

# Dismantling the Doomsday Machines

Dan Ellsberg has given us a book that shows the urgency of re-engaging on nuclear disarmament, writes John V. Walsh.

## With Two Minutes to Midnight, Time Is Running Out

**By John V. Walsh**

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*"From a technical point of view, he [director Stanley Kubrick] anticipated many things. ... Since that time, little has changed, honestly. The only difference is that modern weapons systems have become more sophisticated, more complex. But this idea of a retaliatory strike and the inability to manage these systems, yes, all of these things are relevant today. It [controlling the weapons] will become even more difficult and more dangerous."*

*– Russian President Vladimir Putin commenting on the film, "Dr. Strangelove: or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb," in an [interview with Oliver Stone, May 11, 2016](#). Putin had not seen the movie and did not know of it before Stone showed it to him.*

The ["Doomsday Machine,"](#) the title of [Daniel Ellsberg's](#) superb book, is not an imaginary contraption from a movie masterpiece. A Doomsday Machine uncannily like the one described in "Dr. Strangelove" exists right now. In fact, there are two such machines, one in U.S. hands and one in Russia's. The U.S. seeks to hide its version, but Ellsberg has revealed that it has existed since the 1950s. Russia

has quietly admitted that it has one, named it formally, "Perimetr," and also tagged it with a frighteningly apt nickname "Dead Hand." Because the U.S. and Russia are the only nations with Doomsday Machines to date we shall restrict this discussion to them.

Ellsberg's terrifying message in the book has failed to provoke action in the year since its publication. Instead, on Jan. 24 the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* kept its Doomsday Clock at two minutes to midnight, poised perilously close to Armageddon for a second year, marking a "new abnormal."

The first component of a Doomsday Machine is a mechanism of launching nuclear weapons with a command structure not always in the hands of a president in either country, something carefully hidden from the U.S. public.

The second component is a weapon of such destructive force that it can kill billions at once and then more gradually the entire human race and perhaps all animal life on earth.

Here is a brief consideration of Ellsberg's views as a reminder of the nuclear peril we face along with a plan of action that he and others suggest.

### **Launch and Command**

Russia and the U.S. each have the ability to strike the other with great force, destroy the other's cities and industrial and military bases.

The essence of this first-strike capacity is the ability to wipe out the deterrent of the other side or weaken it so that the remaining force could be intercepted for the most

part.

How can a targeted nation respond to such a capability? It must convince the adversary that such a strike is futile because it will not destroy the deterrent of the targeted nation. The attacker must understand that the nuclear force of the targeted nation, its nuclear deterrent, will survive, and the attacker will be annihilated.

The first approach to ensure this survivability is to build ever more nuclear weapons. Thus, when the U.S. pioneered its first-strike capability in the Cold War, the Soviet Union responded with a buildup. Quite quickly both had a first-strike capacity with the competitive buildup reaching the insane levels shown [here](#). Each side also took the following additional measures.

The first measure to prevent the loss of deterrence is to put the nuclear force on Launch on Warning, which is also described as [Hair Trigger Alert](#).

Most of us have heard about this, but we ought to quake in our boots every time it comes to mind. Since the time to respond to a first strike is only tens of minutes for an ICBM (Intercontinental Ballistic Missile) attack, which takes about 30 minutes to travel between the U.S. and Russia, and even less time for a short or intermediate range missile, a targeted country must have its nuclear force loaded onto delivery vehicles and capable of being launched on warning of a nuclear attack.

Nuclear warheads that are loaded onto delivery vehicles are said to be “deployed.” They are ready to be launched in minutes. On each side –both in [Russia](#) and in the [U.S.](#) –

roughly 1,600 such warheads were loaded onto long-range delivery vehicles in 2018. (There are several thousand more warheads in reserve on each side but not “deployed.”) It is easy to see the danger inherent in this situation.

The second measure to prevent loss of deterrence is “delegation.” This is not widely known or understood.

One aspect of a first strike would be an attempt to knock out known command centers so that a retaliatory strike could not be ordered. This is known as “decapitation.” The antidote to decapitation is “delegation,” that is, others besides the presidents and their immediate successors are authorized to press “the button.” It works this way. These “others” are located in secret command centers far from Washington or the Strategic Air Command Base in Colorado, both of which will be targeted in a decapitation strike. If these secret centers find themselves cut off from communication with Washington or Moscow, then the assumption is made that a decapitating nuclear strike has occurred. In that event these “others” removed from the centers of power are authorized to press the nuclear button. These others are not elected officials and in fact we do not know who they are. What Ellsberg discovered is that some of these “others” are military people who are concerned that they too could be hit in a decapitating strike. So they also have the authority to delegate.

In fact, no one, perhaps not even the president, nor his circle of advisors, knows who can launch the nuclear weapons. Is it possible that one might be like the fictional [General Jack D. Ripper](#), the psychotic, delusional fellow who gives the launch order in Dr. Strangelove, or someone

lusting after the Rapture?

