

U.S. Military and Political Leaders Urge Taking Nuclear Weapons Off Hair-Trigger Alert

Over the past two decades, U.S. political and military officials at the highest levels have recognized that keeping nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert is dangerous, and have called for change.

Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama have both acknowledged the dangers of keeping nuclear weapons on high alert. Both promised to lower alert levels.

- **President George W. Bush**—As a presidential candidate he stated in a speech titled “New Leadership on National Security” (Bush 2000):

“[T]he United States should remove as many weapons as possible from high-alert, hair-trigger status—another unnecessary vestige of Cold War confrontation. Preparation for quick launch—within minutes after warning of an attack—was the rule during the era of superpower rivalry. But today, for two nations at peace, keeping so many weapons on high alert may create unacceptable risks of accidental or unauthorized launch. ...”

“[I]n the area of strategic nuclear weapons, we should invite the Russian government to accept the new vision I have outlined, and act on it. But the United States should be prepared to lead by example, because it is in our best interest and the best interest of the world.”

- **President Barack Obama**—As a presidential candidate he stated in an interview (ACT 2008):

“[K]eeping nuclear weapons ready to launch on a moment’s notice is a dangerous relic of the Cold War. Such policies increase the risk of catastrophic accidents or miscalculation. I believe that we must address this dangerous situation...”

And after being elected, his website stated (Obama’08):

“The United States and Russia have thousands of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert. Barack Obama believes that we should take our nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert.... Maintaining this Cold War stance today is unnecessary and increases the risk of an accidental or unauthorized nuclear launch.”

Other political and military officials have made similar calls:

- **General James Cartwright:** retired Marine Corps four-star general who served as Commander of U.S. Strategic Command under President George W. Bush (2004–2007), and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Presidents Bush and Obama (2007–2011). A May 2012 report he chaired (Global Zero 2012) states:

“The current postures of launch-ready nuclear forces that provide minutes and seconds of warning and decision time should be replaced by postures that allow 24–72 hours on which to assess threats and exercise national direction over the employment of nuclear forces. This change would greatly reduce the risks of mistaken, ill-considered and accidental launch.”

In Senate testimony he stated (Cartwright 2013):

“[T]he current launch-ready postures of the United States and Russia are major sources of instability. They not only would generate pressure on leaders to make a premature decision on the use of nuclear weapons

in a crisis, but they also run a risk of unintentional strikes. The postures pose an existential threat to the very survival of the United States, and Russia perceives no less cause for concern.”

- **General William Odom:** retired Army three-star general and Director of the National Security Agency under President Reagan (1985–1988). He said in an interview (Frontline 1999 a):

“I don’t see why we have the forces alert. I’ve never been a big enthusiast for our whole approach of being able to launch on warning or launch in a very short amount of time. Firing off 1,000 or 500 or 2,000 nuclear warheads on a few minutes’ consideration has always struck me as an absurd way to go to war. ... Therefore I think it would make a lot of sense to completely de-alert.”

- **Admiral Stansfield Turner:** retired Navy admiral who served as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency under President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981). He stated in an interview (Frontline 1999 b):

“...I think that one of the first things we should do is take every U.S. weapon off of high alert. We have an absolutely insane policy in this country. Had it now for 30 or 40 years. ... Our missiles that count are in submarines out here at sea, and they can’t see those. So we can always counter-attack, no matter what they do in that attack.”

- **General Eugene E. Habiger:** retired U.S. Air Force four-star general and the Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command under President William J. Clinton (1996–1998). He said in Senate testimony (Habiger 2002):

“...we have to find a way to move more nuclear weapons off alert status and give leaders more decision time in a crisis.”

At a recent event at the Center for American Progress he stated (Habiger 2016):

“We need to bring the alert status down of our ICBMs. And we’ve been dealing with that for many, many decades. ... It’s one of those things where the services are not gonna do anything until the Big Kahuna says, ‘Take your missiles off alert,’ and then by golly within hours the missiles and subs will be off alert. ... [W]e need to get down to lower and lower levels, we need to have support and big decisions from the people in the White House to make it all happen.”

- **General George Lee Butler:** retired U.S. Air Force four-star general who served as Commander of U.S. Strategic Command under President George H. W. Bush (1992–1994). He stated in an interview (Shepherd’s Grove 2009):

“... pray for the political leadership that they might have the wisdom and the courage to take steps that are required, to reduce these forces from their states of hair trigger alert, where they have been now for lo these many years.”

- **William Perry:** U.S. Secretary of Defense under President Clinton (1994-1997). He stated in an interview (Mehta 2015):

“[T]oday we now face the kind of dangers of a nuclear event like we had during the Cold War, an accidental war. ...ICBMs “are simply too easy to launch on bad information.”

He wrote in his recent book, *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink* (Perry 2015):

“The NORAD false alarm of a Soviet nuclear missile attack I had experienced earlier in my career dramatized well the overwhelming decision scenario--only minutes to make what would be the most foreboding decision ever, and one that stretches the traditional idea of ‘rationality.’” (p. 92)

“These stories of false alarms have focused a searing awareness of the immense peril we face when in mere minutes our leaders must make life-and-death decisions affecting the whole planet. ... [W]e are still operating with an outdated system fashioned for Cold War exigencies. It is time for the United States to make clear the goal of removing all nuclear weapons everywhere from the prompt-launch status in which nuclear-armed ballistic missiles are ready to be launched in minutes.” (p. 188)

- **Robert S. McNamara:** U.S. Secretary of Defense under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson (1961–1968). He wrote in *Foreign Policy* (McNamara 2005):

“The risk of an accidental or inadvertent nuclear launch is unacceptably high. At a minimum, we should remove all strategic nuclear weapons from ‘hair-trigger’ alert, as others have recommended, including Gen. George Lee Butler, the last commander of SAC. That simple change would greatly reduce the risk of an accidental nuclear launch. ...

“The indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons carries a very high risk of nuclear catastrophe. There is no way to reduce the risk to acceptable levels, other than to first eliminate the hair-trigger alert policy and later to eliminate or nearly eliminate nuclear weapons.”

- **Senator Sam Nunn:** U.S. Senator from Georgia (1972–1997) and Chair of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee (1987–1995). He stated in Senate testimony (Nunn 2002):

“I do not believe that our continued Cold War operational status adds to our deterrence or enhances either side’s security; it does, however, increase the chance of a catastrophic accident made from too little information and too little time. ... Both sides could increase decision time by eliminating the prompt launch readiness requirement for as many forces as possible, getting these weapons off hair trigger.”

- **George P. Shultz:** U.S. Secretary of State under President Ronald Reagan (1982–1989); **William J. Perry,** U.S. Secretary of Defense under President Clinton (1994–1997); **Henry A. Kissinger,** U.S. Secretary of State under Presidents Richard M. Nixon and Gerald R. Ford (1973–1977), and Senator **Sam Nunn.** They recommend in their opinion editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* (Shultz et al. 2007):

“Changing the Cold War posture of deployed nuclear weapons to increase warning time and thereby reduce the danger of an accidental or unauthorized use of a nuclear weapon.”

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