

Every Nuclear-Tipped Missile is an “Accident Waiting to Happen”

By [William Burr](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

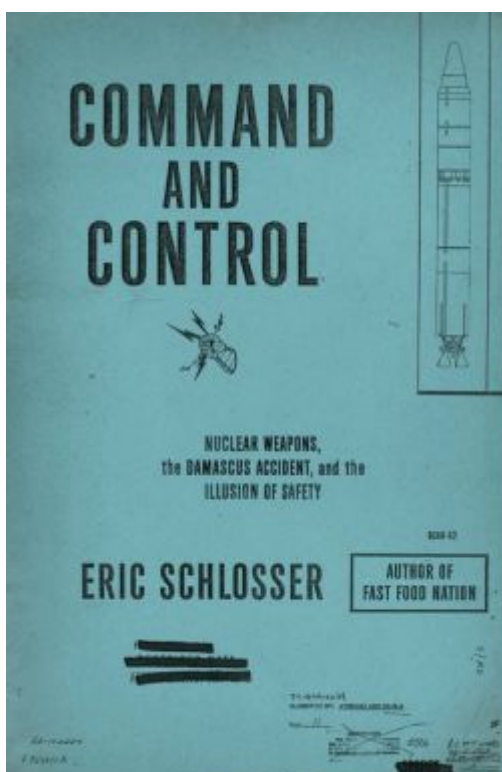
Global Research, October 08, 2013

[The National Security Archive](#) 7 October
2013

New History of Nuclear Weapons Control (and Lack Thereof) Cites National Security Archive Documents on War Plans, Nuclear Accidents, and Command Systems

Eric Schlosser’s *Command and Control* Wins High Praise from Reviewers, Calls Archive “A National Treasure”

National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 442



A nuclear accident never produced a nuclear detonation, but according to a new book by Eric Schlosser every nuclear-tipped missile “is an accident waiting to happen, a potential act of mass murder.” Schlosser’s book, [Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Incident, and the Illusion of Safety](#) (Penguin Press, 2013) includes a truly sobering account of safety breakdowns and failures from the 1950s to the 1980s. All readers will be impressed by the assiduousness of his research, the doggedness of his Freedom of Information Act requesting, and the great care which he has taken to pin down assertions in a great variety of primary and secondary sources. In this connection, staffers at The National Security Archive appreciate Schlosser’s kind words:

I am especially grateful for the work of the National Security Archive, based at George Washington University, which for almost three decades has been obtaining documents through the Freedom of Information Act and suing federal agencies when they are denied but also to hold it accountable for that behavior. The archive is a national treasure. Its digital collections proved invaluable to my research (p. 488).

Command and Control has received high praise from reviewers in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The New Yorker*, among other publications.[1] All agree that it is an outstanding and original account of U.S. nuclear accidents and the efforts by top leaders and government experts to “put some sort of harness on nuclear weaponry” (Louis Menand, *The New Yorker*). The heart of the book, an extraordinarily striking and gripping account of the 1980 Titan II accident, has won deserved acclaim. According to Nina Tannenwald, in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, “Schlosser has written a powerful reminder that nuclear weapons are never really ‘safe’ despite the fact that safety measures have so far worked.” She further observes that the book might help create more support for President Obama’s proposal for nuclear abolition.[2]

To show how Eric Schlosser mined the Archive’s holdings in the Nuclear Vault and the Digital National Security Archive presented below are a sampling of documents cited in the endnotes. Almost all of them were declassified as the result of specific requests by the National Security Archive or were otherwise found through research at the U.S. National Archives. The document selection mirrors key themes in his book—control arrangements over nuclear weapons, command-and-control systems, nuclear accidents, and war plans.

THE DOCUMENTS

Document 1A-C: Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, for Atomic Energy , *History of the Custody and Deployment of Nuclear Weapons (U) July 1945 - September 1977, February 1978, Top Secret, excised copy*

[A](#): Front matter through chapter 13

[B](#): Chapter 14 through chapter 21, Summation, and Bibliography

[C](#): Appendices

Source: FOIA request to Defense Department

Cited several times by Schlosser, this history was declassified in the late 1990s in response to FOIA requests by the Archive and the Natural Resources Defense Council. This release included an excised list of nuclear deployments sites by country that provided enough clues to enable Robert S. Norris, William Arkin, and the present editor to figure out and publish in the *Bulletin of The Atomic Scientists* the names of all countries where the U.S. military deployed nuclear weapons during the Cold War.[3]

