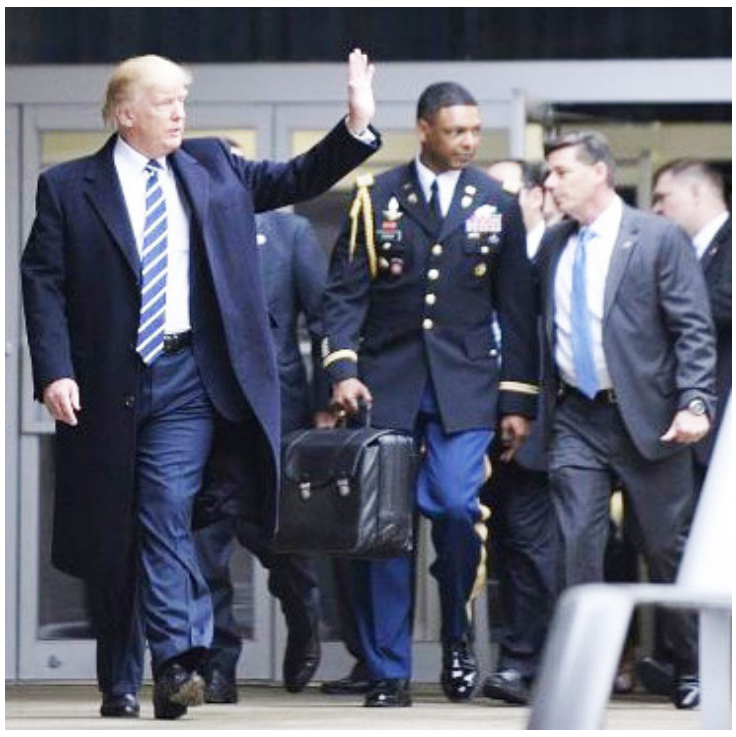
What Does It Mean to Have Trump's Finger on the Nuclear Button?

A nuclear launch expert plays out various scenarios.

By Bruce Blair

Donald Trump, Dec. 15, 2015: "The biggest problem we have is nuclear; nuclear proliferation, and having some maniac, some madman go out and get a nuclear weapon. That's in my opinion that is the single biggest problem that our country faces right now."…



"The nuclear football," pictured being carried by an aide Feb. 12, never leaves the president's side. President Obama was one among millions who were mortified at the thought of Trump gaining control of nuclear war codes. At a rally last October, Obama said it was a terrible prospect. "How can you trust him with the nuclear codes? You can't do it," Obama said, Inquisitr.com reported Jan. 26, 2017.

To a degree we haven't seen, perhaps since the candidacy of Senator Barry Goldwater in 1964, the question of Donald Trump's temperament and judgment on matters of war and peace is stirring attention—and trepidation—particularly when the subject of nuclear weapons comes up. Some people believe that Trump himself is the maniac, the madman with nukes that appears in Trump's own worst nightmare.…

In the atomic age, when decisions must be made very quickly, the presidency has evolved into something akin to a nuclear monarchy. With a single phone call, the commander in chief has virtually unlimited power to rain down nuclear weapons on any adversarial regime and country at any time. You might imagine this awesome executive power would be hamstrung with checks and balances, but by law, custom and congressional deference there may be no responsibility where the president has more absolute control. There is no advice and consent by the Senate. There is no second-guessing by the Supreme Court.…

The "nuclear button" is a metaphor for a complex apparatus that has the president's brain at its apex. The image of a commander-in-chief simply pressing a button captures none of the machinery, people, and procedures designed to inform the president and translate his or her decisions into coherent action. Although it remains shrouded in secrecy, we actually know a great deal about it, beginning with the president's first task of opening the "nuclear suitcase" in an emergency to review his nuclear attack options.…

Let us say the president is awakened in the middle of the night (the proverbial 3 a.m. phone call) by his... top nuclear adviser and told of an incoming nuclear strike. Since the flight time of missiles fired from launch stations in Russia or China to the White House is 30 minutes, and 12 minutes or less for missiles fired from submarines lurking in the Western Atlantic Ocean… the steadiness and brainpower of the president in such circumstances are serious questions indeed.…

This call has never happened.… The closest we came ... occurred in 1979, when the consoles at our early-warning hub in Colorado lit up with indications of a large-scale Soviet missile attack. President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, received back-to-back calls in the middle of the night informing him of the imminent nuclear destruction of the United States. The second call reported an all-out attack. Brzezinski was seconds away from waking Carter to pass on the dreadful news and convince him of the need to order retaliation without delay (within a six-minute deadline). Brzezinski was sure the end was near.

Just before he picked up the phone to call Carter, Brzezinski received a third call, this time canceling the alarm. It was a mistake caused by human and technical error. A training tape simulating an all-out Soviet attack had inadvertently slipped into the actual real-time attack early warning network. The impending nuclear holocaust was a mirage that confused the duty crew. (They were fired for taking eight minutes instead of the required three minutes to declare their degree of confidence that an attack against North America was underway.)

How would ... President Trump behave under such duress, informed of the attack and the imminent destruction of the nation's capital and himself? He would have only a few minutes to consider the reliability of the attack report and decide whether and how to retaliate. If the attack is real, and he hesitates, a president will likely be killed and the chain of command decapitated, perhaps permanently. …

The only real protection against nuclear disaster is total elimination of nuclear weapons.…

—Bruce Blair is a nuclear security expert and a research scholar at the Program on Science and Global Security at Princeton. This excerpt is from a much longer article in* Politico, *June 11, 2016. To see the full piece, and an analysis of statements made by Trump, visit nukewatchinfo.org, and link to: http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/06/2016-donald-trump-nuclear-weapons-missiles-nukes-button-launch-foreign-policy-213955.

