



# US Navy: 'Hollow' force or 'best in world'?

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One of the many issues likely to be batted around during this year's presidential election is the status of the U.S. Navy.

Several times on the campaign trail, Gov. [Mitt Romney](#), the presumptive Republican nominee, has criticized the Obama administration's handling of the Navy.

"Do you realize our Navy is now smaller than any time since 1917?" Romney said during a campaign rally in [South Carolina](#) last January.

A few days later at a debate in Tampa, he said, "Under this president, under prior presidents, we keep shrinking our Navy."

And last October, while speaking at the Citadel, he said, "I will reverse the hollowing of our Navy and announce an initiative to increase the ship-building rate."

But President [Barack Obama's](#) defense secretary said Wednesday, "We have, without question, the strongest Navy in the world."

So who is right? Well, in some ways, both are.

No other Navy in the world has more than two aircraft carriers. The [United States](#) has 11. It is one of the few navies that regularly patrols all the oceans of the world. Other navies may have more warships, but many of them are built to operate very close to home and there's little capability to venture to other regions of the world. So Panetta's right about the United States having the strongest navy.

But Romney was also right to say the navy is shrinking, considering the long term. Since World War Two ended, the U.S. Navy has been shrinking. But as of this year, the Navy is not "smaller than any time since 1917" as Romney said. With 285 commissioned surface warships, it's actually grown slowly since the second term of the [George W. Bush](#) administration when the number dipped to 278.

But it's unlikely that Obama will crow much about that growth. The number of ships will actually decline over the next few years before new ones are added, bringing the number to 300 ships in 2019.

Why the decrease? The [Obama administration](#) plans to decommission about nine older warships. "The Navy ... will retire lower-priority cruisers that have not been upgraded with ballistic missile defense capability or that require significant maintenance," Panetta said in January.

But even as it is mothballing cruisers and a few other older ships, the Navy is building a new aircraft carrier, the USS [Gerald Ford](#) (which will replace the soon-to-retire USS Enterprise) plus dozens of destroyers and littoral combat ships (agile ships designed to operate close to shore) that will include all the latest warship technology.

"The Navy is protecting our highest-priority and most flexible ships, such as the Arleigh-Burke destroyers and the littoral combat ships," Panetta said.

So while some people argue about the number of warships, the Navy looks at it a different way. "It's about numbers and also about capability," said Navy public affairs officer Cmdr. Tamara Lawrence. "What a destroyer could do 25 years ago is not what it can do now. Our ships continue to get better."

Robert Work, the under secretary of the Navy, said just last week in a speech at the Cato Institute, "You take a look at the ships we're building ... every single one of them are the best in the world. ... I'm telling you right now, the surface Navy has a very, very bright future."