A new declassification review of this history is long overdue, but U.S. government rules and regulations hobble the declassification of “formerly restricted data,” even on the names of most countries where Washington deployed nuclear weapons. Until the rules are changed it is unlikely that significant new information will be declassified from this history.[4]

Document 2: L. Wainstein et al., *The Evolution of U.S. Strategic Command and Control and Warning, 1945-1972* , Institute for Defense Analyses, June 1975, Top Secret

Source: FOIA request; also in National Security Archive published collection, *U.S. Nuclear History: Nuclear Weapons and Politics in the Missile Era, 1955-68* , Washington, D.C., 1998), also available on Digital National Security Archive

One of the themes in Schlosser's book is the fear that top U.S. government officials had of "decapitation," that the Soviets would launch a first strike against the White House and other government command-and-control facilities and thereby destroy U.S. capabilities to launch a coordinated response. Cited numerous times by the author, the "eye-opening" Institute for Defense Analyses [IDA] study, *The Evolution of U.S. Strategic Command and Control and Warning* provides significant detail on those concerns as they developed from the late 1950s into the early 1970s.

The IDA study was declassified by the Pentagon in the early 1990s in response to a National Security Archive Freedom of Information Act request. Initially prepared as supporting material for the Defense Department's top secret *History of the Strategic Arms Competition, 1945-1972* by Ernest May, Thomas Wolfe, and John Steinbruner, this study is invaluable because of its comprehensive treatment of the development of U.S. command-control-communications systems and the incessant high-level concern about their vulnerabilities. It includes fascinating detail on nuclear war plans, the first overseas deployments of U.S. nuclear weapons, nuclear stockpile numbers, and warning systems from the Dew Line to the Defense Support Program, among others.

Document 3: Memorandum from Secretary of Defense McNamara to McGeorge Bundy et al., 7 November 1963, enclosing Draft Memorandum to the President, "National Deep Underground Command Center as a Key FY 1965 Budget Consideration," 7 November 1963, Top Secret

Source: National Archives, Robert McNamara Papers, box 119, Reading File (Nov 1963)

Schlosser cites one proposed solution to the command-and-control vulnerability problem that Robert McNamara suggested in November 1963: a "deep underground command center." To be built 3,500 feet below the Pentagon and connected to the White House by tunnels, this "logical survivable node" would be built to withstand "multiple direct hits of 200 300 MT [megaton] weapons bursting at the surface or 100 MT weapons penetrating to depths of 70 to 100 feet." The DUCC was never built, partly because it was not big enough to suit the JCS, although the proposal makes one wonder whether it influenced the underground shelter constructed at the Vice President's residence at the Naval Observatory during Richard Cheney's tenure in office.

Document 4 : Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Secretariat, Historical Division, *Joint Chiefs of Staff Special Historical Study, A Historical Study of Strategic Connectivity, 1950-1981* , July 1982, Top Secret

Source: FOIA appeal to the Department of Defense

Schlosser cites this recently declassified study in a long endnote on page 571. Like the IDA history prepared some years earlier, this historical report demonstrates the enduring concern about command-and-control vulnerabilities and their impact on decisions and developments during the Carter and Reagan administrations. Quoting an account of a Pentagon study by James Wade, Schlosser drew this implication: “the only nuclear war that the United States could hope to win would be one in which it launched first.”

Documents 5A-B: Nuclear Accident in Morocco, January 1958

A: State Department memorandum of conversation, “Sidi Slimane Air Accident Involving Plane Loaded with Nuclear Weapon [sic],” 31 January 1958, Secret

B: Letter from George L. West, Jr. to B.T.E.L “Lane” Timmons, 19 February 1958, Secret

Source: National Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State Records, Records of the Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for Atomic Energy and Outer Space, Records Relating to Atomic Energy Matters, 1944-1963, box 340, 18.1 Aircraft Carrying Nuclear Weapons—Accidents, 1958 and 1960; also in *Digital National Security Archive*]

Schlosser’s account of U.S. nuclear accidents is truly sobering. One of them, the Goldsboro, North Carolina, incident, when an H-bomb fell out of a B-52, recently received major [press](#) coverage. All of the incidents have been reported before, but by seeking declassification of key documents, Schlosser provides fresh perspective and new information.[5] In a few instances, he cites documents on nuclear accidents published by the Archive, including several on the accident at Sidi Slimane Air Force Base in Morocco in late January 1958: a B-47 caught on fire and the plutonium in the nuclear weapon onboard melted into the runway.

