

Presidents and the ‘Nuclear Football’

When U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and his aides were escaping the mob that broke into the U.S. Capitol Jan. 6, 2021, a Coast Guard officer carrying a heavy briefcase was following him on a staircase. That briefcase was the so-called nuclear football. Presidents and vice presidents are routinely accompanied by a military officer carrying the football, which includes information and technology needed for the worst-case situation when the president or his successor decides to order military action in response to a nuclear or possibly conventional attack on the United States or its allies. A military aide carrying the football has been in presidential entourages since the late 1950s and with vice presidents since the late 1970s. Now aides with footballs shadow President Donald Trump and his vice president, JD Vance.

The football includes information on emergency procedures, nuclear war plans, and communications arrangements with the Pentagon and key U.S. allies. Initially referred to as the “satchel” or the “emergency actions pouch,” it also has been called the “black bag,” the “black box,” and by 1963, it became known as the football.

The football is a symbol of the president’s authority as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Since the Harry Truman era, presidential control over nuclear weapons and any decisions to use them have flowed from that authority. Before atomic bombs destroyed two Japanese cities in August 1945, Truman knew little about the nuclear targeting plans but concurred with the arrangements to use the weapons, believing that the targets were straightforward military installations.¹



U.S. Navy Captain Evan Aurand (L) holds an early version of the president’s emergency satchel, later known as the nuclear football, as he accompanies President Dwight Eisenhower (C, with hand on hip) on the White House lawn during Operation Alert, a civil defense exercise, on July 12, 1957. (Photo courtesy of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library)

Days later, Truman, shocked by the mass civilian casualties at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, asserted presidential control by stopping further atomic bombings without his express authority.² Determined to maintain control, in 1948 he refused to turn nuclear weapons over to the Pentagon, declaring that they were not “military” weapons but are “used to wipe out women and children and unarmed people.”³

The Cold War Era

As the Cold War unfolded, Truman’s successor, Dwight Eisenhower, and the presidents that followed, sustained

the practice of presidential control, with John Kennedy tightening it after Eisenhower transferred custody of most of the weapons from the Atomic Energy Commission to the Department of Defense.⁴ Eisenhower and his successors faced the particularly daunting challenge of heightened strategic nuclear competition with the Soviet Union, which developed long-distance bombers—and by 1957, showed a capability to develop and eventually deploy intercontinental ballistic missiles. As the possibility of a severe crisis precipitating a Soviet nuclear attack became more than a theoretical issue, U.S. leaders wanted to be prepared.

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Among the preparatory actions that the Eisenhower administration took was in 1956 when Arthur Flemming, director of the Office of Defense Mobilization, asked a variety of U.S. agencies to begin developing continuity-of-government arrangements and to prepare Emergency Action Documents (EADs), including a proclamation of a national emergency, orders to suspend habeas corpus, provisions for a national censorship office, and other martial-law arrangements. The president would sign them in a crisis.

White House military aide Edward Beach devised the idea of using a satchel to carry emergency information, despite mistaken claims that the Atomic Energy Commission created the football in the early 1960s. Photographic evidence demonstrates that by 1957 naval aides were carrying a locked satchel, but it was not until June 1958 that the agencies had nearly completed a set of the EADs to be carried in it.⁵ The EADs were in the satchel along with documents authorizing emergency use of nuclear weapons, including instructions to make the weapons available to NATO allies that had nuclear sharing arrangements with the United States.⁶

Eisenhower approved instructions in 1956-1960 for "advance authorizations for the use of atomic weapons," designed so that the United States "could not be caught by surprise." Those were the highly secret pre-delegation instructions for military commanders-in-chief in the event that the president and vice president were killed in a nuclear attack.⁷

The Kennedy Administration

Before John Kennedy's inauguration, Brigadier General Andrew Goodpaster, a White House aide, briefed the president-elect on the satchel's contents, including the EADs, Federal Emergency Plan D-Minus, and a document for calling Congress into special session, presumably at the secret location in The Greenbrier Hotel in West Virginia. Goodpaster's briefing also covered emergency plans to move the president and his family to emergency facilities at Mount Weather and other locations "from which he would operate."⁸ During the meeting, Eisenhower told Kennedy, effectively, that the satchel would be in the hands of "an unobtrusive man who would shadow the president for all his days in office."⁹

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Goodpaster also showed Kennedy a booklet that included information on the predelegation instructions. Another booklet described U.S. Department of Defense "emergency actions" and how the Joint Chiefs of Staff would communicate with the president in a severe crisis. Goodpaster further explained the "arrangement" that Eisenhower and Vice President Richard Nixon had established if the president were incapacitated: the "Vice President would accede to the powers of the Chief Executive." Nixon also had a military aide assigned to him, and presumably a satchel, if something happened to the president. Early in the Kennedy administration, the president's military aides sent a satchel to Vice President Lyndon Johnson, who had it returned. Years later, Johnson suggested that he found the presence of a military aide with the satchel to be disconcerting.¹⁰

During the Kennedy administration the satchel would include information on U.S. nuclear war plans that was not available when Eisenhower was president. Before that happened, however, in early 1962, Kennedy had requested the Joint Chiefs to develop procedures to enable the president to initiate a nuclear strike "without prior staffing at the Pentagon." He wanted to know what "he would say to the Joint War Room to launch an immediate nuclear strike" and how the Pentagon could authenticate such instructions. White House naval aide Captain Tazewell Shepard sought to ensure that the procedures in the JCS Emergency Actions File were flexible enough to allow the president to act in a crisis. By November 1962, the White

