Can Drones Save Detroit?

written by Jack Lifton | November 27, 2026

Detroit became the Arsenal of Democracy during the Second World War because it was, at the time, the center of the largest manufacturing industry of its kind in world history. The American OEM automotive industry had developed not only mass-production techniques but also the management of the enormous, complex supply chains needed to sustain mass production. In my view, this latter capability made the American automotive industry's contribution to the Allied victory possible.

I wonder whether the apparent coming transformation of warfare in the twenty-first century may offer the American OEM automotive industry an opportunity to once again become the Arsenal of Democracy and, in doing so, perhaps ensure its own commercial survival.

InvestorNews DYK Facts | *One bomber every 63 minutes*

In April 1944, Ford's Willow Run workforce produced **453 B-24 bombers in 468 production hours**, equivalent to one completed aircraft every 63 minutes, according to The Henry Ford's archival history. Chrysler's Detroit Arsenal, in present-day Warren, built **22,234 tanks during the Second World War**, according to the Archives of Michigan. Detroit's wartime achievement was the conversion of existing industrial knowledge into repeatable production.

The weapons of the Second World War that were amenable to mass production, such as tanks, aircraft, trucks, machine guns, artillery, and naval rifles, required relatively few critical raw materials compared with their modern equivalents. Although aluminum, copper, nickel, chromium, tungsten, and magnesium were strategically important, military production required substantially fewer materials than it does today. Sophisticated

electronics, although increasingly important in applications such as radar, communications, and fire control, constituted a relatively small portion of the total material requirements for mass-produced military equipment.

The situation today is dramatically different. What appears to be an accelerating transformation of ground warfare into combat increasingly dominated by unmanned systems, and in particular by drones, will require the mass production of relatively inexpensive, sophisticated electromechanical and electronic devices. The economics of warfare itself may be changing. The ability to manufacture and replace large numbers of relatively inexpensive devices may become as important as the ability to produce a limited number of extraordinarily expensive and sophisticated weapons systems.

InvestorNews DYK Facts | *A billion dollars for expendable drones*

The current Drone Dominance program describes a **US$1 billion procurement plan** intended to purchase **more than 200,000 small, lethal drones by 2027**. Its published timeline records 30,000 drones ordered in the first phase. The 200,000 figure is a purchasing objective; 30,000 refers to orders rather than completed deliveries.

Who in the United States has the institutional knowledge and experience to undertake such mass production? I would suggest that it is not necessarily the traditional American defense contracting industry, which has evolved into an industry accustomed to producing relatively small numbers of extremely expensive, highly engineered products. It is, rather, the American OEM automotive industry and its extensive network of suppliers.

InvestorNews DYK Facts | *Detroit is already being approached*

Reporting published on November 24, 2026 described preliminary discussions involving **General Motors Company (NYSE: GM)** and suppliers including **Magna International Inc. (TSX: MG | NYSE: MGA)** about supporting military-drone production. Potential components included motors, actuators, sensors and lidar. **Ford Motor Company (NYSE: F)** confirmed separate discussions focused on military vehicles and satellites. The reported discussions were preliminary, with no drone-production agreement announced.

The modern automobile is itself an extraordinarily sophisticated electromechanical device. The automotive industry has spent decades addressing lightweighting, electrification, energy storage, electronic control, sensors, electric motors, and the economical mass production of components made from an increasingly diverse range of materials. These are many of the same categories of industrial capability the military will require in an era of increasingly autonomous and remotely operated equipment.

InvestorNews DYK Facts | *The modern precedent was built in 154 days*

Detroit's ability to organize an industrial pivot has a recent example. **General Motors Company (NYSE: GM)** and Ventec Life Systems completed a federal order for 30,000 critical-care ventilators in 154 days in 2020. Production took place in Kokomo, Indiana. The project demonstrated how an automaker's engineering, purchasing and supplier-management capabilities could support an unfamiliar, highly regulated product.

