

To Avoid Armageddon, Don't Modernize Missiles—Eliminate Them

Land-based nuclear weapons are world-ending accident waiting to happen, and completely superfluous to a reliable deterrent

By Daniel Ellsberg and Norman Solomon

The Nation / October 19, 2021

The single best option for reducing the risk of nuclear war is hidden in plain sight. News outlets don't mention it. Pundits ignore it. Even progressive and peace-oriented members of Congress tiptoe around it. And yet, for many years, experts have been calling for this act of sanity that could save humanity: Shutting down all of the nation's intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Four hundred ICBMs dot the rural landscapes of Colorado, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming. Loaded in silos, these missiles are uniquely—and dangerously—on hair-trigger alert. Unlike the nuclear weapons on submarines or bombers, the land-based missiles are vulnerable to attack and could present the commander in chief with a sudden use-them-or-lose-them choice. “If our sensors indicate that enemy missiles are en route to the United States, the president would have to consider launching ICBMs before the enemy missiles could destroy them. Once they are launched, they cannot be recalled,” former Defense Secretary William Perry [warns](#). “The president would have less than 30 minutes to make that terrible decision.”

The danger that a false alarm on either side—of the sort that has occurred repeatedly on both sides—would lead to a preemptive attack derives almost entirely from the existence on both sides of land-based missile forces, each vulnerable to attack by the other; each, therefore, is kept on a high state of alert, ready to launch within minutes of warning. The easiest and fastest way for the US to reduce that risk—and, indeed, the overall danger of nuclear war—is to dismantle entirely its Minuteman III missile force. Gen. James E. Cartwright, a former vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had been commander of the Strategic Command, teamed up with former Minuteman launch officer Bruce G. Blair to write in a 2016 [op-ed piece](#): “By scrapping the vulnerable land-based missile force, any need for launching on warning disappears.”

But rather than confront the reality that ICBMs—all ICBMs—are such a grave threat to human survival, the most concerned members of Congress have opted to focus on stopping new ones from taking the place of existing ones. A year ago, the Air Force awarded Northrop Grumman a [\\$13.3 billion](#) “engineering and manufacturing development” contract for replacing the current Minuteman III missiles with a new generation of ICBMs named the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent. Current projections peg the overall cost over the next five decades at [\\$364 billion](#). Northrop Grumman [calls](#) the GBSD “the modernization of the ground-based leg of the nuclear triad.” But if reducing the dangers of nuclear war is a goal, the top priority should be to remove the triad's ground-based leg—not modernize it.

Many arms-control advocates, while understanding the inherent dangers of ground-based nuclear missiles, have largely stuck to opposing the GBSD. Instead of challenging ICBMs outright, a coalition of organizations has concentrated on aiming a fiscal argument at Capitol Hill, calling the GBSD program a “money pit” that would squander vast amounts of taxpayer dollars. But the powerful chair of the House Armed Services Committee, Adam Smith, executed a deft end run around that strategy in early summer when he [declared](#) that “Minuteman extension, as it is currently being explained to us, is actually more expensive than building the GBSD.”

The same Congressman Smith [said](#) less than a year earlier, “I frankly think that our [ICBM] fleet right now is driven as much by politics as it is by a policy necessity. You know, there are certain states in the union that apparently are fond of being a nuclear target. And you know, it’s part of their economy. It’s what they do.”

Senators from several of the states with major ICBM bases or development activities—Montana, North Dakota, Wyoming, and Utah—continue to maintain an “ICBM Coalition” dedicated to thwarting any serious scrutiny of the land-based weaponry. Members of the coalition have systematically blocked efforts to reduce the number of ICBMs or study alternatives to building new ones. They’re just a few of the lawmakers captivated by ICBM mega-profiteers. In a report issued this year by the Center for International Policy, nuclear weapons expert William Hartung gives readers a detailed look “[Inside the ICBM Lobby](#),” showing how ICBM contractors get their way while throwing millions of dollars at politicians and deploying battalions of lobbyists on Capitol Hill. As the recipient of the sole-source contract to build the proposed new ICBMs, Northrop Grumman has joined with other top contractors to block efforts to reduce spending on these dangerous and unnecessary systems—or even simply to pause their development.

When opponents of the GBSD decline to challenge the currently deployed Minuteman III missiles, the effects are counterproductive if their ultimate goal is to get rid of ICBMs. Tacit acceptance of the Minuteman missile force while attempting to block the GBSD sends a message that the ICBM status quo isn’t so bad. Such a tactical path might seem eminently pragmatic and realistic. But sooner or later, the extraordinary dangers of keeping any ICBMs in place must be faced, exposed, explained to the public—and directly challenged.

Getting trapped in an argument about the cheapest way to keep ICBMs operational in their silos is ultimately no-win. The history of nuclear weapons in this country tells us that people will spare no expense if they believe that spending the money will really make them and their loved ones safer—we must show them that ICBMs actually do the opposite. Unless arms-control and disarmament groups, along with allied members of Congress, change course and get serious about addressing the fundamentals of why ICBMs should be eliminated, they’ll end up implicitly reinforcing the land-based part of the triad.

“First and foremost,” former Defense Secretary Perry [wrote](#) five years ago, “the United States can safely phase out its land-based [ICBM] force, a key facet of Cold War nuclear policy. Retiring the ICBMs would save considerable costs, but it isn’t only budgets that would benefit. These missiles are some of the most dangerous weapons in the world. They could even trigger an accidental nuclear war.”

Contrary to uninformed assumptions, discarding all ICBMs could be accomplished unilaterally by the United States with no downside. Even if Russia chose not to follow suit, dismantling the potentially cataclysmic land-based missiles would make the world safer for everyone on the planet. Frank von Hippel, a former chair of the Federation of American Scientists and a cofounder of Princeton's Program on Science and Global Security, [wrote](#) this year: "Eliminating launch on warning would significantly reduce the probability of blundering into a civilization-ending nuclear war by mistake. To err is human. To start a nuclear war would be unforgivable."

Better sooner than later, members of Congress will need to face up to the horrendous realities about intercontinental ballistic missiles. They won't do that unless peace, arms-control, and disarmament groups go far beyond the current limits of congressional discourse—and start emphasizing, on Capitol Hill and at the grassroots, the crucial truth about ICBMs and the imperative of eliminating them all.

(Reprinted / Creative Commons courtesy of Dan Ellsberg and Norman Solomon)

###

[Daniel Ellsberg](#) -- Daniel Ellsberg is a former American military analyst employed by the RAND Corporation who precipitated a national uproar in 1971 when he released the Pentagon Papers, the US military's account of activities during the Vietnam War, to *The New York Times*. His book, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*, details this history. Ellsberg is also a former Pentagon expert and author of *The Doomsday Machine: Confession of a Nuclear War Planner*.

[Norman Solomon](#) -- Norman Solomon is the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy and author of *War Made Easy*. A long-time writer and progressive political activist, Soloman is an environmentalist, commentator, and cofounder of [RootsAction.org](#).