a B.A. in Political Science from Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa, where he was President of the Student Government Association and named a Truman Scholar. After college, he received a Marshall Scholarship to study at the University of Oxford. Congressman Amo's professional and personal experiences have ensured that he is ready to deliver for the people of Rhode Island's First Congressional District. He is focused on representing all of the diverse communities in our district and taking on priorities including: strengthening retirement security for our seniors, ending gun violence, ensuring resilience to climate change, securing reproductive freedom, and protecting our democracy. Congressman Amo is committed to fighting for federal policies and resources that elevate economic opportunities for the working families in the First District and support job creation in the supply chains of the future.



Kyle Asman founded Backswing Ventures in 2020 and serves as the firm's Managing Partner, leading its investment strategy, portfolio management, fundraising, and investment selection. He works closely with portfolio companies to leverage Backswing's network across the defense ecosystem, creating strategic partnerships and contracting opportunities, while overseeing the firm's liquidity strategy by pursuing secondary and other exit opportunities designed to generate returns well before the traditional venture capital timeline. Prior to founding Backswing, Kyle co-founded BX3 Capital, a boutique investment bank focused on capital raising and strategic advisory for early-stage companies, and held roles at several major investment banks. He holds a bachelor's degree from Arcadia University and is an avid golfer and skier.



Captain Kevin Behm was appointed as commanding officer of NUWC Division Newport on Sept. 3, 2025.

A native of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, he graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 2004 with a degree in electrical engineering and holds a master's degree in electrical engineering from the University of Pennsylvania.

His sea tours include division officer assignments onboard USS Oklahoma City (SSN 723), Engineer Officer onboard USS Georgia (SSGN 729) (Blue) and USS Florida (SSGN 728) (Gold), and Executive Officer onboard USS New Hampshire (SSN 778). He commanded the USS Hartford (SSN 768),

where his crew earned the Commander, Submarine Force Atlantic (COMSUBLANT) Shipyard Readiness Battle "E" and Hugh McCracken Leadership Award for the top performing Chiefs Mess in the Atlantic fleet.

Ashore, he served as a shift engineer at Nuclear Power Training Unit, Ballston Spa, a Junior Board member on the Pacific Fleet Nuclear Propulsion Examination Board, and as the Chief of Operations for the Office of Stockpile Sustainment at the National Nuclear Security Administration.



Gloria Berlanga Associate Vice President, Business Development – Defense Sector
She serves as Commerce Corporation's ambassador to businesses within Rhode Island's robust defense community. She provides concierge service to defense sector companies by understanding needs, supporting growth and expansion and educating all stakeholders on business opportunities in Rhode Island. Gloria also enhances stakeholder relationships with external partners, from the Congressional Delegation to Federal Agencies, to grow business opportunities and support overall business growth.

Professional Background
Gloria is a combat veteran and retired U.S. Army Officer with 34 years of service. Most recently, Gloria served as the Chief of Staff and Chief of Joint Staff, Rhode Island Army National Guard (2019-2024). In this capacity, Gloria was the full-time Army lead, coordinating staff action and focusing efforts of over 400 full-time personnel to support Soldiers and deployments in support of federal and state missions. Gloria currently served as the National Chairman of the Chiefs' of Staff Advisory Council and principal advisor to the Army Chief of Staff at National Guard Bureau.

Education
Gloria holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature from Wheaton College and a Master of Arts Degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the United States Naval War College. She is a graduate of Yale University School of Management's Global Executive Leadership Program (2020). Last June, Gloria became a graduate from the Said Business School, University of Oxford, with a Diploma in Organizational Leadership.



Dr. Birt is a leading expert in various fields of machine learning, materials, and manufacturing with a passion for using technology to develop solutions to critical problems faced around the globe. Today his energies are focused on building the Solvus team to tackle key challenges in the field of advanced manufacturing. Aaron's passion and commitment to driving technical solutions into real-world commercial applications is the underlying foundation of Solvus Global itself.

With a focus on growing people and solving challenges, Aaron is devoted to making Solvus Global a place where top engineers, thinkers, and creatives can come together to fulfill their own ambitious goals. While completing his PhD at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Aaron formed two companies (Kinetic Batteries & EventTree) from which he learned a great deal about team building, business development, sales, and communication. Since that time Aaron has grown

Solvus from the ground up through the Covid-19 pandemic from 20 employees to over 90 employees in 2024. Through the work of Aaron and his co-founders Sean Kelly and Diran Apelian, they have had Solvus be recognized on Inc. 5000 (#293), SBA Manufacturer of the Year, and WBJ Rising Star in Manufacturing. When he's not in the office or laboratory, Aaron can be found exploring our great globe with his talented wife, Sarah.



