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Keeping Presidents in the Nuclear Dark: The SIOP Option that Wasn't

Bruce G. Blair, Ph.D., President

ONE OF THE MOST RAREFIED experiences of a newly installed president is his receiving of the “nuclear football” conferring the right to order the use of nuclear weapons in defense of the American national interest. Few, if any, presidents have had a firm grip on the “football” however, as all U.S. presidents receive a misleading briefing on their nuclear weapons rights and responsibilities, and options.

From the time of this highly classified orientation briefing given immediately upon his assumption of the presidency through the end of his tenure, a president is made to believe that he is the nuclear quarterback in control of the nuclear football and would call the shots in the event of a nuclear showdown or enemy missile attack. In the latter case, the short flight time of missiles launched from half way around the

planet – 30 minutes from Russia to the American heartland – or from submarines lurking off the U.S. coasts – 10 to 15 minutes to Washington, D.C. – puts the president in the hot seat. He must evaluate early warning information, weigh his response options, and render a decision within minutes and seconds.

Given the awesome responsibility and authority of the commander

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Beware the Phony Defense Budget Prognosticators

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IN FEBRUARY 2004 the Bush administration rolled out its fiscal year 2005 defense budget. Many of the things journalists will write about it will be – and already have been – confusing, if not misleading, and many of the prognostications from Capitol Hill, the Pentagon and the presidential candidates will be quite phony.

The press started out with a literal confusion of numbers. A comparison across different newspaper articles showed that they cannot agree on the levels for the new budget, or even the old one. For fiscal year 2004, some

said it was set at \$380 billion, others that it was \$400 billion, and still others \$462 billion. They are all correct: the Department of Defense (DoD) spent \$380 billion for peacetime operations; adding Department of Energy and other non-Pentagon defense spending brought it to \$400 billion; and with Iraq and Afghanistan operations – that is, to actually use our forces – it cost a grand total of \$462 billion. However, almost none of the articles explained these differences.

The press sows more chaos with what articles say is “real” (i.e. infla-

tion neutral) growth in the defense budget from 2004 to 2005. Few of those calculations across papers will agree. Last year, *The Washington Post* had it at 4.4 percent, *The Wall Street Journal* had it at 4.2 percent, Bloomberg news service had it at 3.8 percent, and a well-distributed trade journal, *Defense News*, had it at 6.5 percent. This year, *The Washington Post* has already had it at both 5.7 percent and 7.9 percent. Don't bother paying much attention.

First, we may not even know the size of the old 2004 defense budget,

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in chief in a situation of apparent incoming nuclear missiles, one can only hope for a deliberate, rational act of leadership and prudence that impels a president to refrain from ordering retaliation in the event of a false alarm triggered by faulty sensors or human error.

What is misleading about the briefing is that the president's supporting command system is not ac-

tually geared to withhold retaliation in the event of enemy missile attack, real or apparent. It is so greased for the rapid release of U.S. missiles by the thousands upon the receipt of attack indications from early warning satellites and ground radar that the president's options are not all created equal. The bias in favor of launch on electronic warning is so powerful that it would take enormously more presidential will to withhold an attack than to authorize it. The option to "ride out" the

onslaught and then take stock of the proper course of action exists only on paper. That is what presidents never learn during their tenures. Their real control is illusory. What's more, the truth has been kept from the presidents intentionally.

Military nuclear commanders designed the hardware and procedures of emergency decision-making to ensure that no president would actually deliberately opt to ride out a Soviet nuclear attack, even though U.S. nuclear policy endorsed

Another Episode: The Case of the Missing "Permissive Action Links"

Last January, I asked Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, what he believed back in the 1960s was the status of technical locks on the Minuteman intercontinental missiles. These long-range nuclear-tipped missiles first came on line during the Cuban missile crisis and grew to a force of 1,000 during the McNamara years – the backbone of the U.S. strategic deterrent through the late 1960s. McNamara replied, in his trademark, assertively confident manner that he personally saw to it that these special locks (known as "Permissive Action Links") were installed on the Minuteman force, and that he regarded them as essential to strict central control and preventing unauthorized launch.

