Authors Perry and Collina present a coherent, well considered argument for removing U.S. presidential sole authority to initiate nuclear war in this straightforward collaboration that is highlighted by their experiences working in government and nuclear weapons policy. The problem: U.S. strategy still relies on assumptions that force a president—confronted by indications that a nuclear attack has begun—to initiate nuclear war within an extraordinarily short time span, a period measured in minutes. “The button” is never far from his or her hands. He or she has sole authority to press it. No Congressional permission is needed. No consideration will be provided save for what the military present at the moment can deliver. In a matter of moments, a single human being could trigger, if not the end of American civilization, the end of world-wide civilization.

The argument against, laid out methodically, begins with a frightening scenario that illustrates just how narrow the gap is between peace and utter catastrophe. Should American defensive systems be hacked to mimic a Russian nuclear attack, and before an analysis can be done, a president would have very little information—and very little time—to verify the reality of the attack and to initiate a response. U.S. land-based missiles nestled in their silos are sitting ducks unless they are launched within minutes of gaining knowledge about the so-called Russian attack. A single human being will then decide the fate of not one nation, but two, and perhaps plunge a good part of the world into nuclear winter—all without the necessary data to make a “proper” choice. It seems like science fiction—but it is a science fact.

In Part One of their discussion, the co-authors proffer that Russia has been supplanted as a U.S. threat. Others have taken its place and they are not nation-states. They are the weapons themselves—always at launch-on-warning status—“controlled” under the sole authority policy and under constant cyber-assault that could fool the system into indicating an enemy attack is underway. The shift to policy and technology and away from Russia (not entirely, of course) is based on the history of false alarms, the constant barrage of cyber-attacks inflicted on the U.S. daily and the belief that the U.S. and Russia both understood for many decades that first use of nuclear weapons by either side was tantamount to national suicide. In the authors’ view, we will, with much higher probability, blunder into nuclear war rather than do so militarily or politically. We didn’t end up standing at the precipice of nuclear Armageddon unintentionally. We found our way there, responding to changing political circumstances, arms-races, perceived threats, and treaty abrogations. Remarkably and frighteningly, we did so without much intel, and in some cases with the wrong intel. We were on the cusp of extermination a few times, but cooler heads prevailed and/or circumstances worked themselves out. We have been fortunate. We escaped the potential catastrophe of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. We evaded the consequences of the huge arsenals accumulated during the nuclear arms race. We missed igniting nuclear exchange after failures of both American and Russian early warning.

Book Review
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The Button: The New Nuclear Arms Race and Presidential Power from Truman to Trump
William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina
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systems. The rise of Donald Trump and his impulsive tendencies also remind us that the nature of the president is another factor that under certain circumstances could end our run of good fortune. But will that luck continue to prevail?

The coauthors explain their solutions to walking us back from the brink in Part Two. First and foremost, they question the need for the triad: ICBMs, submarine launched missiles, and bombers. The ICBMs, siloed in Colorado, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming will be taken out by Russian missiles—their locations have been known for years. That is their fate unless the president orders their immediate launch on word that we are under attack. This only puts more pressure on a president to launch first and ask questions later. Ironically, the ICBMs will likely destroy nothing when they arrive at their targets. It is envisioned that Russia will hold back its better defended armament for a secondary attack having launched its most vulnerable ICBMs in the first salvo. U.S. ICBMs will destroy empty holes in the ground. The authors conclude that if you must use the ICBMs or lose them, the best course of action is to lose them—absorb the attack and bury the ICBMs under radioactive rubble. By waiting to determine if the attack is real, subsequent U.S. actions become justified. If the attack is real, retaliation by the remaining legs of the triad are inevitable—however horrific. But by waiting, considering, and determining that an attack is false, the world is spared civilization-ending Armageddon. The inevitable question: what then do we need ICBMs? The co-authors contend that we don’t. They impose a huge monetary cost to the United States. Arguments that they also impose huge costs to our adversaries by forcing them to be targeted do not, in their view, entirely hold water. Think about the huge cost to the people of Colorado, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming. Those states are the nuclear sponge—they absorb the first wave of utter destruction. More than a sponge—they are a magnet—attracting a nuclear weapons attack. To maintain them and upgrade them costs billions of dollars better spent elsewhere. To eliminate them gives the United States the advantage of time—time to analyze the most difficult situation a president ever has to face: to order nuclear war.