Consider, for example, the production and use of lightweight aluminum and magnesium alloys, including those containing rare earths. The development, testing, qualification, and economical mass production of such materials and components are precisely the kinds of industrial problems Detroit has historically been able to solve. The same is true of producing electric motors,

rare earth permanent magnets, batteries, and integrating electronic systems into mechanically complex products.

What Detroit cannot do, however, is manufacture products from materials that it cannot obtain.

One fundamental difference between the Detroit of 1940 and the Detroit of today is that the former was supported by an extensive domestic industrial infrastructure to produce and process raw materials. Today's American automotive industry depends, directly or indirectly, on foreign sources for a substantial portion of the specialized materials required to produce modern vehicles. In many instances, China is the ultimate source of those materials.

InvestorNews DYK Facts | *The materials gap is measurable*
The U.S. Geological Survey's Mineral Commodity Summaries 2026 estimates that, in **2025**, U.S. net import reliance was **67% for rare earth compounds and metals** and **more than 75% for magnesium metal**. Separately, China accounted for **71% of U.S. rare earth compound and metal imports over 2021–2024**. The import-reliance estimates refer to U.S. consumption, while the China figure measures its share of U.S. imports.

It would be a particularly unfortunate irony if the United States were to find that its ability to mass-produce the military equipment of the twenty-first century depended upon the willingness of its principal strategic competitor to supply the necessary raw materials and components.

I have long argued that building a supply chain must begin with the OEM's requirements and work backward to raw-material sources. Nowhere is this more applicable than in developing a domestic industrial base for modern military production. The discovery of a critical mineral deposit, or even the construction of a mine, does not, in and of itself, contribute

to military preparedness. Industrial preparedness depends on the availability of qualified materials and components, in the required quantities and at economically sustainable prices.

Perhaps the American military's emerging requirements could provide the economic justification for restoring some of the domestic materials production and processing capabilities that the American automotive industry has lost. The combination of civilian and military demand could, in some instances, provide a market large enough to justify the capital investment needed to restore domestic production of magnesium metal, rare earth metals and alloys, permanent magnets, battery materials, and other specialized industrial materials.

I would distinguish, however, between the opportunity for the American OEM automotive assembly companies themselves and the opportunity for the American automotive industrial ecosystem. The greatest beneficiaries of this transformation may be the automotive industry's suppliers: component manufacturers, tool and die makers, materials engineers, and specialists in production engineering and quality control. This infrastructure, much of which remains concentrated in and around Detroit, constitutes a national asset of enormous strategic importance.

InvestorNews DYK Facts | *Michigan's arsenal still has scale*
Michigan's FY2025 Office of Defense and Aerospace Innovation annual report puts the state's defense and aerospace economy at approximately **US$30 billion**, supporting **166,000 jobs across roughly 5,000 businesses**. These are statewide estimates covering the wider defense and aerospace sector. They indicate an existing base of manufacturing, integration and technical skills on which an expanded unmanned-systems industry could draw.

Another economic question remains. Could military demand ever be sufficient to compensate for a substantial decline in American

automobile production? I doubt military demand alone could replace the revenues generated by selling millions of passenger vehicles annually. But it could provide an important additional market, preserve otherwise endangered industrial capabilities, and help finance the modernization of American manufacturing infrastructure. It could also create domestic sources of materials and components that would improve the international competitiveness of American civilian manufacturing.

The military procurement system would itself have to accommodate such a transformation. The economics of automotive mass production depend upon predictable demand, standardized specifications, continuity of production, and the amortization of capital expenditures over large production volumes. Intermittent government orders for continually changing specifications are not necessarily compatible with these economics.

The measure of American military-industrial strength in the coming decades may increasingly be not simply the sophistication of the weapons we can design, but the quantity of equipment we can manufacture economically and the independence and resilience of the supply chains that enable us to manufacture it.

In 1940, the United States did not have to create the Arsenal of Democracy from scratch. It already existed in the form of the American OEM automotive industry. What was necessary was to redirect its capabilities.

Eighty-six years later, much of that industrial knowledge still exists, although the domestic supply chains that once supported it have been substantially diminished.

Could the coming era of drone warfare be a lifeline for the American OEM automotive industry? Quite possibly. But the more important question may be whether the American OEM automotive

industry is a lifeline for the American military.