Bomb Tweeting While the World "Comes to its Senses"

Commentary

When Donald Trump "Tweeted" something about nuclear weapons last December 23, he was deliberately trivializing the Bomb to make it appear small, the way he makes light of targeting civilians, torturing suspects, deporting millions, shooting someone in the street, beating up critics, and sexual assault. About the nuclear arsenal, the chief Tweeter said, "The US must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes."

Trump appears unaware of either the "strength" of the US arsenal, or that much of the world actually is coming to its senses regarding nuclear weapons. Mr. Trump either knows almost nothing about nuclear weapons—and broadcasts nonsense about them—or he wants to distract attention from current progress being made toward their abolition, or both.

The same day as his H-bomb screed, Dec. 23, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) overwhelmingly approved a groundbraking resolution to begin negotiations in 2017 on a treaty banning nuclear weapons. The vote follows the October 2016 decision by the UNGA First Committee to begin work on the new treaty—a resolution that was opposed by the Obama Administration and several other nuclear-armed governments.

The UN nuclear weapons "treaty ban" talks will proceed in two sessions: March 27 to 31; and June 15 to July 7. During a UN budget committee meeting last December, the US delegation under Obama fought against a funding request for the planned four weeks of negotiations. But under pressure from ban proponents Austria, Brazil, Ireland, Mexico, Nigeria and South Africa, the US withdrew its opposition and the funding was approved.

The Dec. 23 UNGA resolution passed 113 to 35. Putting the lie to Mr. Obama's 2009 promise that, "the United States will take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons," US delegate Samantha Power voted *against* the resolution. So did nuclear-armed England, France, Russia, and Israel. But not every nuclear state parroted Obama's obstructionism. US partners India and Pakistan abstained, as did China. North Korea and Iran voted *in favor*. Saudi Arabia bucked pressure from the US, its principle arms supplier, and voted *Yes*. Even Italy voted *Yes*, despite its being a NATO partner and home to about 80 US B61 H-bombs, still deployed at two of its air force bases.

The US government knows a treaty ban will demolish the manufactured perception that nuclear weapons are legitimate, while already banned landmines, gas, poison, biological and cluster munitions are not. An international ban would also make it politically embarrassing, and legally suspect, for the US and NATO to continue their nuclear war planning.

In a leaked document sent to NATO members in October—before the UNGA First Committee decision—the US urged both opposition to the resolution and a boycott of the negotiations. US marching orders were disobeyed by certain allies and partners including The Netherlands, India, and Pakistan—which all abstained, and by Italy which voted *Yes*.

The "capability" of the US nuclear arsenal is already redundant, according to Sec. of Defense Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis. In January 2015, Mattis denigraded the Air Force's 450 land-based missiles, telling the Senate Armed Services Committee, "You should ask: 'Is it time to reduce the triad … removing the land-based missiles?'" Mattis is friends with former Defense Secretary William Perry who has repeatedly called for eliminating the same missiles. They should be scrapped, Perry says, because "They're not needed." The same position is advocated by Gen. James Cartwright, a former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a former commander of US nuclear forces, and by Republican Senator and later Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel.

To "greatly strengthen and expand" the indiscriminate power of H-bombs is strategically irrational, economically bankrupting, and environmentally self-destructive. The Nobel Prize-winning Physicians for Social Responsibility, which has studied the subject for four decades, reported in 2014 that just 100 nuclear warheads—if detonated—could plunge the Earth into smoke-shrouded darkness long enough to destroy agriculture and starve billions of people to death. The United States has 7,000 warheads, or 70 times the "strength" to do ourselves in. Trump would do better to greatly strengthen and expand his understanding of nuclear madness. ***—JL***

"You know what uranium is, right? It's this thing called nuclear weapons, and other things, like lots of things are done with uranium, including bad things."

—Donald Trump

Additional Resources

*** Beyond Nuclear**, 6930 Carroll Ave., #400, Takoma Park, MD 20912; 301-270-2209, info@beyondnuclear.org; beyondnuclear.org

*** CND, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament**, 162 Holloway Road, London N7 8DQ; 020-7700-2393; enquiries@cndnuk.org; cnduk.org

*** Fairewinds Energy Education**, 70 S. Winooski Ave. #289, Burlington, VT 05401; Email: contact@fairewinds.org; 802-865-9933; www.fairewinds.org

*** GAAA, Nonviolent Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weaons**, Haubmannstr.6, 70188 Stuttgart, Germany; 0711-215-5112; mariongaaa@gmx.de; www.gaaa.org

*** Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy**, 866 UN Plaza, Suite 4050, New York, NY 10017-1936 USA; 212-818-1861

*** Nuclear Watch New Mexico**, N902 W. Alameda, #325, Sante Fe, NM 87501; 505-989-7342; info@nukewatch.org; nukewatch.org (they got there first)

*** Physicians for Social Responsibility**, 1111 14th St., NW, #700, Washington, DC, 20005; 202-667-4260; psrnatl@psr.org; psr.org

*** Union of Concerned Scientists**, 2 Brattle Square, Cambridge MA 02138-3780; 617-547-5552; usc.org