**Civics 101 Episode 64 - The Nuclear Codes**

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***[Virginia Prescott] Our guide for today is retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel James Weirick, host of the podcast Military Justice. James, welcome to Civics 101.***

[James Weirick] Thank you for having me.

***[VP] So let's start with the first part of the question what does it mean when we say the president has the nuclear codes?***

[JW] Well the president has both the codes and the authority to launch a nuclear strike. He carries with him or her what's known as the biscuit that is about the size of a credit card encased in another opaque credit card that you would have to snap off the outside layer to look at the inside. And that has what they call the gold codes and that allows the president to communicate with the military and ensure that that it is actually the president giving that order. The bag or briefcase that is carried by the military aid that follows the president around is called the football. And so the little case that the president I think most presidents keep them in their in their jacket. That's called the biscuit. It looks like a really a credit card encased in another credit card. There was a story that they thought President Reagan carried his in his sock because after the assassination attempt you know as he was rushed off to the hospital everything was taken off and somebody had slipped it into his sock. But he actually carried it in his jacket pocket.

***[VP] Biscuit just sounds like such an innocuous little thing for something that is potentially assuring mutual destruction.***

[JW] It sounds like some sort of British Sunday afternoon that they're going to go watch football and have a biscuit.

***[VP] But tell me about the football also. So somebody is always walking around with the president carrying that quote football?***

[JW] There's usually either a lieutenant colonel or commander or a mid senior mid-level officer of the military. There is one from each of the services and that person carries a Halliburton briefcase one of those hardened aluminum briefcase and they are always with in pretty much an arm's distance with the president and inside there. There's a satellite phone there's various plans in various nuclear strike options that the president could initiate.

***[VP] So only one person. I mean just at any given time one person can set off a nuclear strike.***

[JW] No we do have the two person rule and that also the secretary of defense would have to ensure that that order is coming from the president and that it is legit well that it is an order coming from the president. This all this all comes in to at least our modern way of doing this comes into being after the Cuban missile crisis and there was some question about whether or not the actual launch order was coming from the president. So now we're really just concerned about the identity of the person who is saying launch. That's what all of our all of our systems ensure.

***[VP] All right so walk us through the steps. Let's say the president says you know gets word that there has been a nuclear strike and it's time to retaliate. Pulls out the biscuit slash credit card puts in the code the secretary of defense does the same thing what happens next where does it go, and how many warheads are suddenly at his disposal?***

[JW] Well so you have if you had an ICBM launch an intercontinental ballistic missile from let's say Russia or China you have about 30 minutes before that strike hits in the United States if we're talking about a Russian sub off the East Coast you're down to about 10 to 15 minutes. So the president would break open his gold codes that the little credit card and then he would be in contact with the military command office and the military command office would issue a challenge code. You know like knock knock and then he say who's there, you know in there I believe they're usually a two letter challenge. You know so “A” “B”. And then he responds “CD” and then the same thing happens with the secretary of defense and then there's three options inside the football. It has a light medium and heavy package that the president could then order and that just means the number of warheads the number of targets and how we would respond to that first launch from an enemy.

***[VP] Wow. OK so that is in the case of a retaliatory strike but could a president order a nuclear strike without a precipitating event?***

[JW] A president definitely could. It would not be as time sensitive or it should not be as time sensitive in that there would be time for the National Security Council to meet and deliberated and at least give advice to the president. But in the end you know under under the Constitution Article 2 Section 2 Clause 1 the president is the commander in chief. So his orders go from the president to the secretary of defense to the regional combatant commanders. That that's really all it takes. Nobody has any veto power there.

***[VP] Have any presidents come close to using the code?***

[JW] There was a close call during the Carter administration in the middle of the country we have bases that monitor this. They received a message that there had been a very large strike by a Soviet Union. And it turns out that that was wrong. That was communicated to the secretary of defense. and it seems that we were about three minutes from telling the president at the time that happened but everyone figured out oh wait we were running a drill. The Soviets didn't really launch any missiles. Let's not wake up the president. So I believe that's the closest we've come post a Cuban missile crisis.

***[VP] So the potential for human error is huge here and end and I'm even thinking like the biscuit, I mean people have misplaced their wallets something like as small as a credit card. Have there ever been any kind of mishaps with the biscuit itself?***

[JW] Well I mentioned with President Reagan when he was shot and then it seems from my reading that most every president has been separated from it at one time or at one time or another. But no one else would be able to pick the biscuit up and use it. It would only be the president that would know which of the codes in line was the right one to read. So you couldn't have somebody else pick it up and then say oh hi I'm the president let's launch some missiles.

***[VP] So we know the protocols or I guess we do. But how about a potential president, I mean President Trump has shown himself to be rather thin skinned and somewhat reactive in his responses. Does he get trained for this? Is there a sort of protocol before handing the biscuit from one president to the next?***

I mean he would receive training on it. But in the end that is the office that is the president has that authority. And we had we had a case during the Nixon administration there was an Air Force Major herring and he was responsible for launching siloed nuclear missiles. And he said how can I know that in the order he receives to launch his missiles came from a sane president. He was questioning that. So this was during the Nixon administration and then major hearing was then asked to leave the Air Force. That that isn't really a question for the military. The propriety of the order isn't really up for debate. It's just the authenticity of the order.

***[VP] So this really is something I mean for most of the American Cold War history or let's say nuclear missile history it's been said that nuclear arms have been used mostly as a deterrent. Right. But now you have the possibility of one man really two men making the decision to put it pretty much put an end to life as we know it if we know the strength of a nuclear bomb. Should we feel assured by this?***

[JW] I think that we can feel as assured as we have over the past 60 years. I mean it may go back and forth a bit but that power has always been there. And I think it's up to the individual listener to determine what they think about the current administration. But I can only underline that that is why it is so important the person that we pick to be our Commander in Chief.