We would be well advised to recognize the value of what remains of Detroit’s industrial capabilities before we discover how difficult, expensive, and time-consuming it would be to recreate them.

InvestorNews Did-You-Know (DYK) Facts: Five Defense Contractors with Drone and Autonomous Systems Businesses

This ranking covers the five largest diversified U.S. defense prime contractors, by total equity market capitalization, with direct drone, autonomous military vehicle or counter-drone programs. Only companies listed on major U.S. or Canadian exchanges are eligible; all five below are NYSE-listed. It includes aerial, undersea and ground systems and counter-drone technology. The figures value each entire company, including its other defense and commercial activities, rather than its drone operations alone.

Approximate market capitalizations reported for November 25, 2026, in U.S. dollars, rounded to one decimal billion. Company developments and source checks through November 27, 2026.

#	Company and listing	Market cap	Drone and autonomy exposure
1	RTX Corporation NYSE: RTX	US$264.8bn	Coyote interceptors and counter-drone systems
2	Lockheed Martin Corporation NYSE: LMT	US$138.4bn	Vectis autonomous aircraft and Sikorsky U-Hawk
3	The Boeing Company NYSE: BA	US$130.4bn	MQ-25 Stingray and MQ-28 Ghost Bat

#	Company and listing	Market cap	Drone and autonomy exposure
4	General Dynamics Corporation NYSE: GD	US$97.2bn	Bluefin underwater vehicles and autonomous ground systems
5	Northrop Grumman Corporation NYSE: NOC	US$79.0bn	MQ-4C Triton and YFQ-48A Talon Blue

Market-cap sources: RTX | LMT | BA | GD | NOC

1 RTX Corporation

NYSE: RTX | Approximate market capitalization US$264.8 billion

RTX Corporation (NYSE: RTX) gives investors exposure to the equipment used to defeat drones, as well as the wider aerospace and defense market. Its Raytheon business supplies the Coyote interceptor and Ku-band Radio Frequency Sensor, or KuRFS, for the Low, slow, small, unmanned aircraft Integrated Defeat System. On **October 13, 2026**, RTX announced US$729 million in contracts to supply elements of that system to the U.S. Army, Qatar and Jordan.

The company's financial scale matters when assessing its place in this ranking. RTX reported third-quarter 2026 sales of US$25.0 billion and total backlog of US$340 billion, comprising US$176 billion of commercial backlog and US$164 billion of defense backlog. Those are group figures spanning Raytheon, Collins Aerospace and Pratt & Whitney; the company's market value cannot be read as a valuation of its counter-drone franchise.

RTX illustrates the industrial demand generated on both sides of drone warfare: producing unmanned systems and producing the sensors and interceptors used against them. RTX says it is investing in expanded Coyote production. The implication for automotive suppliers is a potential market for qualified,

repeatable manufacturing across the wider defensive system. Access to that market will depend on specifications, production economics and customer qualification, rather than automotive production volume alone.

2 Lockheed Martin Corporation

NYSE: LMT | Approximate market capitalization US$138.4 billion

Lockheed Martin Corporation (NYSE: LMT) is developing Vectis, an autonomous combat aircraft intended to operate independently or alongside crewed aircraft such as the F-35. On **September 14, 2026**, its Skunk Works division announced four additional Vectis vehicles, expanding work beyond the initial prototype. The company continued to target first flight in **2027**. That schedule identifies Vectis as a development program, rather than an aircraft already in operational mass production.

Its unmanned ambitions also extend to helicopters. Sikorsky's S-70UAS U-Hawk adapts the Black Hawk lineage for fully autonomous operation using MATRIX technology. The company says removing the cockpit creates **25% more cargo space**. This is a different industrial proposition from a disposable quadcopter: it applies autonomy to a larger aircraft family with established engineering, maintenance and supplier knowledge.

