

Presidential Authority to Launch a Nuclear Attack

With a single order and acting by himself, the President of the United States has the power to dispatch dozens and possibly hundreds of nuclear missiles.

The US has approximately 2,200 nuclear warheads available for immediate use on intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarines and aboard aircraft or stored at heavy bomber bases. As far as I can determine through discussions with former officials and through reviewing non-classified materials, the President can order the deployment of these weapons without any limitation and without consultation with any other person.

The only check on this authority is the possibility that one or more individuals in the chain of command will disobey the order. Because the chain of events from authorization to launch can happen almost instantaneously, there may be very little time for intervention. Under the present "launch on warning" command system a President, advised of a possible attack, has just a few minutes to make the decision to launch, delay or stand down. A launch could be authorized even if there is no warning of an actual, suspected or impending attack.

There are carefully devised safeguards in place to prevent accidental or unauthorized use of these weapons but the authority of the President appears to be unlimited. In the 1960's (and possibly even now) that authority was actually "pre-delegated" under specified emergency conditions to military commanders so that they could use pre-distributed authorization codes to order a rapid nuclear response to an attack.

It is marginally, if cold-bloodedly, comforting to think that the lives lost will be somewhere else, but what if this single command could bring destruction to Chicago, Charlotte or Cheyenne or to dozens of other US cities large or small? Our own self interest assigns maximum value to our own lives and to the lives of those close to us, but is a human life here really worth more than a human life somewhere else?

Of course, any attack initiated by us is very likely to bring secondary effects and retaliation to the continental US. Airborne radioactive smoke, soot and dust could sweep quickly across continents and back to us. Retaliation by those we target could result in an unlimited and uncontrolled escalation.

Throughout our history, Presidents have become physically incapacitated. President Woodrow Wilson had two disabling strokes in 1919 and his disability was shielded by his wife and close advisors. His Vice President was not allowed to visit him until their last day in office. Several Presidents have had fatal heart attacks and strokes. President John Kennedy was sometimes heavily medicated due to various infirmities and several of our former presidents were, on occasion, intemperate drinkers. President Reagan was seriously wounded in an assassination attempt but remained officially in charge. After he left office, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and there is no way of knowing whether the disease began while he was still in office.

Presidents, like the rest of us, get tired, angry, ill, and depressed. They can be impaired by medication or alcohol. Illnesses can be stealthy like Alzheimer's or a brain tumor or insanity; there is sometimes no clear dividing line between normal and impaired. Since we are flesh and blood, our brains operating through chemical and electrical synapses and our genetic structure the result of continuing evolution, we cannot claim to be wholly logical or rational. Violence and aggression may be built into our design.

It seems self evident that no single person should have the power to order massive and instantaneous worldwide loss of life. Other nuclear nations have similarly flawed systems of nuclear authorization which need revision to provide additional safeguards. Clearly, any changes in these systems will have to be initiated and led by the United States. At the same time, no one nation, including our own, wants to be the first to reduce its ability to respond quickly to an attack.

Our own system was carefully constructed at the dawn of the nuclear age to deal with the exigencies of the Cold War. It may or may not have been

appropriate then. Half a century later, it is time for us to rethink these policies.

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