[Document 6: Vulnerable Jupiter Missile Deployments, 1961](#)

Executive Session, Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, Meeting Number 87-1-4, 20 February 1961

Source: National Archives, Record Group 128, Joint Committees of Congress, Records of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, box 10, Executive Session, Feb. 20, 1961, published in *The Digital National Security Archive*

During the early 1960s, until the Cuban missile crisis settlement led to their removal, the United States deployed Jupiter intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) in Italy and Turkey. Seen as first strike, “use them or lose them” weapons, the Jupiters were highly vulnerable which encouraged some officials to seek their removal even before the Cuban crisis. These concerns permeated the thinking of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy and Schlosser provides extraordinary quotations from Committee members. While the arrangements included a two-person rule so that no individual could use the key to fire the weapons autonomously, Congressman Chet Holifield (D-Ca) thought this was a charade: “all the [Italians] have to do is hit [the U.S. officer] with a blackjack and they have got his key.” Moreover, the missiles were vulnerable to sabotage: the missiles were standing in a field and “can be knocked out with 3 rifle bullets.”

Documents 7A-C: Nuclear War Plans

A: Headquarters, Strategic Air Command, History & Research Division, *History of the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff: Background and Preparation of SIOP-62*, n.d., Top Secret, excised copy

B: Headquarters, Strategic Air Command, History & Research Division, *History of the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff: Preparation of SIOP-63*, January 1964, Top Secret, Excised copy

C: Carl Kaysen to General Maxwell Taylor, Military Representative to the President, "Strategic Air Planning and Berlin," 5 September 1961, Top Secret, excised copy, with cover memoranda to Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Lyman Lemnitzer, released to National Security Archive (appeal pending at Department of Defense).

Source for document C: National Archives, Record Group 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (hereinafter RG 218), Records of Maxwell Taylor (Document under appeal at Department of Defense)

A significant element in Schlosser's narrative is the counterforce strategy which was central to U.S. strategic war plans; top priority went to massive attacks on an adversary's nuclear forces and delivery systems. Schlosser cites two histories of the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), both of which demonstrate how counterforce objectives drove strategic targeting. According to these histories, the destructiveness that inhered in the SIOP worried Army and Navy leaders, who saw "overkill," but Air Force leaders saw valid levels of lethal force. As Schlosser notes, Eisenhower had originally opposed "100 percent pulverization of the Soviet Union" and learned from his science adviser that the new SIOP included "unnecessary and undesirable overkill." Nevertheless, in one of his last actions as president, Eisenhower chose not to rock the boat; he approved the first SIOP, without requesting any changes.

As Schlosser indicates, President Kennedy and his advisers believed that the SIOP was dangerously rigid because it was a one-shot plan that aimed to destroy the entire "Sino-Soviet" bloc; they sought more flexible, less destructive war plans that gave the president some choices in a crisis. Schlosser has an interesting discussion of some of the thinking that emerged from these discussions, Carl Kaysen's proposal for a selective first strike if a crisis over West Berlin access emerged. While Schlosser characterizes the Kaysen study as a "war plan," it was more in the way of a *concept* for a plan. President Kennedy wanted to know what options were available if tensions over Berlin escalated, but the situation never reached the point, as Schlosser suggests on page 293, that the White House had a meeting on "whether to launch a surprise attack."

Documents 8A-B: Predelegation

A: Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, Memorandum of Conference with the President, June 27, 1958 - 11:05 AM," 30 June 1958, Top Secret.

Source: Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Records of the White House Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, NSC Series, Subject Subseries, box 1, file: Atomic Weapons, Corresp. & Background for Pres. Approval & Instructions for Use of (2)

B: " Instructions for the Expenditure of Nuclear Weapons in Accordance with the Presidential Authorization Dated May 22, 1957," revised between 28 January 1959 and 12 May 1960, Top Secret, Excised Copy, 23 pp.

Source: Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Records of the White House Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, NSC Series, Subject Subseries, box 1, file: Atomic Weapons, Corresp. & Background for Pres. Approval & Instructions for Use of (1)

Both first posted in "First Declassification of Eisenhower's Instructions to Commanders Predelegating Nuclear Weapons Use, 1959-1960,"
at <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB45/>

Schlosser observes that "even more secret" than the war plans, which were "one of the "most closely guarded secrets," were the presidential authorizing instructions to top commanders for the emergency use of nuclear weapons in a situation where the President was either missing or killed from a nuclear attack. These instructions were so sensitive that Eisenhower said that he was "very fearful of having written papers on this matter," but in fact "written papers" had to be prepared so that top commanders would know when and how they could act under specified circumstances. Subsequent presidents would modify the instructions, for example, by authorizing non-nuclear responses in certain circumstances; predelegation instructions secretly stayed on the books for years. Both of these documents were declassified through requests to the Eisenhower Library by the National Security Archive.

