



## Marco Rubio says the United States is not modernizing its nuclear weapons

By [Amy Sherman](#)

Tuesday, May 5th, 2015

U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., argues that the United States needs to do more to beef up its military to face down evil.

Speaking at the [Iowa Faith and Freedom](#) summit on April 25, Rubio said that threats worldwide "require strong American leadership, which we cannot exert as long as we eviscerate military spending, which is what we are doing now. We are placing our nation at a dangerous position."

Then he said this about the country's nuclear stockpiles: "We are the only nation that is not modernizing its nuclear weapons."

We wanted to know whether Rubio was correct that the United States isn't modernizing its nuclear weapons, so we consulted with experts on U.S. nuclear policy. (We reached out to Rubio's presidential campaign and Senate office and did not get a response.)

### Modernizing nuclear weapons

Multiple experts told us that Rubio's claim about nuclear weapons is wrong because ongoing and planned nuclear modernization efforts are extensive. The United States has been spending billions modernizing nuclear equipment -- and has plans to continue to do so.

The National Nuclear Security Administration's March 2015 report to Congress details plans to [modernize nuclear equipment](#) including various warheads over the coming years. A Congressional Research Service Report issued the same month covered similar topics.

Modernization is happening for many different types of nuclear programs, said Matthew Bunn, an expert on nuclear proliferation and a professor Harvard University. (During the 1990s, Bunn was adviser to the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy.)

"First, while we haven't deployed major new strategic systems in some time, we've been modernizing the ones we've got more or less continuously — new rocket motors and guidance

systems for the Minuteman missiles, lots of rebuilt parts for the B-52s, etc., etc. We're in the middle of a \$10 billion modernization of the B-61 bomb," Bunn said.

These modernization plans are not cheap. The [Congressional Budget Office](#) estimated in January that the administration's plans for nuclear forces would cost \$348 billion over the next decade. During the next three decades, the cost to maintain the nuclear arsenal and purchase replacement systems could rise to more than \$1 trillion, according to a [2014 report](#) by the The James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies.

The size of the U.S. stockpile has been declining since the 1960s and will decline further under the new [START Treaty](#) agreed to with Russia in 2011. But nuclear weapons can "live" for a long time. Several nuclear weapons introduced or upgraded in the 1990s or 2000s can be used for another 20 to 30 years, said Hans Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists. (Kristensen pointed to [several upgrades](#) in recent decades.)

One analyst we spoke with had concerns that the upgrades aren't happening fast enough. Tom Donnelly, a defense policy analyst at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, told PolitiFact that "we are not really modernizing our nukes very seriously" and that some projects are years -- even decades -- away and could fall prey to budget cuts.

But Benjamin Friedman, an expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, said that even if some modernization plans were canceled, "we would still be modernizing our nuclear arsenal or our nuclear weapons, just less of them. So any normal definition of 'modernize,' describes what the United States is doing with its nuclear weapons."

Rubio compared the United States to the rest of the world without naming any other countries when he said "we are the only nation that is not modernizing its nuclear weapons."

Rubio said that the United States was "the only nation" not modernizing its weapons, but Bunn, the Harvard professor, said comparing the United States on that basis with other countries is misleading. China, for example, is modernizing its arsenal, but its arsenal is also far smaller. The United States and Russia have over [90 percent](#) of the world's nuclear weapons, he said.

"So I would say: (a) not true that we haven't been modernizing at all; (b) IS (mostly) true that we haven't bought any big new strategic delivery systems lately; (c) highly misleading not to mention that all nuclear powers other than ourselves and Russia have tiny nuclear arsenals compared to ours," Bunn said.

## **Our ruling**

Rubio said that the United States "is not modernizing its nuclear weapons."

Most of the experts we interviewed disputed Rubio's statement. While the United States has reduced the number of warheads, it has also been modernizing nuclear equipment and has plans to continue to do so.

We rate this claim False.