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## III. Reviews

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### BOOK REVIEW

# 72 Minutes to Annihilation

by Daniel Platt

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#### **Nuclear War: A Scenario**

by Annie Jacobsen

New York, Dutton, March 2024

Hardcover, 400 pp., \$30.00

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For more than 75 consecutive weeks, the [International Peace Coalition](#) has met online to amplify the warnings of distinguished experts, that the world is now closer to nuclear war than ever before in history. Yet for many Americans and Europeans, who are bathed in incessant, mind-numbing war propaganda, this may seem unremarkable, a mere extension of the current harsh reality. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Annie Jacobsen's book offers a terrifying depiction of what a nuclear war would really be like, in an ingenious format: The story unfolds in rapid-fire increments of one to two minutes each, to emphasize how quickly nuclear war develops after the fatal crossing of the Rubicon. The scenario, pages 33-278 of the book, presents a story that transpires over a mere 72 minutes.

#### **The Scenario**

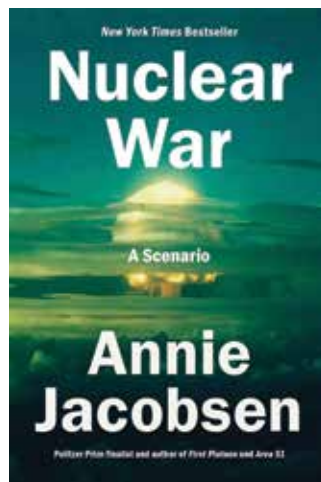
In Jacobsen's hypothetical scenario, a demented North Korean leader launches a nuclear attack on the United States, hitting Washington, D.C. with an ICBM, and then the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant in California with a submarine-launched ballistic missile. Finally, the North Koreans detonate a "super-EMP" (Electromagnetic Pulse) weapon in a satellite over the U.S., knocking out the entire electrical grid of the nation. Meanwhile, in response to the initial attack on Washington, the U.S. launches a devastating

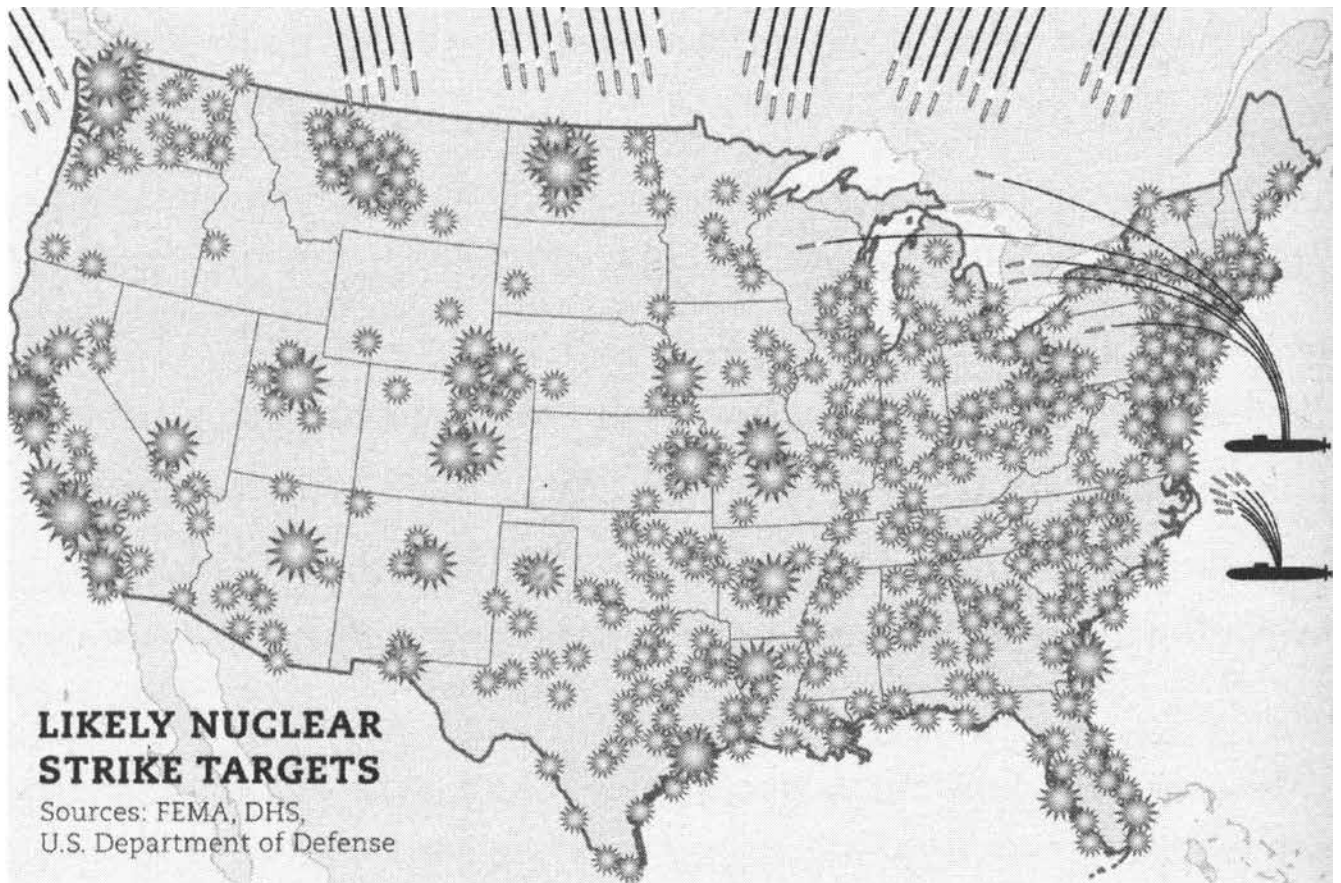
counterstrike on North Korea. Russian leaders, detecting the launch of the U.S. missiles but unable to determine whether this counterstrike is a preemptive attack on their nation, respond by launching a full-scale nuclear attack on the U.S. and NATO installations in Europe. The U.S. responds in turn with a full-scale nuclear attack on Russia.

