

‘We Need to Work This Out’

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The following story is co-published with Matt Bivens' Substack newsletter, [The 100 Days](#).

Transcripts of 18-year-old meetings and phone calls between presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin have just been [declassified](#). Listen in as these two men, nodding thoughtfully, agree they share a duty not to annihilate all life on Earth.

Putin: It is clear that withdrawing from any kind of controls on nuclear warheads is a dangerous thing to do. [He is being understatedly critical of Bush's earlier decision to pull out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, so as to pursue the eternal fantasy of a "missile defense shield" — whether that's the "Star Wars" starter version sold by Ronald Reagan, or "the Golden Dome™" upgrade now pitched by [Donald Trump](#).]

Bush: We need to work on that [i.e., nuclear arms control]. I'm concerned about transparency on what looks like a nuclear launch and everyone panics. We need to work this out. Let me just say I understand your concerns.

Putin: ... A [U.S. nuclear] missile launch from a submarine in [the sea off of] Northern Europe will only take six minutes to reach Moscow.

Bush: I understand.

Putin: And we have established a set of response measures — there's nothing good about it. Within a few minutes [of a perceived attack] our entire nuclear response capability will be in the sky.

Bush: I know.

~~SECRET~~

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2470

Declassified Case: NWW# 78134 Date:
08-25-2025

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with President of Russia (U)

President Putin: Mr. Lavrov is working on this with them but there is no document yet. But it should be clear that in our relations with the U.S. the issue is quite clear too. A missile launch from a submarine in Northern Europe will only take six minutes to reach Moscow. (S)

The President: I understand. (U)

President Putin: And we have established a set of response measures -- there's nothing good about it. Within a few minutes our entire nuclear response capability will be in the sky. (S)

The President: I know. (U)

Notes from the 2008 Bush-Putin meeting in Sochi, Russia, declassified thanks to the work of the National Security Archive at George Washington University.

We all agree: There's nothing good about it!

When Putin says "we have established a set of response measures", he is referring to the so-called Мёртвая Рука — [the Dead Hand](#). That's the ghoulish nickname for what is officially called the Perimeter system, a literal doomsday device. Experts disagree whether the system is always active or whether it's only turned on at times of heightened tension (and some say it's a fairy tale). But supposedly, if the Dead Hand decides that Russia is under surprise nuclear attack (based on some combination of communication silence from headquarters, seismic activity and/or radiation detection), it automatically launches all of the nuclear missiles at ... someone.

Probably America.

This very busy graphic describing the Dead Hand, [from](#) the Russian newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda, is overwhelming in any language, but at least gets across that there is, indeed, nothing good about it.

Ядерную атаку отразит машина Судного дня

КАК СРАБОТАЕТ ОРУЖИЕ ВОЗМЕЗДИЯ

Ядерные удары США
Ответные ядерные удары России
США (АЛЯСКА)
«Статус-6» — российская океанская многоцелевая система с ядерной боеголовкой
Тихий океан
Нью-Йорк
Вашингтон
США
Ракетные удары атомных подводок РФ
Атлантический океан
«Статус-6» — российская океанская многоцелевая система с ядерной боеголовкой
Ракетные удары атомных подводок РФ
Россия
Санкт-Петербург
Москва
Владивосток
Командная ракета отдает приказ на удар возмездия
Истребители с ракетным комплексом «Кинжал»
Су-57
МиГ-31
Су-30
Ракетные удары атомных подводок РФ
Ту-95МС
Ту-160
Ту-95МС

Шхота с командной ракетой
Уцелевшая после удара шхота с ракетой
Мобильные ракетные комплексы
Система предупреждения о ракетном нападении
Сигналы командной ракеты оставшимся ядерным силам РФ после ударов США

Дмитрий ПОЛУХИН

The Dead Hand has been mentioned often in recent months, as we continue to sleepwalk in Ukraine toward nuclear war. This summer, when Donald Trump was in a [tough-talking mode](#), he mocked Russia for having a “dead economy”. Russia’s former president, Dmitri Medvedev, [replied](#) by ominously suggesting Trump remember “how dangerous the mythical Dead Hand can be ☐.” (Yes, he used the emoji.) Trump countered by announcing he had ordered two U.S. nuclear-armed submarines to be positioned “in the appropriate regions, just in case.”

31 July 2025

Про угрозы Трампа в мой адрес в его личной сети Truth, которой он запретил работать в нашей стране

Если какие-то слова бывшего президента России вызывают столь нервную реакцию у целого столь грозного президента США, значит, Россия во всём права и продолжит идти своей дорогой.

А про «мёртвую экономику» Индии и России и «заход на опасную территорию» – ну пусть вспомнит свои любимые фильмы про «ходячих мертвецов», а также то, как может быть опасна несуществующая в природе «мёртвая рука» 😞.

