

Twitter Thread by Marc Ambinder



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Here are the actual physical and temporal limiting factors on presidential nuclear launch authority. 1/

1. POTUS needs to contact the NMCC or an alternate command post. This requires a phone number. These number are on speed-dial on the phones carried by the military aide and emergency action team from WHMO.
2. He could also ask a White House operator from Royal Crown, the secure switchboard to connect him. But he'd have to know exactly what to ask for. Not a big constraint - a tiny one.
3. Assuming POTUS connects to a commander center, he would be transferred to an Emergency Actions controller. By this point lots of other people would be notified that POTUS was trying to do something.
4. The controller would first ask for authentication. POTUS would be read aloud a series of alphanumeric as and challenged to provide the corresponding alphanumeric on the nuclear authentication card he carries.
5. The EA controller needs permission from a senior officer to even access the authentication card that's in a double locked safe in the NMCC, so there's a constraint of sorts.

Assuming the president has been authenticated as the national command authority, he would be asked whether he wanted to initiate a conference call - this is standard procedure because normally one would have been convened before he calls.

The president could say no. He could say - I'd like to bomb the seat of Iran's government. The EA controller would ask if the president had a specific plan in front of him — assuming that the president had asked the military aide to open the “football” and give him the war book.

The binder containing the various pre-planned nuclear war orders. If the president on his own wanted to launch a weapon in a circumstance not covered by one of those pre-cooked orders, then there would be a lengthy delay ... because STRATCOM would have to spin up a new scenario.

Here is where a Law of Armed Conflict review would take place, and the order would NOT be sent immediately down the line to the launch control centers, submarines, fighters.

But let's say POTUS had consulted with the military aide and was reading from the book and selected plan "HOTEL 4." The officers involved could decide to initiate the emergency war order codes - or they could stall for time, and notify as many members of the cabinet as possible

Or both - it's a judgment call. So far as I know, no one has exercised a "25th amendment declaration," but it would probably take hours. If the generals and admirals and SecDef know/knew of no threat from Iran, the law and procedural give them no safe harbor.

They are supposed to execute the order. Especially if it's an order for a pre-planned nuclear option. But the assumption has always always been in virtually every exercise that the nation would be under a clear and obvious external threat.

The discretion - and constraint here - is that the nuclear war managers would have to stand fast and stand together and decide that an order from an unhinged potus is not valid - and perhaps face their own legal consequences down the line.

Whose demands would the men and women who create and transmit the nuclear release messages (EAMs) and war orders (EWO) follow? Trump's right now? Or their superiors in the chain of command at the Pentagon who would urge them to break the law in the interest of a non-apocalypse?

I don't know. Some might be sympathetic to the President. But I'd bet most would probably decide based on their judgment that an order given from an unsound mind was not legit even if they had no way to back up that intuition. Legally and procedurally, though...

The NC3 system does not - does NOT - anticipate a situation like this.