

The U.S. election focuses the mind on who will be commander-in-chief — and why we continue to have nuclear weapons anyway

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In less than two months Americans will decide whose finger should be on the nuclear trigger, ready to possibly destroy Russia, China or North Korea.

The U.S. relies on a “nuclear first use” strategy and although eliminating nuclear weapons would be the best option for civilization, Americans and Russians are simply not prepared to do that. The next U.S. president must be willing to use nuclear weapons first.

As commander-in-chief, the president is constantly shadowed by an aide carrying the nuclear codes in a suitcase, and the president’s order to launch must be obeyed, even if the secretary of defence, the secretary of state and the nation’s top advisers disagree. As Bruce Blair, a Princeton scholar and former Minuteman missile operator, points out, the president is at the apex of the nuclear chain of command and the arsenal’s operators must respond dutifully to his or her orders, even orders that come out of nowhere. “Everything revolves around this one individual,” he says.

Both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump claim they are temperamentally inclined to make rational decisions during world crises. Because the flight time for a missile fired from a Russian submarine at the U.S. can be less than 12 minutes, she or he has to decide whether to order the launch of land-based U.S. missiles before incoming warheads take them out. Nobody can call back the president’s order to launch based on a false warning or a lack of faith in the president’s power to make such a momentous decision.

In the higher echelons of U.S. decision-making, the time available to weigh in on planned drone strikes varies from 20 minutes to several days, but the time to deliberate during a civilization-ending nuclear crisis is less than the time it takes to make a meal.

Faced with ambiguous information, the president might assume the computer technology is fallible and decide to refrain from using nuclear weapons first. But then he or she risks appearing weak and unsuitable as commander in chief.

The hard lessons of nuclear deterrence were reinforced through the Cuban missile crisis (the closest the world got to nuclear war) and they have come to mean every U.S. president must appear ready and resolved to possibly go to the brink of the nuclear abyss. In his memoirs, Bill Clinton describes a very sobering top-secret briefing on the nuclear codes when he became president.

Hillary Clinton is already under fire for her laxity and disregard for the use of secret lethal force by U.S. drones in Pakistan. The investigation of her emails raised questions about her disregard for U.S. laws that bar officials from discussing drone strikes either publicly or privately outside of secure communication systems. Criticisms have surfaced about her appreciation of classified and security issues, despite her unparalleled understanding of international issues gained as secretary of state.

Debates about whether Trump would behave angrily or with a level head as the U.S. commander-in-chief tend to focus on his vengeful nature and basic understanding of nuclear deterrence. During the primaries, radio talk show host Hugh Hewitt asked Trump an easy question about the nuclear triad (strategic bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles): “What’s your priority among our nuclear triad?” Trump veered off-topic: “Well, first of all, I think we need somebody absolutely that we can trust, who is totally responsible, who really knows what he or she is doing. That is so powerful and so important.”

Hewitt pressed him further: “Of the three legs of the triad, though, do you have a priority?” Instead of demonstrating an understanding of how deterrence works, Trump answered: “I think, I think, for me, nuclear is just the power, the devastation is very important to me.”

The history of U.S.-Russian crisis decision-making includes incidents of computer glitches, human error, misunderstandings and miscalculations; all these may be compounded by temperamental unsuitability or a blasé attitude toward secrecy.

The world need not end in nuclear cataclysm. Apart from urging Americans to show up on voting day — since only half of Americans are expected to vote in November — we should urge bystanders to take a stronger stand in favour of nuclear arms control and disarmament.

The Hiroshima-based Mayors for Peace, which includes more than 7,000 mayors in 161 countries and regions, has called for major inroads on nuclear disarmament by 2020. As the representative of 1.4 billion Roman Catholics, the Pope has strongly denounced these evil weapons of mass destruction, as have Protestant leaders from the World Council of Churches. The worldwide Pugwash movement, the Red Cross and Red Crescent organizations, Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Nuclear Disarmament, and Physicians for Global Survival are calling for nuclear abolition.

Asked in April about the possibility of a nuclear-free world, Trump said he would love to see such a world, but “chances are extremely small that will happen, so I think that’s something that in an ideal world is wonderful, but I think it’s not going to happen very easily.”

In October, Canada will vote at the UN on whether to take urgent action to deal with the threat to humanity posed by the existence of nuclear weapons and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any detonation. Canada could still put its weight behind the resolution mandating negotiations on a legally binding nuclear weapons convention. We could also press for less consensus-based, hamstrung decision-making at the UN’s Disarmament Conference in Geneva.

As a NATO ally and a member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Canada could call for emergency meetings on conflicts that could trigger nuclear war.

At the same time there are moves on a northeast Asian nuclear-weapon-free zone, we could take steps to establish an Arctic nuclear-weapon-free zone.

While Canadians can’t cast votes in the American election, we can push for a nuclear-weapon-free world along with many other middle powers, more than 800 members of the Order of Canada, and 44 prominent Canadian non-governmental organizations.

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Longtime peace activist Murray Thomson is spearheading nearly 900 of his peers in the Order of Canada who endorse a nuclear weapons convention.