



Too Reckless to Be Commander in Chief

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The most important assessment of any potential president is whether she or he can pass the commander-in-chief test. Article II of the U.S. Constitution establishes the president as commander in chief of the U.S. military, the most powerful fighting force the world has ever known. The current dysfunctional state of Congress, unfortunately, has eroded the constitutional checks on the president's ability to order U.S. forces into battle. And most of the U.S. nuclear arsenal remains on hair-trigger alert, explicitly designed to be launched in a matter of minutes on the president's say-so. The presumptive GOP presidential nominee, Donald J. Trump, is simply too reckless to be commander in chief.

Robert Gates, a former secretary of defense under both Republican and Democratic presidents, has warned that Trump's national security policies would have "dangerous consequences for the United States."¹ Gates and other senior former national security officials are most worried about Trump's repeatedly stated plans to order the U.S. military to commit war crimes, even if the military initially refuses.² What's more, Trump wants to abandon U.S. allies,³ encourage more countries to build nuclear weapons,⁴ and ban one-fifth of the world's population from entering the United States.⁵ These are all dangerous ideas that would do great harm to the security of the United States.

The awesome power of the U.S. military at Trump's fingertips

*"He's not a war hero. He's a war hero because he was captured. I like people that weren't captured."*⁶

— Donald Trump

No military power in the world can match the firepower of American soldiers on the battlefield. Equally true is that no other country is asking more of its brave people in uniform than the United States. The nation's armed forces have been at war for nearly 15 years, the longest continuous conflict in American history.⁷ They are on the front lines fighting enemies in multiple countries in an effort to keep the American people

safe. Commanding the U.S. military is the most solemn responsibility for the president of the United States. The resources devoted to the U.S. military are unrivaled, and as commander in chief, a President Trump would sit atop the military command structure and could order this incredible fighting force into war with few practical constraints on his power to do so.

The Constitution originally intended war powers to be shared between the president and Congress, investing the legislature with the authority to declare war and raise the armed forces to fight it and the president with the responsibility of commanding the military during war.⁸ In practice, sharing war powers between the president and Congress has been uneven, with some instances of Congress authorizing a military operation before it begins and other times when the president orders U.S. forces onto the battlefield without a vote in Congress.⁹ Since the end of World War II, there has never been an instance in which the president ordered the U.S. military into battle without prior congressional approval and Congress in turn forced the president to stop.¹⁰ We should not expect that to change should Donald Trump become president.

Should he become president, Trump would command 1.1 million active duty soldiers, sailors, marines, and air personnel, with another 1.4 million in reserve.¹¹ The nearly 700,000 ground troops are backed by 9,000 tanks and more than 40,000 armored fighting vehicles.¹² In addition to locations in the United States, these troops are stationed at 587 overseas military bases, projecting American power and strength to literally every corner of the world.¹³

This worldwide network allows the United States to conduct overseas military operations from established U.S. bases. For example, U.S. overseas bases currently being used in Operation Inherent Resolve—the military campaign against the Islamic State, or IS, in Iraq and Syria—include Incirlik Air Base in Turkey, Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates, Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Jaber Air Base in Kuwait, and the U.S. 5th Fleet is stationed in Bahrain.¹⁴ In addition, the USS Harry Truman aircraft carrier is now stationed in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, serving as another primary launching point for U.S. airstrikes against IS.¹⁵

The U.S. Navy currently has 10 aircraft carrier battle groups, such as the USS Truman now in the Mediterranean, each consisting of up to 75 attack aircraft and five other warships in addition to the aircraft carrier.¹⁶ The first of a new class of aircraft carriers—dubbed supercarriers—the USS Gerald Ford, should be ready for service in September, bringing the total number of carrier groups to the congressionally mandated 11.¹⁷ The USS Ford will be able to operate 33 percent more daily flights under regular service than existing U.S. carriers, surging to more than double existing capacity during intensive operations.¹⁸

The rest of the world combined only has six aircraft carriers capable of launching a fleet of aircraft, and only the French and Indian navies operate anything resembling a U.S. carrier battle group.¹⁹ If helicopter carriers and those used for training are included, the United States will have exactly half of the world's 40 aircraft carriers once the USS Ford comes online this fall.²⁰

