NUKING THE MOON

AND OTHER INTELLIGENCE SCHEMES AND **MILITARY PLOTS** LEFT ON THE DRAWING BOARD

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PENGUIN BOOKS

13.

THE DUCC

If I go there will be trouble (si me voy va a haber peligro)
And if I stay it will be double (si me quedo sera el doble)

—The Clash, "Should I Stay or Should I Go," 1982

The Clash. Genius.

In one simple yet mind-blowingly catchy chorus, they summed up the Cold War debate about how to best keep our leaders alive and in charge during the age of ballistic missile technology—and they did it in two languages.

Should I stay or should I go? In the age of nuke-laden bombers, the question wasn't all that complicated. National leadership would have hours of warning prior to an attack. Enough time to make a comprehensive assessment of the strategic situation, converse with military and political leadership, and then still get the hell out of Dodge before the nukes arrive (if you fail to shoot them down along the way).

But in the age of the ballistic missile, things changed. No longer were we thinking in terms of the hours it might take for a relatively slow airplane to fly halfway around the world. Now it was minutes. An intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launched from the Soviet Union could arrive in Washington, New York, Boston, or Miami in about thirty minutes. A submarine lurking off the East Coast of the United States could send its missiles (SLBMs—submarine-launched ballistic missiles) to their targets in even less time, perhaps as quickly as five to ten minutes. And if ground-based missiles were deployed closer to the United States (let's just randomly pick a place . . . Cuba, for instance), then Soviet medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs and IRBMs) could be raining down on American cities, with little to no warning, by the hundreds.

This, of course, means that on the very brink of World War III, the American leadership wouldn't have the luxury of taking the time to figure everything out before they had to make key decisions. A lot of the most important choices of World War III would have to be made *after* the missiles had started to hit their targets. So keeping the key people alive to make those decisions was paramount. Would it be better to hunker down somewhere safe(ish) and hope to ride out the attack? Or was it better to get moving, and stay moving, so that the Soviets couldn't get a bead on you? Bobbing. Weaving. Never still. Never an easy target. A thermonuclear game of tag.

At best, you have thirty minutes to decide. At worst, in just five minutes the spot where you are standing will be superheated to a million degrees in a microsecond.

So ya gotta let me know (me tienes que decir).

Should I stay or should I go?

The first step toward a national command post came during the Korean War. The U.S. Air Force set up an office in the Pentagon to try and heighten the nation's readiness against a strategic (read: nuclear) attack from the Soviet Union. Early warning technology was developed, like the DEW Line—"Distant Early Warning"—a series of radar stations that spread from the Aleutian Islands to Alaska, Canada, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland. These were designed to

spot enemy bombers long before they arrived in the United States, and to give civilian and military leadership the time to react and respond in plenty of time before bombs began falling on Washington, DC.

In 1953, the Joint Chiefs of Staff established the Alternate Joint Communications Center (AJCC) on the border between Maryland and Pennsylvania (popularly called either the "Little Pentagon" or "Raven Rock," after a nearby mountain, or sometimes "Site R"). This was considered an ideal location to stash American leadership in the event of war. Close enough to DC for the most important people to get there quickly and, well, before DC ceased to exist. And yet far enough away from DC that you wouldn't be caught up in residual damage from what would certainly be a massive strike on the nation's capital.

And you'd be under a mountain. So you've got that going for you. Which is nice.

Here's how it would (theoretically) work in the event of an attack: If the president declared a strategic alert (let's say the DEW Line picked up a fleet of bombers heading right for us), and the Joint Chiefs kicked the AJCC into operation, the top honchos of each of the services (all the highest-ranking generals/admirals in Washington), the Joint Chiefs themselves, the secretary of defense, and probably the president would head north to the Maryland-Pennsylvania line and direct World War III from Raven Rock.

