

## REVIEW OF *NUCLEAR WAR: A SCENARIO*

Well that was terrifying!

In a nutshell:

1. North Korean leader gets his feelings hurt and nukes the USA in response
2. USA nukes North Korea per “launch on warning” policy
3. Chaos and mistrust make Russia think this is an attack on them, so they nuke the USA/NATO
4. USA nukes Russia in retaliation
5. Mass death, end of global civilization, nuclear winter, etc

You’ll note that the Wikipedia page I linked for “launch on warning” doesn’t actually support the claim that we have a launch on warning policy. I’m unclear on this, but I *think* Jacobsen is contradicting public information on the basis of insider information; as a Politico piece about the book implies:

...a “launch on warning” policy, something Jacobsen’s sources characterize as a constraint to move before enemy missiles actually strike, but which government policy documents insist is merely an option and not a mandate.<sup>1</sup>

Two things stood out to me.

First: being near a nuclear blast would be unimaginably horrible. OK, I probably shouldn’t need a book to tell me that. But it’s too easy to focus on the *instantaneous annihilation* aspect of nuclear weapons and forget about the not-so-instantaneous deaths in store for people who are a ways out from the epicenter.

Thirteen-year-old Setsuko Thurlow was 1.1 miles from ground zero [at Hiroshima]...<sup>2</sup>

...[She] made it outside. It was early in the morning, but it looked like night. The air was thick with dark smoke. Setsuko saw a black object shuffling toward her, followed by other black objects that, at first, she mistook for ghosts. “Parts of the bodies were missing,” she realized.

“The skin and flesh were hanging from the bones. Some were carrying their own eyeballs.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kathy Gilsinan, “72 Minutes Until the End of the World?” POLITICO, April 29, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/04/29/the-frighteningly-fast-path-to-nuclear-armed-don-00154591>.

<sup>2</sup>Annie Jacobsen, *Nuclear War: A Scenario* (New York: Dutton, 2024), 8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 9.

Second: that the USA's ability to "shoot down an incoming, attacking ICBM"<sup>4</sup> is virtually nonexistent. Jacobsen says our interceptor missiles only have about a 55% success rate in testing.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, we only have 44 of them (!!!)<sup>6</sup>, which is peanuts compared to the number of nukes out there:

As of early 2024, Russia has 1,674 deployed nuclear weapons, the majority of which are on ready-for-launch status. (China has a stockpile of more than 500; Pakistan and India each have around 165; North Korea has around 50.)<sup>7</sup>

Notably lacking from the book is any discussion whatsoever of how to prevent nuclear war. It's easy to point out that mutually-assured destruction is an insane policy *from the standpoint of humanity as a whole*, but since humanity doesn't have a mechanism for making decisions as a unified entity, it's far from obvious to me that individual countries have a better option than arming themselves and promoting deterrence. In an interview, Jacobsen said:

...there are scores of people in NGOs around the world who have dedicated decades to the question that you just asked me: What is the solution? And so I wouldn't want to step out of my lane as a journalist and as a storyteller and into their lane as an expert on solutions. But they are definitely there and ready to offer opinions.<sup>8</sup>

How accurate is the book's information? I have no idea, of course. Here's a very negative reddit thread—many of the criticisms would require expertise to evaluate, though I think complaints of the form *North Korea wouldn't behave so irrationally* are missing the point. I'd like to live in a world where no single moment of irrationality from one leader anywhere could trigger the apocalypse. But there is an interesting related criticism of the book in a review from *Responsible Statecraft*:

China, Russia, and North Korea all oppose the U.S.-led world order due to their specific national interests. For all of those countries, nuclear weapons are the ultimate life insurance policy. The real danger posed by North Korea lies in the Kim dynasty's **rational** fears; they know that they are quite vulnerable to both internal and external enemies, so their threat calculus likely leaves little room for error.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 76–77.

<sup>8</sup>Gilsinan, "72 Minutes Until the End of the World?"

<sup>9</sup>Matthew Petti, "Cartoonish Claims about Nuclear War Scenario Are Unhelpful | Responsible Statecraft," accessed July 29, 2024, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/nuclear-war/>.