When the history of the nuclear Cold War is finally comprehensively written, this McNamara vignette will be one of a long litany of items pointing to the ignorance of presidents and defense secretaries and other nuclear security officials about the true state of nuclear affairs during their time in the saddle. What I then told McNamara about his vitally important locks elicited this response: "I am shocked, absolutely shocked and outraged. Who the hell authorized that?" What he had just learned from me was that the locks had been installed, but everyone knew the combination.

The Strategic Air Command (SAC) in Omaha quietly decided to set the "locks" to all zeros in

order to circumvent this safeguard. During the early to mid-1970s, during my stint as a Minuteman launch officer, they still had not been changed. Our launch checklist in fact instructed us, the firing crew, to double-check the locking panel in our underground launch bunker to ensure that no digits other than zero had been inadvertently dialed into the panel. SAC remained far less concerned about unauthorized launches than about the potential of these safeguards to interfere with the implementation of wartime launch orders. And so the "secret unlock code" during the height of the nuclear crises of the Cold War remained constant at 00000000.

After leaving the Air Force in 1974, I pressed the service, initially by letters addressed to it and then through congressional intermediaries, to consider a range of terrorist scenarios in which these locks could serve as crucial barriers against the unauthorized seizure of launch control over Minuteman missiles. In 1977, I co-authored (with Garry Brewer) an article entitled "The Terrorist Threat to World Nuclear Programs" in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* in which I laid out the case for taking this threat more seriously and suggesting remedial measures including, first and foremost, activating those McNamara locks that apparently he and presidents presumed had already been activated.

The locks were activated in 1977.

second-strike retaliation – assured destruction – as the essential element of U.S. deterrent strategy. While the rhetoric of top civilian officials, the theories of academics, the media accounts, and the debates on Capitol Hill revolved around the necessity and sufficiency of being able to retaliate massively after absorbing a full-scale Soviet strike, the nuclear commanders had long since jettisoned this principle. They knew full well that the U.S. nuclear command system would collapse under the weight of such a Soviet first strike, and that their ability to carry out their war plan (the Single Integrated Operational Plan, or SIOP) and achieve the high level of destruction of Soviet military and industrial facilities required by the war plan (which they themselves set at such high levels) depended completely on not waiting more than a few minutes before initiating a large-scale counterattack. Riding out was not a practical choice in the real world, and so the operational system was geared so that presidential approval to unleash U.S. strategic forces before the first incoming Soviet missile reached America would be obtained. And if for some reason timely presidential authorization could not be secured, launch authority quickly cascaded down the military chain of command to ensure that U.S. missiles did not remain sitting ducks for very long.

Presidents were innocent victims of the prevailing overarching principle of deterrence based on second-strike retaliation, never the wiser to the thorough-going engineering of the complex early warning and command system operations so as to deny them any semblance of wartime options aligned with that

very principle. Almost no senior civilian official, let alone president, ever caught on to the egregious deception that kept them in the dark about their true options in wartime. One exception was former Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga. His close scrutiny of nuclear affairs, combined with a keen intellect, led him to realize that the United States long ago adopted a strategy of launch on warning

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(LOW) – that is ordering and carrying out U.S. missile launches after early warning sensors indicate an incoming nuclear missile strike but before enemy missiles hit their targets on American soil. He came to this realization quite independently, without helpful testimony from strategic nuclear commanders who doggedly denied their reliance on LOW in public, and virtually all private, fora. The official dogma they expressed was that the United States had the capability to launch on warning and a potential adversary should not assume that a U.S. attack would be ridden out, but that the United States did not rely

on LOW. For Nunn, however, it was clear that the apparatus of nuclear control and release was geared to do just that. If it looked, sounded, and walked like a LOW duck, then call it a LOW duck. Nunn declared it a duck, understood that this duck carried serious risks of starting a nuclear war by accident, and proceeded to call for a relaxation of the nuclear hair-trigger on both U.S. and Russian missiles in order to alleviate this danger.

Nunn almost certainly did not fully grasp the commitment to LOW embodied in the nuclear operational world, however. Only the most senior nuclear generals understood the imperative, and they simply refused to admit it, owing to their justifiable apprehension that such an admission would stir enormous public controversy and almost certainly force them to revise operational practices in ways that would put the viability of the U.S. SIOP in jeopardy.

