



Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety

By Eric Schlosser

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The documentary *Command and Control*, directed by Robert Kenner, finds its origins in Eric Schlosser's book and continues to explore the little-known history of the management and safety concerns of America's nuclear arsenal.

The documentary will air on PBS's *American Experience* on January 10th.

A myth-shattering exposé of America's nuclear weapons

Famed investigative journalist Eric Schlosser digs deep to uncover secrets about the management of America's nuclear arsenal. A groundbreaking account of accidents, near misses, extraordinary heroism, and technological breakthroughs, *Command and Control* explores the dilemma that has existed since the dawn of the nuclear age: How do you deploy weapons of mass destruction without being destroyed by them? That question has never been resolved—and Schlosser reveals how the combination of human fallibility and technological complexity still poses a grave risk to mankind. While the harms of global warming increasingly dominate the news, the equally dangerous yet more immediate threat of nuclear weapons has been largely forgotten.

Written with the vibrancy of a first-rate thriller, *Command and Control* interweaves the minute-by-minute story of an accident at a nuclear missile silo in rural Arkansas with a historical narrative that spans more than fifty years. It depicts the urgent effort by American scientists, policy makers, and military officers to ensure that nuclear weapons can't be stolen, sabotaged, used without permission, or detonated inadvertently. Schlosser also looks at the Cold War from a new perspective, offering history from the ground up, telling the stories of bomber pilots, missile commanders, maintenance crews, and other ordinary servicemen who risked their lives to avert a nuclear holocaust. At the heart of the book lies the struggle, amid the rolling hills and small farms of Damascus, Arkansas, to prevent the explosion of a ballistic missile carrying the most powerful nuclear warhead ever built by the United States.

Drawing on recently declassified documents and interviews with people who designed and routinely handled nuclear weapons, *Command and Control* takes readers into a terrifying but fascinating world that, until now, has been largely hidden from view. Through the details of a single accident, Schlosser illustrates how an unlikely event can become unavoidable, how small risks can have terrible consequences, and how the most brilliant minds in the nation can only provide us with an illusion of control. Audacious, gripping, and unforgettable, *Command and Control* is a tour de force of investigative journalism, an eye-opening look at the dangers of America's nuclear age.

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Editorial Review

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Nuclear bombs must be handled with the proper care, yet that is not always the case. Mentioning harrowing mishaps in the history of the American atomic arsenal, Schlosser singles out one for detailed dramatization, the explosion in 1980 of a Titan II missile. Some airmen were killed and injured, but since the warhead didn't detonate, the safety system appeared to have worked. Color Schlosser skeptical, for, as he recounts this accident, which began with a mundane incident—a dropped tool that punctured the missile—he delves into nuclear weapon designs. Those are influenced by the requirement that the bomb must always detonate when desired and never when not. Citing experts in the technology of nuclear weaponry who have pondered the “never” part of the requirement, Schlosser highlights their worry about an accidental nuclear explosion. Underscored by cases of dropped, burned, and lost bombs, the problem of designing a safe but reliable bomb persists (see also *The Bomb*, 2009, by weapons engineer Stephen Younger). Well researched, reported, and written, this contribution to the nuclear-weapons literature demonstrates the versatility of Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation* (2001). --Gilbert Taylor

Review

[Los Angeles Times](#)

“Deeply reported, deeply frightening... a techno-thriller of the first order.”

