



Trump's shaky finger on the trigger

Larry Wilson

November 26, 2017

In the end, it may be his remarkably bad manners, not a nuclear war, that is his undoing.

Two out of three Americans polled this month say that civility in our nation has gone down since Donald Trump's election.

In a small North Carolina focus group periodically brought together by a pollster, of the five Trump voters, only one still strongly supports the president. The others call his administration "chaotic" and "embarrassing." The pollster, quoted last week in the Los Angeles Times, says that the college-educated and middle- to upper-income whites who did vote for Trump have in particular turned against him.

The only thing they like is the economy, as indicated by strong equity markets buoyed by corporate stock buybacks and good jobs numbers, both of which have continued the upward swing they were enjoying through the later Obama years.

So, thank goodness for small favors, and here's hoping the dismal pattern of mean things said in mean ways — oh, and the lies — will bring Trump down before he has a chance to take us down with him.

But a growing number of Americans are not willing to take a chance on the timing of his comeuppance. They worry about having a shaky finger on the nuclear trigger. So, for the first time ever, there is a legitimate movement seeking to change policy and law that allows a president to unilaterally fire nuclear weapons.

The only precedent in the generations since Hiroshima was during a dark White House time for Richard Nixon, when the president was drinking heavily and often appeared morose. Then-Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger and a small cabal of advisers informally created an end-around that would save the world from a nuclear caprice influenced by Watergate woes and too many highballs.

But Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, early Nixon, Carter, Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, Obama — though they disagreed with policies of those presidents, no sane American seriously worried about their sole access to the nuclear codes.

Until now. Yes, there are partisan plays here. South Bay Rep. Ted Lieu, a Democrat, has drafted H.R. 669, the "Restricting First Use of Nuclear Weapons Act," which goes: "The president may not use the Armed Forces of the United States to conduct a first-use nuclear strike unless such

strike is conducted pursuant to a declaration of war by Congress that expressly authorizes such strike.”

But it's not only Democrats who are worried. Libertarian Cato Institute Vice President Gene Healey calls the bill “worth considering.” He writes: “By giving the secretary of defense or the (Joint Chiefs) chairman added cover to get in the way of a decision he knows to be crazy, it could slow or stop the delivery of the order from the Pentagon to the launch officers.”

But there's another, bipartisan way out — a policy change that was campaigned on by both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, who then both failed to implement it as president. As the Union of Concerned Scientists has long advocated, we could remove a Cold War legacy that no longer serves us well, the so-called hair-trigger alert. The United States still keeps its 450 silo-based nuclear weapons, and hundreds of submarine-based weapons, on these hair-triggers. But there is a safety switch that is used to prevent a launch of the missile when maintenance crews are in the silo. The U.S. could remove its land-based missiles from hair-triggers by turning this switch to the safe position in each silo. The commander in chief could, as his predecessors promised, order this change on his own.

It's a simple way to make the world a safer place.