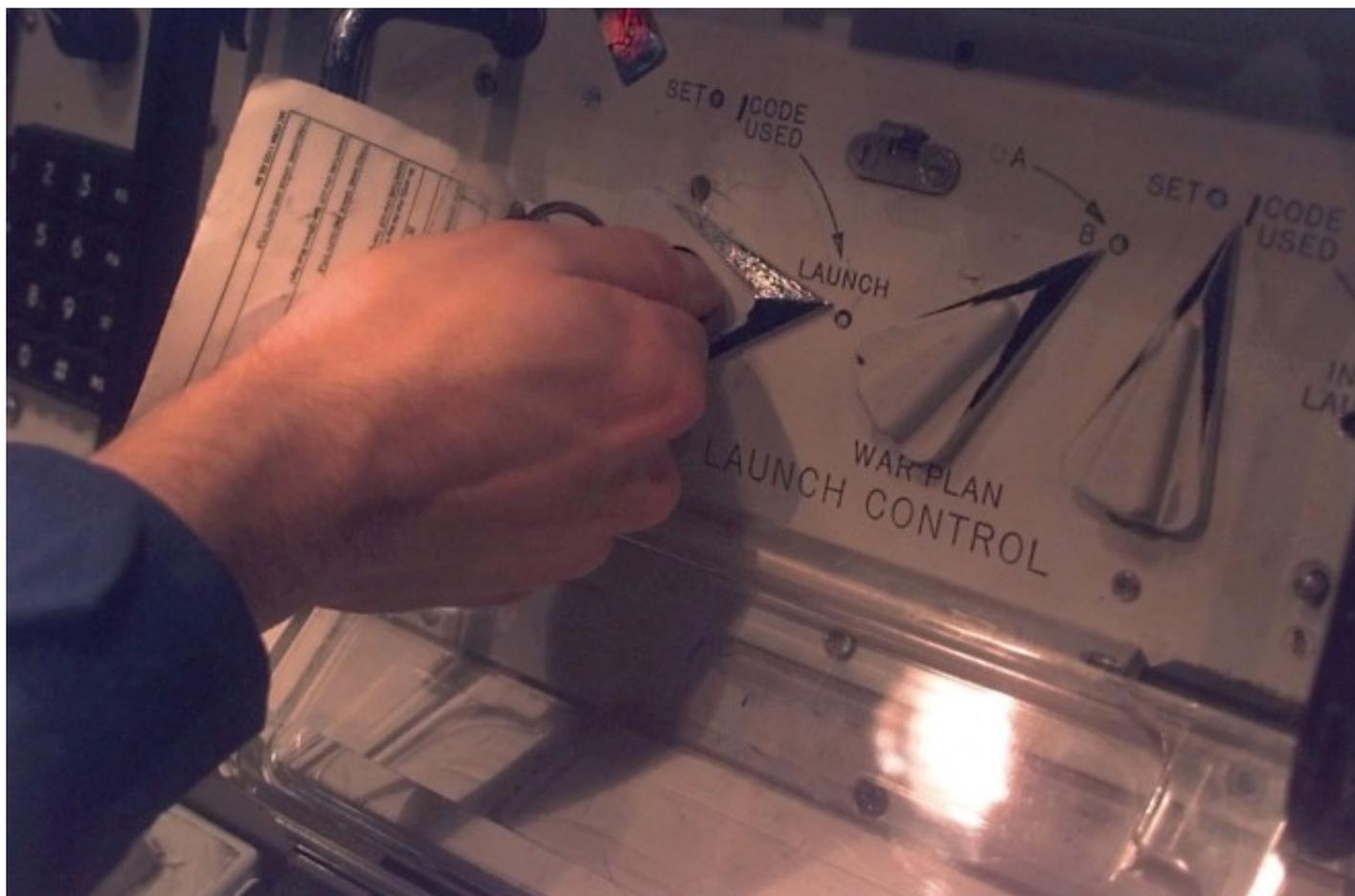


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Communication With 50 Nuke Missiles Dropped in ICBM Snafu

By [Noah Shachtman](#)   October 26, 2010 | 5:15 pm | Categories: [Nukes](#)

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The Air Force swears there was no panic. But for three-quarters of an hour Saturday morning, launch control officers at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming couldn't reliably communicate or monitor the status of 50 Minuteman III nuclear missiles. Gulp.

Backup security and communications systems, located elsewhere on the base, allowed the intercontinental ballistic missiles to be continually monitored. But the outage is considered serious enough that the very highest rungs on the chain of command — including the President — are being briefed on the incident today.

A single hardware failure appears to have been the root cause of the disruption, which snarled communications on the network that links the five launch control centers and 50 silos of the [319th Missile Squadron](#). Multiple error codes were reported, including “[launch facility down](#).”

It was a “significant disruption of service,” an Air Force official familiar with the incident tells Danger Room. But not unprecedented: “Something similar happened before at other missile fields.”

A disruption of this magnitude, however, is considered an anomaly of anomalies.

“Over the course of 300 alerts — those are 24-hour shifts in the capsule — I saw this happen to three or four missiles, maybe,” says John Noonan, a former U.S. Air Force missile launch officer who first [tweeted word of the issue](#). “This is 50 ICBMs dropping off at once. I never heard of anything like it.”

“There are plans and procedures available to deal with individual broken missiles,” Noonan adds, “but they are wholly inadequate to handle an entire squadron of missiles dropping offline.”

The incident comes at a particularly tricky time for the Obama administration, which is struggling to get the Senate to ratify a nuclear arms reduction treaty with Russia. In conservative political circles, there’s a distrust of the nuclear cuts — and a demand that they be matched with [investments in atomic weapon upgrades](#). Saturday’s shutdown will undoubtedly bolster that view.

The disruption is also dark news for the Air Force, which has been hustling to restore the “[zero defects](#)” culture that was the [hallmark of its nuclear forces](#) during the Cold War.

After a series of mishaps — including nosecone fuses mistakenly sent to Taiwan, and [warheads temporarily MIA](#) — the Air Force has made restoring confidence in its nuclear enterprise a top priority. Officers have been fired and [disciplined for nuclear lapses](#). The Air Force’s top general and civilian chief [have been replaced](#). A new Global Strike Command has been put in place, to oversee all nuclear weapons. Nuclear Surety Inspections, once relatively lax, have become [pressure cookers](#). These days, a few misfiled papers or a few out-of-place troops means the entire wing [flunks the NSI](#).

“Any anecdotal exposure of a weakness ... could result in an [unsafe, unsure, unsecure or unreliable nuclear weapon system](#),” Maj. Gen. Don Alston, who oversees the Air Force’s entire ICBM arsenal, told Danger Room last year. “And I am not encouraged when people can rationalize: ‘but for that mistake, we were, y’know, kicking ass.’ Well, but for that mistake, you would have passed. But you didn’t. You failed. Tough business. And it needs to stay that way.”

Yet the Air Force official claims there was “no angst” about Saturday’s incident.

“Every crew member and every maintainer seemed to follow their checklists and procedures in order to establish normal communications,” the official says. “I haven’t detected anyone being particularly upset with what happened.”

Photo: DoD

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