The U.S. Air Force is by far the world's largest and uses the most advanced fighter aircraft, strategic bombers, and other attack aircraft in the world.²¹ Its arsenal of 1,245 F-16s, just one of several types of U.S. Air Force fighter aircraft, ranks as the world's third largest air force.²² It has nearly 1,000 attack helicopters, more than 150 strategic bombers, and massive armed gunships and a fleet of armed unmanned aerial vehicles, which no other air force possesses.²³

The U.S. nuclear deterrent remains terrifyingly large despite significant reductions from its Cold War peak. The United States has 7,100 nuclear warheads in its total arsenal, with roughly 1,500 currently deployed in missiles, submarines, and bombers.²⁴ Of these deployed warheads, roughly half are on hair-trigger alert, meaning they can be launched in minutes.²⁵ Even though the threat of an intentional nuclear attack on the United States has receded dramatically since the end of the Cold War, keeping nuclear weapons on this status persists given the nuclear arsenals of Russia and other powers.

The nuclear chain of command, by necessity, invests enormous power in the single person who is commander in chief. America's nuclear arsenal remains on hair-trigger status in order to serve as a genuine deterrent to a surprise nuclear attack. It must be able to launch in as little as 10 minutes from the first indication of an incoming missile. A nuclear missile launched from a submarine in the western Atlantic Ocean could hit targets on the East Coast in 10 to 15 minutes.²⁶ If another power believed it could take out the U.S. command and control structure and destroy most of the nation's nuclear missiles, it may be tempted into a surprise-first strike in hopes of eliminating America's ability to retaliate.

Given the requirement to respond in an incredibly short time frame and under the most unimaginable stress, the nuclear command structure must respond to the orders of the president without question or hesitation. As Bruce Blair, a Princeton University scholar on global security, recently put it, if the president "gave the command [to launch nuclear weapons], his executing commanders would have no legal or procedural grounds to defy it no matter how inappropriate it might seem."²⁷

A President Trump would be in command of a nuclear arsenal that is specifically designed to launch possibly hundreds of nuclear warhead weapons in a matter of minutes on his say-so alone, and no one could do anything about it.

Trump's rhetoric and policies are reckless

Donald Trump has proposed policies that would be directly harmful to the security of the United States and do serious damage to American interests and standing in the world. His plans could jump-start a nuclear arms race in already volatile regions, fuel terrorist groups such as the Islamic State, and return the world to an international system that exacerbates global power struggles that almost always lead to horrible wars in which tens of thousands or even millions of people die.

Trump's nuclear weapons policies would start an arms race

"If Japan had that nuclear threat, I'm not sure that would be a bad thing for us."²⁸

— Donald Trump

Unique among modern American leaders, Trump actually favors a world in which more countries possess nuclear weapons. He believes that the United States would be better off if countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, which do not currently possess nuclear weapons, developed their own nuclear arsenals.²⁹ For example, earlier this year Trump said, "If Japan had that nuclear threat, I'm not sure that would be a bad thing for us."³⁰ He substantiates these views with the claim that it is "only a question of time" before these and other countries get nuclear weapons anyway.³¹

This is extremely dangerous nonsense. Every U.S. president since Harry Truman has worked to restrain nuclear proliferation and limit the number of nuclear-armed nations.³² American-led global nonproliferation efforts have resulted in 14 countries giving up nuclear weapons or nuclear programs in the past 30 years.³³ There are now nine nations with nuclear weapons—the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea.³⁴ It is correct that the global nonproliferation regime has not completely eliminated the spread of nuclear weapons, but there are now fewer countries with nuclear weapons programs than at any time since the 1950s.³⁵

Experts warn that Trump's nuclear recklessness would likely spark a dangerous nuclear arms race in Asia. Kelsey Davenport, the director of nonproliferation policy at the Arms Control Association, said:

A move by [Japan or South Korea] to nuclear weapons would undoubtedly be used as a justification by North Korea to expand its own nuclear arsenal and improve its ballistic missiles ... [which] could spark an arms race in the region if the two countries tried to achieve parity with each other or China.³⁶

This development "would risk global security with almost no upside," argues Patrick Cronin of the Center for a New American Security.³⁷

East Asia is already dangerously unstable because of the erratic and unpredictable leadership from nuclear-armed North Korea. China is also testing its neighbors with its expansion into the East and South China Seas, and its government is growing more aggressive in challenging its adversaries in this already volatile region. Adding a nuclear arms race to this already combustible mix would be incredibly foolhardy and perilous, yet Trump seems to envision Japan “maybe even [going on] offense against North Korea.”³⁸

