

## TALES OF THE MISSING NUCLEAR LAUNCH CODES: AND OTHER SCARY TALES OF THE “NUCLEAR FOOTBALL”



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### THE STORY OF THE FOOTBALL AND THE BISCUIT

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*Lieutenant Commander Woody Lee stands in Red Square with ‘The Football,’ a briefcase containing codes needed by the president to launch a nuclear attack, attached to his wrist as President Reagan toured the square with Mikhail Gorbachev in 1988.*

In the spring of 1988, President Ronald Reagan made a historic trip to Moscow to meet with General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev to finalize the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which had just been ratified by the Senate.

The iconic photo of the occasion was not the Reagan-Gorbachev signing ceremony at the Grand Kremlin Palace at the end of the summit. It was the one of Reagan reaching out to shake the hand of a young Russian boy as the two heads of state walked through Red Square. The photo betrayed a note of irony: Just as the leaders of the two countries were embarking on a historic nuclear agreement, a military aide who was just feet behind the president was prepared to end it and had the equipment with him to do so.

The aide-de-camp had at his feet what is commonly referred to as the “nuclear football,” a leather briefcase with a sturdy aluminum frame — the ultimate power accessory, which could initiate global destruction. Officially known as the “president’s emergency satchel,” the contents are to be used by the president to authorize a nuclear attack while away from fixed command centers, such as the White House Situation Room or the Pentagon.

It may have seemed audacious to have at the ready the device that could launch a nuclear strike on a country from its very soil, but Gorbachev was also accompanied by a military aide who was clutching a very similar device, known in Russia as the *chemodanchik*, or “little briefcase.” It became the most literal example of deterrence by mutually assured destruction in history.

The nuclear football came into active service after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis when President John F. Kennedy worried how the Pentagon and nuclear launch officers would be sure that it was the president ordering a strike. Declassified documents reveal his concerns: “What would I say to the Joint War Room to launch an immediate nuclear strike?” Kennedy asked. “How would the person who received my instructions verify them?”

The football got its name, according to former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, because it was part of an early nuclear war plan code-named Operation Drop Kick.

The football, which has always been manufactured for the White House by Zero Halliburton, the Utah firm that also supplied aluminum briefcases to Hollywood, does not contain a big red button for launching a nuclear war, contrary to popular belief. Its primary purpose is to confirm the president's identity, and it allows him to communicate with the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon, which monitors worldwide nuclear threats and can order an instant response.



**THE "FOOTBALL"**

The nuclear football allows the President to authorize a nuclear attack while away from fixed command centers, such as the White House Situation Room.

The football also provides the commander-in-chief with a simplified menu of nuclear strike options. There are four things in the football: The Black Book containing the retaliatory options, a book listing classified site locations, a manila folder with eight or ten pages stapled together describing procedures for the Emergency Alert System, and a three-by-five-inch card with authentication codes. The Black Book was about nine by 12 inches and had 75 loose-leaf pages printed in black and red. The book with classified site locations was about the same size as the Black Book and was also black. It contained information on sites around the country where the president could be taken in an emergency.

The first declassified reference to the existence of the football is contained in a formerly top-secret memorandum from 1965 obtained by the National Security Archive of George Washington University. Tasked with reducing the weight of the football, a senior defense official agreed this was a worthy goal, but added, "I am sure we can find strong couriers who are capable of carrying an additional pound or two of paper."

That may have been true, but a recurring complaint of presidents and military aides alike has been that the football, which currently weighs around 45 pounds, contains too much documentation.



*A U.S. Navy military aide carries the president's "emergency satchel" toward Air Force One ahead of President Donald Trump's first overseas trip on Friday, May 19, 2017*

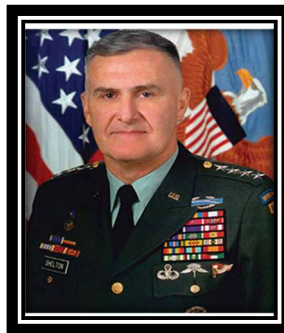
President Jimmy Carter, who had qualified as a nuclear submarine commander, was aware that he would have only a few minutes to decide how to respond to a nuclear strike against the United States. **Carter ordered that the war plans be drastically simplified.**

But for as much as the football contains, it won't work without "the biscuit" – a credit-card-sized piece of plastic containing the codes the president needs to order the launch of nuclear weapons.

