

Nuclear football

The **nuclear football** (also known as the **atomic football**, the **President's emergency satchel**, the **Presidential Emergency Satchel**,^[1] the **button**, the **black box**, or just the **football**) is a briefcase, the contents of which are to be used by the President of the United States to authorize a nuclear attack while away from fixed command centers, such as the White House Situation Room. It functions as a mobile hub in the strategic defense system of the United States. It is held by an aide-de-camp.



Briefcase used by the President of the United States to authorize a nuclear attack while away from fixed command centers

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According to a *Washington Post* article, the president is always accompanied by a military aide carrying a "football" with launch codes for nuclear weapons.^[2] The football is a metal Zero Halliburton briefcase^[3] carried in a black leather "jacket". The package weighs around 45pounds (20 kilograms).^[4]

In his book *Breaking Cover*, which was released on August 11th of 1980 ^[5], Bill Gulley, the former director of the White House Military Office, wrote:^[4]

There are four things in the Football. The Black Book containing the retaliatory options, a book listing classified site locations, a manila folder with eight or ten pages stapled together giving a description of procedures for the Emergency Alert System, and a three-by-five-inch [7.5 × 13 cm] card with authentication codes. The Black Book was about 9 by 12 inches [23 × 30 cm] and had 75 loose-leaf pages printed in black and red. The book with classified site locations was about the same size as the Black Book, and was black. It contained information on sites around the country where the president could be taken in an emergency.

A small antenna protrudes from the bag near the handle, suggesting that it also contains communications equipment of some kind.^[4]

Operation

If the president (who is commander-in-chief of the armed forces) ordered the use of nuclear weapons, he would be taken aside by the "carrier" and the briefcase would be opened. A command signal, or "watch" alert, would then be issued to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The president would then review the attack options with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and decide on a plan, which could

range from a single cruise missile to multiple ICBM launches. These are preset war plans developed under OPLAN 8010 (formerly the Single Integrated Operational Plan). Then, using Milstar, a Yankee White would contact the National Military Command Center and NORAD to determine the scope of the pre-emptive nuclear strike and prepare a second strike, following which Milstar/Advanced Extremely High Frequency or Boeing E-4Bs and TACAMOs would air the currently valid Nuclear Launch Code to all nuclear delivery systems operational. Where a two-person verification procedure would be executed following this, the codes would be entered in a Permissive Action Link



Play media

Video describing the United States' nuclear launch authorization process

Before the order can be processed by the military, the president must be positively identified using a special code issued on a plastic card, nicknamed the "biscuit".^[6]

The United States has a two-man rule in place at the nuclear launch facilities, and while only the president can order the release of nuclear weapons, the order must be verified by the Secretary of Defense to be an authentic order given by the president (there is a hierarchy of succession in the event that the president is killed in an attack). This verification process deals solely with verifying that the order came from the actual President. The Secretary of Defense has no veto power and must comply with the president's order.^[6] Once all the codes have been verified, the military would issue attack orders to the proper units. These orders are given and then re-verified for authenticity. It is argued that the President has almost single authority to initiate a nuclear attack since the Secretary of Defense is required to verify the order but cannot legally veto it.^{[7][8][9]}

The football is carried by one of the rotating presidential military aides, whose work schedule is described by a top-secret rota (one from each of the five service branches). This person is a commissioned officer in the U.S. military, pay-grade O-4 or above, who has undergone the nation's most rigorous background check (Yankee White).^{[10][11]} These officers are required to keep the football readily accessible to the president at all times. Consequently, the aide, football in hand, is always either standing or walking near the president, including riding on Air Force One, Marine One, or the presidential motorcade with the president.^[11]

Journalist Ron Rosenbaum has pointed out that the operational plan for nuclear strike orders is entirely concerned with the identity of the commanding officer and the authenticity of the order, and there are no safeguards to verify that the person issuing the order is actually sane.^[12] Notably, Major Harold Hering was discharged from the Air Force in late 1973 for asking the question "How can I know that an order I receive to launch my missiles came from a sane president?" under Richard Nixon.^[13]

History

The football dates back to Dwight D. Eisenhower, but its current usage came about in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when John F. Kennedy was concerned that a Soviet commander in Cuba might launch missiles without authorization from Moscow.^[10] Kennedy asked several questions related to the release of US nuclear weapons. These were:

1. "Assuming that information from a closely guarded source causes me to conclude that the U.S. should launch an immediate nuclear strike against the Communist Bloc, does the JCS Emergency Actions File permit me to initiate such an attack without first consulting with the Secretary of Defense and/or the Joint Chiefs of Staff?"
2. "I know that the red button on my desk phone will connect me with the White House Army Signal Agency (WHASA) switchboard and that the WHASA switchboard can connect me immediately to the Joint War Room. If I called the Joint War Room without giving them advance notice, to whom would I be speaking?"
3. "What would I say to the Joint War Room to launch an immediate nuclear strike?"
4. "How would the person who received my instructions verify them?"^[14]

An Associated Press article stated that the nickname "football" was derived from an attack plan codenamed "Dropkick".^[4] The nickname has led to some confusion as to the nature—and even the shape—of the device, as the leather bag or "jacket" in which it is carried appears large enough to contain an actual football.

