

Nuclear Codes

The recent Nuclear Security Summit and President Obama's expressed concerns about the possibility of having a person in the Oval Office who does not "know very much about foreign policy or nuclear policy" spotlights the extraordinary destructive power we give to our President.

Is this then an opportune time to reconsider the authority to dispatch our nuclear weapons?

Although much of the information is classified, it appears that the President has the sole authority to order nuclear weapons to be launched. The technical systems in place, under what is termed a two-man rule, require that there be a secondary confirmation by the Secretary of Defense (who is a link in the President's military "chain of command" and is appointed by the President) before the actual machinery is set in motion.

For many years we had a policy that we would launch our weapons upon warning of an attack. In 1957, some military commanders were even given "pre-authorization" allowing them to dispatch nuclear weapons without communication with the President in the event of a surprise attack. The "launch on warning" policy was changed in 1997 to one of retaliation after confirming that we are under nuclear attack, probably including actual detonations on our own soil. Accordingly, under present policy, there is some time available at the time of an attack to decide whether to use nuclear weapons. Since the deterrent effect of our arsenal of nuclear weapons is based on assured retaliation, then there may no longer be a need to be organized for immediate or near immediate retaliation.

If there is even a slight possibility that we might elect to the Presidency a person who might be impulsive and unpredictable, is it sound policy to entrust that person with the nuclear codes? Even under the best of circumstances, 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.

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. When President Roosevelt was re-elected in 1944 it appears

that he had severely elevated blood pressure, congestive heart disease and possibly cancer, leading to his death in April of 1945. 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.

When we discuss the technical details of our authorization system, it is easy to forget or downplay the countless lives at stake. A single one megaton weapon (about 70 times as destructive as the rudimentary bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) detonated in a city center creates an instantaneous crater 300 feet deep and 1,200 feet in diameter. A fireball more than one half mile in diameter is created, quickly growing to up to three miles in diameter. The resulting blast wave creates a fire and wind storm covering a wide area with accompanying deadly radiation. The US has dozens of bombs of this size within the arsenal of approximately 2,200 "operationally deployed strategic warheads," the number allowed under the 2002 Moscow Treaty. Our present system puts millions and possibly hundreds of millions of precious lives in the hands of one or two individuals.

In fact, it is not possible to bring destruction on this scale to others elsewhere without bringing devastation to ourselves. Massive amounts of airborne radioactive smoke, soot and dust could sweep quickly across continents and back to us. Retaliation by those we target is likely to bring fireballs and devastation home in an unlimited and uncontrolled escalation. This is an infinitesimally greater threat to our lives than the terrorists who concern us now. Cyril Connolly, in his collection of essays entitled The Unquiet Grave, written in 1944 before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, wrote: "*Civilization is maintained . . . in a small number of places and we need only some bombs and a few prisons to blot it out altogether.*"

If initiation of nuclear warfare or a nuclear response should not be in the hands of a president or a military chain of command, then who should be empowered to make such a decision?

A system needs to be devised where there is civilian control of the nuclear codes. There would need to be more than two or three individuals involved. It should probably involve the President and a pre-ranked group selected from the Senate and the Judiciary. By pre-ranked we mean that if individual A cannot be contacted, then individual B would be substituted and so forth. If response time is no longer a critical factor, then immediate access to the nuclear codes also becomes less important.

Other nuclear nations have similarly flawed systems of nuclear authorization which also need revision to provide additional safeguards. Our power is magnitudes greater so it is appropriate for us to take the lead in designing a revised control system which will make all of us more safe.

Having completed seventy years since the last and only hostile use of nuclear weapons there is an inevitable feeling of complacency which grows as the years extend. Carlo Rovelli in Seven Brief Lessons on Physics gives us a prescient warning: *“We are perhaps the only species on earth to be conscious of the inevitability of our individual mortality. I fear that soon we shall also have to become the only species that will knowingly watch the coming of its own collective demise, or at least the demise of its civilization.”*

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