Perry and Collina come to this simple conclusion: with a no-first-strike policy and no ICBMs, U.S. policy shifts to second-strike-only with survivable retaliatory forces (submarines and bombers) that an enemy can never be sure are neutralized. Nuclear weapons assume their real identity: they truly become weapons of deterrence (something we all assumed was true from the get-go). This lays the groundwork for more intelligent policy change. For example, instead of spending billions on the modernization of ICBMs, assets such as command and control should be made more survivable, not only from nuclear weapons but also from cyber- and satellite-attack. Money should not be spent on overkill. It serves us better to spend it on the means to give the president time—time to realize, analyze, and operationalize a proportionate response. Spending should address survivability of our forces, including command and control capabilities, to give leadership the time it needs to determine the validity of early warning data and the time to consider second steps if the attack proves real.

The co-authors are realists. They acknowledge that the current political circumstances largely exacerbated by former President Trump and his counterpart in Russia are not fortuitous for implementing their recommendations. They point to Putin violating the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty and Trump’s total failure to negotiate a solution—in fact, the United States pulled out of the treaty legitimizing Putin’s actions. The result: an arms race is on again. In a rather forceful chapter, they debunk the efficacy of missile defense technology that originated in the Reagan administration (the so-called “Star Wars” defense shield). It was destabilizing then and according to them, it remains so. It also has the dubious quality of being incapable of performing as advertised. The “delusion” as they refer to it, is, unfortunately, the leverage Russia has used to prevent moving forward with arms reduction talks. Where then does that leave their recommendations?

In the final part of their triad, the co-authors lay out a ten point plan to move us away from the precipice. It is based on Reagan’s assertion that “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” The lesson of the Cold War in their view is that Russia is highly unlikely to initiate an attack (the national suicide idea). Instead, both nations could mistakenly initiate a nuclear war. Perry and Collina promote arms reduction but not at the cost of U.S. security. In fact, they contend that their recommendations improve U.S. security and at significant cost savings. As you would imagine, based on the remarks above, they advocate for a phase-out of all ICBMs. And, they recommend that limits on missile defense systems be established so that substantive arms reduction talks with Russia can be initiated.

There are no charts, no tables, and only a handful of black and white photos; but this is actually beneficial, as this book is clearly directed at a lay audience. Written in plain language, the co-authors make their case without fuss in a very
conversational tone that is engaging, effective, and efficient. It is supplemented by twenty-four pages of endnotes and an index for the scholarly reader (Note: mine was a soft-cover, pre-publication copy with six blank pages reserved for the index). This book would also be an excellent choice for supplementary reading in a university nuclear non-proliferation or history of technology course. The coauthors weave their personal experiences and the history of nuclear weapons into the narrative—a nice touch that reveals not only their extensive expertise, but more importantly their passion for not only modernizing our nuclear defense policy, but also their desire to make the world a safer place.

Perry and Collina make the analogy of our present circumstances to being aboard the Titanic, enjoying the comforts of a hotel at sea surrounded by music, elegant dining, and all the trappings that our technology has to offer. Everyday life and everyday politics go on as we speed ahead into the future, ignoring the danger our current nuclear policy and nuclear infrastructure pose. Our political leadership seems unable to recognize that we are playing a never-ending game of Russian roulette with civilization. In the end, the co-authors tell the reader, it comes down to all of us. The bomb survives because it has become the norm. It is a default setting for national defense. To adjust nuclear policy requires a committed president and an electorate who urge that president to chart a new course that decreases the chances of a catastrophic error. The words of President Abraham Lincoln, quoted in the book, apply here: “In this age, in this country, public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed.”

Continuing to sail through the darkness without a care is risky. Perry and Collina have sounded the collision alarm. It is time to alter course.