

What Winning at All Costs Means When the White House Is the Prize

“The way to deter aggression ... is to be willing and able to respond vigorously at places and with means of our own choosing.” On Oct. 12, 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles based Washington’s relationship with Moscow on our massive nuclear arsenal and the ability to nuke Russia until it glowed. That lasted until 1969 when the Soviet Union achieved nuclear parity. For the next 22 years, until the USSR fell in 1991, the threat of mutual assured destruction dominated the relationship between the world’s two superpowers. Today’s world is arguably far more perilous.

During the presidential election of 1960, Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy excoriated the Eisenhower administration for allowing a supposed “missile gap” favoring the Soviet Union. If Republican candidate Vice President Richard Nixon knew Kennedy was wrong, he remained silent. President Eisenhower, however, knew any strategic weapons gap favored the United States because the U.S. possessed overwhelming nuclear superiority. His certainty relied on highly classified satellite reconnaissance, its quality classified above Top Secret. Eisenhower and Nixon put national security above partisan politics. Nixon lost.

Not so in 2016. On Oct. 14, in a television interview, Vice President Joe Biden stated, “We’re sending a message. We have the capacity to do it. It will be at the time of our choosing and under circumstances that will have the greatest impact.” He was referring to a supposedly forthcoming cyber-attack on Russia retaliating for Moscow’s hacking into the Democratic Party’s computers.

On Oct. 19, during the third and last presidential debate, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, referring to launching the nuclear force, stated, "There's about four minutes between the order being given and the people who launch the nuclear weapons to do so."

I don't know if that's true. From 1971 until 1975, I was an intelligence officer in the Warning Center at Headquarters, Strategic Air Command. The particulars of our nuclear deterrent and how it operated were classified beyond Top Secret, especially information concerning command and control involved with launching the force. I can only assume that someone whose "vast experience in public service" includes eight years residing in the White House, serving as a U.S. senator, and then spending four years as secretary of state, might know how long it takes to launch a nuclear strike. One also should assume it is imperative that our enemies, especially Russia possessing nuclear capabilities approximating or exceeding ours, *not* know that.

Why? How long would it take for sea-launched ballistic missiles launched from just one Russian submarine lurking a couple hundred miles off the Atlantic coast to reach Washington and other cities from New York to Miami? How long would it take those missiles to reach air and naval bases from Bangor, Maine to Barksdale, Louisiana, installations integral to America's nuclear deterrent? I have a good idea but I'm not sharing because I want to die of old age, in bed at home and not in a jail cell at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

It's not a case of "ol' Joe just being Joe" or "all's fair in politics," mainly because all is not fair when it involves national security. As for Biden's threat, eerily mirroring words spoken by Secretary Dulles 62 years ago, warfare in 2016 is vastly different from 1954. The next world war, if it occurs, will probably involve major cyber-attacks. The current list of cyber-war actors includes nation-states, rogue nations North Korea and Iran, Islamist terrorists groups, and talented

individual hackers, some mentally unstable and others manifesting personal grudges. If, indeed, Russia experiences a cyber-attack approximating "the greatest impact," Putin will face enormous political pressure from hardliners pointing to Biden boasting, "We have the capacity to do so," as reason to retaliate against the United States.

The "greatest impact" of a cyber-attack far exceeds revealing tantalizing tidbits of political chicanery. Imagine most if not all of a modern nation-state's power grid shut down. Society collapses quickly if food doesn't get to market because fuel can't be pumped to transports. Medical supplies do not reach hospitals and local pharmacies. Computers in gas stations, banks, supermarkets shut down; so do transactions. Police cannot respond because their radios and computers are down; without fuel their cruisers are useless. In a few weeks, millions perish. Those who are sick die first followed by the elderly, then the children, and almost everyone else. Civilization reverts to a primeval state. The world dies with a whimper rather than a bang.

Biden's remarks were foolish, as were Clinton's if hers merely were "off the cuff" and untrue. If accurate, Clinton's remarks are criminal, possibly treasonous. But then what difference does it make? We decide that on Nov. 8. {eo}

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