

# A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO NUCLEAR WEAPONS



PRINTABLE GUIDE · NUMBERS, FACTS, AND FIGURES

## WHICH COUNTRIES HAVE NUCLEAR WEAPONS? HOW MANY NUCLEAR WEAPONS ARE THERE IN THE WORLD?

Although the global nuclear stockpile is smaller now than it was during the Cold War, when it peaked at 70,300, there are still 12,241 nuclear weapons in the world. Of these, around 9,700 are in active military service (either deployed or in the military stockpile, where they could easily become deployed). The rest are slated to be dismantled.

The nine countries with nuclear weapons are: the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea.

## HOW MUCH DOES THE U.S. SPEND ON NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

In 2024, the United States spent \$110.3 billion dollars on nuclear weapons. This spending covered not only on warhead maintenance, but also related costs like environmental cleanup and missile defense. See Fig.2 for how that money was divided up.

In 2025, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office estimated that U.S. spending on nuclear weapons over the next decade will total \$946 billion. This is a \$190 billion increase from its previous prediction for spending from 2032 to 2032.

## Nuclear Weapons by Country

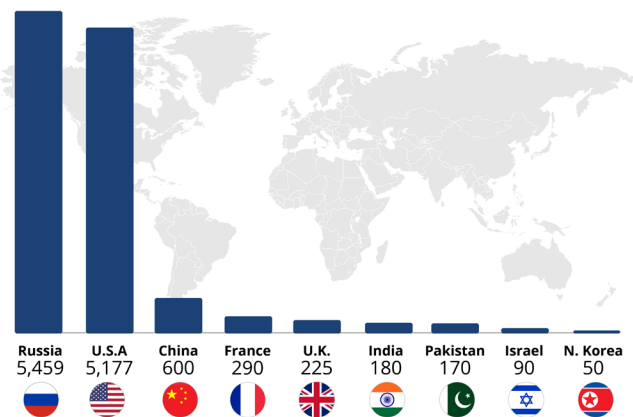


FIGURE 1: Numbers from the Federation of American Scientists. Graphic by Anthony Eyring.

## HOW MANY NUCLEAR WEAPONS DOES THE U.S. HAVE?

In 1967, the U.S. nuclear stockpile peaked at 31,255. As of January, 2025, the United States has roughly 5,177 nuclear warheads. Of these, 1,770 are deployed and another 1,930 could be deployed out of the military stockpile on short notice. Finally, 1,477 are retired and waiting to be dismantled.

Most of the nuclear weapons in the U.S. arsenal are strategic nuclear weapons, which are designed to swiftly decimate an opponent by destroying military bases, key infrastructure, entire cities, and many millions of people. Around 200 are considered “tactical” nuclear weapons, which are seen as more usable, as they have less range and produce a less powerful explosion than strategic

nuclear weapons. Some tactical nuclear weapons, however, are [more powerful](#)<sup>1</sup> than the bomb used in Hiroshima.

The U.S. nuclear arsenal includes [three methods of delivery](#)<sup>2</sup> via the land, sea, and air. The weapons can be launched from intercontinental ballistic missiles housed in underground silos, from the sea by submarines, and from the air by bomber planes. Analysis from the [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#)<sup>3</sup> estimates that the U.S. stores its nuclear weapons across 11 U.S. states and five European countries.

An arms control treaty between the U.S. and Russia, known as The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), has limited how many long-range nuclear weapons either country can deploy. It is set to expire February 5, 2026.

See Figure 3 to learn more about the United States’ nuclear arsenal.

**HOW WOULD THE U.S. LAUNCH A NUCLEAR WEAPON?**

In the United States, the president is the only person who has the authority to order the launch

of nuclear weapons. The president may confer with advisors or military staff including the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding such a decision. But the president is not required to consult anyone—and once the president has ordered a launch, no one has the authority to cancel it. This is known as [sole authority](#)<sup>6</sup>.

