

# Dozens of House Democrats Call on Biden to Give Up Sole Nuclear Launch Authority



A U.S. military aide carries the “President’s emergency satchel,” also known as “the football,” with the nuclear launch codes, as President Trump walks to board Marine One, Jan. 12, 2021, in Washington. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert )

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Nearly three dozen House Democrats are urging President Joe Biden to relinquish his sole authority to order the launch of nuclear weapons, arguing that no single person should wield apocalyptic military power.

“[V]esting one person with this authority entails real risks. Past presidents have threatened to attack other countries with nuclear weapons or exhibited behavior that causes other officials to express concerns about the president’s judgment,” according to the letter, which was spearheaded by California Reps. Jimmy Panetta and Ted Lieu.

The letter doesn't explicitly mention former President Donald Trump, but Democrats frequently questioned his mental state and composure during his time in the Oval Office. Trump often flouted the enormous power he had at his disposal, often making light of nuclear weapons and openly threatening to use them — one time saying his nuclear button was “much bigger” and “more powerful” than that of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

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Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi told Democrats two days after a pro-Trump mob assaulted the Capitol on Jan. 6 that she had spoken with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley about “preventing an unstable president” from launching nuclear weapons.

“The worry is not about Biden, but more about Trump or another future Trump-like president,” said Stephen Young, who advocates on the dangers of nuclear weapons for the Union of Concerned Scientists. “No one person should have this ability to kill tens or hundreds of millions in less than an hour. It is simply too much power.”

The lawmakers' letter argues that other officials, including the vice president and speaker of the House, should concur with a launch order before it can be issued.

“While any president would presumably consult with advisors before ordering a nuclear attack, there is no requirement to do so,” the letter states. “The military is obligated to carry out the order if they assess it is legal under the laws of war. Under the current posture of U.S. nuclear forces, that attack would happen in minutes.”

But giving up the ability to make a quick decision during an emergency could have grave security consequences, others say.

Both the president and vice president are always accompanied by a so-called “football,” which contains communications equipment needed to order a nuclear launch.

If an adversary were to launch a strike against the United States, the president would potentially have only minutes to make a decision and launch an attack —

raising concerns over any additional bureaucracy during a time of crisis.

John Robinson, a retired Army chief warrant officer 5 and a former targeting officer who helped plan the use of nuclear weapons at the combatant command level, said having a “nuclear football by committee” could be devastating

“How would that work?” he asked, saying such a change could mean that congressional leaders would need their own nuclear footballs. “You could have as little as 20 minutes’ heads up. If the North Koreans fired a weapon at the Japanese, we have a treaty obligation.”

The biggest worry, Robinson said, would be a potential constitutional crisis if multiple people must green-light a first or retaliatory strike.

“What if one of them disagrees? Is this a majority vote? Whether they’re right or wrong, you still have to wrestle with Article II, Section 2 [of the U.S. Constitution]. There’s nothing there that says anybody other than the commander in chief will have this level of responsibility.”

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