

## Letter to Senator Corker re Presidential Authority to Launch Nuclear Weapons

Written by John Hallam  
Monday, 13 November 2017 14:12 -

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PEOPLE FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT  
HUMAN SURVIVAL PROJECT

ATTN SENATOR BOB CORKER

RE: HEARINGS ON PRESIDENTIAL AUTHORITY TO LAUNCH NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Senator Bob Corker  
cc  
Ranking member of Foreign Relations Cttee  
Senate Subcommittee on Strategic Forces  
Senator Markey  
Rep. Richard Lieu

Dear Senator Bob Corker:

I am writing to welcome the hearings you have announced to review Presidential authority to launch nuclear weapons.

In 2007, I was instrumental in persuading the United Nations General Assembly to adopt a resolution, entitled 'Operational Readiness of Nuclear Weapon Systems' that urged a lowering in the alert status of nuclear weapon systems, in both the US and Russia, in order to allow time for rational decision-making to take place. That resolution has been adopted a number of times by the UN General Assembly, most recently in 2016, with over 160 governments voting in its favor. Both the US and Russia (in my view obviously, misguidedly) vote against it.

The issues of Presidential nuclear decision-making authority, and of Presidential nuclear decision-making time, are bound together. The current US Presidential nuclear decision-making framework is optimized to make decisions speedily: In fact, far too speedily. Decisions, at least on the potential use of the United States silo-based Minuteman force, must in principle be made sufficiently quickly to allow that force to be launched before it is hit by incoming missiles whose flight time (from Russia it is presumed) is of the order of 30 minutes. Given the time taken to detect a launch, evaluate whether it is likely to be a false alarm, alert POTUS, and to execute launch procedures, effectively forces decisions to be made (even if the decision is not to launch because we are uncertain if the incoming strike is in fact real), within a highly compressed timeframe. The same considerations apply (and even more so) to Russian silo-based nuclear forces.

Making decisions within such a highly compressed time-frame is the reason the US has chosen the decision-making structure that it has. The compressed time-frame also makes rational decision-making virtually impossible: All that even the most rational, stable, individual can ever possibly do in such limited time is to go through a checklist – or else to announce that s/he is simply not ever going to make a decision within that timeframe because it cannot be

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done.

The US has in the past come frighteningly close to initiating the apocalypse by computer error on a number of occasions, notably in the early 1980s. Russia has had similar experiences. The most well-known of these was on Sept 26th 1983, when Colonel Stanislav Petrov 'saved the world' by being skeptical of the information his computer was giving him and deciding to wait for radar confirmation of a US launch. This proved to be the right decision.

A single individual – no matter who that might be – having the sole authority in which to launch a number of thousands of nuclear warheads with a limited time for reflection and information gathering, and based on information that may well be plain wrong, is a recipe for global catastrophe.

The US should allow greater decision-making time either by making its ICBM force invulnerable to attack (incredibly difficult), or by scrapping it entirely and relying solely on its air-force and submarine force.

It should also do as a number of other nuclear-armed governments including possibly Russia have done, and require input from at least TWO senior individuals with nuclear briefcases in order to authorize a launch.

The adoption of 'No first use' policies would also make a launch at the whim of a specific individual, no matter whom, impossible though it might not eliminate the danger of a launch based on false alarm.

Of course, if nuclear weapons were abolished because they are illegal (as indeed they are under the commonly accepted laws of war, as well as under the Ban Treaty that the US refuses to sign), none of this would need to be contemplated, and the possibility of an accidental apocalypse bought about by inadequate decision-making procedures and the foibles of specific decision-makers would just never arise.

I urge you to take evidence from former Minuteman Launch control officer Bruce Blair (now I believe at Princeton), and former US nuclear commanders Generals Cartwright and Eugene Habiger. You should if possible also consult Russia's former commander General Pavel Zolotarev, and former US Defence Secretary William Perry. Doubtless you have already thought of these people or had them recommended to you. (Note that time constrains mean I have not consulted them!)

Your hearing is most welcome and timely. It goes beyond the narrow issue of whether certain individuals are suitable to have the sole authority to launch thousands of warheads to whether or not ANYONE (or any single person) can ever have that authority, and to wider questions of nuclear posture, which I urge you to consider carefully.

John Hallam  
UN Nuclear Disarmament Campaigner  
People for Nuclear Disarmament

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