

America's 1.2 Trillion Dollar Nuclear Weapons Project. Are Nuclear Weapons Immoral?

Matt Brown Says General Dynamics Is “Strong-Arming Rhode Island Taxpayers,” and the State Needs to Move Beyond Its Military Economy

By [Matt Brown](#)

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When I first heard Matt Brown was considering a run for Rhode Island governor, the first thing that struck me was how he's spent the last decade since leaving office as secretary of state: first founding and then running Global Zero, an organization dedicated to the elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide by 2030. That work was certainly in direct contrast to a key focus of the state's Congressional Delegation, which has thrown its political capital into development of a new class of nuclear-armed, ballistic missile submarines to be built at local Navy contractor General Dynamics-Electric Boat at the cost of up to \$104-billion to U.S. taxpayers. Gov. Gina Raimondo, Brown's opponent in this year's Democratic primary, has also latched onto EB's good fortune, dedicating more than \$4-million in government funds to train the company's workforce, labeling it one of the top jobs opportunities for the state.

I spoke to Brown by phone earlier this week, touching on his thoughts about nuclear weapons and Rhode Island's role in producing them. The conversation evolved into a discussion on corporate power and the role of government in recent decades in enabling the most inequitable economic climate in America since the Gilded Age. As Brown sees it, his campaign will be about educating the public on these challenges with truthful and robust debate. The former founder of Rhode Island's City Year school improvement program, Brown says his view of economic development distinguishes him from Raimondo, a former venture capitalist who has largely built her jobs growth plan around corporate subsidies and tax incentives—or what Brown characterizes as “giveaways.”

Below is an edited and condensed version of our conversation.

NUNES: Are nuclear weapons immoral?

BROWN: First of all, from a national security standpoint, spending a [trillion-plus dollars](#) over the next 30 years to modernize and expand our nuclear arsenal doesn't make any sense. These are weapons we don't use. They are weapons that are outdated at best. Even for people who believe that they have a deterrent role, we have 5,000 of them. We convened a commission at Global Zero several years ago chaired by [retired U.S. Marine Corps] General Jim Cartwright, who was the commander of nuclear forces. They did a deep and serious analysis of what actually is required just from a deterrent standpoint in terms of the size of the nuclear arsenal. These are experts. These are people who understand the war plans,

who understand the strategy, who understand the geopolitics. And their determination was we needed no more than 900 nuclear weapons for deterrence. So the idea that we need to be building nuclear weapons and modernizing nuclear weapons doesn't make any sense.

Matt Brown at the Global Zero London Summit 2011 (Source: The Simons Foundation)



In terms of the nature of nuclear weapons themselves, my view is that the destructive capacity of these weapons and the indiscriminate nature of that destruction inherently would kill civilians, would destroy environments, and potentially, in a large-scale nuclear war, would be destructive to the entire planet. These are not weapons with a legitimate military role. Some will make the case "Well, the point of nuclear weapons is deterrence. The point of nuclear weapons is to make sure nuclear weapons aren't used." But if you're going to argue that the only role of nuclear weapons is deterrence, then the obvious next step is to say, "Well, then let's move to a world in which we steadily and verifiably reduce all nuclear arsenals, and ultimately get to zero. The conclusion of a lot of experts and a lot of leaders is simply that nuclear weapons make the world more dangerous, not safer.

NUNES: You're saying these are incredibly dangerous; they put the world at risk. You don't think they have a justifiable, strategic purpose. They kill indiscriminately; some people would say that makes them immoral. Based on those facts, is General Dynamics-Electric Boat, a company that's developing and expects to build one of these weapons systems, a company that is producing a dangerous weapon that's also immoral?

BROWN: I'm talking about going forward. Looking backwards, what's done is done. I'm certainly glad that if these things are going to be built, which they are right now, that the jobs are in Rhode Island. We certainly need the jobs. Having said that, we need to look at what we're going to do going forward. And going forward, from a national security standpoint, spending a trillion dollars-plus of taxpayers' money to build weapons that we don't use and don't need is not the best way to conduct our national security. And it's certainly not the best economic development policy. As you know, there's a boom-bust cycle to these kinds of jobs. I saw the bust and was here in the early 90s, and it was painful and devastating for a lot of people. It's just not the smartest investment in terms of economic development. We need to invest in jobs and an economy that are stable and long-lasting.

As you've reported on, government dollars that go to the defense industry do not create as many jobs as investments in clean energy, healthcare, education, and other areas. For Rhode Island, the future of the economy is going to be and has to be being a leader in clean energy, a leader in healthcare, and a great place to start and run a small business. That's the future of the economy. Unfortunately, the current [Raimondo] administration is taking us backwards on all three of those. Look at building a fracked gas plant [in Burrillville]. If we

build a fracked gas plant, we can't be a leader in clean energy. Defunding Medicaid has gutted the hospitals, and so our healthcare system locally is on the verge of collapsing. It's essentially bankrupt and looking to sell itself to out of state corporations. And then giving one off giveaways in taxpayer dollars to massive corporations instead of helping out our small businesses, which are really the future of the economy.