Trevor Kelly-Bissonnette, Director, International Cooperation at NAVSEA Warfare Centers (NSWC/NUWC) (Ret.) In that role, she was responsible for the leadership and oversight of the warfare center's international and security assistant programs since 2020.

(Prior posts include a long tenure (30+ years) working national and international Test and Evaluation, including leadership of the NATO FORACS (Naval Forces Weapons and Accuracy Check Sites) Project with three test ranges in operation (Greece, Norway, and one affiliated in United States) and a project office located at NATO HQ, in Brussels.)



Andrew Bond is Executive Director of the Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology (CCAT), where he leads strategic initiatives and supports organizational growth. He brings more than 25 years of experience in engineering, shipbuilding, and the defense industrial base, including serving as Vice President of Planning at General Dynamics Electric Boat. His leadership extends to statewide industry and workforce development initiatives, and he currently serves on the Board of ReadyCT. Andrew holds degrees from Webb Institute and MIT.



Commander David Brannighan, having Joined the Royal Navy in 2006, is a career Warfare Officer with a broad range of operational experience across seagoing and shore appointments. His early career saw tours on the Trafalgar Class SSNs HMS TURBULENT and HMS TORBAY, focused on operations in both the North Atlantic and East of Suez/Indian Ocean. He then completed two WESTLANT deployments as the Navigating Officer of HMS ASTUTE, progressing the platform through trials to operational readiness, before switching to the SSBN HMS VICTORIOUS, where he spent three years as the Operations Officer planning and executing strategic deterrence patrols. In a departure from the standard warfare career pipeline, in 2017 Dave was seconded to the Royal Household as Equerry and Chief of Staff to HRH Prince William, now HRH The Prince of Wales. Returning to the RN in 2021, he was appointed to J3 Joint Effects at Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) Northwood, where he led the Tomahawk Strike Cell at CMSA UK, before being appointed as the UK Executive Officer of Theater Undersea Surveillance Command Atlantic (TUSC LANT) in November 2023. Selected for promotion in 2024, Dave assumed his present role as Staff Officer Submarines within the British Embassy in July 2025. Married to Eva, an accountant, he has three children, Lucie (12), Harry (10), and Juliet (7), and one very energetic Golden Retriever!



Max Conway is a seasoned venture capital investor with a focus on early-stage transactions across defense, aerospace, manufacturing, and adjacent sectors. He currently serves as General Partner at DYNE Ventures, an early-stage firm backing founders at the intersection of national security, defense, and the maritime domain, and as Founding Partner of Hydra Group, a privately held investment firm with focused expertise across manufacturing, defense, and advanced technology. Max also sits on the Board of Directors for LumiTerra, an early-stage manufacturing business, Island Health Care, a federally qualified community health center in Martha's Vineyard, and the Vineyard Preservation Trust, a nonprofit that restores and maintains 20 historic landmarks on Martha's Vineyard to preserve the island's cultural heritage for future generations. Prior to his current roles, Max was a Partner at Industrious Ventures, an early-stage venture capital firm investing in reindustrialization with an emphasis on aerospace and defense. Earlier in his career, he served as Head of Business Development at AGC Partners, a boutique investment bank focused exclusively on technology companies. He holds a B.S. in Management from Tulane University's A.B. Freeman School of Business.



Abigail Fabian, Effectors Lead, Technology Teaming & Transitions

Abigail is the Effectors Portfolio Lead of Technology Teaming and Transitions for Raytheon, an RTX Corporation. In this role, she delivers discriminating capabilities to key defense programs. She works at the intersection of industry, government, and emerging technology by forging strategic partnerships, aligning stakeholders and leading technology transitions that deliver operational value.

Fabian is a versatile leader who has successfully led undersea and defense programs beyond this field. She is an innovator that was the principal investigator for several undersea acoustic/signal processing research and development projects.

Fabian earned a Master of Science in Electrical Engineering and a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Her graduate research focused on implementing biologically inspired search algorithms.

She is the President of WID Greater Boston Chapter, a National Defense Industrial Association Affiliate, and has received the 2025 Chapter of Excellence Award on behalf of her board. She is a keynote speaker on technology and professional development as well as an active volunteer for STEM initiatives in her community.



Dr. John F. Griffin currently serves as Vice President for Defense Strategy and Growth at Edison Chouest Offshore (ECO), the nation's largest privately owned shipbuilder and fully integrated marine services provider. In this role, he is helping ECO expand from its traditional energy-support markets in oil, gas, and offshore wind into the defense sector, with a particular focus on the development of an autonomous fleet of mid-sized vessels exceeding 200 feet.