Seems simple enough. But when the AJCC was first developed, a number of critical questions still remained unanswered. Like:

1. What was the precise set of circumstances that would trigger the activation of the AJCC? Would it be "there are bombers on the way"? Would it be "the Soviets have launched a conventional attack on Western Europe"? Would it be "we are about to bomb

the hell out of them, maybe we should not be here when they decide to punch back"? No one knew.

2. How much warning can we expect before an attack? A couple of hours? Less?

3. Who would be relocated to the AJCC, and how would they get there? Do we bring everyone, or just the principals? What about the vice president, the secretary of state, the Speaker of the House? Clearly the secretary of the interior and the secretary of agriculture are screwed, but who else should we save? And do we fly everyone there, drive them there, take a train? It would suck to be stuck in DC traffic while trying to escape a nuclear holocaust.

4. Could the AJCC even survive a direct nuclear attack? Unfortunately, there would only be one way to find out for sure.

5. Would the AJCC's communications survive a direct nuclear attack? This is perhaps the most significant of these questions. It's great if the facility keeps people alive, but if they cannot communicate with the outside world, then they can't control combat forces in a post-attack environment, and there's no point in doing any of this in the first place. Keeping the president alive is important not just because he's the president. Keeping the president alive is important so that he can direct, command, and ultimately *end* the war. U.S. Air Force general Thomas Power, who became commander of the Strategic Air Command in 1957, encapsulated this concept perfectly: "Without communications all I command is my desk, and that is not a very lethal weapon."

These were important questions. And all of them remained contentious throughout the 1950s. Until they didn't matter any longer. The missile era changed everything.

. . .

The launch of Sputnik in 1957 brought with it mixed reviews. For the space geeks, it was a "Woohoo!" moment. Humans had finally gone into the great void outside the Earth's atmosphere. For the national security experts, it was an "Oh crap" moment. If they can put a satellite in space, ICBM technology is not far behind. Now we can never sleep soundly, knowing annihilation is only minutes away.

For the AJCC concept to work, you needed warning. Time to get from DC to Raven Rock. The advent of intercontinental ballistic missiles meant that warning went bye-bye. And, of course, as I mentioned before, there was no guarantee that the AJCC itself would survive a nuclear attack. As missiles became more and more accurate—which was almost certain to happen—even the fortified-by-a-mountain AJCC would become vulnerable to a dedicated Soviet attack.

To take a step back, it's important to understand that this wasn't just an academic debate about whether or not we could keep the president alive (and communicating). I'm sure the generals and admirals in the Pentagon liked and respected the president, but that wasn't the point. The point was to maintain strategic deterrence—what would later be called "mutually assured destruction" (MAD). The president needed to stay alive so that the United States could guarantee a strong retaliation against a Soviet attack. Or the Soviets needed to legitimately *believe* the president would survive. So that he, and not the secretary of health and human services, could order the retaliatory deaths of millions of Soviet citizens.

This was the Cold War calculus of how to prevent a war in the first place. We had to ensure that the Soviets knew/believed that we would survive a surprise attack and then make them pay for it (by killing all of them). Thus they wouldn't attack us, because they understood it would be suicidal. The mental gymnastics are exhausting, but it made

sense to strategic planners at the time. And if you simplify it to the basics, it's easier to understand. If you have the power to knock someone out in a single blow, you might consider throwing a punch at someone who insults your mother. But if you hit them, and then they get back up, knock the stuffing out of you, and then punch your mom, dad, siblings, neighbors, third-grade teacher, and anyone else you've ever known (and then kick your dog just because they can), you might think twice before you pick a fight. Your mom *is* kinda fat, if you're perfectly honest about it.

For U.S. military planners in the early 1960s, the best way to ensure the continued existence of the strategic deterrent was to build redundancy into the system. Stay *and* go. Continue to work on making better fixed facilities like the AJCC, but also begin to develop mobile options in case the use of those facilities became untenable. Each of the services proposed their own means of maintaining continuity of government. Not surprisingly, the Air Force proposed an airborne platform, and the Navy a seaborne platform. The Army's suggestion of a mobile railroad command post was quickly dismissed.