In summary, first-strike capability is the source of the problem. It leads to a nuclear arms buildup, launch on warning and delegation. The idea of having such a capability is deeply imbedded in U.S. "strategic" thinking and will be hard to dislodge.

### **Weapons of Human Extinction**

The second component of a Doomsday Machine is the weaponry. What is the destructive power of the nuclear weapons used in a first strike? In 1961, when Ellsberg was among those working on nuclear-war fighting strategy for the Kennedy administration, he requested an estimate from the Pentagon of the deaths due to a first strike as the war planners had mapped it out then. To his surprise the estimate came back at once – the Pentagon had made it and kept it hidden. At a time when the global population was about 3 billion, a first strike by the U.S. would result in the deaths of 1.2 billion from explosions, radiation and fire. That number was deaths only, not injuries. And it was only the result of U.S. weapons; it did not include deaths from a Soviet response if they managed one. The deaths would be concentrated in targeted countries, then and now the U.S. and Russia. Ellsberg was stunned to learn that the Pentagon would coolly make plans for such a gargantuan and immediate genocide. And so should we all be.

But the damage does not stop there. This is the surprise that the Pentagon did not understand at the time. The ash from the fires of burning cities would be cast up into the

stratosphere so high that it would not be rained out. There it would remain for at least a decade, blocking enough sunlight to prevent crops from growing for 10 years. That is sufficient to cause total starvation and wipe out the entire human race, with only a handful at most able to survive. Nuclear winter was publicized in the 1980s and encountered some initial skepticism.

Now with the interest in global warming, better computer models have been developed. When the results of a nuclear first strike are put into these models, nuclear winter again makes its appearance as Brian Toon, Alan Robock and others have shown. The TED talks of Toon and of Robock describing their findings are well worthwhile; they are brief and well-illustrated. We are confronted with a genocide of all or nearly all humanity, an "Omnicide."

The launch of the 1600 "deployed" warheads of either the U.S. or Russia is sufficient to give us nuclear winter. So we in the U.S. have put in place a weapon system on hair-trigger alert commanded by we know not whom that can kill virtually all Americans – along with most everyone else on the planet.

We have on hair trigger alert a weapon that is in fact suicidal. Even if we neglect the effects of nuclear winter, the nuclear attacks would be concentrated on Russia and the U.S. So most of us would be consumed. Thus MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) is replaced with SAD (Self-Assured Destruction).

### **Abandoning First-Strike Policy & Capacity**

Dismantling the Doomsday Machine with its hair-trigger alert

and system of delegation means abandoning a first-strike policy *and* capacity. And right now, only two countries have such first strike capacity and only one, the U.S., refuses to take the right to use it “off the table” even when not under attack

What does the elimination of first-strike capacity mean in practice? This involves two basic steps for the U.S. First, the land-based ICBMs, the Minuteman III, must be entirely dismantled, not refurbished as is currently being undertaken at enormous cost. These missiles, the land-based part of the Strategic Triad, are highly accurate but fixed in place like “sitting ducks.” They are only good for a first strike, for they will be destroyed in a successful first strike by an adversary. [Former Secretary of Defense William Perry](#) and [James E. Cartwright](#), formerly head of the Strategic Air Command and formerly vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have both [called for](#) dismantling the Minuteman III. The second step is to reduce the Trident Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) force to the level where it cannot destroy the entire Russian land-based missile force.

Russia would also need to execute similar measures, taking into account the specifics of its arsenal. Here negotiations, treaties and verification are necessary. But these are impossible in the current atmosphere of Russiagate and Russophobia, which is why both are existential threats and must be surmounted. We must talk despite our differences, real or perceived.

An additional measure has also been proposed. All nuclear warheads should be removed from deployed status by Russia

and the U.S. (The anodyne term is “de-alerting.”) That is, the warheads should be removed from their delivery vehicles and stored in a way that would take days or even weeks to deploy – that is to remount. This has been proposed by the Global Zero [Commission on Nuclear Risk Reduction](#) whose plan is laid out [here](#).

## **The Work Ahead**

Total abolition should be the ultimate goal because no human hand should be allowed to wield species-destroying power. But it seems that an intermediate goal is not only needed to give us the breathing space to get to zero nuclear weapons. An intermediate and readily achievable goal can call attention to the problem and motivate large numbers of people. The [Nuclear Freeze movement](#) of the 1980s is a very successful example of this sort of effort; it played a big role in making the Reagan-Gorbachev accords possible.

The effort to kill the Doomsday Machines might well be called something like “Step Away from Doomsday” or simply “Step Away.” At two minutes to midnight we must make haste to do this. Abolishing nuclear weapons will require a breakthrough in the way countries deal with one another, especially nuclear armed countries. Let us give ourselves the breathing space to accomplish that.

An earlier version of this article appeared on [Anti-war.com](#).

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