The narrative juxtaposes the relentless, mindless efficiency of military technology, to the frailty of the humans who presumably control it. In Jacobsen's scenario, the American leaders fumble their evacuation from the target zone in Washington, resulting in the death of the U.S. President and the blinding of the Secretary of Defense by the intense light of the nuclear explosion. The Russians are mistrustful of attempts by lower-ranking officials to contact them, demanding to hear from the President

(who at that point is missing in action), and as the precious minutes tick by, they conclude that they are under attack and initiate their missile launch. The humane impulse of the Secretary of Defense, who has become acting President and Commander in Chief, to not retaliate against the mistaken missile launch by Russia, is disregarded by American military leaders; the hallowed concept of civilian control over the military simply goes out the window in the chaos of conflict.

Constructing this scenario necessarily involved making certain assumptions about politics. The author walks a tightrope between making her scenario conform to the narratives of the prevailing neocon *Zeitgeist*, and acknowledging some of the appalling realities of the neocons' track record in the real world: in her scenario,





FEMA, DHS, DoD; image by Michael Rohani

*Contrary to the assumption of many, there are many more likely nuclear strike targets in the continental United States than just a few large cities, according to Jacobsen's map. The continent would be devastated.*

the Russians, who are struggling to ascertain whether the U.S. has actually launched a nuclear strike against them, "...know the U.S. president—and possibly every leader in the Western world—despises the Russian leadership. And when the U.S. wants regime change, history shows the U.S. will lie." [page 224] The North Korean leadership is depicted as a gang of wholly psychotic, cartoonish super-villains.

### **Extensive Research**

The author consulted an impressive array of experts in the writing of this book, which lends credence to her highly detailed descriptions of the technologies involved and the ghastly consequences of their deployment. One of her most-quoted authorities is MIT professor emeritus and former advisor to the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations Dr. Ted Postol, who has addressed International Peace Coalition meetings on numerous occasions. Her descriptions of the physiological effects of nuclear weapons are graphic and hair-raising, and

ought to be enough to sober up even the most ardent war-monger.

Citing Protocol II, Article 15 of the Geneva Conventions [page 126], Jacobsen notes that an attack on a nuclear reactor, as envisaged in her scenario, is a serious breach of international law, without mentioning that such attacks have been carried out repeatedly by acting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's regime in the ongoing Ukraine war.

