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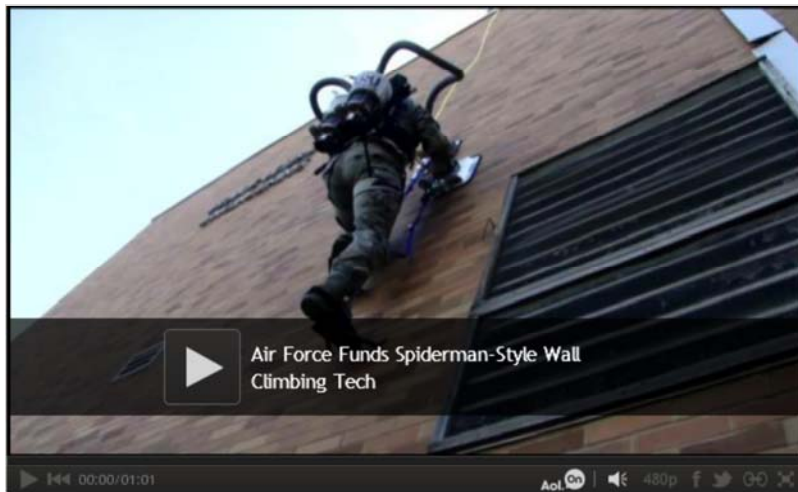
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Air Force Funds Spiderman-Style Wall Climbing Tech



By Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.



Spiderman, Batman, and the Air Force Research Laboratory came together in an unlikely alliance to inspire college kids to build gadgets to let commandos climb up walls. Many of the entries in April's annual AFRL Design Challenge were Batmanesque grappling guns that fired a hook or anchor into the top of the wall, trailing a rope or ladder behind it, including the Air Force Academy's design, which beat out

the teams from West Point and Annapolis. But the winning entry among the 17 civilian schools participating was Utah State University's PVAC, which variously stands for Personal or Personnel Vacuum-Assisted Climber, an ingenious -- but noisy -- gadget that uses a vacuum-cleaner-like suction action to cling to the wall, Spiderman-style.

So while the Defense Department gets a lot of flak for taking years and billions of dollars to develop new technology, they fund fast and nimble projects too: The wall-climbing competition required just nine months and \$20,000 of seed money for each of the 20 entries, plus a \$100,00 grant for the two winning teams to further develop their technology. Still, as ugly as the regular Pentagon procurement system can get, let's not toss out the Joint Strike Fighter, the Littoral Combat Ship, or the Ground Combat Vehicle programs just yet in favor of competing teams of college kids. Right now, the PVAC climbing system is impressive but way too loud and bulky for real-world use. Even when perfected, it will be at best a specialized tool for one particular application, not the kind of widely applicable weapon system that's a mainstay of the US military. Small, innovative teams can work wonders in certain areas, as DARPA has been proving for decades, but no one's figured out a way to build big weapons without big bureaucracies.
