

‘My jaw dropped’: Annie Jacobsen on her scenario for nuclear war

The author’s new book posits an all-too-possible catastrophe, destruction assured by human frailty as much as by technology



Annie Jacobsen was ‘constantly surprised by the insanity’ of what she learned about the threat of nuclear war. Photograph: Rob Atkins/Getty Images

Julian Borger

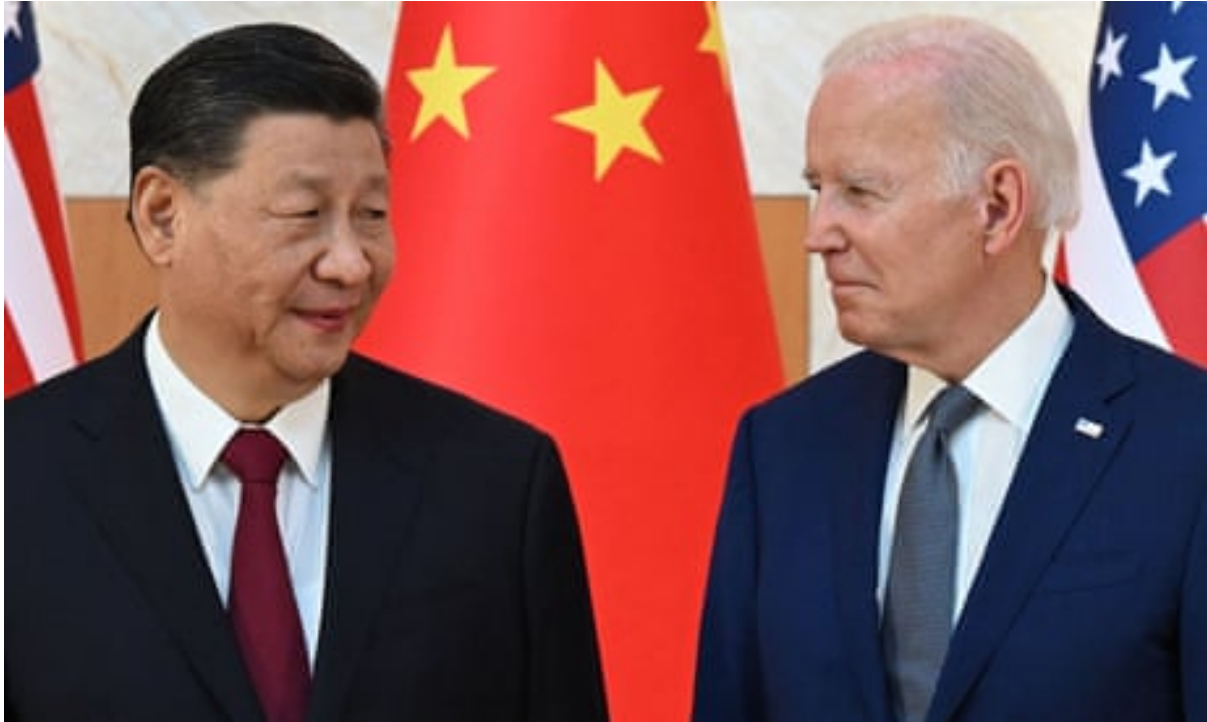
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nnie Jacobsen was a high school student in 1983, when ABC television broadcast the film *The Day After*, about the horrors of nuclear war. She never

forgot the experience. More than 100 million Americans watched and were terrified too. One of them lived in the White House. According to his biographer and his own memoirs, it helped turn Ronald Reagan into a nuclear disarmer in his second term.



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Not long after, the world's stockpile of nuclear warheads peaked and began to decline rapidly, from 70,000 to just over 12,000 currently, according to the Federation of American Scientists.

That is still enough however to reduce the Earth to a radioactive desert, with some warheads left over to make it glow. Meanwhile, the global situation is arguably the most dangerous since the Cuban missile crisis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine grinding on mercilessly and China contemplating following Moscow's example by making a grab for Taiwan.

The danger of nuclear war is as immediate as ever but it has faded from public discourse, which is why Jacobsen, now a journalist and author, felt driven to write her new book, Nuclear War: A Scenario.

“For decades, people were under the assumption that the nuclear threat ended when the Berlin Wall went down,” Jacobsen said, before suggesting another

reason the existential threat of nuclear weapons has been filtered out of mainstream discourse – it has been turned into a technical debate.

“ Nuclear weapons and the whole nomenclature around them have been so rarefied it’s been reserved as a subject for those in the know,” she said.

In her book, Jacobsen seeks to break through jargon and details in order to tell a terrifying story in a devastatingly straightforward way. The spoiler alert is that it doesn’t end well.

You want a commander-in-chief of sound mind, fully in control of his mental capacity, not volatile, not subject to anger
Annie Jacobsen

As the book promises on the cover, it presents a single scenario for a nuclear war, set in the present day. North Korea, perhaps convinced it is about to be attacked, launches a surprise missile strike against the US, leading Washington to respond with a salvo of 50 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). These are aimed at North Korea’s weapons sites and command centres, but in order to reach their intended targets the missiles have to fly over Russia, because they do not have the range to use any other route.

All too aware of the danger of miscalculation, the US president tries to get hold of his Russian counterpart. But the two men and the countries they run are not getting on, and he fails. Making things even worse, Russia’s dodgy satellite early warning system, Tundra, has exaggerated the scale of the US salvo, and from his Siberian bunker, the Russian president (Vladimir Putin in all but name) orders an all-out nuclear attack on the US.

The scenario is based on known facts concerning the world’s nuclear arsenals, systems and doctrine. Those facts are all in the public domain, but Jacobsen believes society has tuned them out, despite (or perhaps because of) how shocking they are.

Jacobsen was stunned to find out that an ICBM strike against North Korea would have to go over Russia, and that Russia’s early warning system is beset with glitches, an especially worrying fact when combined with the knowledge that both the US and Russia have part of their nuclear arsenals ready to launch at a few minutes’ notice. Both also have an option in their nuclear doctrine to “launch on warning”, without waiting for the first incoming warhead to land.



Donald Trump meets Kim Jong-un, in Singapore in June 2018. Photograph: Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

A US president would have a few minutes to make a decision if American early warning systems signaled an incoming attack. In those few minutes, he or she would have to process an urgent, complex and inevitably incomplete stream of information and advice from top defence officials. Jacobsen points out that in such circumstances the president is likely to be subject to “jamming”, a chorus of military voices urging he or she follows protocols which lead inexorably towards a retaliatory launch.

“My jaw dropped at so much of what I learned, which was not classified but had just been removed or rather sanitised from the public discourse,” she said. “I found myself constantly surprised by the insanity of what I learned, coupled with the fact that it’s all there for the public to know.”

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Ultimately, only presidents can make the decision and once it is made, no one has the authority to block it. It is called sole authority, and it is almost certainly the

most frightening fact in the world today. It means a handful of men each have the power to end the world in a few minutes, without having to consult anyone.



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It is not a group anyone would choose to have that responsibility, including as it does the likes of Putin and Kim Jong-un. In Washington it is a choice this year between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. They all bring a lot of human frailty, anger, fear and paranoia to a potential decision that could end the planet.

“You would want to have a commander-in-chief who is of sound mind, who is fully in control of his mental capacity, who is not volatile, who is not subject to anger,” Jacobsen said, referring to this year’s presidential election.

“These are significant character qualities that should be thought about when people vote for president, for the simple reason that the president has sole authority to launch nuclear weapons.”

- *Nuclear War: A Scenario is published in the US by Dutton*