The power to 'press the button' does not lie just with the U.S. President and Soviet Premier, either. The fighter planes of nine U.S. allies (Britain, Belgium, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, West Germany and Turkey) have been armed at various times with atomic weapons, *without proper safety devices*, according to a Pentagon spokesperson.[15] Here again, the risk of accident is escalated.

Moreover, a "certain number" of Minuteman missiles have been placed under the control of U.S. generals, who in certain situations have the authority to detonate a nuclear weapon without the go-ahead of the President. These generals, under the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations, delegated this power in turn to colonels.[16] This is not comforting, given how some generals speak openly and glibly of how an all-out nuclear war "would put the U.S. agriculturally, industrially and so forth back to about 1925 or 1932..."[17] Such an unrealistic outlook on the damage nuclear weapons are capable of, coupled with the power to use them, may be the greatest danger to human life right now.

What may be most deeply frightening are errors that have occurred in the system, the brain, of our weapons network. In 1979 and 1980 five nuclear alerts were serious enough that a hundred B-52 bomber pilots had to hurry into their planes and ready their engines, while land-based missiles were prepared for firing. Two of these resulted last June from computer failures when a dime-size chip worth 46 cents caused monitors to indicate that the Soviet Union had launched a massive missile attack on the U.S.[18] Two others occurred when radar operators interpreted a decvaying rocket body and a Soviet missile test, respectively, as attacks on the U.S. The fifth was caused by a wargames tape that was mistakenly inserted into the live computer system.[19] Alerts such as these occur two or three times a year, according to Air Force officials.[20] In the radar system's early years serious false alerts came about when a flock of geese was interpreted as a Soviet bomber attack, and when radar signals echoed off the moon.[21]

One notable fact revealed in the missile alerts is that the federal government's very first precaution in case of a nuclear threat is to *protect its weapons*. No one outside the military establishment was notified of these accidents until several hours-or in some, several months-after they were concluded; evidently only the military's response to attack is of value. The Pentagon speaks of ICBM vulnerability, but never of human vulnerability.

These accidents might not have happened if the Pentagon's missile alert system were not splintered into thirteen centers scattered across the country, each dividing the total responsibility for detecting and responding to every external nuclear threat, but safety in the military's missile warning system is subject to bureaucratic and internal political forces that often take precedent over concern for human life.

Weapons system accidents are frightening because they expose how dependent our lives are on massive, extremely complex machines, but also because we realize how the survival of civilization depends on the decisions of a few humans in a very short span of time—less than thirty minutes. In fact, if the Pentagon adopts a 'launch-on-warning' policy, a prolonged false alarm could unleash an all-out U.S. nuclear attack on the Soviet Union. Under this policy, which Carter Defense Secretary Brown has indicated is foreseeable,[22] there need be no immediate human decision to push the nuclear button, only a warning that the U.S.S.R. is attacking.

Whether or not such a policy permitting full-scale war without Congressional declaration is constitutional, the U.S. is almost certain to adopt launch-on-warning if the Soviet Union adopts it. And should the MX system be completed, because with it all Soviet land-based missiles could theoretically be knocked out at once, more pressure will be brought to bear on the Soviet Union to respond more quickly, perhaps, when filtered through their own military logic, to launch on warning. Through a series of changes to 'protect our national security,' we may once again up the probability of nuclear holocaust.

We must not view nuclear weapons and their use purely academically, but in terms of our lives, our future, as well. It is natural to fear nuclear weapons: what is crucial is how we respond to our fears. If we repress them, we allow a self-righteous atmosphere of militarism to push into existence such dangers as the MX and launch-on-warning: we allow others to pro foundly dominate our lives. Only a broad, loud and enduring voice against the arms race can slow it down and reverse it. We must begin now.

-John Lindsay

[1]"Air Force is silent on whereabouts of warhead from demolished silo," Wendell Rawls, Jr., *N.Y. Times*, Sept, 21, 1980, pp.1, 37.

[2]"Missile silo explodes; 1 killed, 21 injured," Wendell Rawls, Jr., *N.Y. Times*, Sept. 20, 1980, p.8.

[3]*Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Yearbook, 1977*, pp.65-66.

[4]Ralph Lapp, *Kill and Overkill*, p.127.

[5]Stephen Talbot, "The H-bombs next door," *The Nation*, Jan. 7, 1981, p.147.

[6]Joel Larus, *Nuclear Weapons Safety and the Common Defense*, pp.87-9; Gregg et al vs. the United States, 186 Federal Supplement, p.44.

[7]Arthur Hadley, *The Nation's Safety and Arms Control*, pp.89-90.

[8]Joel Larus, pp.95-6.

[9]Edward Klein and Robert Littell, "Shh! Let's tell the Russians," *Newsweek*, May 5, 1969, p.47.

[10]Robbie Brandwynne, et al, "A conversation with Daniel Ellsberg," *Not Man Apart*, Feb., 1980, p.24.

[11]"Marketing the nuclear nightmare, profiles of U.S. exports to five countries," National Action/Research on the Military Industrial Complex, Dec. 1979.

[12]"Four nuclear safety dilemmas," *The Defense Monitor*, Feb, 1975, p.9.

[13]Sidney Lens, "On the uses and abuses of secrecy," *The Progressive*, Mar. 1980, p.47.

[14]Louis Rene Beres, *Apocalypse: Nuclear Catastrophe in World Politics*, p.57.

[15]"9 allies' planes have atom bombs," *N.Y. Times*, Nov. 23, 1965, pp.1, 3.

[16]Klein and Littell, p.47; Daniel Ellsberg, *A Year of Disobedience*, p.9.

[17]Lt. Gen. Daniel O. Graham in the film "War Without Winners," distributed by the Center for Defense Information.

[18]"Missile alerts traced to 46¢ item," *N.Y. Times*, Jume 18, 1980.

[19]"Recent False Alerts from the Nation's Missile Attack Warning System," Report to Senate Armed Services Comm., Oct. 9, 1980, p.5.

[20]Richard Halloran, "Senators report false warning of Soviet Strikes," *N.Y. Times*, Oct. 29, 1980, p.16.

[21]Richard Burt, "False nuclear alarms spur urgent effort to find flaws," *N.Y. Times*, June 13, 1980, p.16; LLoyd J. Dumas, "National Insecurity in the Nuclear Age," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, May, 1976, p.29.

[22]Harold Brown, Dept. of Defense Annual Report, F.Y. 1981.