The Navy's proposal came first, in November 1960, when Arleigh Burke, the Chief of Naval Operations, advocated for the use of the cruiser USS *Northampton* as what he called the National Emergency Command Post Afloat (NECPA). The ship would float around the Chesapeake Bay and on random routes in coastal waters (to make its location less detectable and its route less predictable), staying close enough to DC to allow the top people to get there quickly—via car, helicopter, speedboat, or even submarine.

The Air Force thought this was a ridiculous plan. Yes, there were parochial interests at play here, but in the end they did have a valid point (other than, "That's stupid"). The destruction from a nuclear attack on Washington (or the AJCC) could also encompass the NECPA's cruising area as well. It would be too slow to get far enough out of

the way to guarantee the safety of the evacuees. In addition, despite attempts to keep the ship bobbing and weaving to avoid detection, it would still be highly vulnerable to satellite and reconnaissance aircraft surveillance, or clandestine tracking from enemy submarines or even disguised spy trawlers. You're not keeping the president safe—and, more important, maintaining command and control—if the boat you put him on sinks from an enemy torpedo.

The Air Force responded with its own proposal: the National Emergency Airborne Command Post (NEACP—if you want to be cool and pretend you are in the know, you pronounce this as "kneecap"). Either before or after tactical warning ("tactical" meaning the nukes are on the way), the president and other important government and military types would jump on a helicopter and fly to an airfield, where they would meet the NEACP plane (a specially modified KC-135 Stratotanker aircraft) and be up and out of the DC area within fifteen minutes. And this is all they would have, if they were lucky. The newly deployed BMEWS (Ballistic Missile Early Warning System) could—perhaps—provide fifteen to twenty-five minutes of warning for an incoming ICBM attack. Once the VIPs were safely aboard, the aircraft would circle to the west of the city until all incoming missiles had done their thing, and then figure out where it could eventually land (at a predetermined site, with comms, that wasn't a smoldering pile of radioactive waste).

But both of these plans were overly optimistic. NEACP and NECPA could completely ensure the president's survival only if he received adequate warning. Fifteen minutes is not a lot of time. Maybe, just maybe, if you are lucky and BMEWS spots the Soviet missiles the minute they leave the silos, the president can make it to safety on the NEACP plane.

Even that is cutting it close. And with the advent of SLBMs, the United States needed a better solution.

At the end of 1963, the secretaries of state and defense proposed

one to newly inaugurated President Lyndon Johnson. It was called the Deep Underground Command Center, or DUCC. It would be built thirty-five hundred feet under the Pentagon. In a memorandum to the president, the case was made:

> As you know, the currently projected Washington Command and Control Complex consists of the National Military Command Center (a soft installation in the Pentagon), the Alternate National Military Command Center at Ft. Richie, Md. (being hardened to withstand [REDACTED] of overpressure), and Emergency Airborne Command Post, the Emergency Command Post Afloat and [REDACTED]. Studies indicate that the fixed facilities of this complex and their communications could be eliminated with reasonably high probability by a small number (6–10) of 10 megaton weapons, resulting in only the aircraft and the ship surviving. The aircraft . . . would require 10 to 15 minutes to become airborne and another 10 minutes to fly beyond the lethal range of a 50 MT [megaton] weapon if airburst over Andrews. The ship is 30 to 60 minutes flying time from Washington. Both times are in excess of the upper limit of expected tactical warning. Projected improvement in enemy weapons size and delivery means [SLBMs] will further shorten this time.

This isn't very good news. But wait, there's more:

> These considerations create serious doubt that currently projected facilities are keyed to today's threat, much less the threat of the 1970's, or that they adequately provide for protection of top civilian and military leaders who would be required to make and disseminate high level decisions in an emergency.