John retired from the U.S. Marine Corps after a distinguished career as an infantry officer, commanding at every level through battalion. He served as an infantry and light armored reconnaissance officer, a Middle East-North Africa Regional Affairs Officer, and within the special operations community. His operational assignments included Operation Restore Hope in Somalia; Operation Southern Watch in the Arabian Gulf; Joint Task Force 160 at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; Operation Iraqi Freedom, including the Battle of Fallujah; and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Israel. Following his retirement from the Marine Corps, John joined the U.S. Naval War College as an assistant professor, where he co-founded a research and education center focused on information warfare for U.S. and international officers. He later served as the National Security Innovation Network Regional Engagement Principal for Boston, with responsibilities across New England. He subsequently joined the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU), where he served as Strategic Advisor and Government Engagement Lead for the Autonomy Portfolio while also leading DIU's Boston and New England activities.

John's extensive civilian education includes a BA in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts Boston; an MPA in Public Management from Troy University; an MMS in Military Science from Marine Corps University; an ALM in Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University; and an EdD in Organizational Leadership from Northeastern University. His doctoral dissertation focused on artificial intelligence education and training for senior organizational leaders. His military education includes resident selection at every level of Professional Military Education.

In addition to his professional work, John serves as an Assistant Field Hockey Coach at Harvard University and with the Team USA U18 Junior National Field Hockey Team. John is a strong advocate for veteran education and is active in local ministries.

John has been married to Jean Marie Sasso of Revere, Massachusetts, since 1997. They have two children, John "Jack" Griffin and Abigail "Abby" Griffin, and an Icelandic Sheepdog named Reyki.



James Holmes;
Professor, Naval War College

James Holmes holds the J. C. Wylie Chair of Maritime Strategy at the Naval War College and served on the faculty of the University of Georgia School of Public and International Affairs. A former U.S. Navy surface-warfare officer, he was the last gunnery officer in history to fire a battleship's big guns in anger, during the first Gulf War in 1991. He earned the Naval War College Foundation Award in 1994, signifying the top graduate in his class. His books include Red Star over the Pacific, an Atlantic Monthly Best Book of 2010 and a fixture on the Navy Professional Reading List. General James Mattis deems him "troublesome."



Molly Donohue Magee serves as Chief Executive Officer of the Undersea Technology Innovation Consortium (UTIC), the nonprofit organization she founded to accelerate undersea technology innovation, research, and workforce development. Under her leadership, UTIC manages the Department of the Navy's Undersea and Maritime Technology Innovation Other Transaction Agreement, providing a collaborative environment where the government, industry, and academia can communicate, innovate, and prototype solutions meeting Navy mission needs.

She recently concluded her concurrent role as CEO of SENEDIA, the alliance for Defense Tech, Talent, and Innovation. During her tenure, she advanced major economic and workforce development initiatives and launched SENEDIA's nationally recognized annual event, Defense Innovation Days, as well as the original BuildSubmarines.com platform.

Her career began at the Naval Undersea Warfare Center in Newport, RI, a billion dollar Department of the Navy research and development enterprise, where she spent three decades in roles of increasing responsibility. She led product assurance engineering for submarine systems before moving into senior leadership, ultimately serving as Director of Corporate Operations and Chief Financial Officer.



Leslie-Ann McGee is the Chief Innovation Officer and leads the WHOI Strategic Hub for Innovation and Partnerships. Ms. McGee served as the Director of Coastal Zone Management for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Director of Programs for the World Ocean Council, Director of Ocean and Coastal Solutions at Battelle Memorial Institute. She has held state and federal positions with NOAA, the New England Fishery Management Council and the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game. Ms. McGee is a graduate of the University of Colorado at Boulder and Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment. She conducted her graduate research on Bluefin Tuna at the New England Aquarium. She serves as a Commissioner on the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, the Silver Lake Regional School Committee and is a Board Member of the Marine & Oceanographic Technology Society and the Marine Technology Society's New England Chapter.

Education

University of Massachusetts at Amherst, M.B.A. 2025 Duke University, Nicholas School of the Environment, M.E.M., 1996 University of Colorado at Boulder, Geography, B.A., 1993 Project Management Professional (PMP), Project Management Institute, 2019



Ryan Musto is a Principal at 8090 Industries, where he focuses on investments across defense, maritime dual-use, advanced manufacturing, and critical infrastructure. Prior to joining 8090, Ryan was a Principal at Alumni Ventures, where he led investments across DefenseTech and HardTech, with a focus on maritime technologies, critical minerals, and supply chain resilience. Ryan holds an M.Sc. with Distinction from the University of Oxford and a B.A. from Cornell University. He is an Associate Member of The Economic Club of New York, speaks Arabic fluently, and has published on defense and industrial policy.