The connection to Detroit is the combination of established industrial capabilities with new control systems and mission requirements. Lockheed Martin's projects suggest a range of potential manufacturing roles, from airframe and propulsion components to cargo-handling equipment and electronics integration. Our assessment is that this opportunity would develop through qualified supplier relationships and funded production programs. Prototype investment and a planned first-flight date establish technical activity; they do not establish recurring, high-volume orders.

3 The Boeing Company

NYSE: BA | Approximate market capitalization US$130.4 billion

The Boeing Company (NYSE: BA) has direct exposure to military autonomous aircraft through the MQ-25A Stingray unmanned aerial-refueling program. On **September 14, 2026**, Boeing announced a U.S. Navy low-rate initial production award for three additional aircraft, bringing the total under contract to **14**. That total included development and test articles, including two ground-test aircraft; it should not be described as 14 operational aircraft delivered.

Boeing also develops the Australia-originated MQ-28 Ghost Bat, an autonomous aircraft designed to support missions alongside crewed platforms. In a May 27, 2026 program update, Boeing reported three flight tests at Point Mugu, California, marking the program's first international operations in allied airspace. The tests demonstrated deployment and autonomous operations from an allied location, while supporting the company's work on potential exports.

Boeing provides a useful qualification to the economics in Jack's column. The unmanned market includes sophisticated tankers and combat aircraft as well as inexpensive consumable drones. Its MQ-25 award marks a transition from development toward low-rate production, with production processes and supply-chain readiness explicitly part of that transition. Detroit's relevant contribution would therefore vary by program: cost reduction and repeatable assembly remain valuable, while certification, testing and mission requirements determine the production system.

4 General Dynamics Corporation

NYSE: GD | Approximate market capitalization US$97.2 billion

General Dynamics Corporation (NYSE: GD) belongs in this broader

defense-contractor comparison because its unmanned exposure includes undersea and ground systems. Its Bluefin family of autonomous underwater vehicles supports mine countermeasures, intelligence collection, inspection and scientific missions. The company also highlighted a shipboard tethered unmanned aerial system, C-TEM, in January 2026. Its inclusion should therefore be understood as exposure to military autonomy across several operating environments.

General Dynamics offers a particularly direct connection to Detroit's industrial ecosystem. Its Land Systems headquarters in Sterling Heights houses nearly **2,000 employees** supporting products including Abrams tanks, Stryker vehicles, SGT Stout air-defense platforms and Small Multipurpose Equipment Transport ground robots. That mix demonstrates that conventional vehicle engineering, air defense and unmanned equipment already coexist within the same Michigan-based industrial organization.

The parent reported third-quarter 2026 revenue of US$14.6 billion and quarter-end backlog of US$220.3 billion. Those totals encompass businesses including submarines, combat vehicles, technology services and business aviation. For this article, the significance lies in the existing connection between automotive-style engineering and military systems. The company's size demonstrates industrial resources, while its total market capitalization gives no standalone measure of the value of Bluefin or its ground-robot programs.

5 Northrop Grumman Corporation

NYSE: NOC | Approximate market capitalization US$79.0 billion

Northrop Grumman Corporation (NYSE: NOC) combines established unmanned surveillance aircraft with investment in a new generation of autonomous combat systems. Its MQ-4C Triton is designed for maritime intelligence, surveillance and

reconnaissance. The company describes an aircraft capable of operating above **50,000 feet for more than 24 hours**, illustrating the endurance and sensor requirements of the larger end of the drone market.

Its company-funded YFQ-48A Talon Blue is intended to serve as an autonomous wingman alongside crewed fighters. Northrop Grumman emphasizes modular manufacturing, reduced parts and weight, and faster development. The company explicitly identifies Talon Blue as an internally funded initiative: an Air Force aircraft designation indicates engagement with military requirements, while leaving the question of funded production orders separate.

Northrop Grumman's Project Talon portfolio also includes Talon IQ, an autonomy testbed using the Scaled Composites Model 437 aircraft. It is intended to help partners test and improve software on an established flight platform. The industrial implication is that scalable drone production requires both dependable hardware and a way to update its capabilities. Detroit's manufacturing knowledge could contribute to the hardware side, while aerospace integration and software expertise remain essential to the finished system.