[The New Yorker](#)

“An excellent journalistic investigation of the efforts made since the first atomic bomb was exploded, outside Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945, to put some kind of harness on nuclear weaponry. By a miracle of information management, Schlosser has synthesized a huge archive of material, including government reports, scientific papers, and a substantial historical and polemical literature on nukes, and transformed it into a crisp narrative covering more than fifty years of scientific and political change. And he has interwoven that narrative with a hair-raising, minute-by-minute account of an accident at a Titan II missile silo in Arkansas, in 1980, which he renders in the manner of a techno-thriller... *Command and Control* is how nonfiction should be written.” (Louis Menand)

[Time magazine](#)

“A devastatingly lucid and detailed new history of nuclear weapons in the U.S. ... fascinating.” (Lev Grossman)

[Financial Times](#)

“*Command and Control* ranks among the most nightmarish books written in recent years; and in that crowded company it bids fair to stand at the summit. It is the more horrific for being so incontrovertibly right and so damnably readable. Page after relentless page, it drives the vision of a world trembling on the edge of a fatal precipice deep into your reluctant mind... a work with the multilayered density of an ambitiously conceived novel... Schlosser has done what journalism does at its best when at full stretch: he has spent time – years – researching, interviewing, understanding and reflecting to give us a piece of work of the deepest import.”

[The Guardian](#)

“The strength of Schlosser's writing derives from his ability to carry a wealth of startling detail (did you know that security at Titan II missile bases was so lapse you could break into one with just a credit

card?) on a confident narrative path."

San Francisco Chronicle

"**Perilous and gripping...** Schlosser skillfully weaves together an engrossing account of both the science and the politics of nuclear weapons safety... The story of the missile silo accident **unfolds with the pacing, thrill and techno details of an episode of 24.**"

New York Times Book Review:

"**Disquieting but riveting... fascinating...** Schlosser's readers (and he deserves a great many) will be struck by how frequently the people he cites attribute the absence of accidental explosions and nuclear war to divine intervention or sheer luck rather than to human wisdom and skill. Whatever was responsible, we will clearly need many more of it in the years to come."

Mother Jones:

"**Easily the most unsettling work of nonfiction I've ever read,** Schlosser's six-year investigation of America's 'broken arrows' (nuclear weapons mishaps) is by and large historical—this stuff is top secret, after all—but **the book is beyond relevant. It's critical reading in a nation with thousands of nukes still on hair-trigger alert...** *Command and Control* reads like a character-driven thriller as Schlosser draws on his deep reporting, extensive interviews, and documents obtained via the Freedom of Information Act to demonstrate how human error, computer glitches, dilution of authority, poor communications, occasional incompetence, and the routine hoarding of crucial information have nearly brought about our worst nightmare on numerous occasions."

Vanity Fair:

"Eric Schlosser detonates a truth bomb in *Command and Control*, a powerful exposé about America's nuclear weapons."

Publishers Weekly (starred):

"**Nail-biting... thrilling... Mixing expert commentary with hair-raising details of a variety of mishaps,** [Eric Schlosser] makes the convincing case that our best control systems are no match for human error, bad luck, and ever-increasing technological complexity."

Kirkus Reviews (starred):

"**Vivid and unsettling...** An exhaustive, **unnerving** examination of the illusory safety of atomic arms."

Lee H. Hamilton, former U.S. Representative; Co-Chair, Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future; Director, the Center on Congress at Indiana University:

"The lesson of this powerful and disturbing book is that the world's nuclear arsenals are not as safe as they should be. We should take no comfort in our skill and good fortune in preventing a nuclear catastrophe, but urgently extend our maximum effort to assure that a nuclear weapon does not go off by accident, mistake, or miscalculation."

About the Author

Eric Schlosser is the author of *The New York Times* bestsellers *Fast Food Nation* and *Reefer Madness*. His work has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Rolling Stone*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Nation*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Roberta Petty:

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William Todaro:

Exactly why? Because this Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety is an unordinary book that the inside of the guide waiting for you to snap the idea but latter it will surprise you with the secret the item inside. Reading this book alongside it was fantastic author who else write the book in such incredible way makes the content inside of easier to understand, entertaining means but still convey the meaning entirely. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this ever again or you going to regret it. This unique book will give you a lot of benefits than the other book have such as help improving your proficiency and your critical thinking method. So , still want to delay having that book? If I ended up you I will go to the publication store hurriedly.

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