If the U.S. detects an incoming missile, the country’s “launch-on-warning” posture enables a retaliatory nuclear strike while the adversary’s missiles are still in the air. To achieve this, the U.S. keeps nearly one thousand nuclear weapons on nuclear submarines and in land-based silos on [hair-trigger alert](#)<sup>7</sup>—they are staffed around the clock and ready to launch just minutes after receiving the order.

Once the U.S. nuclear command and control system detects an incoming nuclear attack, the president in most cases may only have a matter of minutes to decide whether to launch a nuclear counter-attack. This leaves little time for the president to even [verify whether a warning is accurate](#)<sup>8</sup> before making a decision that could change -- and destroy much of -- the world. Since the atomic age began in 1945, there have been numerous nuclear close calls when humans or computer systems mistakenly believed that the

**U.S. Spending on Nuclear Weapons in 2024**

Source	Purpose	Amount
U.S. Department of Defense	Modernizing and maintaining nuclear weapons	\$49.2 billion
U.S. Department of Defense	Missile Defeat and Defense	\$28.4 billion
U.S. Department of Energy and National Nuclear Security Administration	Environmental cleanup from nuclear weapons activities	\$32.7 billion

FIGURE 2: Numbers from the [2025 Nuclear Weapons Programs Tax Calculator](#)<sup>4</sup> and [Congressional Budget Office](#)<sup>5</sup>.

# Breakdown of U.S. Nuclear Arsenal

Status	Number
Nuclear warheads on intercontinental ballistic missiles, which launch from underground silos. In position for military action (deployed).	400
Nuclear warheads on submarine-based ballistic missiles, which launch from underwater. In position for military action (deployed).	970
Nuclear warheads at air force bomber bases to be dropped by military aircraft. In position for military action (deployed).	300
Tactical nuclear weapons at aircraft bases in Europe. In position for military action (deployed).	100
Nuclear warheads held in reserve—they are not yet in position for military action, but could be loaded onto missiles and aircraft.	1,930

FIGURE 3: Numbers from [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, "United States nuclear weapons, 2025<sup>11</sup>"](#).

United States was facing imminent nuclear attack.

After the president decides, they must give orders for how many nuclear weapons will be launched, and where they will go. A set of documents called the Black Book gives the president a menu of nuclear strike options to choose from. This list, along with secure communication equipment to reach the National Military Command Center, are kept inside a briefcase known as the [nuclear football](#)<sup>9</sup>. The football also has a laminated card called “the biscuit,” with unique alphanumeric codes used to authenticate the president’s identity, and is carried by a military aide who stays close to the president wherever they go.

U.S. nuclear policy also leaves the possibility of first use on the table. In this scenario, the president could order a pre-emptive nuclear strike.

Once again, nobody but the president can order a nuclear attack, and nobody can rescind a launch if the president has ordered it. Although only Congress has the authority to officially declare war, the president can still unilaterally decide to launch a nuclear weapon—effectively a declaration of war. To learn about the process, read “[How to Launch a Nuclear Weapon](#)”<sup>10</sup> from the Outrider Foundation.

# Links

## NUMBERS, FACTS, AND FIGURES

1. <https://www.ucs.org/resources/tactical-nuclear-weapons>
2. <https://armscontrolcenter.org/factsheet-the-nuclear-triad/>
3. <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2025-01/united-states-nuclear-weapons-2025/>
4. <https://preventnuclearwar.org/2025-tax-calculator/>
5. <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/61224>
6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2024.2441624>
7. <https://outrider.org/nuclear-weapons/articles/presidents-sole-authority>
8. <https://www.ucs.org/resources/what-hair-trigger-alert>
9. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-12/focus/nuclear-false-warnings-and-risk-catastrophe>
10. <https://time.com/6965539/u-s-presidents-nuclear-football/>
11. <https://outrider.org/nuclear-weapons/articles/how-launch-nuclear-weapon>



Scan for the latest  
links and actions.

[www.preventnuclearwar.org](http://www.preventnuclearwar.org)

Back from the Brink is a national grassroots campaign of committed individuals, organizations, and elected officials advocating for common-sense policies to prevent nuclear war and abolish nuclear weapons from the planet.

This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.