

Annie Jacobsen Gets It Wrong about Nuclear Deterrence

By

Peter Huessy

Annie Jacobsen's new book, *Nuclear War: A Scenario*, is receiving rave reviews. It portrays a scenario in which a limited North Korean nuclear strike on the United States spirals into global thermonuclear war between the United States and Russia, ultimately killing a significant portion of the world's population. For Jacobsen, who treats her fictional scenario as if it is fact, the problem is American nuclear policy, which, she asserts, is an utter failure. The only solution to the problem she creates is arms control and nuclear disarmament.

In Jacobsen's scenario, North Korea unexpectedly launches a limited preemptive strike against the American homeland. The United States responds with a decapitating strike against North Korea's nuclear arsenal. Through unlikely errors, Russia believes that the United States is attacking them instead of North Korea. In response, Russia launches a large-scale strike. This leads the United States to launch everything. Bing, bang, boom, and we have Armageddon followed by nuclear winter and the death of billions.

In interviews with *Vanity Fair* and *Mother Jones*, Jacobsen argues that the US has a plan to conduct nuclear warfighting, based on a series of previously adopted requirements that leave the president little leeway to modify his response. This problem is only made worse by the fact that the president has sole authority to employ nuclear weapons. To this point, Jacobsen argues that military "war mongers" have a very "aggressive culture" that has a predilection to "jam" the president toward "quickly launching a massive retaliatory strike."

Jacobsen asserts that American intercontinental ballistic missiles are on "HAIR TRIGGER ALERT." Why? She interviewed William Perry who used the term. Bam, nuclear weapons are on hair trigger alert and missileers have itchy trigger fingers.

While admitting that nuclear deterrence has worked for seven decades, Jacobsen warns that deterrence will fail and when it does, any use of a nuclear weapon will result in large-scale nuclear war. Why? Jacobson interviewed Paul Bracken, who participated in government sponsored wargames—four decades ago—that ended in general nuclear war. Ipso-facto, the use of one nuclear weapon leads to Armageddon.

In Jacobsen's scenario, American missile defenses are a complete failure. Why? She interviewed Ted Postol who said they do not work—case closed. Her conclusion is that missile defense is a farce and a waste of money. And the United States is lying to itself if it thinks they will ever stop an inbound nuclear weapon.

Elsewhere in the scenario, the president is forced to launch a large-scale nuclear response against the Russians within six minutes. Why? Jacobsen was also told by Perry that the president "will not wait" and thus assumed that Ronald Reagan's memoir, in which he made an off-hand remark about having six minutes to decide on nuclear weapons use, reflects policy. Abracadabra, the president must decide to use nuclear weapons within six minutes.

Jacobsen's predilection for incorrectly contextualizing the statements of those she interviewed is both stunning and worrying. The conclusions she draws about the present from the statements of former, often Reagan era or earlier, officials boggles the mind. Jacobsen does not seem to grasp the fact that she or her interviewees may be wrong about the relevance of their past experience to the present. Three examples are indicative.

Problems

First, Jacobsen is wrong about the alert status of the nation's intercontinental ballistic missile force. They are not on "HAIR TRIGGER ALERT." The United States does not have a launch-on-warning or launch-under-attack policy/doctrine. Nothing of the sort exists. Adam Lowther and Derek Williams dismantle this argument and [explain](#) that the United States maintains a launch-under-attack option, which allows the president to employ intercontinental ballistic missiles pre-, mid-, or post-strike. The option requires nothing of the president.

A number of variables will influence this decision. What is important to remember is that there is tremendous work that goes into thinking through scenarios well before they ever arise. Thus, the idea that these weapons are on hair trigger alert is ridiculous. Years of planning and analysis take place left of launch.

Second, Jacobsen is clearly unfamiliar with the design and purpose of wargames. They are specifically designed to understand the implications of a concept or capability. This means a scenario is artificially designed to ensure participants achieve the game's objectives. Thus, when Jacobsen assumes that because a wargame or series of wargames end in general nuclear war, that a real conflict must necessarily end in general nuclear war, she is fundamentally misunderstanding the purpose and arbitrary nature of wargames. Within the wargaming community, it is well understood that they are not predictive of the future but are instructive of potential options.

Third, missile defenses are not worthless, as Jacobsen claims. They are making steady improvements in their ability to destroy targets. Ted Postol, her primary source of information about missile defenses, was wrong about the effectiveness of Israel's Iron Dome system. Hard data is proving that missile defenses, in this case Iron Dome, are far more effective than Postol believed.

Although there are additional areas where Jacobsen incorporates inaccurate information into her scenario, the point is clear. Annie Jacobsen's *Nuclear War: A Scenario* would be far more accurately titled, *Nuclear War: A Novel* or *Nuclear War: Disarmament Propaganda*. The biggest challenge with the book is that Americans with little understanding of nuclear operations will believe the bias with which Jacobsen writes. This makes it imperative that those within the nuclear community speak out and correct the record. Nuclear deterrence is too important to turn over to a journalist with an agenda.

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