But there was hope on the horizon:

> Studies of deep underground structures and analysis of weapons test data indicate that it is feasible to design and construct a command facility at depths of about 3,500 ft. so that it will withstand multiple direct hits of 200 to 300 MT weapons bursting at the surface or 100 MT weapons penetrating to depths of 70–100 feet. Extrapolation of weapons technology predicts that such weapons represent the upper practical limit to be credited to the enemy in the mid-1970's.

We've gotten a little jargony, so let's quickly talk about the power of nuclear weapons. The strength of a nuclear weapon is referred to as its "yield," and is listed in either kilotons (KT) or megatons (MT). This terminology was created in order to help people understand the magnitude of a new and undeniably transformative technology. Take something people have understood for decades (TNT), and use it as a foundation to help explain the exponentially greater power of this novel weapons system. Hence, when I say the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima ("Little Boy") had a yield of 13 KT, I am saying it had the explosive power of 13,000 tons of TNT. "Fat Man," dropped on Nagasaki three days later, had a yield of about 22 KT. For comparison, the largest conventional explosive dropped by any combatant in World War II was equivalent to 10 tons of TNT. On November 1, 1952, the United States detonated a thermonuclear (hydrogen) device in the Pacific on the Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The test, code-named "Mike," produced a yield of 10.4 MT—the equivalent of 10.4 *million* tons of TNT.

The most powerful weapon ever tested in human history was the so-called Tsar Bomba. On October 30, 1961, the Soviet Union detonated a thermonuclear weapon on Severny Island, about 250 miles

north of the Russian mainland, with a yield of 58 MT (about fifteen hundred times as powerful as both Little Boy and Fat Man *combined*). The Soviets had also designed a 100 MT weapon, but they worried the test would kill everyone on Earth, so they decided not to do it.

That was nice of them.

But take a quick peek back at the document I was quoting earlier. The DUCC would be designed to "withstand *multiple* direct hits of 200 to 300 MT weapons." That's pretty damn good, considering we now know the largest man-made explosion in human history was the Tsar Bomba at 58 MT. So why design the DUCC for such dramatically more powerful weapons? Why the overkill (so to speak)?

Because no one—even the Soviets, despite their decision to scrap the testing of the 100 MT weapon—knew the upper limits of nuclear weapons development, which by this time had ceased to be a scientific calculation, and had frighteningly become a geopolitical one. You could drop a "lowly" 5 MT bomb on New York City and easily kill millions. Or Washington. Or Moscow, Beijing, Chicago, Seoul, London, Paris, Berlin. You didn't need anything larger than that. Military necessity was not the driving force behind bigger and bigger yields. It was national pride and propaganda: Hey, look at us, our nuke is larger than yours.

So the DUCC was overengineered, but better safe than sorry. It also had an additional cool feature: The principals could access the DUCC without leaving their respective buildings (the White House, Pentagon, State Department). This had two benefits. First, it made for a quick and easy getaway to safety. The president or secretary of state would take an elevator down, and then a handy access tunnel would lead him to the safety of the DUCC. Second (and arguably as important), because the evacuation would be underground, there would be no overt signs of panic. The president and his team could take shelter without the political consequences of being seen running from DC.

In a real emergency, this wouldn't make much difference (everyone who might vote against him in the next election would likely be dead). But in a false alarm, or a crisis situation in which the worst was averted, the president could look cowardly fleeing for the hills while the rest of the country remained sitting ducks.

Why would this matter? Because a president fearful of how his actions could look to voters might be less likely to seek shelter when it counted. That would be a serious problem.

Okay, then. Let's build this thing, right? The president supports it, as do the secretaries of state and defense. Who could possibly stand in the way of a secret underground lair for America's civilian and military leadership?

Interestingly, it was the Joint Chiefs of Staff who resisted the project.

In a memorandum to Secretary of Defense McNamara, dated January 10, 1964, the JCS made their views known: "It is the opinion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that a DUCC as a military command center cannot be justified and it is not recommended for inclusion in the National Military Command System (NMCS) program."

Then they gave their reasons.