4.9M 02:47



Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

Based on the highly provocative statements of the Former President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, who is now the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, I have ordered two Nuclear Submarines to be positioned in the appropriate regions, just in case these foolish and inflammatory statements are more than just that. Words are very important, and can often lead to unintended consequences, I hope this will not be one of those instances. Thank you for your attention to this matter!

11.3k ReTruths 48.5k Likes

Aug 01, 2025 at 12:53 PM

Dueling hotheads: Medvedev on Telegram, Trump on Truth Social.

So here we are. Eighteen years ago, Putin was telling Bush: Look, the Dead Hand, there's nothing good about it! And I've got six minutes to make a decision if you launch from a submarine nearby!

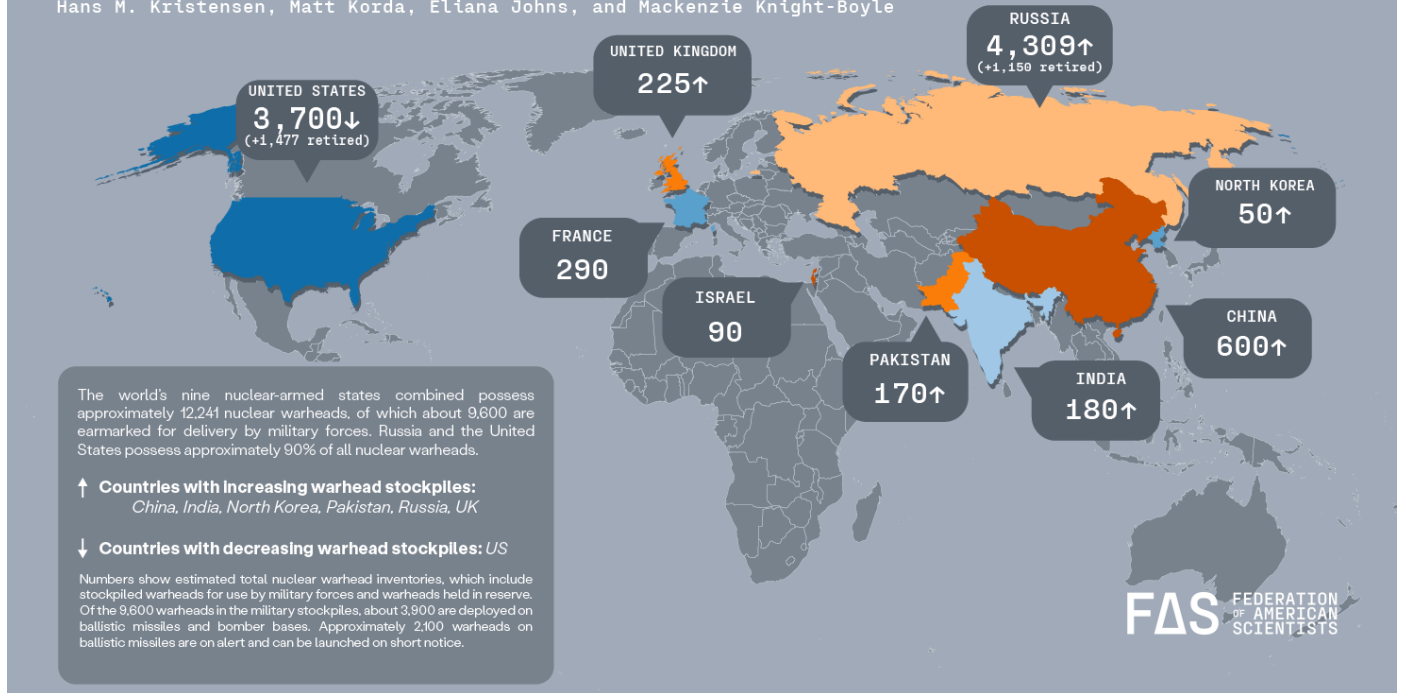
Today, we've got Medvedev telling Trump to remember the Dead Hand, and Trump replying he's going to park a submarine or two nearby.

Hair-trigger insanity

The Cold War legacy nuclear arsenals of America and Russia are still massive (and are now being built back up). Meanwhile, the smaller arsenals of other nations have grown. Today [there are](#) more than 12,000 nuclear warheads held worldwide. More than 10,000 of those are either American or Russian. That said, almost any nuclear-armed nation — from India to France — [has the power](#) all on its own to crash the global climate and wipe out agriculture and world civilization. Israel alone could kill us all. Heck, for that matter, the power to wipe out all of human civilization is also held by each and every one of the command teams of the 14 Ohio-class U.S. nuclear submarines.

Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead Inventories, 2025

Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight-Boyle



From the [Federation of American Scientists](#), a leading authority on world nuclear arsenals.

In a responsible world — the world, by the way, that Putin and Bush in their 2008 sit-down repeatedly promised each other they'd try to bequeath to their successors — we'd be dialing down the crazy.

That's not how things have gone. These days, the Russians — led by a Putin made grim in part by 30 years of disappointments with the West — have been ratcheting tensions up. They have been talking nuclear throughout the Ukraine war, with Putin adviser Sergei Karaganov as recently as [this week](#) telling Tucker Carlson: "If Russia comes ever close to a defeat, that would mean that Russia now would use nuclear weapons and Europe would be finished physically." The Trump team, meanwhile, reflexively shoves back whenever shoved, while the leaders of France, Britain and Germany are also spoiling, at least rhetorically, for a fight.

Throughout, the nuclear weapons of America and Russia have remained pointed at each other and on hair-trigger alert — poised for launch within minutes. Presidents from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama have [complained](#) about such a wildly dangerous policy. It's not just reckless, but also *unnecessary*: There's no need to launch everything in a panic, because even after a major nuclear attack on America (or Russia), submarine fleets safe in the oceans would be capable of delivering a crippling counterstrike, hours or even days later.

Reagan was appalled that he had six minutes to decide whether to launch a world-ending retaliatory nuclear strike — that's what he said the Pentagon would give him, if it perceived nuclear missiles incoming from the Soviet Union. (His accidentally recorded joke about "outlawing

Russia forever” with bombing to begin “in five minutes” was infamous, but also likely reflected his discomfort with a world that could end in minutes at his command.)

Bush, meanwhile, more crass than Reagan, put it Dubya-style, and mused that he might not have time to get off “the crapper.” Obama, he of the cool intellectual pretensions, once summarized a National Security Council meeting discussion about nuclear weapons by stating, “Let’s stipulate that this is all insane.” Trump, too, is [repeatedly on record](#) over many decades perseverating about the possibility of blundering into a nuclear war.

“I’ve always thought about the issue of nuclear war,” Trump once told an interviewer. “It’s the ultimate, the ultimate catastrophe, the biggest problem this world has, and nobody’s focusing on the nuts and bolts of it. It’s a little like sickness. People don’t believe they’re going to get sick until they do. Nobody wants to talk about it. I believe the greatest of all stupidities is people’s believing it will never happen, because ‘everybody knows how destructive it will be, so nobody uses [the] weapons’. What bullshit.”

And it’s not just the presidents who are freaked out. Top national security experts are on record as spooked and alarmed that we still do this — still keep nuclear weapons on hair-trigger for launch, as if every nation is just an unshaved gunslinger pacing the drought-cracked ground of Sad Hill Cemetery, glaring at the others and fingering its six-shooter.



“The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” a classic Italian film from the 1960s that culminates in a tense standoff in a Mexican cemetery.

Those experts [include](#) former heads of the CIA and the National Security Agency, former secretaries of defense and state, and *three former heads of U.S. nuclear forces*. They are high-level, sober statesmen, yet on this topic, they use language like “absurd” or “absolutely insane” in describing our day-to-day chosen reality.

Putin (c. 2008): “I’m horrified” by my military’s “barbaric” ideas

Back to our declassified Bush-Putin confab. It’s fascinating to hear Putin explain to Bush why missile defense — “Star Wars,” or “the Golden Dome™ of Greenland Trump Lasers” — is such a terrible idea for all:

Putin: The military has come to me now, they tell me the following: “There was the balance and the threat of mutual assured destruction. Now, the Americans are going to build a missile defense umbrella and have the feeling that they are invincible.” What should we do? ... It’s simpler and cheaper to create a new strike system which would overwhelm your defenses. And they’re already coming to me with proposals that strike me as very barbaric. When I read them I’m horrified.

President Putin: What you’ve just said is very important. All the preceding decades the world was a safer place because there was a certain balance in place. And the military has come to me now, they tell me the following: “There was the balance and the threat of Mutual Assured Destruction. Now, the Americans are going to build a missile defense umbrella and have the feeling that they are invincible.” What should we do? Either create the same umbrella or our own strike systems to neutralize their defenses. Creating a missile defense system is quite expensive. It’s simpler and cheaper to create a new strike system which would overwhelm your defenses. And they’re already coming to me with proposals that strike me as very barbaric. When I read them I’m horrified. And not building a platform for our cooperation on this front, we’re forced with this type of arms race. (S)

From the declassified transcript.