House had received from the Pentagon an emergency actions folder, later renamed the Gold Book, for inclusion in the satchel. It may have offered the procedures, along with emergency conferences, that Kennedy had sought.¹¹

When Kennedy became president, the Eisenhower administration had recently completed the first Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), a nuclear war plan that included targets for strategic bombers, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and intercontinental ballistic missiles. Initially the SIOP was a one-shot plan involving the launching of thousands of nuclear weapons simultaneously against the Soviet Union and its allies with the potential of causing scores of millions of casualties. Kennedy and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara were dissatisfied with this plan's inflexibility and in 1961-1962 approved arrangements to break up the SIOP into more discrete options, such as preemptive or retaliatory strikes on military and urban-industrial targets together, or military targets only. Those options also would involve huge casualties.¹²

A Comprehensible War Plan

Distilling the war-plan options into a form that was comprehensible for any president took time, but in 1963, the Joint Chiefs of Staff developed the SIOP Execution Handbook, later known as the "black book," and gave a copy to Kennedy in July. The satchel included booklets with explanations of SIOP attack options and estimated casualties presented in "cartoons and color schemes to make the thing more understandable." As the SIOP changed over the years, military aides would update the handbook and related material.¹³

By 1963, the satchel was becoming known as the “football” for unknown reasons—but possibly because it was passed from military aide to military aide and the Kennedy family had a fondness for touch football. At that time, when the president was traveling outside Washington, warrant officers on shifts carried the football because they were closer to the president than the military aides. Yet only the military aides knew the combination for the lock and could make its contents available to the president. During the 1960s, the aides and warrant officers did not follow the president around Washington because the Pentagon knew how to get in touch with him, but eventually the aides routinely would accompany the president during local travel. The football was not light: By 1963 it weighed about 30 pounds and by the 1990s, about 45 pounds.¹⁴

When Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas Nov. 22, 1963, Ira Gearhart, an Army warrant officer, was at the back of the motorcade. He rushed to the hospital and, learning of Kennedy’s death, took the football to the room where Vice President Lyndon Johnson was sitting. Although the Pentagon was worried about Gearhart’s location, he followed Johnson to the airport and was on Air Force One when the new president took the oath of office. During the flight back, military aide Chester Clifton briefed Johnson on the football. Once back in Washington, Tazewell Shepard arranged for fuller briefings for the new president on the football and its contents.¹⁵

Although Johnson did not like the idea of the football and wanted to hand off the responsibility to the Pentagon, he eventually acquiesced in the arrangement. A newspaper article from 1965 included the first public reference to the football, quoting White House aide Jack Valenti as saying, “The ‘black bag’ or ‘football,’ as we call it, goes wherever the President travels.”¹⁶ As far as is known, Johnson did not arrange for a football to be assigned to his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, and no information is available indicating that vice presidents Spiro Agnew and Gerald Ford, who served under President Richard Nixon, or Nelson Rockefeller, who served under President Ford, had a football assigned to their military aides. When Nixon resigned in August 1974 and

flew off to California, the football was in the hands of Ford’s military assistants.¹⁷

A Football for the Vice President

Believing that the vice president should be a partner in national security policymaking, President Jimmy Carter assigned a football to Vice President Walter Mondale and this became the practice for future U.S. administrations.¹⁸ By Carter’s time, if not before, the president carried a laminated card, known as the “biscuit,” with unique alphanumeric codes needed to authenticate his identity with the Pentagon before authorizing nuclear weapons use. Carter accidentally left the biscuit in clothes sent for dry cleaning at one point. In 1981, when President Ronald Reagan was shot, the card was separated from him during surgery and found later in a shoe, while the aide with the football was left behind at the Washington Hilton Hotel when Reagan was rushed to the hospital. Years later, President Bill Clinton lost his biscuit.¹⁹

The protocols that developed over the years for the football and the military aides who carry it remain highly classified. No doubt, the football includes the EADs and information on basic options in nuclear and non-nuclear strike plans. Reportedly, the football includes communications gear, is hardened to protect against electromagnetic pulse, and holds a tablet with satellite links to tactical warning systems. All of that plus armor has added to the football’s weight.²⁰

The fact that one person, the U.S. president, has had the singular authority to make life-or-death nuclear use decisions has led to debates and proposals to address the dangers inherent in this arrangement, including by involving other responsible officials in nuclear use decisions in order to prevent a rushed process and by Congress asserting its war powers more robustly.²¹ Such reforms are worth serious discussion no matter who resides in the White House, but the advent of a new president who



The nuclear football, which goes wherever the U.S. president goes, contains the launch codes for nuclear weapons, communications gear, and options for a nuclear strike; it weighs about 45 pounds. (Photo by Andrew Leyden/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

rejects checks on executive authority and is determined to expand personal control over the government increases their relevance.

The current configuration of power, with one party controlling all major institutions of government, suggests that meaningful reforms are not in the cards for the foreseeable future. The United States can only hope that serious crises do not emerge when the football must be unlocked.

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