We need a real economic development strategy that provides long-lasting, good, stable jobs that aren't going to crash in a boom-bust cycle and aren't going to be outsourced.

NUNES: Having interviewed a lot of elected and appointed officials in Rhode Island, I've not heard anyone say anything about nuclear weapons or Electric Boat that's remotely as skeptical or critical as what you just said. I imagine that perspective you laid out would put you very much at odds with where the Congressional Delegation is at this point—Senators Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse, and [Rep.] Jim Langevin [in particular]—in terms of their incredibly strong advocacy for building this new Columbia-class of nuclear-armed submarines.

BROWN: What about what I said was in contrast to that?

NUNES: [Jack Reed](#), as the ranking Democrat on the [Senate] Armed Services Committee, thinks that these submarines play an incredible strategic role. He thinks it's a great jobs and economic development opportunity for the state. He thinks that the defense economy, generally speaking, is a great opportunity for the state. If they speak about threats geopolitically, they see these weapons as justified.

BROWN: I think that there's not enough discussion at the state level. There's more at the national level a discussion about national security issues. But these are issues that affect everybody right here on the ground. These aren't just issues for Washington. By the way, this is why I've followed you. I think what you're doing is important, because I think people here need to be part of the discussion. There needs to be much more focus and emphasis on questions of national security, because they affect all of us.

Just to say that there are rising threats, so we need to spend a trillion dollars on nuclear weapons—that doesn't really answer the question. If political leaders and others want to make the case that we need to do this trillion dollar buildup of our nuclear arsenal, they should really explain what the missions of those weapons are going to be, because when you talk to the experts, the people who have commanded nuclear weapons strategy, they will tell you that you need no more than 900 weapons to carry out the current mission of deterrence. Not 5,000 nuclear weapons. I'd encourage anyone who wants to make the case to Rhode Islanders that they, as taxpayers, should contribute to a trillion dollar buildup of a 5,000-weapon nuclear arsenal to explain what everyone of those weapons is for. That's the kind of discussion we ought to have. Just to say there are rising threats, and we need to spend a trillion dollars to deal with them, we ought to have more than that in our dialogue.

NUNES: I've thought the same thing. It seemed to me the public was being cheated out of a robust debate on this if Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse just say, "Oh, China and Russia. Big threats. Definitely need to do this. End of discussion."

BROWN: They should also explain that nuclear weapons are not the only answers to a

threat, by the way. In fact, they're very far down the list. The United States now has conventional precision weapons that can get around the world very quickly and are very accurate in reaching their targets that do not indiscriminately kill civilians, that do not send radiation up into the environment that crosses all borders. These are weapons from the last century. We have other military strategies and responses to actual military threats.

NUNES: What do you think drives U.S. nuclear weapons policy and this modernization that Pres. Obama announced and now is being continued? If you talk to anti-war activists or anti-nuclear activists, they say it's because people, including Jack Reed, are in the pockets of General Dynamics and these other defense companies that push for this.

BROWN: Part of it is that there is a small contingent of bureaucrats at the Pentagon—they called them the nuclear priesthood [in the 1980s]—who still believe that the answer to any national security concern that we have is to have a massive nuclear arsenal. I think they're a small but influential group that uses tactics that are effective in Washington. And certainly, like everything else in our political system, there's certainly the influence of corporations, of industry, and their money plays a role in policy-making, which it shouldn't.

NUNES: I looked up campaign contributions to Gina Raimondo from General Dynamics-Electric Boat. The total was just under \$11,000, most coming after she was sworn in as governor; \$2,000 coming from the company president, Jeffrey Geiger; \$1,000 coming from the head of human resources, Maura Dunn. Do you expect that this company's going to oppose you or challenge you because of where you stand and your history of anti-nuclear advocacy?

BROWN: I don't know. [Laughs.]

NUNES: It seems like people who run for political office in this state are intimidated or at least get in line with what Electric Boat wants to happen.

BROWN: Well, all I can do is tell you what I think. One of the things that's important to me in this campaign is saying what I believe, and I think that's all I can do.

NUNES: In terms of an economic development strategy, the Congressional Delegation and Gina Raimondo say defense-based jobs are this low-hanging fruit, and we'd be foolish not to go for it. It seemed like what you were saying earlier is these are unsustainable jobs because defense spending is so fickle, and this is Cold War economy stuff we should be moving beyond. Am I summarizing what you said correctly?

BROWN: Yeah, that's right. The boom-bust problem. The poor return on the taxpayer dollar compared to investments in clean energy and healthcare, which I think are the future of the economy here, which we're now going backwards on. Building a fracked gas plant in 2018 is crazy. We've got to use what we've got. We've got a lot of wind. We've got to use that. We've got to build an economy on that and solar, and we can be leaders in the new energy economy, and that's going to be around for hundreds of years. That's going to be the world energy system, and Rhode Island could be a leader. We could produce all of our energy with local, renewable resources and export it. These are the parts of the economy we need to be investing in. Not one off [deals]—I don't even call them incentives. There's a lot of evidence that, in fact, these giveaways to corporations are not incentives at all. They're just not factors at all in their decisions about where to locate. They look at schools, roads, governance, other things.

