

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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September 23, 1964

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Re: Summary of the existing plans for emergency use of nuclear weapons

On March 26 you approved recommendations from McNamara and the Joint Chiefs to put into effect updated instructions for expenditure of nuclear weapons in emergency conditions.

This instruction covers four emergency situations. Two of them are essentially defensive and would allow the use of nuclear weapons only against military targets in the air or at sea. These are: 1) active defense against air and space nuclear attack on the U. S., and 2) naval and air action against an imminent seaborne missile attack on the U. S.

In these two cases the commanders could act without contacting the President if the necessary delay would make it impossible for them to prevent the imminent attack.

The other two cases are 1) retaliation to a nuclear attack on the U. S., and 2) reply to a major assault on major U. S. forces at sea or in foreign territory. In these two cases every effort to contact the President must be made (with the qualifying phrase in the second case: "every effort consistent with the preservation of his command"). The authorized retaliation for an attack on the U. S. is a strategic attack on the Soviet Union. The authorized retaliation in the other case is against hostile forces but not repeat not against the Soviet Union itself.

The instructions reveal an interesting difference between situations in which nuclear weapons would do enormous civilian and industrial damage and situations in which they would be used in the upper atmosphere or on the high seas. In the latter cases commanders have latitude to decide that the delay in contacting the President would be excessive. This is in line with a belief which Eisenhower had that when the destructive force of nuclear weapons would hit only military forces, the decision on their use was a very much less serious matter. It is possible that we ought to take account of this distinction in anything we say in the next few days.

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