She also provides some anecdotes to describe how some of the technologies involved have fallen short of their advertised potential: for example, in the 1950s, early-warning radars mistook a flock of swans for a fleet of Russian MiG fighters. But lest we become utterly demoralized by the depictions of human or technological failure in her scenario, she references the case of Stanislav Petrov [page 168], who ought to be much more famous. Petrov was the commander in charge of the Serpukhov-15 facility in western Russia, which receives early warning data from satellites. In

1983, that facility received data that indicated that five American ICBMs were headed for Moscow. Petrov chose to interpret this as a false alarm because, he said, “I had a funny feeling in my gut.” He saved the world.

## Missile Defense

The question of ballistic missile defense receives some interesting but ultimately inadequate attention in Jacobsen’s book. Longtime readers of *EIR* will recall that its founder, Lyndon LaRouche, played a seminal role in the genesis of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) which was announced by President Ronald Reagan in 1983. The program went off the rails when it became dominated by the ideas of Lt. General (ret.) Danny Graham, head of the High Frontier organization, who deemphasized development of directed energy technologies (lasers and particle beams) in favor of more inexpensive “kinetic kill” weaponry (anti-missile missiles).

Jacobsen recounts the history of failures of the kinetic approach. On page 73, she writes, “after five years, and many billions of U.S. tax dollars spent, nine out of twenty hit-to-kill U.S. interceptor tests failed, which means there is only an approximate 55 percent chance that a Hwasong-17 [North Korean ICBM] will be shot down before it reaches its target.” She recalls the analogy that, because of the high speeds at which ballistic missiles are traveling, targeting one missile with another is “akin to shooting a bullet with another bullet.”

On the other hand, however, the use of directed energy technologies, as advocated by LaRouche, creates an entirely different situation: because these defensive technologies operate at or near the speed of light. Consequently, they have the advantage of several orders of magnitude greater velocity than the target missile and can rapidly take it off its trajectory. Jacobsen paints a convincing picture of our impressive technical capacity to detect missiles during their “boost phase,” but references lasers only briefly on page 299, saying that “the Pentagon’s classified laser weapons program is fostering a new kind of arms race.”

This, of course, misses the point of LaRouche’s proposal: that the U.S. and USSR collaborate on directed energy research, to create a technological environment where defense has the advantage over offense, a doctrine of “Mutually Assured Survival” to supplant “Mutually Assured Destruction”—in Ronald Reagan’s words, to “make nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete.” Interestingly, Jacobsen does cite a

proposal for collaboration made by physicist Richard Garwin, known as the author of the first hydrogen bomb design. He is quoted as saying, “We proposed a joint initiative with Russia. They also have an interest in keeping North Korea from launching a nuclear weapon. Just as we do.” [page 71] But, Jacobsen reports this suggestion fell on deaf ears.

## The Aftermath

Having chronicled the extinction of most of humanity over the span of just 72 minutes, the author makes a surprising leap, 24,000 years into the future, to a world that has finally recovered from the nuclear winter which ensues in the wake of a nuclear war. She imagines the descendants of today’s humans discovering the ruins of some 21st Century habitation, and compares it to the discovery by archeologists of Göbekli Tepe, a neolithic site in Türkiye, which had been buried for nearly 12,000 years and presents riddles about early civilization which remain unsolved today.

## Conclusion

Jacobsen opens the Acknowledgements section at the end of her book with these words:

“Nuclear war is insane. Every person I interviewed for this book knows this. Every person. The whole premise of using nuclear weapons is madness. It is irrational. And yet here we are.”

Others have made it more a question of volition. Jacobsen quotes John Rubel, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense in John F. Kennedy’s administration, who attended a Strategic Air Command meeting in 1960 at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska where the Single Integrated Operational Plan for fighting nuclear war was discussed. Some 40 years later, as an elderly man, Rubel looked back on this event, saying, “I thought of the Wannsee Conference in January 1942.” [page 29] The Wannsee Conference was the meeting in a suburb of Berlin of top Nazi leaders where the decision was made to systematically exterminate the Jewish population.

No sane person wishes to kill 600 million people, as the Single Integrated Operational Plan proposed to do. But peace is not simply the absence of war, and sanity is not merely the absence of psychopathology. We need a new paradigm for international relations, one that permanently dismisses geopolitics in favor of a commitment to the common goals of mankind. This is the mission of the International Peace Coalition.