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ACTION

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17 January 2025

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

VIA: *BULLETIN OF THE ATOMIC SCIENTISTS*

FROM: LISBETH GRONLUND

PURPOSE: MODIFY THE US POLICY OF SOLE AUTHORITY TO LAUNCH NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Mr. President, as you know, as president, you must approve any use of nuclear weapons—whether first or in retaliation. This would be a momentous decision for any one person to make. While any use would be devastating, the future of the world would hang in the balance because it might lead to an all-out nuclear war, immediately killing hundreds of millions of people, many of these Americans. Many more deaths—in the United States and globally—would occur within a year from a lack of medical services for the injured and radioactive fallout. The Earth's temperature would change and severely lower agricultural production, resulting in widespread starvation. Such a war would leave the United States and other countries barely functional, with destroyed infrastructures and defunct societies.

The United States should adopt a better approach that avoids placing this responsibility on one person, take advantage of the wisdom and perspective of other officials, and reduce the risk of nuclear war. The global community would welcome a US policy that does not rely on just one person to decide to use nuclear weapons.

Ordering the Pentagon to adopt a modified policy that incorporates the input of a few other officials would bolster your international credibility as a real leader who made tough decisions to reduce the risk of nuclear war. Moreover, once the new Trump policy is in place, it would be difficult for future presidents to return to the old, more dangerous approach. You would be remembered for significantly reducing the risk of inadvertent nuclear use, and you would set a new standard for all future administrations.

## BACKGROUND

If the Pentagon detected an incoming Russian nuclear attack aimed at US missile silos, it would consider launching these missiles before Russian missiles could destroy them. And it would need your approval to do so. Because the Russian missiles would land quickly following their detection, you would have about 10 minutes for the Pentagon to brief you and lay out a small number of launch plans for your decision and approval. You could also decide to not launch any missiles. Any modified policy to involve other people in the decision-making process would need to function under such severe time constraints.

If instead the first use of nuclear weapons was proposed, there would be much more time to consider various nuclear options as well as conventional ones. Any options laid out by the Pentagon would have been pre-determined to respect the laws of war. Pentagon lawyers would examine any options you might propose, to determine whether they would be legal; if they are not, the military is obligated to not carry out your order.

To ensure presidential continuity if you—and others in the line of succession—were to die or become incapacitated, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) continuously tracks the location of all the officials in the line of succession and maintains the ability to communicate with them securely in real-time. Vice President JD Vance will have his own nuclear football and a code that the Pentagon would only activate should he become the president.

The Pentagon could use the FEMA tracking system to communicate quickly and simultaneously with you and a small number of other people, allowing them to also take part in the Pentagon briefing following warning of an incoming attack on the missile silos.

## OPTIONS

— Option 1: This option could be used for either a first or retaliatory strike. Any nuclear attack plan would require a presidential order and agreement by the next two people in the presidential chain of succession. Under normal circumstances, these would be the vice president and Speaker of the House. You alone would have the authority to order a specific attack, but either of the other two could veto your order. If for some reason the other people could not be reached, the procedure could default to the current one.

— Option 2: This is a modification of option 1. Any two people could be tracked by FEMA and required to agree to a presidential order for a nuclear attack. Options include the Secretary of State, who would know

how other countries would likely react politically, and the Defense Secretary, who would have information about how the attacked country as well as other countries would likely respond militarily. These two people are in the presidential chain of succession, but not near the top.

– Option 3: This option would apply only to the first use of nuclear weapons but could be augmented with either of the options outlined above for a retaliatory strike. Because such an attack would be the beginning of a war and only Congress can declare war, congressional approval would be required for any first use of nuclear weapons. Approval would require majority support by both the House and Senate.

#### RECOMMENDATION

You should immediately adopt Option 1. I also recommend discussing Option 3 with your advisers and members of Congress to determine, among other things, the precise steps required and the length of time such approval would likely take.

While both Options 1 and 2 would require the approval of two other people for any use of nuclear weapons, the people next in the presidential chain of succession have greater political legitimacy to take part in such decision because they are designated by law to become commander-in-chief and assume the authority to order a nuclear attack if the officials above them were no longer in power.

Option 1 would also provide democratic input. The top three officials in the line of succession (the third person is the president pro tem of the Senate) are elected and two of them are members of Congress. Unless several top officials died or were incapacitated, under Option 1 at least one congressional leader would need to agree with an order to use nuclear weapons. While this falls short of Option 3's requirement for congressional approval of the first use of nuclear weapons, it would provide some congressional input.

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