Document 9: C.H. Builder, D. C. Kephart, and A. Laupa, "The U.S. ICBM Force: Current Issues and Future Options," RAND Corporation, PR-1754-R, October 1975, Secret, excised copy

Source: FOIA release by U.S. Air Force

Schlosser cites and quotes this report in his discussion of launch-on-warning posture. The authors of this report looked closely at a number of problems, including the possible vulnerability of Minuteman ICBMs to preemptive attack. The authors saw "launch-under-attack-assessment" as one method for preserving the Minuteman force from attack. Highlighting "attack assessment" instead of "warning," their term presaged one that would come into vogue within a few years: "launch under attack." Further, their definition of attack assessment showed that the authors sought more authoritative reliance than satellite warning systems: to avoid a precipitous missile launch, they suggested that a "launch decision" would depend in part on "confirmed reports" that Soviet warheads had detonated "in the U.S. heartland."

To support launch-under-attack assessment, the authors argued that "the technical capabilities to launch ICBMs on attack assessment should be developed for their deterrence value-so that no adversary would dare assume that the U.S. could not launch the force out from any attempted disarming attack." Nevertheless, they warned against an open declaration of such a policy because launch-on-warning was so controversial: "it would be rigorously opposed as both dangerous and unstable (an accident could theoretically precipitate a nuclear war)." The authors also argued that the matter of ICBM survivability alone should not determine a decision to launch on attack assessment. Implicitly, the danger of nuclear war was too terrible to allow the "assurance of ICBM retaliatory

capabilities [to] rest upon such an awesome commitment.”

Document 10: Minutes, National Security Council Meeting, “SALT (and Angola)”, 22 December 1975, Top Secret, excised copy

Source: Gerald R. Ford Library, National Security Council Meetings Files, Box 2

Schlosser quotes a discussion during a National Security Council meeting where some officials raised doubts about launch-on-warning while others supported for such a posture. Discussing a worst-case scenario—a Soviet ICBM attack on U.S. Minuteman silos—Secretary of State Henry Kissinger showed how difficult it would be for Soviet leaders to contemplate such an attack. Not only could the United States respond by launching SLBMs and bombers, it could also launch ICBMs on warning; the Minuteman force alone could produce 80 million Soviet casualties. When ACDA Director Fred Ikle mentioned the risks of a launch-on-warning posture—“accident prone” and “dangerous”—Kissinger implied it was already an available option by suggesting that command-and-control arrangements could be fixed to ensure that missiles were never launched without “presidential authority.”

Kissinger and top Pentagon officials were more interested in preserving the ambiguity of the U.S. posture so that the Soviets could not know with any certainty that, in Kissinger’s words, the United States had a “launch-on-warning policy.” Ambiguity would complicate Soviet nuclear planning; the policymakers wanted to keep Moscow guessing. Further, as National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft suggested, it was “not to our disadvantage if we appear irrational to the Soviets in this regard.” The implication was that such a tack could make the Soviets nervous and encourage diplomatic caution.

NOTES

[1] Even critical reviewers such as Gerard DeGroot in *The Telegraph* (26 September 2013), who finds the book hyperbolic, concedes that “it is perhaps right that we should exaggerate the threat of these weapons, since they are indeed horrible ... Maybe it’s not a bad thing if the effect is greater vigilance.” DeGroot suggests that only a “few cows” would have been killed if a 20 megaton warhead had somehow exploded, but this attempt at humor significantly understates the terrible effects of such weapons. Farmers and their families and residents of nearby small towns would have been incinerated and prevailing winds could have dumped radioactive fallout on such nearby cities as Memphis, TN, with all the dangers to public health that would involve.

[2] Some readers will be surprised that, despite Schlosser’s warnings about the nuclear danger, he dismisses abolition as a serious long-range option.

[3] Robert S. Norris, William Arkin, and William Burr, “Where They Were,” and “How Much Did Japan Know?,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November-December 1999 and January-February 2000 respectively (may be available to subscribers only).

[4] William Burr, “[Atomic Energy Act Prevents Declassification of Site of 1958 ‘Broken Arrow’ Nuclear Weapons Accident](#),” *Unredacted*, 13 April 2013.

[5] Robert S. Norris, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Accidents: Dangers in Our Midst," [The Defense Monitor](#), (1981).

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