

Trump and the Nuclear Option: The Fiction of Sanity

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It had not happened in decades. On Tuesday, members of the US Congress gathered to consider the scope of presidential power in launching a nuclear strike. The state of the mind of the current president was very much at the forefront of the discussion, even if some present preferred not to name him specifically.

One senator who was fairly frank about his concerns was Democrat Chris Murphy of Connecticut, giving more than a hint where some members were coming from.

“We are concerned that the president of the United States is so unstable, so volatile, has a decision-making process that is so quixotic, that he might order a nuclear strike that is wildly out of step with US interests.”

Of the procession of experts consulted on the matter, Peter Feaver of Duke University was of some interest.

“Let me start with a simple but important question,” came the query from Sean Illing of Vox. “Can the President unilaterally launch a nuclear strike?”[1]

Feaver was cautious, preferring to consider the issue in terms of logistical matters, and legal authority. To that “precise point” the answer was “no”. “He requires other people to carry out an order, so he can’t just lean on a button and automatically missiles fly.” But in a legal and political sense, the President had “authority on his own to given an order that would cause other people to take steps which would result in a nuclear strike.”

Illing pressed further, wanting a scenario where a strike might be called for. Feaver’s description is that of a complex of mass preparatory killing in action. Consider the instance where the president is woken up in the middle of the night. He has a mere 30 minutes or less to make a decision about using the nuclear option, either because the US has been attacked or will be attacked.

By that point, “hundreds if not thousands of people in the national security complex” would have evaluated, examined and abided by protocols, awaiting an answer from the executive. Feaver speaks with instrumental precision: “the system is designed to be able to carry out an order in that narrow time span, and he alone would have the legal authority to give that order if he’s still alive.”

A second scenario was also supplied: that of the errant president itching to call for a strike “in the middle of the night”. (Interesting how these desires lie dormant during the day.)

“Hey, I wanna do a nuclear strike,” comes the seemingly unhinged request. The response from this same mass security complex might be more critical. “Well,” they would ask, “what is this? Why are we doing this?” A good number would have to affirm the decision’s soundness.

Feaver’s assumption here is of a smooth, functioning system that neutralises the madman, corners the poor decision. Soldiers, for instance are “trained to disobey illegal orders, so context matters.” Presumptions of legality may exist, or otherwise. A nuclear strike ordered “with no context, no crisis, no alert” casts no presumption of legality. “Alarms,” claims Feaver, would go off “throughout the system”.

Retired General Robert Kehler, formerly the commander of US Strategic Command, added more meat to the bone in suggesting that the military might well refuse to follow an order deemed illegal. No one, however, was any the wiser how that process would unfold.

Senators claiming that Trump is not stable in terms of how he would handle a nuclear strike ignore the fact that anyone who contemplates such a move is bound to have his sanity questioned to begin with. Their grievance is with what form of insanity is most suited for the occasion.

Feaver did, at the very least, admit that a closer “look at nuclear command and control” was due, even if sceptical about “legislative fixes” that would hem in presidential power. (Congress, as ever, is regarded with suspicion in times of nuclear catastrophe – best leave it to the more fleet-footed president.)

The annihilating nature of nuclear war, in its very realisation, renders its use an act of insanity. But such insanity is built into the military industrial complex. It is measured, gauged and dolled out in portions. What this grand nuclear military process is supposedly meant to do is administer it cautiously, a rationalised nonsense, if ever there was one.

This shines light on a perverse point: the security establishments of the world where nuclear weapons are still present make it mandatory to assume that use might well be urgent. They couch this as a precautionary principle in terms of safe guards, rational actors and oversight, the false comforts of credible theory. Again, such measures are fairly meaningless where momentum is in place, and will unwavering.

The only genuinely sane appraisal in terms of a nuclear option is not to have one. To date, the only leading politician in a nuclear state who has made it clear he will not use his country’s nuclear option should he become prime minister is Jeremy Corbyn of the British Labour Party. And how the chicken hawks greeted that decision, deeming the man a terrorist for not wanting to engage in an act of mass murder.

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Note

[1] <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/11/17/16656856/trump-congress-nuclear-weapons-war>

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