Michelle K. Estaphan Owen currently serves as the Chief Accountability Officer for the Experimental Payload Group (EPG), the Navy's premier AUV (Autonomous Underwater Vehicles) technology development and operations team primarily focused on full ocean depth AUVs providing increased endurance, range, and payload capabilities for the Navy. Michelle has been in technical leadership roles for AUV projects since joining NUWCDIVNPT in October 2016. Her expertise in AUV prototype development includes working with our industry partners for PMS394, ONR, DARPA, SCO, DIU and the USMC/MCWL. Michelle has actively sponsored multiple NIUVT and NISE projects, as well as working with URI and UMASS Dartmouth on subsea robotics.

Prior to joining NUWCDIVNPT, Michelle led various research teams advancing subsea robotics technologies and capabilities. As a Technical Program Manager for Shell TechWorks (STW) in Cambridge, MA she led two AUV Leak Detection projects, introducing advanced sensors suites that were new to the oil and gas industry. Prior to STW, Michelle was a Program Manager at Bluefin Robotics, leading multiple integrated product development teams through the full product lifecycle, including a DARPA program that successfully developed and deployed the deepest rated, free flooded, AUV with a variable buoyancy system. Michelle grew her technical and leadership skills as a Principal Electrical Engineer at Raytheon, Integrated Defense Systems in multiple roles. While at Raytheon, Michelle was the lead Systems Engineer for multiple domestic and international subsea programs, working teams in Seattle, London, UK and an in-country deployment to Adelaide, Australia.



Jack Reed is a United States Senator representing the state of Rhode Island. Senator Reed grew up in Cranston, Rhode Island and went on to attend West Point Military Academy, where he earned a degree in engineering. After serving in the U.S. Army for several years, Reed earned a law degree from Harvard Law School and worked as an attorney before entering politics. He was first elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1990, and then to the Senate in 1996, where he has served ever since. Known for his work on military and national security issues, Reed has also been an advocate for affordable housing, education, and healthcare reform. He currently serves as the Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and is a member of several other committees, including the Appropriations Committee and the Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee.



Nick Rotker is MITRE's Chief BlueTech Strategist and Cross-Cutting BlueTech Director within MITRE Labs. He leads MITRE's efforts to solve big challenges in the BlueTech space, including internal R&D, partnerships, and government work programs. He has experience developing and leading solutions in underwater acoustics, SONAR, signal processing, algorithm development, and distributed sensing systems. Nick facilitates maritime innovation-related collaboration across the government, industry, and academic stakeholders, and provides connection and mentorship to early-state entrepreneurs looking to accelerate the nation's Blue Economy.

Nick has been instrumental in growing MITRE's presence as a connector within the Blue Economy by increasing access to testing infrastructure through the design and construction of the MITRE BlueTech Lab. As well as accelerating collaboration across industry, academia, and government through the roll out of the MITRE BlueNERVE regional connectivity initiative enabling real time data and lab sharing between geographically distributed institutions. Both activities have provided huge impact to Northeast and enabled the BlueTech ecosystem in the region to thrive. Through these initiatives Nick has also spent time growing awareness and future workforce opportunities within the Blue Economy by leading several Highschool and STEM programs. Nick and the MITRE team built and ran an annual BlueTech Highschool Summer camp partnered with MassRobotics. He also enabled a teacher workshop partnered with Marine Technology Society (MTS) MateROV through a MassTech Collaborative grant which hosted 35 Massachusetts teachers to learn and join the MateROV high school competition program.

Nick is currently an executive board member of TMA BlueTech and former board member of the New England Chapter (Chair) of the Marine Technology Society (MTS). Prior to MITRE, Nick worked as an Acoustic Research Scientist at Scientific Solutions, Inc. He holds a B.S. in Electrical Engineering from the University of Vermont and a M.S. in Electrical Engineering from Tufts University.



Pete Rumsey is the AVP for Economic Development, Innovation & Entrepreneurship as well as the Operations Director for URI Innovations University of Rhode Island (URI). He focuses in both capacities to accelerate the translation of research, IP, and know-how into cutting edge innovations and high growth ventures. With more than 30 years of proven experience as a serial entrepreneur and executive across early-stage startups and Fortune 1000 companies, he specializes in power systems, information technologies, and "green & blue" tech. Pete actively bridges academia, government, and industry by leading major ocean tech initiatives to include the Office of Naval Research (ONR) funded RISE-UP program as well as the RI Grow Blue partnership. A recipient of the PBN Career Achievement Award, he is also a decorated former U.S. Air Force intelligence officer, chairman emeritus of Leadership Rhode Island, co-chair of RIHub, and holds an engineering degree from Cornell University alongside executive credentials from Stanford and Harvard.