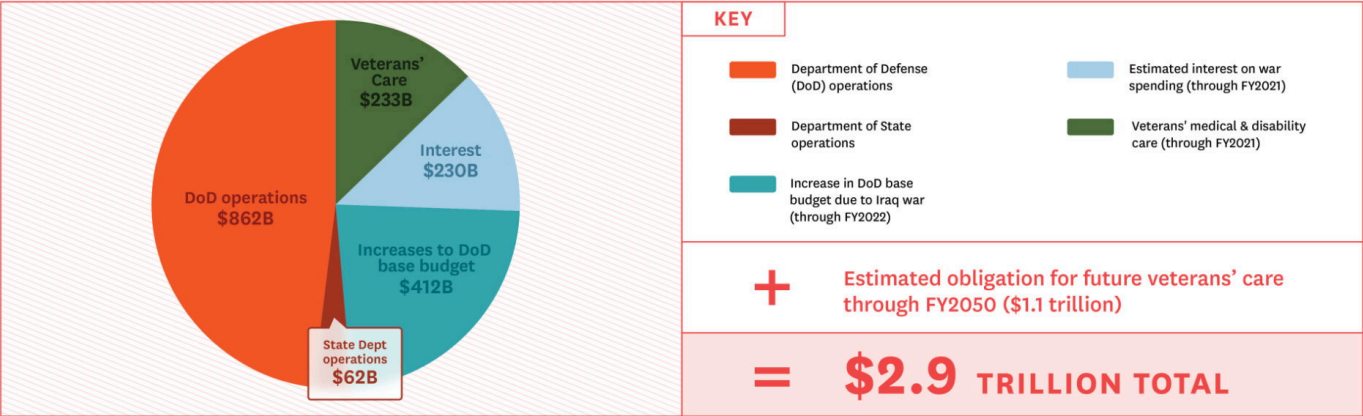
Barbaric proposals. Putin was horrified. Yet he’s speaking about things that Russia, 18 years later, now has today. For example, the hypersonic Oreshnik, a nuclear-capable missile, which was [used](#) two weeks ago for only the second time, to blow up an airplane repair factory in Lviv, Ukraine. (Medvedev, the Kremlin’s social media attack dog, [described](#) this missile attack as “a lifesaving injection of haloperidol” to treat Europe’s and America’s psychotic behavior.)

The Oreshnik moves at Mach 10. Only Tom Cruise’s experimental Darkstar, a plane that is not real in a movie about fake places, can rival it. Hypersonic missiles like these, designed to overwhelm Star Wars/Golden Dome™ projects, were on the drawing board as Putin begged us —

pleaded with us — not to push things in that direction. Bush replied with expressions of friendship and a politician’s soothing saynothings.

So, add this moment to the damning record of failures by Bush the Dubya, our worst-ever president — worse by far, still, than President Trump. Bush would hold that title simply for the war-of-choice invasion of Iraq, an evil and foolish adventure that killed more than half a million people, and forced millions to flee the Middle East. (Does Europe have a refugee crisis today? They can thank George W. Bush.) We *borrowed money* for that project, by the way, and the [estimated](#) interest payments for that war — just the interest payments! — are running about \$230 billion a year. That kind of money could easily cover, for example, [free dental care](#) to every American. Instead, we’ll just pay the *interest payments on the mortgage* for one more war no one needed.

Estimated U.S. Costs of **War in Iraq and Syria**, in \$ Billions FY2001–FY2023



From the Brown University Costs of War Project.

By the time of this 2008 Bush-Putin meeting, Bush’s 5-year-old Iraq war was already a clear catastrophe. He’d also had years of living with the idea that, as president, he might be on “the crapper” when he was ordered to hurry up and make another bad decision, after a panicky briefing lasting just several minutes, about whether to kill millions or even billions. (As he’d just told Putin: “I’m concerned about transparency on what looks like a nuclear launch and everyone panics. We need to work this out. Let me just say I understand your concerns.”)

Top U.S. national security officials — from the CIA, NSA, Pentagon — had been telling him for years to take the weapons off of hair-trigger. Retired U.S. Air Force Gen. George Lee Butler, who headed the U.S. Strategic Command (i.e., was in charge of all nuclear weapons forces) for Dubya’s father, would a year after this fruitless Bush-Putin meeting suggest the American people’s last resort was simply to turn to prayer:

“Pray for the political leadership, that they might have the wisdom and the courage to take steps that are required, to reduce these forces from their states of hair trigger alert, where they have been now for lo these many years.”

Neither Bush nor Putin accomplished anything useful that day. All they did was agree the world situation was dangerous, promise vaguely to do better, and worry that future Russian and American leaders might be less wise or lucky or chummy than they.

And if you made it this far, all I can offer as a reward is the suggestion that you [head over to YouTube](#) to enjoy “Five Minutes,” the 42-year-old disco hit that samples Reagan laughing about bombing Russia. After all, little has changed since then.