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In real life, President Idris Elba wouldn't get such bad advice.



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I Spoil Netflix's Nuclear War Movie

I won't ruin "A House of Dynamite," a new film from justly famed director Kathryn Bigelow, by saying whether a single warhead destroys Chicago, having been launched by an unknown actor from the waters off northeast Asia.

The movie does, however, misrepresent what a president would have to decide in the moments before impact. One warhead isn't going to disarm the U.S. An attack on Chicago isn't going to decapitate U.S. leadership.

The last thing an adversary would do if intending a massive follow-up strike is send a warning shot so the U.S. would be able to mobilize its forces and protect its command and control.

A challenge faces President Idris Elba, all right, but not one that calls for an uninformed retaliatory strike against nuclear powers that may not even be involved. Could there be worse advice? These rivals would see such a response coming and face their own use-it-or-lose-it nuclear dilemma.

So President Elba would know he has both time and the need to prepare the U.S. for something that isn't Armageddon. Whatever its purpose, an attack with a single warhead is a more limited challenge to American security interests—that is, if it wasn't accidental or unauthorized. The U.S. has long understood it could spend weeks or months on nuclear forensics and intelligence analysis trying to sort out who sent a sub-launched nuclear warhead.

Let's stop here. I picked similar nits with "Nuclear War: A Scenario," last year's book by Annie Jacobsen. North Korea launches an inexplicable, suicidal attack on the U.S.—basically a MacGuffin, as Hollywood would call it, to move the plot along to an all-out exchange involving the much larger arsenals of the U.S. and Russia.

Ms. Bigelow's movie begins with U.S. satellites failing to detect and precisely locate the initial launch. Maybe North Korea developed a subbased launcher sooner than expected? Again, a MacGuffin: Other countries already have sub-launched missiles. These are hard to trace. Ditto the possibility of two nuclear powers acting in concert, hoping their combined arsenals, plus U.S. uncertainty, would checkmate America's ability to respond.

The goal presumably would be to impair the U.S. response to some regional challenge. But these are possibilities the U.S. anticipates. It's not going to react insanely.

Movie history is irresistible here. Dr. Strangelove complains—too late—that a Soviet doomsday device bungles its purpose if it's *kept secret*.

In "Fail Safe," also released in 1964, procedures meant to strengthen deterrence by making sure U.S. retaliation takes place go haywire instead.

Deterrence fails all the time in the movies but has succeeded so far in real life despite the effort of filmmakers to make deterrence the villain.

That's why we have so many weapons, of so many descriptions and yields. An enemy can't hope to get away with nuclear use because the U.S. lacks a proportionate, non-escalatory response. In the Bigelow movie as in real life,

interceptors are unreliable but also increase an enemy's uncertainty and perhaps make it more believable that a U.S. president would pull the trigger.

The military officer who follows the president around with the nuclear "football"? He's there to remind rivals that the U.S. is always ready to answer quickly.

The first goal of every nuclear system we develop is not to be used, but to deter use.

In Ms. Bigelow's movie, a general besotted with last night's all-star game argues for broad retaliation against U.S. nuclear rivals yet offers no coherent rationale for doing so. (The plausible rationale would be to destroy enemy weapons on the ground to limit inevitable and otherwise unavoidable damage to the U.S., but that's not the evident risk here.)

A young White House staffer (the goodie) argues for riding out the Chicago attack to reduce the risk of a general nuclear exchange. In fact, riding it out is the right choice because the U.S. loses nothing and potentially gains a lot by sussing out the challenge it faces so it can respond with maximum effectiveness for American interests. And President Elba would hardly need to be told this on the spot.

How to deter an attack without a return address is a live and running concern for U.S. planners. It's also been a subject of previous columns here. Answers exist: A reliable forensic capability is a deterrent. Resilience is a deterrent— so an adversary knows the U.S. will be able to withstand an attack and respond effectively.

In the more challenging world now coming into place, also worth considering is a new message to U.S. nuclear adversaries, who are small in number, are increasingly aligned, and have shown a predilection for destabilizing new delivery systems: If a U.S. city disappears under a mushroom cloud from an untraceable attack, each might also expect to lose a city to an untraceable attack so they had better ride herd on each other's geopolitical game-playing.

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