Lee A. Silvestre has decades of experience supporting Defense and commercial markets through technology development and transition, programmatic execution, and strategy formation, particularly focused on multiple-use, multi-mission applications. In early 2026 she launched Venture Frontiers where Lee brings her years of experience helping ventures to develop, evolve, and thrive in the blue tech world evolving from early stage to sustained, robust businesses. She partners with early stage and dual use companies that are looking to evolve their business in the blue tech space and explore opportunities across maritime commercial and defense applications. This recent role has allowed a heightened focus and priority to the evolving companies, business entities, and investment opportunities in the North Atlantic region.

As the NavalX North Atlantic Tech Hub Director, Lee worked with entrepreneurs, small businesses and academia, blue tech industry members, high tech investors, as well as nontraditional defense companies and large system integrators to identify, accelerate, and expose unique and dual-use technology solutions that contribute to Naval missions and pressing needs of national security and the blue tech/ocean sector. This Navy regional tech hub was a partner in the Defense Innovation Unit's East Coast Defense Innovation Community of Entities (DICE) team, and partnered with DIU, Air Force, Space Force, Army, Academic, and community teammates to address pressing national security needs, engaging the nontraditional commercial sector.

Previously she worked to stand up and subsequently manage the Undersea Technology Innovation Consortium, a national organization awarded the Navy's undersea technology OTA (Other Transaction Agreement) focused on undersea and maritime technology prototype efforts. Prior to this, Lee was one of five senior entrepreneurial leaders that established a new business in high tech light and color technology. Earlier, Lee served in various senior leadership roles in the $6.2B Integrated Defense Systems Raytheon Business where Lee was Vice President, Mission Innovation, the group chartered with identifying dual-use, high growth applications for Raytheon's defense technologies. Lee's early career experience with KPMG Peat Marwick embedded her professionally within the maritime defense community where her efforts addressing issues of National Defense and the intersection of technology and mission needs became a passion.

With degrees in Applied Mathematics and Operations Research, Lee is leveraging her innovation and business transformation experience within the high-tech community to transition technologies and solutions into meaningful applications that address critical mission needs.



Toby Stapleton is an internationally recognized expert in blue technology, marine innovation, and ocean entrepreneurship, Dr. Tobias (Toby) serves as the Director of the Blue Venture Forum. In this role, he delivers programming, matchmaking, and mentorship to startups, investors, and policymakers. With deep expertise spanning ocean technology commercialization, maritime sustainability, coastal resilience, aquaculture, offshore energy, and venture development, Toby has worked extensively with founders to launch and scale high-impact blue tech companies while helping investment groups to identify emerging opportunities across the sector.

Through leadership in connecting research institutions, industry, and investors, Toby fosters the sustainable economic growth of ocean and coastal industries. Toby is also an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Decision & Information Sciences Department at UMass Dartmouth's Charlton College of Business.



Chris Weeks is an accomplished maritime, defense, and undersea technology executive with more than 20 years of experience spanning program leadership, unmanned and autonomous systems, undersea weapons systems, strategic business development, and international markets.

Chris has held senior program and business leadership roles at Bluefin Robotics, Ultra Maritime, and Saab, Inc.'s Autonomous and Undersea Systems Division. Throughout his career, he has successfully led complex technology programs, strategic captures, and major U.S. and international business opportunities. He has managed approximately $150 million in direct P&L and led multi-hundred-million-dollar strategic captures. He has a proven track record of driving program execution, exceeding customer expectations, and leveraging organizational resources to deliver mission-critical capabilities while maximizing profitability and customer value.

At Saab, Chris advances undersea autonomy and defense capabilities through diligent program execution, strategic business development, technology integration, and international collaboration. Working closely with Saab's Swedish Underwater Systems organization, he plays a key role in translating global technologies and capabilities into executable business opportunities and innovative solutions for U.S. defense customers.

Chris began his career as the owner and operator of a maritime business before transitioning into subsea defense program management and technology leadership. This progression has provided him with a distinctive combination of hands-on maritime experience, technical expertise, customer insight, and commercial discipline. His career reflects a consistent focus on building businesses, fostering strategic partnerships, and delivering advanced undersea capabilities to meet evolving defense requirements.

Chris holds a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Engineering from Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

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