

Why was a nuclear-armed bomber allowed to fly over the US?

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Global Research, September 09, 2007
wsws.org 7 September 2007

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Wednesday's revelation that a US Air Force B-52 bomber flew over the length of the United States armed with six cruise missiles carrying nuclear warheads has attracted amazingly little media attention.

The story, first broken by the *Military Times* web site based on tips from military officers, was relegated to the bottom of page 16 in Thursday's *New York Times* and to page 10 of the *Washington Post*.

Featured prominently in both newspapers and generally in media coverage were reassurances from a spokesman for the Air Force that it represented "an isolated mistake" and that "at no time was there a threat to public safety."

This incident, however, has immense and ominous significance. Describing it as an "isolated mistake" begs the obvious questions of how a nuclear-armed B-52 was allowed to become airborne—ostensibly without the approval of senior officials—and who ordered this extraordinary flight, and why.

The B-52 took off from Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota and flew to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana on August 30 after six nuclear-tipped Advanced Cruise Missiles were mounted on the pylons under its wings. Each of the warheads carried a yield of up to 150 kilotons, more than ten times as powerful as the US bomb that leveled Hiroshima at the close of the Second World War.

As far as is known, the incident marked the first time that a US plane has taken off armed with nuclear weapons in nearly 40 years. While bombers were kept in the air in the 1960s as part of the nuclear brinkmanship with the USSR, the practice was halted in 1968 after a series of accidents involving nuclear-armed B-52s. After that, bombers loaded with nuclear weapons were kept on alert at the end of runways for rapid takeoff until 1991, when this practice was halted as well.

A Pentagon spokesman said that the incident prompted an emergency call by the Air Force chief of staff, Gen. Michael "Buzz" Mosley, to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, adding that "it was important enough that President Bush was notified of it."

In response to the episode, the Pentagon has announced that a munitions squadron commander at Minot has been relieved of his duties and several airmen have been decertified for handling nuclear weapons. It also reported that an investigation is continuing.

The Air Force announced in March that the Advanced Cruise Missile (ACM) is being phased

out under a nuclear reduction treaty signed with Moscow in 2002, and it has been suggested that the weapons were being transported between the two bases as part of this process. The transport of weapons from one base to another, however, is normally carried out in the holds of C-17 and C-130 cargo planes, not fixed to the wings of combat bombers.

Someone had to give the order to mount the missiles on the plane. The question is whether it was a local Air Force commander—either by mistake or deliberately—or whether the order came from higher up.

The first scenario recalls nothing so much as the 1964 black comedy produced by filmmaker Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove*. The film's plot centered on the unilateral order given by a delusional air force commander, Gen. Jack D. Ripper, for an air wing to carry out an unprovoked nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union. The US president is shocked to find out that supposed failsafe systems barring any such strike without his direct order have been overridden.

Given the Pentagon's claim that the incident represented a "mistake," the Minot-Barksdale flight indicates that the present failsafe systems—either deliberately or inadvertently—do not prevent a single commander from deploying nuclear weapons.

Experts on nuclear weapons have described the episode as shocking and inexplicable. "It seems so fantastic that so many points, checks can dysfunction," said Hans Kristensen, the Federation of American Scientists chief researcher on US nuclear forces. "That's perhaps what is most worrisome about this particular incident—that apparently an individual who had command authority about moving these weapons around decided to do so."

Representative Edward Markey, a ranking Democrat on the House Homeland Security Committee, issued a statement declaring it "absolutely inexcusable that the Air Force lost track of these ... warheads, even for a short period of time."

Markey added, "Nothing like this has ever been reported before and we have been assured for decades that it was impossible."

The implication is that the threat of a nuclear holocaust is even greater today than at the height of the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

The US maintains a nuclear stockpile estimated at 9,900 warheads, nearly half of which are operationally deployed. It is estimated that the US and Russia have more than 1,000 warheads each on high alert, with the ability to launch them with ten minutes notice.

There have been persistent reports that the nuclear command and control system in the former Soviet Union has deteriorated significantly for lack of investment, prompting fears that an accidental launch has become more likely.

Meanwhile, the US, in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, has elaborated a doctrine of "preventive war"—wars of aggression—which it has implemented in countries on or near Russia's borders, from the former Yugoslavia to Afghanistan and Iraq. The Bush administration has also repeatedly floated plans for the unilateral use of nuclear weapons in war.

There is another tactical consideration that makes the supposed mix-up at Minot Air Base

even more chilling. The Air Force, as well as the Navy, is increasingly making dual use of its cruise missiles, changing nuclear warheads for conventional ones. Conventional Air Launched Cruise Missiles have been used extensively in recent US military interventions. If such a “mistake” is possible in a flight between two US air bases, presumably it is equally possible in a wartime situation, with the potential of a B-52 launching a nuclear strike against a target that was meant to be hit with a conventional weapon.

The second possibility—that the flight was authorized at a higher level—poses an even more immediate threat.

B-52s from Barksdale have been used repeatedly to strike targets in Iraq, firing cruise missiles at Iraqi targets in 1996 and 1998, and in the “shock and awe” campaign that preceded the 2003 invasion, carrying out some 150 bombing runs that devastated much of the southern half of the country.

Moreover, the weapon that was fixed to the wings of the B-52 flying from Minot air base was designed for use against hardened targets, such as underground bunkers.

Given the ratcheting up of the threats against Iran and the previous reports of plans for the use of “tactical” nuclear weapons against Iranian nuclear installations, there is a very real possibility that the flight to Barksdale was part of covert preparations for a nuclear strike against Iran.

If this is indeed the case, the claims about a “mistake” by a munitions officer and a few airmen in North Dakota may well be merely a cover story aimed at concealing the fact that the government in Washington is preparing a criminal act of world historic proportions by ordering—without provocation—the first use of nuclear weapons since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki more than sixty years ago.

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