During their presidencies, both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan preferred to keep the launch codes in their jacket pockets.^[15] Congressman John Kline served as a colonel in the United States Marine Corps and carried the football for Presidents Carter and Reagan.^[16]

The coded card was separated from Ronald Reagan immediately after the 1981 assassination attempt against him.^[17] He was separated from it when his clothing was cut off by the emergency department trauma team. It was later discovered lying unsecured in one of his shoes on the emergency department floor. This led to an urban legend that Reagan carried the code in his sock. Reagan was separated from the rest of the football as well, because the officer who carried it was left behind as the motorcade sped away with the wounded president. On occasion, the president has left his aide carrying the football behind. This happened to Nixon in 1973; after Nixon presented Soviet Leader Leonid Brezhnev with a Lincoln Continental at Camp David, Brezhnev unexpectedly drove with Nixon off the retreat onto a highway while leaving Nixon's Secret Service personnel behind, separating Nixon from the football (and his security detail) for nearly 30 minutes.^[18] Presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush,^[19] and Bill Clinton have also been separated from the football.^[17]

Recent times

As the football is required to be near to the president at all times, the aides carrying it frequently appear in press photographs.^[20] While giving a speech during a 2016 Hillary Clinton general election campaign rally in Scranton, Pennsylvania, Vice President Joe Biden pointed out the officer holding the nuclear football, which drew criticism from some conservative pundits.^[20] In February 2017, on the occasion of North Korea firing a nuclear-capable Pukkuksong-2 ballistic missile over the Sea of Japan,^[21] a guest at President Trump's Mar-a-Lago posed for a photo with the military aide carrying the Football, posting the image to Facebook and identifying the aide by his first name.^[22] U.S. military officials clarified that it was neither illegal nor against proper procedure for the officer to appear in such a photo, although they admitted that the situation was strange.^[20]

On November 8, 2017, when President Trump made an official state visit to China, US military aides carrying the football were reportedly involved in a brief tussle with Chinese security officials, after the latter tried to bar the former access to the Hall of the People auditorium. According to Jonathan Swan, the political correspondent behind the report, wrote: "...at no point did the Chinese have the nuclear football in their possession or even touch the briefcase....[T]he head of the Chinese security detail apologised to the Americans afterwards for the misunderstanding."^[23]

See also

- Cheget, the Russian counterpart
- Letters of last resort
- Gold Codes
- Permissive Action Link
- Nuclear briefcase

Notes

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Gold Codes

The **Gold Codes** are the launch codes for nuclear weapons provided to the Presidents of the United States in their role as Commander-in-Chief of the United States armed forces.^[1] In conjunction with the nuclear football, the Gold Codes allow the president to authorize a nuclear attack.^[2] Gold Codes, as well as a separate nuclear football, are also assigned to the Vice President in case the president is incapacitated or otherwise unable to discharge the duties of office pursuant to the Twenty-fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution.^{[3][4]} Gold Codes are arranged in a column and printed on a plastic card, nicknamed **the biscuit**.^[5]

The card is similar to a credit card, and the president carries it on his or her person. Before it can be read, an opaque plastic covering must be snapped in two and removed.^[6]

Gold Codes are generated daily and provided by the National Security Agency (NSA) to the White House, The Pentagon, United States Strategic Command, and TACAMO. For an extra level of security, the list of codes on the card includes codes that have no meaning, and therefore the president must memorize where on the list the correct code is located. The concept behind the codes is that they permit the president to positively identify himself as the commander-in-chief and thereby authenticate a launch order to the National Military Command Center(NMCC).^{[7][8]}

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Protocol

Should the president decide to order the launch of nuclear weapons, he or she would be taken aside by the "carrier" of the nuclear football and the briefcase opened.^[3] Once opened, the president would decide which "attack options" (specific orders for attacks on specific targets) to use. The Attack Options are preset war plans developed under OPLAN 8010, and include major attack options (MAOs), selected attack options (SAOs), and limited attack options (LAOs). The chosen attack option and the Gold Codes would then be transmitted to the NMCC via a special, secure channel.

Stephen Schwartz, an independent nuclear policy consultant, explained in 2018: "Once [the president's] identity is verified, he gives the order and it is transmitted down the chain of command. The chain of command goes from the president through the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and then, if we're using long-range weapons, down through the Strategic Command, then the order is relayed to our forces in the field. It always happens extremely quickly"^[9]

As commander-in-chief, the president is the only individual with the authority to order the use of nuclear weapons.^[10] A two-man rule applies, however: the National Command Authority comprising the president and Secretary of Defense must jointly authenticate the order to use nuclear weapons to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.^[6] It is argued by Franklin Miller that the President has almost single authority to initiate a nuclear attack since the Secretary of Defense is required to verify the order, but cannot legally veto it.^{[11][12]} However, Section 4 of the 25th Amendment of the Constitution allows for the vice president, together with a majority of cabinet heads or Congress, to declare the President disabled or unfit to execute the duties of the office.^[13]

See also

- [National Command Authority](#)
- [Nuclear football](#)
- [Nuclear weapon control in the United Kingdom](#)

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