



## BOOK REVIEW

# NUCLEAR WAR

## A Scenario

By Annie Jacobsen

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In her book, *Nuclear War: A Scenario*,<sup>1</sup> national security writer Annie Jacobsen has produced a well written albeit flawed overview of a potential world ending nuclear conflict. Capitalizing on the post Oppenheimer interest in nuclear war, her book is already a New York Times bestseller, with the rights being sold for a possible movie. For those in the nuclear weapons field as well as the general public, I would recommend the book, however, it should be read more as a work of fiction and not a realistic scenario.

### Summary

The book is a 72-minute overview of a nuclear strike scenario, starting from a missile launch and ending in a mass nuclear extinction event. The scenario starts with a “bolt out of the blue” North Korean Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) strike against Washington DC (there is no reason given for the attack). The strike triggers a series of events, to include radar detection, alert of national command authority, and attempted interception of by ground based mid-course missile defense (GMD) from Fort Greeley Alaska.

When the GMD fails to intercept the North Korean ICBM, the “fog of war” sets in. The U.S. President is grasping at potential response options, while he simultaneously must evacuate himself and his family from Washington. The President is unable to communicate with subordinate commands or other world leaders. Adding more confusion, a second missile from a submarine is detected, heading towards California.

From there, a parade of worst-case scenarios occurs, exacerbating the mass confusion. North Korea launches a Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) at the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Plant in California. North Korea also launches a VX attack against South Korea and an Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) against the continental U.S. In response, the President launches multiple ICBM attacks against North Korea, with the intent to destroy the Kim regime. In their confusion, Russia believes that the U.S. is launching a nuclear strike against them and immediately launches a strike against the U.S. This in turn forces the U.S. to launch its nuclear weapons against Russia. The scenario concludes 72 minutes after the initial launch with the impact of 1,000 Russian nuclear warheads striking the continental U.S. The remainder of the book discusses the aftermath of the strike and the subsequent nuclear winter that impacts Earth for the next 24,000 years.

### The Good

As mentioned, the book is well written, covering issues of nuclear command and control, missile defense, and continuity of government in a way the layman can understand. She weaves in historical anecdotes and explainers that further simplify the issues related to nuclear weapons policy. She also contributes to the “launch on warning” (more accurately labeled “launch under attack”) debate that should be considered more broadly by the U.S. public.

## The Bad

Many parts of her “scenario” are unrealistic and are scripted to build the end state of a world ending mass nuclear exchange. First, her “bolt out of the blue” North Korean ICBM with no previous escalation or warning is unlikely to happen. The no warning strike contributes to the “fog of war,” and the subsequent cascading effects, however this strike is bordering on absurd.

Furthermore, her description of missile defense failures as well as a North Korean SLBM strike are equally unrealistic. A closer read of the book shows that she relies on Dr. Theodore Postal, an MIT professor and defense analyst for much of her analysis. While Dr. Postal has some impressive credentials, he has recently espoused crackpot theories to include:

- Chemical attacks in Syria were launched by the rebels and not the regime.
- The Israeli Iron Dome system is almost ineffective.
- North Korean ICBM designs were essentially the same missiles as Russian ICBMs.

Therefore, his scenario of zero interceptions of a North Korean ICBM as well as North Korean SLBM capabilities should be taken with a grain of salt.

Finally, and most importantly, Jacobsen does not cover the range of options a U.S. President would have in response to a North Korean nuclear strike. In her scenario, the U.S. immediately launches its land-based ICBMs against North Korea, which triggers Russia to launch its massive attack against the U.S. In reality, the U.S. President would have a range of options against Pyongyang, from conventional strikes, to theater based nuclear weapons, to submarine launched ballistic missiles. All of these can be done at a time and place of the presidents choosing, obviating the time clock that is the cornerstone of the scenario. None of these scenarios would likely trigger an immediate massive nuclear strike by our adversaries, as outlined by Jacobsen.

## The Ugly

There is one scene that strikes out as me as somewhat offensive. In her historical summary she describes a 1960 planning meeting at Strategic Air Command (SAC) discussing the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP). In the event of nuclear war, the SIOP called for a massive retaliation against all the major cities in Russia and China, resulting

in over 600 million deaths. One might argue that this plan represented overkill, targeted too many civilians, bordered on immoral, and was divorced from overall political objectives.

However, Jacobsen takes this a step too far, comparing the SAC planners to the perpetrators of the Holocaust. She goes into specific detail arguing that those that designed the SIOP are like the “German bureaucrats [who] swiftly agreed on a program to exterminate every last Jew they could find anywhere in Europe, using methods of mass extermination more technically efficient than vans filled with exhaust gasses, the mass shootings, or incineration in barns and synagogues uses until then.” You can say a lot about General Curtis LeMay, General Thomas Powers etc., but comparing them to senior Nazi leaders strikes me as unseemly.

As I mentioned earlier, I would recommend this book. It is relatively quick read (I read it at Barnes and Nobles in an afternoon), decently written, and covers nuclear weapons policy well enough for the laymen to understand. However, it should be read more as a work of fiction than an actual scenario that could take place. ■

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is currently a policy analyst and strategist at the U.S. Army CWMD and Nuclear Agency as well as an adjunct professor at Georgetown University. He holds a M.A. in Security Studies from Georgetown and a B.A. from Johns Hopkins University. He held previous intelligence positions at the Department of the Army, Defense Threat Reduction Agency, and Department of Homeland Security. He is a former Army officer and combat veteran of OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM and OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM.

## Notes

1. Annie Jacobsen, *Nuclear War: A Scenario*, (New York: Dutton, 2024).