

THE NATIONAL MEMO

Button, Button, Who's Got The Button?

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In the early evening of January 2, the president of the United States tweeted this boast:

“North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the ‘Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.’ Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!”

I’m going to try hard to ignore that missing hyphen and not think about the commas looking for a home. There’s so much else to worry about here.

I am not one to argue gender superiority, ever. However, it’s hard to imagine any female leader engaging in this “mine is bigger” idiocy. As a rule, we do not, for example, think any good comes from saying, “You show me yours, and I’ll show you mine.”

Let us find hope in this where we can. As *New York Times* senior staff editor Russell Goldman helpfully explained, there is no such thing as a presidential “nuclear button.” That button doesn’t exist anywhere except in Donald Trump’s head, which, of course, is the worst place it could be.

So many questions. Just how big is this nonexistent Button in the supposedly existent mind of Trump? Where is this Button? What does this Button look like? And why did he capitalize Button? Is Button his name for something that isn’t a small-b button?

Stop, wicked mind. Stop.

“This may be the most irresponsible tweet in history,” Colin Friedersdorf wrote for *The Atlantic* — not the least bit hyperbolically, which is where we are now.

Friedersdorf continued by quoting Julian Sanchez of the far-from-liberal Cato Institute, who “articulated the best-case scenario: ‘The good news is, other countries won’t take talk like this too seriously because they understand Trump is a small man who blusters to make himself feel potent. That’s also the bad news; there’s nowhere left to go rhetorically when we need to signal ... we’re serious.’ Most likely, that’s the fallout.”

Friedersdorf argues that all world leaders should be banned from using Twitter, in part because it is designed to stoke “needless conflict” by fellow humans who publish “ill-considered” words.

That’s a nice way of saying that America is on the verge of a collective heart attack because our commander in chief is treating the presidency like his favorite new video game. *Pow-pow-pow. I know you are, but what am I?*

Fortunately, we have a new movie, *The Post*, to remind us of the redemptive power of journalists, whom Trump likes to call “the enemy of the American people.” As a journalism professor, I’ve been meaning to thank him for that. Nothing inspires this next generation of truth seekers like a president who thinks that what he’s doing to this country is a whole lot of none of their business.

“The Post” is the story of two brave newspapers, really, but focuses on one of them: *The Washington Post*. In 1971, after President Richard Nixon’s administration persuaded a court to temporarily bar *The New York Times* from continuing to publish the Pentagon Papers, *The Washington Post* stepped up.

At the heart of this story is the late *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham, played in the film by Meryl Streep. I have yet to see it because movies are released later in Cleveland than on the East Coast, even though we share the same time zone. I add that as a helpful tip for those of you in New York and Washington who, in the course of phone conversations with us, ask, “What time is it where you are?” So annoying.

In preparation for the movie, I’m rereading Graham’s 1997 memoir, *Personal History*. Hours after Trump’s tweet, I came across a favorite passage. Graham addressed the “chauvinist tradition” of 1960s Washington and noted the one exception: Adlai Stevenson.

She described President John F. Kennedy’s lament that he didn’t understand Stevenson’s hold over women. A Stevenson confidant explained the difference.

“While you both love women,” he said, “Adlai also likes them, and women know the difference.”

Again, I would never claim gender superiority, and heaven forbid I push a Button.

But yes. Yes, we do.