The Middle East makes East Asia seem stable, yet Trump still supports Saudi Arabia obtaining nuclear weapons. Apparently, he simultaneously believes that individuals from Saudi Arabia are such a threat that they should be prohibited from entering the United States but that the Saudi government can be trusted with nuclear weapons. A Saudi nuclear weapon would assuredly lead to Iran, Saudi Arabia’s main rival in the region, reneging on its current commitment to forsake a nuclear program and develop its own nuclear bomb. It is hard to overstate the recklessness of advocating for a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

Trump’s impulsive and counterproductive counterterrorism policies would fuel terrorists

“When you get these terrorists, you have to take out their families.”³⁹

— Donald Trump

Trump is keeping secret his strategy to defeat the Islamic State, claiming this prevents the terrorist group from learning of his plans in advance.⁴⁰ But his impulsive reaction to terrorist attacks or other disasters and the terrifying glimpses he has provided of his counterterrorism policies are dangerous and reckless. After Trump’s latest tirade following the horrific attack in Orlando earlier this month, David Ignatius of *The Washington Post* relayed the conclusion of senior intelligence analysts in the fight against IS that the “strongest remaining force that propels the Islamic State is the Islamophobia of Trump and his European counterparts.”⁴¹

In the wake of the shootings in San Bernadino, California, late last year, Trump decided that he would bar adherents of an entire religion from entering the United States.⁴² This has not only fueled anti-Muslim bigotry and violence in the United States but is also extremely counterproductive from a security perspective and plays into the hands of extremists who are pushing the false narrative that the West is at war with Islam.⁴³ In fact, Trump has already starred in an IS recruiting video.⁴⁴

In the hours after the crash of an EgyptAir flight over the Mediterranean in May, Trump immediately labeled it an act of terrorism, a claim that no actual terrorist organization has yet made.⁴⁵ Trump went on to claim that “if anyone doesn’t think [the plane] was

blown out of the sky, you're 100% wrong."⁴⁶ The cause of the tragedy is still undetermined several weeks after the crash, but there are increasing indications that the plane may have suffered a mechanical failure.⁴⁷ Regardless of what turns out to be the cause, Trump's penchant to rush to judgment is among the worst possible traits for a commander in chief with a finger on America's conventional and nuclear triggers.

When Trump has put policy options on the table for confronting IS, he has mostly proposed egregious violations of the law. He has said many times that he would order the deliberate murder of women and children in retaliation. Trump said last December, "When you get these terrorists, you have to take out their families."⁴⁸ If Trump's policy were to occur in a war setting, it would be a war crime.⁴⁹ If it is implemented outside the context of a war, it would simply be murder.

Trump offered another glimpse of his counterterrorism policy when he said, "We should go for waterboarding and we should go for tougher than waterboarding."⁵⁰ Whatever one's view of the legality of the George W. Bush administration's use of waterboarding, Trump has clearly said he would adopt torture techniques that go beyond that. Torture has been illegal in the United States since at least 1948, when the United States ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁵¹ President Ronald Reagan signed the Convention against Torture in 1988.⁵² Congress adopted the anti-torture statute in 1994.⁵³ And just last December, Congress explicitly prohibited waterboarding and any other interrogation technique not approved in the U.S. Army Field Manual on Interrogation.⁵⁴

An exhaustive, years-long study of the Bush administration detention and interrogation program by the Senate Intelligence Committee released in 2014 concluded that torture and other abusive interrogation techniques did not produce useful or reliable intelligence. The principle finding of the report was that "the CIA's use of its enhanced interrogation techniques was not an effective means of acquiring intelligence or gaining cooperation from detainees."⁵⁵ Trump wants to reinstitute and expand torture that is illegal—and simply does not work.

Trump's plan to abandon allies would undermine American power

*"They've got to pay up."*⁵⁶

— Donald Trump

Trump has repeatedly threatened to abandon America's allies. In a scheme more reminiscent of a protection racket than an alliance structure, Trump says American allies "have to pay up, do re mi, right, they have to pay up. They've got to pay up."⁵⁷ He made this extortion demand in a bewildering foreign policy speech in which he also com-

plained that “our friends are beginning to think they can’t depend on us.”⁵⁸ But Trump explicitly called for the United States to leave allies and partners at the mercy of Russia during the Ukraine crisis, when he urged the United States “to do a little following and let the neighbors take a little more of an active role in the Ukraine.”⁵⁹

History is littered with examples of powerful nations that willfully committed horrible abuses, arms races that spun out of control, and strong nations that took advantage of weak ones. These examples almost always led to horrific wars, leaving hundreds of thousands or even millions of people dead. Responsible American global leadership after World War II ended several great power struggles and imposed an international order that has worked to the enormous benefit of the United States. Trump wants to return to a time when innocent civilians were deliberate targets in war, torture was a common practice, and strong nations preyed on the weak, frequently leading to major conflicts between great powers. Only in Trump’s world, those great powers are armed with nuclear weapons, and he actually supports more nuclear proliferation. What could go wrong?