My efforts to expose the hair-trigger status of U.S. and Russian nuclear forces and their reliance on LOW have been met with vigorous denials from the nuclear brass. The efforts have been well-grounded in personal experience, confidences with senior U.S. nuclear generals, facts and analysis assembled in articles and books – notably, *Strategic Command and Control* (Brookings, 1985), *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Brookings, 1993), and *Global Zero Alert for Nuclear Forces* (Brookings, 1995). But neither this body of work nor any other clarion call from any quarter succeeded in engendering a national debate and reckoning. And the nuclear brass never stepped forward to testify candidly about the true state of affairs – about the

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(nicknamed Rods from God) designed to burst from space into the atmosphere at high speeds and slam into deeply buried bunkers. Far from being aimed solely at the protection of U.S. space capabilities, such weapons are instead intended for offensive, first-strike missions.

Tauscher is right to be concerned about the wisdom of the Air Force plans. U.S. unilateral weaponization of space is likely to set off a space arms race that in the long run will undercut, rather than enhance, U.S. national security and global stability. Up to now, most nations of the

world – with the exception of the United States – have expressed a desire to ban space weapons under an international treaty. The U.S. military’s obvious interest in space weapons, however, has led some countries, such as China and India, to consider countering with their own anti-space programs.

A space arms race would have no true winners. Launching and maintaining satellites and spacecraft is exorbitantly expensive. Satellites also are inherently vulnerable; therefore space-based weapons would be high-value, “use them or lose them”

assets – resulting in itchy trigger fingers during a crisis. Indeed, past Pentagon war games have found that use of space weapons often led to rapid escalation of hostilities – in some cases straight to all-out nuclear war.

Finally, destroying satellites will create debris, already recognized by the international space community as a threat to future safe operations in space. Tauscher has taken a first step toward forcing the “space hawks” in the Bush administration to explain their misguided goal of space domination. Here’s hoping others in Congress will follow her lead. ■

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illusory nuclear flexibility of the president.

To his great credit, one senior general spoke candidly of the matter soon after retiring from his exalted position as commander in chief of the Strategic Command in 1994. Former Air Force Gen. George Lee Butler gave an interview in which the truth was finally laid bare for all to read. Here are some excerpts:

“Part of the insidiousness of the evolution of this system ... is the unfortunate fact that, whatever might have been *intended* by the policymakers (who, incidentally, had very little insight into the mechanisms that underpinned the simple words that floated onto a blank page at the level of the White House), *in reality*, at the operational level, the requirements of deterrence proved impracticable. ... The consequence was a move in practice to a system structured to drive the president invariably toward a decision to launch under attack. ... Launch under attack means that

you believe you have incontrovertible proof that warheads actually are on the way. ... Our policy was premised on being able to accept the first wave of attacks. We never said publicly that we were committed to launch on warning or launch under attack. Yet at the operational level it was never accepted that if the presidential decisions went to a certain tick of the clock, we would lose a major portion of our forces. ... Notwithstanding the intention of deterrence as it is expressed at the *policy* level – as it is declared and written down – at the level of *operations* those intentions got turned on their head, as the people who are responsible for actually devising the war plan faced the dilemmas and blind alleys of concrete practice. Those mattered absolutely to the people who had to sit down and try to frame the detailed guidance to exact destruction of 80 percent of the adversary’s nuclear forces. When they realized that they could not in fact assure those levels of damage if the president chose to ride out an attack, what then did they do? They built a construct that powerfully biased the

president’s decision process toward launch *before* the arrival of the first enemy warhead.” (Jonathan Schell, *The Gift of Time*, Metropolitan Books, 1998, pp. 191-194).

This admission should go down in the annals of nuclear truth-in-packaging, but I am afraid that no president is reading the fine print on the label of his “nuclear football.” Maybe hardly anybody cares any more about this state of affairs. But they should care, because the nuclear hair-trigger constitutes a continuing danger of apocalyptic proportions, and the folks behind the scenes who quietly turn high-level policy intention on its head, still cannot immunize their launch on warning configured system from the confusion and false alarms that could trigger an inadvertent nuclear exchange. The early warning and command systems on both sides are inherently susceptible to mistakes and technical malfunctions, and serious false alarms of incoming nuclear strikes have occurred on both sides since the official end of the Cold War. Let the holders of the nuclear footballs beware. ■

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