

Why SECDEF Austin's Secret Hospitalization Really Mattered

By

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Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's recent hospitalization and revelations that key Pentagon and White House leaders, including President Biden, were [unaware of his "incapacitation" for five days](#) is concerning. The reason for such concern should transcend political criticism. Indeed, the real concern regarding the secretary's uninformed absence relates to the negative impact on America's nuclear deterrent.

One of the most valuable qualities of American nuclear credibility is its incorporation of responsible authority to ensure nuclear command and control (NC2), which is the exercise of authority and direction over nuclear weapons by the president as the chief executive and head of state. According to the Congressional Research Service's [Defense Primer: Command and Control of Nuclear Forces](#):

The US President has sole authority to authorize the use of US nuclear weapons. This authority is inherent in his constitutional role as Commander in Chief. The President can seek counsel from appropriate military advisors; those advisors are then required to transmit and implement the orders authorizing nuclear use. The President does not need the concurrence of the US Congress to order the launch of nuclear weapons, and neither the military nor Congress can overrule these orders.

The US Constitution and the Presidential Succession Act of 1947 [provide a framework for the order of succession](#) in the event of presidential incapacity or demise. If a president cannot fulfill the duties of the office, including those of NC2, another designated government leader will take over in a specific order. The secretary of Defense is sixth in line for the presidency, following the vice president, speaker of the House, president pro tempore of the Senate, secretary of State, and secretary of the Treasury. Any cabinet member or elected official in an office identified in the line of succession, but is [not a natural-born citizen](#), cannot become president.

In addition to being one of the president's key advisors during a nuclear decision event, the secretary of Defense is a key "designated survivor" option for presidential succession planning. During the Eisenhower administration, officials introduced "continuity of government" to prepare for a possible Soviet nuclear attack. Maintaining constitutional legitimacy during the Cold War was important if the president or his successor were killed. Because of the awesome responsibility, those in presidential succession [receive appropriate training](#). Knowing where each of those government officials identified in the presidential line of succession, like the secretary of Defense, remains paramount to national survival.

Two congressmen, Jimmy Panetta and Ted Lieu, [requested](#) President Biden "consider modifying the decision-making process the United States uses in its command and control of nuclear forces." The congressional authors noted, "You alone possess the authority to order the use of nuclear weapons, which assures that nuclear weapons remain under civilian control." They also

advocated that the secretary of Defense be required to certify that the “launch order is valid,” presumably even in a second-strike nuclear retaliation. However, adding this caveat to the president’s already compressed nuclear decision timeline could lead to negative impacts, especially in light of Austin’s incapacitation.

By the 1950s it was well known that the president’s office is vulnerable to a decapitation strike, especially a nuclear one. According to a 1975 Institute for Defense Analysis Study, “[The unique role](#) of the President as the Commander in Chief, as well as Chief Executive, and his particular statutory powers with regard to nuclear weapons, made the survival of the presidency—the office if not the man, indispensable for legitimate nuclear action.” A 1969 blue ribbon defense panel convened by President Nixon [concluded](#):

It is stated US policy to retaliate only in the event of unmistakable attack, only by decision of the President or his constitutional successor, and with discrimination according to the source, magnitude, and type of attack to perform as desired [in an environment of nuclear war would be extremely difficult at best. Yet, the possibility of a disruption of command which would either immobilize retaliatory forces, subject them to piecemeal destruction, or bring about a weak or uncoordinated response which an enemy might feel he could cope with, might offer an aggressor too tempting an objective and thereby dangerously weaken deterrence.

In order for nuclear deterrence to be effective, potential aggressors must view the United States’ nuclear capabilities, architecture, and process as credible. This means that the president must have his key advisors (secretary of Defense and US Strategic Command commander) available to assist in decision-making, and succession must be reliable and contribute to shaping the adversary’s decision calculus.

On the worst of days, good advice and presidential continuity is crucial in ensuring that a decision to retaliate can be made. To achieve this, the secretary of Defense or his clear designee must be available to the president. The ability to maintain credible nuclear command and control is essential to America’s deterrence threat.