National security leaders believe Trump is dangerous and scary

“Distributing atomic weapons so that its OK that Japan gets atomic weapons, if Korea gets atomic weapons. ... Those are crazy positions.”⁶⁰

— Leon Panetta

Former senior national security officials from both parties are increasingly alarmed at Trump’s policies and rhetoric. These leaders have been on the front lines in the fight against terrorist groups and know firsthand the threats and challenges that will face the next president of the United States. Their conclusion is that Trump is unfit to be commander in chief.

Robert Gates, former secretary of defense under both Presidents George W. Bush and Obama, said “I think that some of the things he has said have some very—if they were to be implemented, have dangerous consequences for the United States.”⁶¹ Leon Panetta, another former Obama administration secretary of defense who also served as director of the CIA, highlighted one of those extremely dangerous policies when he said, Trump “talks about distributing atomic weapons so that its OK that Japan gets atomic weapons, if Korea gets atomic weapons. ... Those are crazy positions.”⁶²

Michael Hayden, the former director of both the CIA and the National Security Agency under President George W. Bush, was perhaps the most pointed when he warned that he “fear[s] for the republic” should Trump assume the presidency.⁶³ He went on to say that if Trump would order the U.S. military to carry out his policies, “the American armed

forces would refuse to act. ... You are required not to follow an unlawful order.”⁶⁴ When confronted with Hayden’s statement, Trump replied, “They’re not gonna refuse me. Believe me. ... If I say do it, they’re gonna do it.”⁶⁵

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), a retired Air Force colonel and one of Trump’s opponents for the Republican presidential nomination, said that Trump “would be a terrible commander in chief.”⁶⁶ After he withdrew from the campaign, he said, “When Donald Trump speaks about foreign policy, it scares the hell out of me. ... The soldiers on the battlefield, make sure you’re picking leaders worthy of their service.”⁶⁷

Conclusion

The U.S. military is an incredibly powerful fighting force, present across the globe with hundreds of foreign military bases, warships, and aircraft. Much of its nuclear arsenal can be launched in a matter of minutes. Should Trump become president, all of this power would be at the fingertips of a man with no government or national security experience who has an impulsive temperament and has boasted of his ability to get the military to follow his orders no matter how heedless and rash. Bluntly put, Donald J. Trump is far too reckless and dangerous to be commander in chief.

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The Commander in Chief Clause of Article II, Section 2 provides that "The President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States." scholars too numerous to count have accepted without qualification the argument that the President possesses at least some independent authority to use military force in domestic emergencies—assuming that such power derives, most naturally, from the Commander in Chief Clause. Over the past four years, we've had a commander-in-chief without experience, vision, or values—and it's been an unmitigated disaster. More Americans have died during Trump's mismanagement of COVID-19 than in the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan all put together. While we all wish the President, the First Lady, and the many infected senior administration officials a full recovery, it's clear that Trump's already reckless approach to the virus is getting even more dangerous. That's not all. American democracy is also under attack, most notably by the President himself who is determined to A commander-in-chief or supreme commander is the person who exercises supreme command and control over an armed forces or a military branch. As a technical term, it refers to military competencies that reside in a country's executive leadership, a head of state or a head of government. The formal role and title of a ruler commanding the armed forces derives from Imperator of the Roman Kingdom, Roman Republic and Roman Empire, who possessed imperium (command and other regal) powers. The presumptive GOP presidential nominee, Donald J. Trump, is simply too reckless to be commander in chief. Robert Gates, a former secretary of defense under both Republican and Democratic presidents, has warned that Trump's national security policies would have "dangerous consequences for the United States." The Constitution originally intended war powers to be shared between the president and Congress, investing the legislature with the authority to declare war and raise the armed forces to fight it and the president with the responsibility of commanding the military during war.