

NEWSLETTER

Opinion Today

Should Either of These People Have the Power to End the World?

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A large majority of Americans say they don't trust a government run by the opposition party. So we must ask ourselves: Is it moral, just and wise to vest the ability to end other nations in the hands of one person?

"As president, I carried no wallet, no money, no driver's license, no keys in my pockets — only secret codes that were capable of bringing about the annihilation of much of the world as we knew it," Ronald Reagan wrote in his autobiography.

That's right. President Biden this very minute could unilaterally decide to launch a devastating nuclear strike anywhere in the world in minutes — without a requirement to consult Congress or the courts. The missiles would be in flight before even the most plugged-in Americans knew they'd been launched.

This is an enormous amount of power to grant any single person. That's doubly true in undemocratic nations, several of which have nuclear arsenals of their own.

It is time to explore what alternatives to the president's sole nuclear authority could be, and that's what my colleague W.J. Hennigan does in the latest installment of our series "At the Brink," published this morning.

Last year, Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts and Representative Ted Lieu of California introduced legislation that would prevent any American president from launching a first nuclear strike without congressional approval. Passing this bill or one like it is an obvious step.

Yet the American public is owed a bigger plan on how countries around the globe can work together to reduce nuclear threats. Today nuclear weapons loom over international politics in ways not seen since the Cold War — a dynamic Times Opinion explored in the first installment of the series earlier this week.

The phrase "serious debate" is often tossed around in campaign season. It's a way to insist on talking about something, even if in a nebulous way. Fortunately, there are chances for a substantive public discussion of nuclear weapons, and we invite the country and the world to join in the conversation. Americans might be surprised to hear what those in other nations think.

Times Opinion has invited President Biden and President Trump to explain in our pages what their next administrations would do to reduce these risks. We hope they will do so. We also hope this will be a subject in the upcoming presidential debates. Reporters covering the president and his competitor should press them on their policies and thinking around sole authority and other nuclear policies.

Though Mr. Trump and Mr. Biden "will have to confront questions from voters about their mental acuity, competence and stamina to take on another four-year term," as Hennigan writes today, "regardless of who wins this election or the next one, the American president's nuclear sole authority is a product of another era, and must be revisited in our new nuclear age."

That should be something that most Americans can agree on.

Kathleen Kingsbury is the Opinion editor of The New York Times, overseeing the editorial board and the Opinion section. Previously she was the deputy editorial page editor. She joined The Times in 2017 from The Boston Globe, where she served as managing editor for digital. She received the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for distinguished editorial writing. @katiekings