1. It was lacking many of the advantages of the other, already existing options. It would force military leaders to operate while cut off from the outside world, and "without adequate staff or support in a 'buttoned-up' environment from which communications and egress would be uncertain following a nuclear attack."

2. It was way too expensive. Congress was unlikely to appropriate funding specifically for the DUCC, so the construction and upkeep of the facility would have to come out of the budget for the NMCS, which would "limit in number and degree of enhance-

ment of the more desirable mobile alternate command centers" and curtail "communications and other support systems."

3. Communication in the DUCC would be extremely vulnerable. "The weakest link in a hardened communications system is the antenna. In view of limited progress to date in the design of hardened antennas, the probability of survival of DUCC communications depends primarily on redundancy of antennas." And we weren't there yet technologically. Not even close. The president and his generals would be in command of the DUCC—but not much else. Unlike in the more mobile systems, leadership would be stuck there for quite some time. It's not like anyone can just pop their heads out once the bombs stop dropping. Washington is likely to be *gone*. And what's left will be incredibly radioactive.

4. The proposed design was far too small, and making it bigger would cost far too much money. There wasn't enough room for "essential staff support and housekeeping support." Someone needs to get the general's coffee. And the floor of this underground command facility isn't going to mop itself.

So the Joint Chiefs didn't like the DUCC, but the JCS is merely an advisory committee, there to give the president sound military options and guidance. They had no real power in this fight—and even if they did, the DUCC was supported by the president and other principals.

Thus the plan went forward, and in early 1964 the Department of Defense requested funds in fiscal year 1965 for further DUCC research from the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) as part of the U.S. Army's military construction appropriations. It's rare that I feel sorry for members of Congress, but the DUCC request really put HASC firmly between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, they had

all of the head honchos in the government telling them they wanted money for the DUCC. On the other hand, they had learned that the JCS recommended against the project (this was Washington; nothing like that ever remains secret for long).

In the finest tradition of the U.S. Congress, HASC did exactly what you would expect in a situation like this: nothing. They punted, and created a special subcommittee to "study" the issue thoroughly.

The DoD was not deterred. For fiscal year 1966, the Defense Department requested $26.2 million for the DUCC, and this time Congress did, in fact, make a decision—they reduced it to $4 million, which would give the Pentagon at least a little money "to more fully develop plans and to again present the actual construction authorization request" for fiscal year 1967.

I'll translate what this says to me: "Please don't make us do this. Here, have some money. It's not much, but it will keep you busy. Come back next year. Maybe then we will give you more."

Yet there would be no "next year." Secretary of Defense McNamara apparently saw the writing on the wall, and in March 1966 he ended the program. There isn't much written on McNamara's ultimate rationale for this decision. Anything I say here would be a guess—an educated guess, but a guess nonetheless. If I had to put money on it, I would say that several things probably led to SecDef's termination of the DUCC project.

But one stands out among the others: Vietnam. The concept of the DUCC was envisioned during a time when nuclear war, and really nothing but nuclear war, was on everyone's mind. In the decade leading up to the cancellation of the DUCC, we had the launch of Sputnik, the first ICBMs, the Berlin Crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and China's development of an atomic bomb (to name just a few). But by the mid-1960s, the Vietnam War was sucking up more and more of the

focus of policymakers, and more and more of the funding available from Congress.

So McNamara and the DoD were now spending their time worrying about the war they had, rather than the war that might never come.

AND THEN WHAT?

The Pentagon was fighting in Vietnam, but that didn't mean they were *completely* ignoring the maintenance of continuity of government and nuclear command and control. They continued to invest in upgrading the survivability and communications for NEACP and Raven Rock.

How much? And what else did they do?

Check back with me in about fifty years. There is nothing more classified than the specifics of modern-day continuity of government and nuclear command and control. Of course there are bunkers around Washington, DC, and throughout the country. Of course there is a plan in place for getting the president and his top civilian and military leadership the hell out of Dodge when World War III begins. We just don't know where they are, or what it is.

And that's fortunate, because our lack of knowledge means these plans have never been necessary.

