



Nuclear War: A Scenario Annie Jacobsen, pp. 373, London: Penguin Random House, 2024, ISBN 978-059-34-7609-3, \$30.00 or £23.24 or EUR27.68 (hardcover).

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The background to Annie Jacobsen’s 2024 fictionalised account of Armageddon, *Nuclear War: A Scenario*, is North Korea’s development, with Russian help, of nuclear weapons as a means of deterring an attack on the Hermit Kingdom. In its 5 March 2025 edition, the British broadsheet *The Daily Telegraph* reviewed North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme, concluding that “North Korea could have more [nuclear] weapons than the UK by 2035” (Ryall, 2025). According to the *Telegraph*, in a decade’s time

North Korea could have as many as 300 warheads as against Britain's 225. During a January 2025 visit to a North Korean enrichment facility, Kim Jong-Un told his scientists to speed production of fissile material (Ryall, 2025). The fact that North Korea is investing in nuclear weapons at a time of pronounced global instability where, largely because of Donald Trump's reorientation of US foreign policy, the post-Second World War geopolitical settlement is crumbling, does not augur well for world peace. The *cliché* pouring gasoline on a fire comes to mind.

Annie Jacobsen's book is simultaneously a linear account of a nuclear decapitation strike on the United States, a historical account of the development of fission and fusion weapons and the doctrines that inform their development, deployment and use and a scientific account of the consequences for life on earth of a global thermonuclear war. The artifice of admixing factual information with the imagined decapitation strike – a seventy-two-minute event whose key moments are described by Jacobsen in numerous discrete, short chapters – produces a narrative that is informative and gripping. The reviewer found it hard to put the book down. The fact that it takes Jacobsen three hundred pages to describe a seventy--two-minute event is a testament to the granularity and completeness of the author's dissection of thermonuclear Armageddon. While other books succeed in capturing the facts and tragedy of thermonuclear war – books such as Young's (2019) *Nuclear War in the UK* and McDowall's (2023) *Attack Warning Red! How Britain Prepared for Nuclear War* – only Jacobsen's account can trap the reader into learning about the end of us in one sitting. *Forbes's* (cited in Penguin, 2025) description of the book as "A stomach-clenching, multi-perspective, ticking-clock geopolitical thriller" is merited.

Jacobsen's account of North Korea's thermonuclear assault on the United States is enriched by her psychological study of the protagonists'

interactions and fate. Her descriptions of the tension between the US military and the President (the commander-in-chief) as it implores him to strike at North Korea (p. 155) and of the President lying bleeding and helpless in a forest after parachuting from a stricken Marine One (p. 211) are instructive and affecting. The President dies, alone and afraid, avoiding what is to come.

Following the book's publication, Jacobsen reflected on the pressures inherent in the nuclear launch decision process and on the psychological qualities needed to manage those pressures. Mindful of the imminent 2024 presidential election, Jacobsen (cited in Borger, 2024) observed: "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. 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." Would Donald Trump meet Jacobsen's nuclear decision-making competency standard? Former National Security Advisor John Bolton's (2020) insider account of Trump's first term and Lee's (2017) analysis of Trump's capacities suggest he might struggle to meet the standard.

In accordance with the US nuclear warfighting doctrine of "restoring deterrence" (p. 194), eighty-two thermonuclear warheads are launched toward the Hermit Kingdom. Not unexpectedly, the Russians, whose early-warning satellites lack the finesse of America's early-warning satellites, assume that the US has launched a decapitation strike against Russia. Russia launches against the US. Armageddon ensues. In her discourse on the fallibility of Russia's early-warning satellites, Jacobsen thoughtfully mentions the 1983 nuclear war near-miss when sunlight reflected off high-altitude clouds so confused a Russian early-warning satellite that it broadcast an attack warning (Bennett, 2022).

There is a devastating irony at the heart of Jacobsen's scenario: Armageddon is ushered in by a limited nuclear strike. North Korea succeeded in detonating just two devices over United States territory. One destroys the Diablo Canyon, California nuclear power plant, the other the seat of government. A third device malfunctions. Unsure as to how many missiles North Korea intends to launch, the Americans, in accordance with the doctrine of restoring deterrence, responded by launching eighty-two warheads against North Korea's nuclear weapons command, control and launch infrastructure.

Jacobsen reveals that while Russia forewarns the United States of missile tests, North Korea does not (p. 37). With reference to Reason's (1990, 2016) work on vulnerability, this is a latent error – an accident or, in this case, nuclear maelström waiting to happen.

The book has some weaknesses, the most conspicuous and irritating being Jacobsen's habit of repeating the same facts about the destructive power of thermonuclear weapons. Once the facts are established, repetition serves no purpose other than to waste words that could be invested in the narrative.

To summarise, Jacobsen presents a plausible account of how a global thermonuclear war might commence. The book is a treasure-store of information on the technologies and bureaucratic mechanisms of thermonuclear war and a useful guide to the nature and consequences of a nuclear winter (see Part V: The next 24 months and beyond at pp. 279-297) – the end-of-life-on-earth phenomenon identified by Carl Sagan (1984) and his colleagues at the height of the Cold War.

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Regards,