The President and the bomb

by Alex Wellerstein

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I'm in the process of writing up something more substantial about nuclear weapons and the 2016 Presidential election, but I keep getting asked one thing repeatedly both in person, over e-mail, and online: "*Are there any checks in place to keep the US President from starting a nuclear war?*"

What's amazing about this question, really, is how seriously it *misunderstands* the logic of the US command and control system. It gets it *exactly* backwards.

A recent Tweet by the USAF expresses US nuclear doctrine in a nutshell: "Always on the ready is an understatement when you are providing #POTUS with the ability to launch ICBMs." (November 17, 2016)

The entire point of the US command and control system is to guarantee that *the President and only the President* is capable of authorizing nuclear war *whenever he needs to*. It is about enabling the President's power, not checking or restricting him. As former Vice President Dick Cheney put it in 2008:

> "The president of the United States now for 50 years is followed at all times, 24 hours a day, by a military aide carrying a football that contains the nuclear codes that he would use and be authorized to use in the event of a nuclear attack on the United States.
>
> "He could launch the kind of devastating attack the world has never seen. He doesn't have to check with anybody, he doesn't have to call Congress, he doesn't have to check with the courts."

This isn't new; it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone. This has been discussed since the 1940s. And yet, people today seem rather shocked to hear it, even very educated people.

To be sure, the official doctrine that I have seen on the Nuclear Command Authority implies that the President should be given as much advice as possible from the military, the Department of Defense, and so on. But nothing I have seen suggests that this is any more than advisory — and the entire system is set up so that once the President's order is verified and authenticated, there are meant to be only minutes until launch.

It isn't entirely intuitive — why the President, and not someone else, or some combination of people? Why not have some kind of "two-man rule," whereby two top political figures were required to sign off on the use before it happened? The two-man rule is required for commanders to authorize nuclear launches, so why not the Commander in Chief?

One can tell that the relationship between General Groves (left) and David Lilienthal (right) was not exactly the smoothest. Photo by Ed Westcott.

To understand why this is, you have to go back and look at the history of how this doctrine came about. Today we tend to discuss this in terms of the speed in which a retaliation would be necessary in the event of a crisis, but the debate wasn't originally about expediency at all, but about an understanding of Constitutional power and the inherently political nature of the bomb. I see the debate about the (un-)targeting of Kyoto, in mid-1945, as the first place where some of these questions started to get worked out. Presidents generally do not pick targets in war. That's a general's job. (Like all things in history, there have, of course, been exceptions.) But when it came to the atomic bomb, the civilian branch of the executive government (personified here by the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson), demanded veto power over the targets. The military (here, General Leslie Groves) pushed back, asserting that this was a military matter. Stimson insisted, and eventually got the President's personal ear on the matter, and that was that. Truman, for his part, while he did not authorize the actual bombing in any explicit way (he was shown the bombing order, but he did not issue it nor was his approval required, though he could have vetoed it), did, on August 10th, re-assert nuclear authority by prohibiting future bombing activity without his explicit permission.

From that point forward, the President made very explicit that his office was in charge of the atomic bomb and its uses, not the military. It was not a "military weapon," which is to say, it was an inherently *political* weapon, one that needed to be handled by that most inherently *political* office, the Presidency. This became the framework for

talking about domestic control over nuclear weapons in the 1940s, the civilian vs. military split. It was believed that only an elected civilian could make the call for this of all weapons. Truman himself put it to David Lilienthal in 1948:

> "I don't think we ought to use this thing unless we absolutely have to. It is a terrible thing to order the use of something that, that is so terribly destructive, destructive beyond anything we have ever had. You have got to understand that this isn't a military weapon. It is used to wipe out women and children and unarmed people, and not for military uses. So we have got to treat this thing differently from rifles and cannons and ordinary things like that."

In the early days, this civilian-military split was actually enforced at a physical level, with the non-nuclear parts of the weapons kept by the military, and the nuclear parts (the pits) kept by the civilian Atomic Energy Commission. By the end of the Eisenhower administration, changes in doctrine, technology (sealed-pit weapons), and fears (e.g., a Soviet "sneak attack") had led to 90% of the nuclear weapons transferred into the hands of the military, making the civilian-military distinction a somewhat theoretical one. Eisenhower also "pre-delegated" the authority to start nuclear war to several military commanders on the front lines, on the idea that they would not have time to call back to Washington should Soviet tanks start pouring into Western Europe. (So while the President is the only person who can authorize a nuclear attack, he can also *extend* that authority to others if he deems it necessary.)

A retired "nuclear football" suitcase, from which the President can authorize a nuclear attack.
Photo credit: Smithsonian Institute/Jamie Chung

The Kennedy administration, looking to assert more positive control over the beginning of a nuclear conflict (especially after the Cuban Missile Crisis, which raised the real possibility of a low-level misunderstanding "escalating" in times of uncertainty), requiring the weapons themselves to have sophisticated electronic controls (Permissive Action Links) that would prevent anyone without a coded authorization to use them. There is more to these stories, but I just want to illustrate a bit of what the "control" debate was really about: making sure the President, *and only the President*, was ultimately the one making decisions about the bomb.

I have been asked: would the officer carrying the "football" actually go forward with a nuclear attack, especially if it seems heedless or uncalled for? (The "nuclear football" is the special computer that, once the nuclear "codes" are inputted into it,

somehow electronically starts the sequence of events that leads to the weapons being used.) Which I find lovably optimistic. The entire *job* of the person carrying the football is to enable the President to launch a nuclear attack. They would not presume to know the "big picture" of why the President was doing it — they are not a high-level military or policymaker. They are going to do their job; it is what they were chosen to do.

Would the military second-guess the President, and override the order? I mean, anything is possible — this has just never happened before, so who knows. But I am dubious. In 1973, Major Harold Hering was *fired* for asking, "How can I know that an order I receive to launch my missiles came from a sane president?" Not because it is a fireable offensive to imply that the President might not, at all times, be entirely capable of making such an order, but because to start to question *that order* would mean to put the entire credibility of the nuclear deterrent at risk. *The entire logic of the system is that the President's will on this point must be authoritative*. If people start second-guessing orders, the entire strategic artifice breaks down.

So is there any check on the President's power to use nuclear weapons? Well, technically the US election process *is meant to be that check* — don't elect people you don't trust with the unilateral authority to use nuclear weapons. And this, indeed, has been a theme in numerous US elections, including the most recent one. It is one issue among many, of course.

Do I personally worry about an unhinged, unthoughtful President using nuclear weapons heedlessly? Sure, to some degree. But not as much as I worry about other damage that such a President will do to the country and the world (the environment, economy, social fabric, international order, and human rights are higher on my list of concerns at the moment). Which is to say, it's on *the list* of things one might worry about (for any President, but certainly the next one), but it's not my *top worry*. Ultimately I do have some faith, perhaps unearned, that even someone who is woefully under-educated about world affairs, strategic logic, and so on, will come to understand rather rapidly that it is *in the United States' best interests* not to break the nuclear taboo.

The United States benefits from the taboo disproportionately: should the threshold for nuclear use be lowered, we would be the ones who would suffer the most for it, because we tend to put our cities and military forces and everything else in centralized, easy-to-take-out-with-a-nuke sorts of arrangements, and because we enjoy a powerful conventional military power as well. We have the *luxury* of a nuclear taboo, in other words: we don't have to use nukes to get what we want, and indeed in many situations nukes are just not as useful as they might at first appear.

So only a true idiot would think that using nukes foolishly would actually be a useful thing, aside from the collateral damage, moral issues, and so on. Take from that what you will.