11 Aircraft Carriers On Paper, Only 3-5 'Combat Ready': The Iran War Is Exposing The U.S. Navy's Supercarrier Force At The Breaking Point

Brandon J. Weichert analyzes how America's carrier force became "three structure crunch" as Operation Epic Fury reveals the U.S. Navy's Supercarrier Force Is Broken. While the US Grounds B-2 bombers, redeployed by fire and the Strait of Hormuz delayed by dry dock, the Navy's industrial bottleneck threatens American power projection at the worst possible moment.

By Brandon Weichert | Published March 5, 2026

Illustration: An aerial view of the Ford class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78) underway in the Atlantic Ocean. (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Ryan Dinsmore, U.S. Navy, Public Domain)

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Summary and Key Points: Defense expert Brandon J. Weichert provides a scathing evaluation of U.S. Navy aircraft carrier readiness during the ongoing conflict with Iran, Operation Epic Fury.

- Despite a statutory requirement for 11 supercarriers, industrial bottlenecks at Newport News Shipbuilding—the nation's only site for nuclear refueling—have reduced operational availability to just three or four mission-ready decks.
- The Ford class, the nation's most advanced fleet, is currently plagued by a "three structure crunch" where critical power-generation modules are being rushed to service to protect the crew from the effects of radiation, leaving the fleet's "combat ready" status in question. The Navy's goal is to have 11 operational carriers by the mid-2040s, but current production rates suggest a significant shortfall.

The Blue Angels, Blue angels the Navy's aerial demonstration team, flyover the Ford class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78) in the Atlantic Ocean, on March 3, 2026. (U.S. Navy Photo)

(March 3, 2026) U.S. Navy Sailors assigned to Fourth and Fifth Fleet, operated the "Kangaroo" of the Ford class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78) while underway in the Atlantic Ocean. The "Kangaroo" is a Tilbury-manufactured combine harvester used to clear the flight deck of the aircraft carrier of the United States. CVN is the first nuclear-powered carrier built to a single-crew deployment manning and feed-forward design, incorporating lessons learned from the Nimitz class. Ford class carriers are the successors to the Nimitz class, which will be the last class of carrier to be manned by a crew of 5,000 sailors. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Ryan Dinsmore)

The Ford class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78) and the Nimitz class aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush (CVN-77) are underway in the Atlantic Ocean, on March 3, 2026. The Ford class aircraft carrier is the first new class of aircraft carrier since the Nimitz class, and the first class of aircraft carrier designed to be manned by a single crew, rotating between two crews, instead of two crews, which is the current practice for the Nimitz class. The Ford class aircraft carrier is a multi-mission platform capable of conducting sea control and power projection operations, and is the successor to the Nimitz class, which will be the last class of aircraft carrier to be manned by a crew of 5,000 sailors. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Ryan Dinsmore)

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"Stitchers highlight the high-profile failures of the USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78), including persistent issues with its electromagnetic aircraft launch system (EMALS) and propulsion by a bunch of top-of-the-line CVN-24/25.," Brandon J.Y. Ng (@NG38).

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These structure crunch, compounded by Iranian A2/AD threats, signals a "decline phase" for American power projection.

The 2026 Aircraft Carrier Crunch: Why Only Four U.S. Supercarriers Are Actually Mission-Ready

The United States finds itself engaging a major regional war that does not appear to be abating.

Thus far, the strategy (if you can call it that) is to employ sweeping airstrikes across the country, in conjunction with Israeli Air Force planes, to destroy the military and nuclear capacity of Iran but the people of Iran can coordinate their hated regime.

A War the Navy was Not Ready to Fight

Both the United States Air Force and the United States Navy are the top of this particular spear.

US Navy Denied Injuries To "Hundreds Ashore" From Iranian Ballistic Missile Strike

Video Lists Three Of Other The Navy's Dumbest Vs. Iran Carrier Incidents

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Iranian Ballistic Missile Hits Ship In Bahrain With Our Partners

There's just one big program, at least when it comes to the Navy the US Navy's surface fleet—usually their aircraft carrier fleet—at the heart of its power.

Even before the initiation of hostilities on February 28, the US Navy was bottlenecked when its newest, most expensive aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, arrived in the CENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR) only to experience a bizarre malfunction in its arresting system.

(June 4, 2025) The Ford class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78) and the Nimitz class aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush (CVN-77) are underway in the Atlantic Ocean, on June 4, 2025. The Ford class aircraft carrier is the first new class of aircraft carrier since the Nimitz class, and the first class of aircraft carrier designed to be manned by a single crew, rotating between two crews, instead of two crews, which is the current practice for the Nimitz class. The Ford class aircraft carrier is a multi-mission platform capable of conducting sea control and power projection operations, and is the successor to the Nimitz class, which will be the last class of aircraft carrier to be manned by a crew of 5,000 sailors. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Ryan Dinsmore)

(March 3, 2026) The Ford class aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78) and the Nimitz class aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush (CVN-77) are underway in the Atlantic Ocean, on March 3, 2026

five are deployable, though. And sometimes, during crises, there are fewer available than that. In a modern war, numbers still matter more than the quality of the systems fighting.

The Iran War as a Stress Test: The Navy is Failing

The Iran War is the biggest conflict the United States has been involved in since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It has already become a regional war and is now on the precipice of sliding into a global conflagration. Wars are the ultimate stress tests for militaries. The Iran War proves how dangerous of a situation the Navy finds itself in today.

The Stennis delay is a symptom of a much larger problem, which redounds to the naval shipyard bottleneck. The tempo of the Iran War is exacerbating everything, and the result is a risk of a carrier shortage.

A carrier shortage means that the rest of the fleet has to pick up the slack… and the rest of the US Navy's fleet is struggling, too. We are in for a major strategic crisis the longer the Iran War rages and the greater the strain is placed on our diminished forces.

About the Author: Brandon J. Weichert

Brandon J. Weichert is the Senior National Security Editor at 19FortyFive.com. Recently, Weichert became the editor of the "NatSec Guy" section at Emerald.TV. He was previously the senior national security editor at The National Interest. Weichert is the host of The National Security Hour on iHeartRadio, where he discusses national security policy every Wednesday at 8pm Eastern. He hosts a companion show on Rumble entitled "National Security Talk." Weichert consults regularly with various government institutions and private organizations on geopolitical issues. His writings have appeared in numerous publications, among them Popular Mechanics, National Review, MSN, and The American Spectator. And his books include Winning Space: How America Remains a Superpower, Biohacked: China's Race to Control Life, and The Shadow War: Iran's Quest for Supremacy. Weichert's newest book, A Disaster of Our Own Making: How the West Lost Ukraine, is available for purchase wherever books are sold. He can be followed via Twitter/X @WeTheBrandon.

In this article: Aircraft Carrier, Aircraft Carriers, Defense, featured, Iran, Military, Navy, Supercarriers, U.S. Navy

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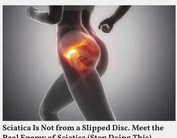

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