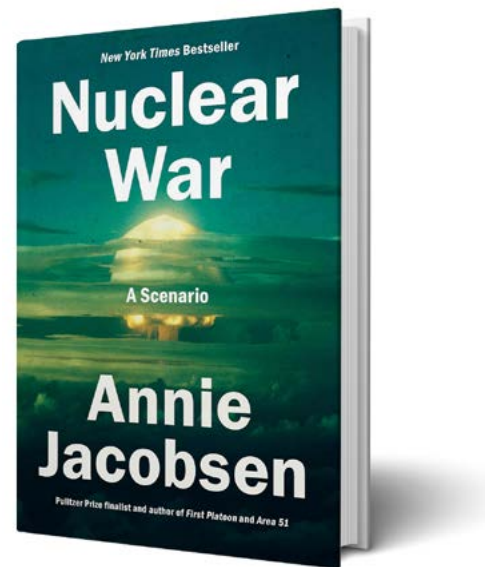


intelligence in public media

Nuclear War: A Scenario

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Reviewer: The reviewer is a retired CIA officer.

What if a single nuclear warhead plummeted from the sky and obliterated Washington DC? How would the United States respond? Would this mad act set in motion a general nuclear war that might spell the end of civilization?

Journalist Annie Jacobsen, the well-known author of *Area 51* and *The Pentagon's Brain*, devises a sinister and provocative scenario. With a bolt-from-the-blue surprise attack, North Korea, using one of its hard-to-find mobile launchers, fires a single Kwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with a 1-megaton thermonuclear warhead, right at our nation's capital. (15) The premise is plausible, because North Korea has the technical means to

do it, doesn't announce ballistic missile launches (37), and just might be crazy enough to try it. When the warhead explodes over Washington, it will completely destroy 100 square miles of US territory.

The narrative in *Nuclear War: A Scenario* is ruthless and relentless. Jacobsen explores the dark corners of our nuclear defense apparatus and attempts to expose the nuclear deterrence "myth" and its potential consequences. Not relying solely on open-source and declassified documents, Jacobsen conducted many interviews with top experts such as Richard Garwin and Theodore Postol, who "know what we do not" about the reality of nuclear war and the twisted logic of deterrence theory. (xxiv)

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Nuclear War: A Scenario

The book usefully details the vast array of US institutions, facilities, and procedures dedicated to fighting and surviving a nuclear war, but Jacobsen's larger purpose is to grab us by the shirt collar and shake us out of our complacency about the unstable, "second nuclear age" we live in.

Jacobsen's book has appeared at a time when taking a hard look at nuclear deterrence policy makes sense. For instance, Ukraine's recent seizure of Russian territory has challenged a key tenet of deterrence theory—that nuclear-armed states are immune from invasion. *Nuclear War* exposes other flaws in the theory. Nuclear madness may have peaked with our Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) of 1960, which anticipated a response causing 600 million casualties worldwide. SIOP may seem extreme, but this book suggests that our fundamental approach to nuclear conflict has changed little since then. In her scenario, a limited nuclear attack exposes the profound vulnerability of our defenses, and the rational irrationality of our overwhelming response, with our commitment to just war, human rights, and even environmental protection thrown by the wayside.

According to Jacobsen, our missile tracking and defense system, designed to stop a single rogue missile launch, has significant flaws. As we follow an incoming ICBM missile in her narrative, the realization slowly dawns that there's not a damn thing we can do about it. We have a short five-minute window to shoot it down in its boost phase, but our space-based infrared satellite sensors lose track of it in its midcourse phase. (71) We learn the massive Sea-Based X-Band Radar station, meant to detect the missile in midcourse, is widely considered unreliable, issuing many false positives. (75) The US Missile Defense Agency is responsible for intercepting the missile, but its systems have only a 55-percent success rate under ideal conditions. (72–73) Decoys from the ICBM might decrease that even more. In the terminal phase, the warhead separates for its final minute-and-a-half descent to Washington, DC.

Miscommunication and misconceptions play prominent and plausible roles in this scenario. Uncertainty and reaction, not rational thought, predominates as policymakers are gripped by "energetically minded

groupthink." (66) No one, not even the president, is in control of events, which swiftly get out of hand. When the blast over Washington comes, potentially all life in a mile diameter is extinguished. In a matter of minutes, deterrence theory, the theoretical foundation of our nuclear weapons policy, proves to be bankrupt.

Jacobsen's scenario also exposes contradictions in our defense planning. Getting the president, with the all-important nuclear launch codes, to safety and responding to the nuclear attack at the same time proves nearly impossible. US Strategic Command is begging for the launch codes while the president's being hustled by the Secret Service aboard *Marine One* to fly to Raven Rock Mountain Complex, the underground nuclear bunker and command center in Maryland. (105)

If nuking our capital weren't bad enough, Jacobsen continues her scenario with a North Korean submarine's launch of another ballistic missile at a nuclear power plant in California. If you can't detect the sub beforehand, there is no defense against this attack, and the warhead slams into a nuclear power plant in California, "a worst-case scenario beyond measure." (126) Weaponized nuclear power now turns peaceful nuclear power into complete devastation for the region.

Having described two devastating strikes, Jacobsen asks, "Do we carry out a massive retaliation?" Our policy of launch-on-warning demands we respond to the attack with numerous ICBMs of our own. (59) A knee-jerk response—the only response possible with so much at stake and so little reaction time—threatens massive collateral damage to the world's population outside North Korea. As Jacobsen points out, "restoring deterrence," by hitting back with overwhelming force, to change our enemy's decisionmaking, is our military doctrine. (194) Moreover, our strategy regarding nuclear weapons is, "use them or lose them." (241)

The trouble is that North Korea is so small that the collateral damage to neighboring countries from nuclear fallout—including to our allies Japan and South Korea, and even nuclear-armed China—will be inevitable. (96) Moreover, due to their range issues, Minutemen III missiles must transit Russian airspace to reach their North Korean target. The silos

in F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming belch fire, sending 50 Minutemen III's carrying their 300 kiloton warheads to strike North Korea. (136)

Our response also inadvertently triggers another real danger: Will Moscow understand that the missiles overflying their territory are not a nuclear first-strike on our part against Russia? Russians have an early warning satellite system, "Tundra," which is thought to be unreliable. Will Russian leaders understand our missiles are aimed at North Korea, and not them? (154) Were the Russians to strike back, using their own deterrence logic, they will likely aim for our nuclear silos in the northern Midwest.

Based on game theory, there is no way to "win" Jacobsen's scenario. We respond to a limited if destructive attack with a devastating reprisal, gaining no geostrategic benefit. The aftermath brings about Carl Sagan's planetary "nuclear winter" of widespread

radiation poisoning, freezing cold, ozone loss, and mass starvation (22).

If nuclear deterrence cannot keep us safe, what does it even mean? Jacobsen asks. (21) Despite being a gripping and informative read, her extreme scenario approach has its drawbacks. It is fiction, after all. Her bolt-from-the-blue attack would be an intelligence failure of the highest magnitude. Nuclear War doesn't convincingly argue that deterrence theory is defunct; North Korea's leadership still seems more committed to survival than national suicide, and our defenses, though flawed, might be good enough to discourage a nuclear surprise attack. Deterrence's effectiveness can't be completely dismissed. Moreover, Jacobsen gives us little by way of solutions to avoid this doomsday scenario. Still, her sensational book raises some important and lingering questions about deterrence theory's contradictions and our own limited defense. ■