

It Could End in an Afternoon...

“The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-human, outright evil thing that mankind has ever made... this world of ours is four thousand, six hundred million years old. It could end in an afternoon.”- Arundhati Roy.

Dr. Bruce Blair, president of the World Security Institute in Washington, was for several years a Minuteman ICBM launch control officer in the US Air Force. Here are excerpts from his account of the nuclear peril we live in today, which he gave at a Workshop celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, held in Pugwash, Nova Scotia, on 6th-7th July/07.

“Both the Kremlin and the White House... require their respective nuclear forces to be constantly prepared to fight a large-scale nuclear war with each other at a moment’s notice. These forces are assigned long lists of targets, running into thousands on each side, to strike in the event of war, and they are expected to inflict serious damage with high probability on all targets... Both strategic arsenals are kept on hair-trigger alert, ready to launch-on-warning of incoming warheads launched by the opposing side.... Both nuclear superpowers manage their strategic arsenals in almost exactly the same manner today as they did in the Cold War. Many hundreds of missiles on land and sea are fully armed, fueled and targeted, and will fly out of their silos and tubes as soon as they receive a few short computer signals, as simple as stroking a few keys on a keyboard and hitting ‘enter’ several times.”

The following scenario suggests the consequences of an accidental launch, on any day or night of this week, this month, this year...

3:00 pm It’s a pleasant summer day in mid-July. I am having coffee with my friends on their back verandah, on a leafy street in Ottawa. A cardinal watches us from its perch high up on their maple tree. Moto, their Jack Russell terrier, has just chased a stick onto the grass thrown by me. He returns with the stick in his mouth and challenges me to take it away from him. I do so, unaware that, at that moment, 2,000 miles away, radio signals from infrared satellite sensors in space are received in Colorado Springs, Colorado, warning of incoming nuclear missiles from Russia (could be China instead).

3:00 pm An Early Warning Assessment is held, which confirms the signal, and an urgent message is sent to the White House.

3:07 pm The White House receives the message, the President is notified and the “doomsday decision process” begins. The National Security Advisor, Vice President, Secretary of Defence, the Joint Chiefs, the NORAD warning center that initiated the process, and all the nuclear commanders including the Strategic Command head in Omaha, Nebraska, are notified and together with the President begin an emergency consultation on a secure phone. The President is briefed on the apparent threat by NORAD and the head of Strategic Command briefs the President on his nuclear response options and their consequences for physical infrastructure and people in Russia. He seeks his advisors opinions. If one of them is convinced that a nuclear attack is underway, and if he is able to persuade the President, then the decision to launch or not becomes the President’s call.

On this day, the President, uncertain, troubled and harassed by various political setbacks, is reluctantly persuaded that loaded missiles are on the way. He issues an order to launch.

3:22 pm: The Pentagon’s war room transmits the launch order around the world. All Minuteman launch officers receive the order almost instantaneously and begin their launch checklists, while simultaneously top nuclear headquarters (esp. Strategic Command at Omaha), bomber crews, submarine crews, and tens of thousands of nuclear support personnel receives the President’s order and immediately begin their emergency war procedures.

3:25 pm: Approximately 1,000 nuclear warheads, which have been on hair-trigger alert, are launched from land-based ICBMs and, a few minutes later (9 to be exact) another 400 nuclear warheads from sea-based Trident submarines, all aimed at over 1,000 sites in Russia. (The average destructive power of each warhead is ten or more times as powerful as the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima).

3:28 pm An electronic signal from a Russian early warning satellite is received in Russia that incoming missiles have been launched from the

US. A similar process of assessment is made; then a message of confirmation is sent to the Kremlin.

3:45 pm The President of Russia, after consulting with his Joint Chiefs and other highest confidants, issues a command to the Russian General Staff at their nuclear war command centers in Moscow and elsewhere to respond in kind.

Before leaving my friends' house that afternoon I tell them that the annual Blues Festival is drawing big crowds in Ottawa; we decide to get tickets before I leave for Europe the following week.

3:55 (ICBMs have 30 minute flight time; SLBMs hit a few minutes earlier because they have 15 minute flight times but were launched 9 minutes after Minuteman) US warheads explode on (more like 300 cities and 1000 missile and other nuclear sites) 200 cities and missile sites in Russia. Some targets receive five or more warheads each. Anywhere from ten to forty million Russians are killed this afternoon, or begin suffering an agonizing death. Most hospitals and their medical staff in the cities hit have disappeared or been rendered incapable of giving assistance to the survivors.

4:20 pm I am about to leave for my home, unaware of what is happening, when the CBC announces that reports have been received from towns in upstate New York that the city of New York has been largely destroyed. Additional unconfirmed reports from incoherent, hysterical announcers in different rural parts of the US say that Washington, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Dallas, Los Angeles, Seattle, Omaha, Denver, Phoenix and other still unidentified cities have suffered nuclear attacks and the worst is feared.

Anywhere from ten to forty million Americans are dead or are suffering agonizing deaths. Most hospitals and their medical staff have disappeared or are incapable of giving assistance to the survivors. Radioactive clouds have formed and begin to drift with the prevailing west to eastern wind currents, threatening the cities of Vancouver, Calgary, Regina, Winnipeg, Windsor, Hamilton, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal.

“As long as there is a finite, nonzero, annual probability that an accidental launch will occur, then given sufficient time, the probability for such a launch approaches certainty.” Conclusion from a study on Accidental Nuclear War, New England Journal of Medicine, April 1998

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NOTES:

The scenario described so vividly by Murray Thomson is based on the existing nuclear weapons policy of the nuclear weapons states. This is the background to the statements of Pugwash on de-alerting issued in the 50th Anniversary communiqué [Revitalizing Nuclear Disarmament](#) which recommends “Immediate de-alerting of the thousands of nuclear weapons, on quick reaction alert, that could be launched by accident, miscalculation, or unauthorized computer hacking of command and control systems”. Read this communiqué and the subsequent report [The Imperative of Revitalizing Nuclear Disarmament](#).

Review the [Call to Canadians](#), which presses for action now, from every level of society and government.