

President Has Six Minutes to Decide on Nuclear War Launch

written by Stanley Heller | October 23, 2025



Netflix is streaming a film called “A House of Dynamite” starting on the 24th of October. Directed by Academy Award winner Kathryn Bigelow it shows what happens when a lone missile with presumably a nuclear bomb in its nosecone is shot towards Chicago. CBS Sunday Morning News did a piece detailing how the movie accurately shows what goes on inside the military’s nuclear war chain of command and among the president and his advisors.

The bible on public information about nuclear warfare is the 2024 book titled *Nuclear War: A Scenario* by Pulitzer Prize finalist Annie Jacobsen. She researched enormous amounts of unclassified documents and interviewed something like 50 former high officials and experts who dealt with nuclear weapons including former Secretary of Defense William Perry (1994-1997). The book is a “scenario” of a minute-by-minute account of what happens over 72 minutes starting when a missile from North Korea is sent flying towards Washington D.C (spoiler alert – the scenario ends in utter catastrophe). The missile is detected within 3 seconds after launch. After 3 minutes of multiple confirmations the president is notified. He then has 6 minutes to decide what counterattack to make. “The president has no idea that as soon as he is briefed on what is happening, he has six minutes to deliberate and decide which nuclear weapons to launch in response.” Six minutes. (p.64)

While he or she is trying to deliberate a whole host of military, advisors and Secret Service will be calling out for his attention. Part of his brain is surely in shock. Jacobsen says he’s surely “underinformed” about nuclear weapons issues. (p.64) He has not been trained how to respond. Nuclear war military personnel undergo constant drills. The president does not. Retired Lt. General Dan Karbler, consultant and actor in “A House of Dynamite”, said in the CBS news segment, “I believe the last president to have participated in one of the exercises was President Reagan,”

Yet in a sense a path is predetermined. U.S. policy is “launch on warning”, says Jacobsen. It means military policy is not to wait and see if the attack is real. It is not to absorb the first blow. Instead, the plan is to send off a nuclear response as soon as electronic warnings are confirmed. George W. Bush during his 2000 campaign that “high-alert hair-trigger status is another unnecessary vestige of the Cold War”, but neither he nor the presidents who came after him did anything to change the policy. (p.59)

Well, what about the anti-missile systems? The U.S. has spent enormous amounts of money on a system to destroy incoming missiles. In a 2023 poll “46 percent of Americans say they are at least somewhat confident” the US missile defense system will protect them. Unfortunately, this is a

complete illusion. "Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD)" as it is called is designed to launch a missile to hit an incoming missile that is traveling around 30,000 miles per hour. It's as difficult as it sounds. Joe Cirincione (who is a national security analyst with 40 years in the field) wrote on his "Strategy and History" Substack, "We have actually sunk \$63 billion into ... the Ground-based Missile Defense system (GMD). It is part of the \$453 billion that the Congress has spent on failed national missile defense systems since Ronald Reagan launched his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in 1983. The best contractors, the best scientists, a fire house of money and...nothing has worked."

In tests, many of them scripted to take place under ideal conditions for detection, the interception fails half the time. A pro-missile defense site notes there have been only 20 tests of GMD and the success rate is just 57%.

After spending \$453 billion there are just 44 of these GMD's operational. Cirincione states, "The GMD system is so bad that the Department of Defense has canceled both the interceptor program and the kill-vehicle program and gone back to the drawing boards for a new system."

There is a complete alternative idea to the fool idea of security through perfection of anti-missile defense. It's the "Back from the Brink" campaign. From its website we learn the campaign advocates nuclear bomb abolition and to effect that goal it calls "on the United States to lead a global effort to prevent nuclear war by:

- Actively pursuing a verifiable agreement among nuclear-armed states to eliminate their nuclear arsenals
- Renouncing the option of using nuclear weapons first
- Ending the sole, unchecked authority of any U.S. President to launch a nuclear attack
- Taking U.S. nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert
- Cancelling the plan to replace the entire U.S. nuclear arsenal with enhanced weapons

Now the Left historically pooh-poohs arms control as naïve and believes that total capitalist system overhaul or abolition has to come first. Yet in the 1980's nuclear weapons treaties *did* have a major impact. Ronald Reagan's USA and Soviet Union were at each other's throats but Reagan and Gorbachev made agreements that eventually cut the world's nuclear arsenal from 64,000 to 10,000 nuclear weapons. Supposedly a huge influence on Reagan was the film "The Day After" which aired in 1983 and which showed hideous effects of nuclear war on the U.S. Hopefully we can use "A House of Dynamite" to same effect. Back in 1983 "The Day After" was shown on national TV and educators spent days in class talking about it. Let's get teachers, their unions and others in education to mount a similar effort.