These giveaway programs are just corporations playing states off of each other, and the taxpayers foot the bill. What do these multi-billion dollar, multi-national companies care about 10, 20, 30 million dollars? That's a drop in the bucket to them, but it's not to the taxpayers here who can barely rub two dimes together. So, same in this case [with General Dynamics-Electric Boat]. If General Dynamics needs to do some workforce training, that's fine. But they can certainly afford to do it themselves. Again, to be clear, because we need jobs here, I'm glad they're here. But I'm talking about what we do going forward. And going forward, that's not real economic development. To be strong-armed by a corporation that made \$30-billion-plus [in revenue] last year to pay for their workforce development when they could pay for it themselves is not the way to grow the economy.

The CEO of General Dynamics made [\\$21-million](#) [in 2016]. They spent, as you [reported](#), \$10-billion on stock buybacks from 2013 to 2016. They could have trained the workers themselves. That's their job. We've already paid for the jobs once, right? This is a federal contract that they have paid for by taxpayers, including Rhode Island taxpayers. If they need another subsidy from Rhode Island taxpayers, then there's something wrong with their business model; they can't run their company and train their workers.

NUNES: Which I doubt is the case.

BROWN: Exactly. So then it's just strong-arming Rhode Island taxpayers for a subsidy. [People] make the argument: Well, this is good workforce development for these workers. I'd say: Look, yes. We've got to do a better job preparing people for work in this state. But the answer to that is not to give millions of dollars to a massive corporation that doesn't need it. It's to invest in our education system. It's to invest in our schools, which are literally falling apart—the school buildings—and what's going on inside the school buildings often isn't a lot better. We're just not giving all of our kids a good education in this state.

The other option, of course, if General Dynamics is having a hard time attracting workers, is to pay them more than an average of [\\$35,000 a year](#). I mean, raise the wages. They might be able to attract some more workers. Again: \$35,000 a year average salary for the worker while the CEO's getting paid \$21-million.

You had a [report](#) a few days ago about some of the corporations that had gotten these giveaways from the taxpayers of the state [and] are paying salaries that are so low that their employees are ending up on Medicaid, and the taxpayers are then providing their healthcare. So, where's the money going to? It's going to the company, to the profits. We've seen this trend for four decades that people are working harder than ever, the companies they're working for are more productive, but the benefits of that labor and the benefits of that productivity are going almost entirely to CEOs, shareholders, investors, the very wealthy—it's not going to the workers, which is why incomes and wages have wavered between decline and stagnation. And it's why, in Rhode Island, what people earn is not close to what they have to spend on the basic things that they need: housing, college, healthcare, childcare. And that's the only economic fact that matters. They don't have more money than they used to, but everything they need costs more. So life is harder. And that hasn't happened by accident. It's happened because government, for a long time, has made a lot of decisions that have created an economy where most of the money goes to big corporations, the very wealthy, big banks, and less and less to everyone else.

NUNES: How did you arrive at these opinions you're expressing? When you were secretary of state I was in college, and I wasn't following Rhode Island government as closely back

then, so I don't know what your stances were then. These are pretty progressive ideas that you're talking about. What was your path to developing these opinions? Are they new? Did you always think this way?

BROWN: I grew up, as a kid, as an activist. My mother was part of the civil rights movement, of the anti-Vietnam War movement, and I grew up with her, going with her to all sorts of causes before I can even remember. And then, out of college, the first thing I did was to come back here and start City Year working in communities, working in schools that were disadvantaged and trying to do something to help. My basic worldview I've always had, which is that I think for a long time there have been deep trends in our state, in our country, in our world that have made life harder for a lot of people and have created a lot of problems: economical problems, social problems, social division, serious environmental problems. And my feeling is that the discussion in our political system, as we've been talking about, is just not seriously addressing these problems and not even really being truthful with the people about how serious the problems are and about what's caused the problems. I've had that viewpoint for a longtime. The particular economic critique has probably emerged throughout my life, just like everyone else, watching the way things have gone, how extreme these trends are.

By the way, Rhode Island ranks very high in inequality, so we feel all these trends: the extreme concentration of wealth, the corporate dominance and monopolization that have crushed small businesses, environmental degradation, dominance of our political system by corporations and the wealthy that have contorted policy. Rhode Island, because we're small, because we haven't really had a robust economy since the manufacturing left 70 years ago, we're more vulnerable to all these trends than a lot of other places are. So part of what I'm trying to do is to really lay out a plan of how we can solve these problems and counter these trends and build a different kind of economy here that's really for people and not for corporations, and try to relentlessly tell the truth about what's really going on and what it's going to take to solve these problems.

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