We do know, however, bits and pieces of the infrastructure. Nothing concrete. Nothing comprehensive. But we have hints of what's been put in place, and how things might go down in a real nuclear crisis.

And it's not good.

Ten years after the formal end of the Cold War, on a rather normal Tuesday morning in September, most everyone in New York

and Washington was going about their lives the same way they had every other day that year. The president was down in Florida, visiting with some schoolchildren. The vice president was in the White House, and the secretary of defense and his staff were at the Pentagon. Colin Powell, the secretary of state, was in Peru, and Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill was also abroad, discussing economic policy in Japan.

When American Airlines Flight 175 hit the South Tower of the World Trade Center, and it quickly became apparent that America was under attack, it launched a security protocol for President Bush (and his potential successors)—the continuity-of-government plan.

It was a complete mess.

When Air Force One left Florida that morning, United Flight 93 (which later crashed in Pennsylvania) was still in the air. By that point, two aircraft had hit the towers in New York, and the Pentagon had already been hit as well. Because of spotty communications around the country, very few people, even at the highest levels of government, had a complete picture of what was happening in the country—on the ground or in the air.

We've talked a lot about communications—or lack thereof. As Air Force One was preparing to land at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana to refuel, Russian president Vladimir Putin was trying to get through. He was wondering why the United States had upped the readiness posture of its strategic forces (nuclear forces) to DEFCON (Defense Condition) 3. (It goes from 5 to 1. DEFCON 5 is peace. DEFCON 1 is nuclear war. Anytime you get closer to 1, it's a big deal.) You'll never guess what happened.

Okay, maybe you will—he couldn't get through. For thirty really stressful minutes, the White House communications team tried to establish a secure link between Air Force One and the Kremlin, finally giving up. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, who

spoke fluent Russian, then got on the phone with the Russian president to agree on a cooperative stand-down.

Rice was down in the emergency White House bunker along with Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta, who on most days had a fairly unassuming job. Not today. He was directing the Federal Aviation Administration's decision to ground all aircraft in U.S. airspace.

Meanwhile, Bush was trying to get the pilots to return him to Washington, despite specific plans to avoid exactly that. Air Force One's pilot was frustrated: "We had the president who didn't want to follow our plans for a nuclear attack, which is hide him, keep him safe and allow continuity of government." Against all advice to the contrary, Bush flew back to Washington later that day.

Okay, fine. If the president doesn't want to do what he's supposed to, then at least we can try and keep those down the line safe and out of harm's way. Right?

Nope. Vice President Cheney refused to budge, and stayed at the White House (which, if you recall, was one of the likely targets for United Flight 93). The fourth person in the line of succession, Senate Pro Tem Robert Byrd of West Virginia, also refused to evacuate and instead went home, just minutes' walk from the U.S. Capitol, another possible Flight 93 target. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (seventh in line) was at the Pentagon when it was attacked. He also decided to stay, sending his deputy Paul Wolfowitz to Raven Rock for safety.

According to reports, not one of the principals knew the plans in any detail, and four of the five top successors to the presidency declined to follow the continuity-of-government protocols.

Hey! Four out of five. That means there was someone who both knew what to do and actually *did* it! Well, at least there's that. Someone would still be alive to run the country. Who was that person, by

the way, who followed protocol and went to Andrews Air Force Base to be flown to an undisclosed safe location?

Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, who was later indicted on federal charges of structuring bank withdrawals to evade bank reporting requirements, making false statements to federal investigators, and sexually abusing three male students when he was a teacher more than three decades earlier (it ended up being four students). He would become a guest of the government at the Federal Medical Center prison in Rochester, Minnesota.

He has since been released, but has been banned from having contact with anyone under eighteen unless an adult is present. He also has to provide copies of his phone bills and credit card statements to his supervising probation officer, and is forbidden from using the internet without prior approval from a probation officer.

That is who could have been the leader of the free world.

We develop technologies to keep the president safe for a reason.