

The Nuclear "Crisis" That Wasn't
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In May 2013, several media outlets reported on the suspension of 17 nuclear missile launch officers following a nuclear missile wing inspection at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota, with some reports implying that these suspensions amount to a crisis in the United States' nuclear force. They do not. In fact, they imply the exact opposite: the Air Force has learned from past mistakes and is acting proactively to ensure the continued safety and security of our nuclear weapons.

In March, Minot's 91st Missile Wing, which is responsible for maintaining 150 nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), underwent a periodic inspection of the unit's ability to perform its operational mission along with inspection of safety and other key areas. The unit passed the inspection with an overall "Satisfactory" rating, and was rated "Outstanding," "Excellent," or "Satisfactory" in 21 out of the 22 individual categories that were inspected. However, the unit received a "Marginal" rating on its ability to conduct missile launch operations, which prompted the suspension, decertification and retraining of 17 of the unit's 150 launch officers. A marginal rating in one sub area is far from unprecedented in the history of our nuclear forces. The inspections are demanding and the scenarios require instant closely coordinated actions by the crew to satisfy the highly experienced, closely observing inspectors. No wing commander is happy with even one marginal sub area rating out of 22 and this commander is no exception; he took immediate and aggressive action to identify those relatively few crew members who needed additional training to assure their skills are honed and their performance beyond question.

The results of the inspection are now being considered as a possible "crisis" because of a poorly worded and emotionally charged email that was designed solely to get the attention of those 17 of the 150 crew members who did not perform to the standard expected of them. Commanders have always communicated their desires and assessments directly to their troops, and more often than not with dramatically positive results. Leaders, elected officials, and the public should not let the unfortunate choice of words in this particular email diminish their perception of the overall satisfactory performance of the 91st Missile Wing, or the rest of the ICBM crew force for that matter.

The 91st Missile Wing Commander should be applauded for taking this aggressive action to draw attention to the high standards demanded of missile crew members and identify specific retraining required to elevate their performance. These suspensions should reassure policymakers and the public that there is no margin for error when it comes to our nuclear weapons. This episode demonstrates that the commanders entrusted with our nuclear arsenal have zero tolerance for marginal performance of any kind, and will not hesitate to take swift, comprehensive measures to ensure that the safety and security of these powerful weapons never comes close to being compromised because problems are solved before they become significant issues.

Launch control officer duty is a uniquely challenging job: our ICBM crews have been on duty around the clock, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for over 50 years. Their duty is arduous and isolated, the tolerance for error or inattention is zero, the responsibility is enormous, and the consequences of crew member actions in response to a Presidential Order in a national security crisis are literally world changing. The vigilance and professionalism of these launch control officers is at the heart of our nuclear deterrence, so it is critical that they remain dedicated to and satisfied with their jobs. Special incentives could be created to attract and retain officers with nuclear expertise, but at a minimum, attention should be focused on promotion rates and competitive career paths for those who continue the silent, underground vigil.

Given the no-excuse standards and demanding inspections, commanders of nuclear missile units are challenged every day, and even more so in the current budget environment, to maintain a constant state of readiness. Besides continuing to take proactive, comprehensive action to ensure that launch officers are always ready and able to properly perform their duty, unit commanders and Air Force leadership must also ensure that these officers remain motivated and committed to their mission.

While investments and improvements can and should be made in order to assure the career satisfaction of our nuclear launch officers, last month's suspensions should assure all Americans that if the ability, attitude, or commitment of these officers is anything less than satisfactory, they will not be entrusted with the keys to our nuclear weapons.

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