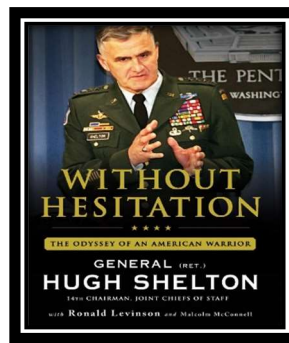
**The president is supposed to carry the biscuit at all times, but that's been a bit of a challenge for some presidents in the decades since instituting that system.**

**In Washington circles, it's been an open secret that Jimmy Carter inadvertently lost his when a suit was sent to the dry cleaners.** Officials would never confirm nor deny those claims.

An even closer brush with disaster came during the attempted assassination of Reagan in March 1981. During the chaos that followed the shooting, the military aide was separated from the president and did not accompany him to the George Washington University hospital. In preparation for surgery, Reagan was stripped of his clothing and other possessions, including the biscuit. **It was later found dumped in a plastic bag at the hospital.**



*General Hugh Shelton was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time. He served as Chairman from October 1, 1997 until Sep 30, 2001*



**Worse was to happen under Bill Clinton's presidency when,** according to General Hugh Shelton, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, **"the codes were missing for months." Shelton wrote in his memoir Without Hesitation: "That's a big deal – a gargantuan deal."**

**The General's book was the first time that saga was revealed after the Clinton administration somehow managed to keep the farce out of the press.**

He added: "You do whatever you can and think you have an infallible system, but somehow someone always seems to find a way to screw it up."



*Bill Clinton and his staff were responsible for the security gaffe.*

One of Clinton's former military aides, Lt. Col. Robert "Buzz" Patterson, recalled that the morning after the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal broke, he asked the president for the card so that he could supply an updated version. The president couldn't find it.

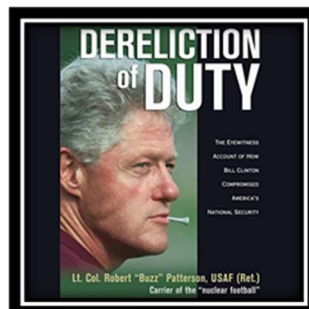
"He thought he just placed them upstairs," Patterson wrote in his book, Dereliction of Duty: Eyewitness Account of How Bill Clinton Compromised America's National Security. "In my experience, nuclear launch codes are usually in the last place you saw them. We called upstairs, we started a search around the White House for the codes, and he finally confessed that he misplaced them. He couldn't recall when he had last seen them."

That kind of occupational stress is truly unmatched.



*Lt/Col Robert "Buzz" Patterson*

Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Robert "Buzz" Patterson was one of the military aides to commander-in-chief William Jefferson Clinton. What Patterson saw shocked him - and finally led him to write this stunning book. It is a warning of just what harm an irresponsible president can do to our national security - harm that, Patterson shows, made the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, almost inevitable.



*Lieutenant Colonel Robert "Buzz" Patterson, United States Air Force (Retired), is the author of New York Times best sellers, Dereliction of Duty: The Eyewitness Account of How Bill Clinton Compromised America's National Security and Reckless Disregard.*

“You’re always kind of on edge,” *Patterson said of carrying Clinton’s football.* “I opened it up constantly just to refresh myself, to always be aware of what was in it, all the potential decisions the president could make.”

And that’s why aides who carry the nuclear football have extensive psychological evaluations to assess whether they’re up to the task. Peter Metzger, a former marine who was one of five military aides charged with carrying the nuclear football for Reagan, said that he underwent extensive vetting by the Defense Department, the Secret Service, and the FBI before he was given the job.

“The result of a decision the president would make is so grotesquely horrible — it would change the face of the earth, it would change humanity, it would change mankind,” he said. “I guess when you’re on duty, you try not to think of the import of that. But you are fully prepared to do so if you have to.”

JFK recognized that after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis when he realized how dangerously close the world came to nuclear war, remarking, *“It is insane that two men, sitting on opposite sides of the world, should be able to decide to bring an end to civilization.”*

*Yet, there is no psychological evaluation for presidents to have the nuclear codes.*

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