Carnegie Council Activity on Nuclear Complacency: The Officer's Dilemma (30-45 minutes)

Overview

In this 30-minute interactive simulation (with the ability to extend to 45 minutes), students step into the role of a military officer facing an apparent incoming nuclear strike and must decide whether to follow protocol or exhibit restraint. Through this dilemma, they grapple with uncertainty, moral responsibility, and the ethical pressures embedded in nuclear decision-making. By the end, students learn the scenario is based on a real 1983 event, prompting reflection on nuclear complacency, global security, and the enduring importance of international cooperation on humankind's most deadly weapon.

Learning Outcomes

- Students will gain an understanding of the current strategic nuclear environment.
- Students will engage in debate and discussion on nuclear weapons and weigh the individual, institutional, and international responsibility associated with deployment and diplomacy.
- Students will reflect on arms control and weapons reductions of the past and think critically about diplomatic and ethical solutions for a better, more stable future.

Carnegie Council principles that the lesson addresses:

- **The commitment to international cooperation** is a moral proposition because it goes to the essence of ethics—recognizing what is common for all, while managing the intrinsic and inevitable differences between and among people.
- **The defense of democracy in the U.S. and globally** requires confronting autocrats who discriminate based on ethnicity, gender, and religion, and who deny basic freedoms to their citizens.
- **Fidelity** means honesty, integrity, and a good-faith effort at serving the truth. Rhetoric certainly matters, and in an age of disinformation, leaders must fight against lies, willful deception, and deliberate misrepresentation of facts.
- **The humanitarian imperative** is the duty to save lives and alleviate suffering through humane and equal treatment. As violence and cruelty abound in conflict zones around the world, mounting effective humanitarian responses remains the essential moral imperative of our time.

Pre-Readings:

- *Nuclear Complacency*, Kathleen Egan & Joel Rosenthal, Carnegie Council, November 3, 2025 (10 min read)
- "Nuclear Ethics Revisited," Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Ethics & International Affairs*, April 25, 2023 (15 min read)
- Nuclear deterrence, Carnegie Council (Key Term)
- Background: Today, restraints that once kept nuclear dangers in check are weakening.
    - The bilateral agreements of the post-Cold War era have expired (New START) with little political will to renegotiate critical arms and testing limitation treaties.
    - Unlike the Cold War and post-Cold War era, it is a multipolar world with no treaties on how, when, and in what manner (if ever) these weapons should be used, stockpiled, or tested. Currently there are no bilateral or multilateral agreements with China (for example).
    - As alliances change, traditional commitments to extended deterrence appear less credible leading to non-nuclear states considering nuclear options.
    - Public attention to nuclear risk has faded, creating a dangerous sense of complacency.

Set-Up (5 minutes)

Divide students into five "Ethics Councils." Project the scenario on a PowerPoint slide. Ask one student to read the scenario aloud:

Scenario

Country A is in a tense standoff with rival state B. Relations are strained after Country B's recent missile tests and cyber intrusions into Country A's defense grid. It's past midnight. The duty officer in Country A's nuclear command center is monitoring the early-warning system when alarms suddenly blare: A missile appears to have been launched from Country B toward Country A. Protocol requires the officer to immediately report the alert triggering an automatic retaliatory strike. Communications are silent. Radar data is uncertain. The officer has only 10-15 minutes before the detection window closes and the system automatically assumes a strike is underway.

- If the officer reports and it's a false alarm, the world could descend into nuclear war.
- If the officer does not report and it's real, millions of Country A's residents could die.

What should the officer do?

Small-Group Deliberation (10 minutes)

In their five Ethics Councils, have students debate whether the officer should report or not report at all.

During the small-group deliberation, each group prepares:

- A one-minute summary of its position (report or do not report)
- A two-sentence justification for that choice

Council Debate & Vote (10 minutes)

Facilitator reconvenes the class as a Global Ethics Council.

Each group presents its stance; then a moderated discussion follows:

- Is risking national destruction more moral than risking global annihilation?
- In a situation this consequential, should an individual follow established orders or rely on one's own judgement?

After discussion, take a class vote:

1. Report immediately
2. Do not report

Reveal (5 minutes)

Facilitator announces:

- This was not a fictional story. On September 26, 1983, during the Cold War, a Soviet officer named Stanislav Petrov faced this exact scenario.
- The Soviet Union's early-warning system detected several incoming missile strikes from the United States. The Soviet military's protocol would have been to retaliate with a nuclear attack of its own.
- Petrov had to act quickly as U.S. missiles could reach the Soviet Union in just over 20 minutes.
- He chose not to report and dismissed it as a false alarm, breaking protocol and breaching his instructions. He was right. If he had referred it up, it is most likely the case that no one would have said anything against the report.
- He ended up being right. The alert was triggered by sunlight reflecting off clouds. His judgment likely prevented a full-scale nuclear war.

Sources:

"Stanislav Petrov: The man who may have saved the world," Pavel Aksenov, BBC, September 26, 2013
"Stanislav Petrov, 'The Man Who Saved The World,' Dies At 77," Greg Myre, NPR, September 18, 2017

Context - Then vs. Now:

Facilitator announces:

- At the height of the Cold War, the U.S. had ~ 30,000 nuclear warheads to the Soviet Union's 40,000—numbers driven by the strategy of deterrence, which was normalized as the doctrine of "mutual assured destruction."
- Despite these seemingly astronomical arsenals, arms control agreements like the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START) worked. These treaties managed to temper competition.
- Today's numbers: China has 500 nuclear weapons, with plans to reach 1,000 by 2030; the U.S. has about 3,700 nuclear weapons; and Russia has about 4,400.
- That's a very significant reduction from the height of the Cold War days. But we are walking away from that achievement.
- Since 1983, the nuclear context has shifted from the bipolar, high-stakes U.S.-Soviet standoff to a more fragmented and unpredictable landscape, where the urgency is defined by nuclear proliferation. Today's strategic nuclear environment is marked by the collapse of arms control, the weakening of extended deterrence, the advancements in technology, and the intersection of nuclear issues with global concerns like climate change.
- Facilitator asks for any thoughts about this and provides reflection discussion questions.

Concluding thoughts: Arms control and weapons reductions have been possible in the past. The impediments to a better, more stable future are not scientific and technical but rather political and ethical.

Facilitator closes discussion and provides reflection questions and further reading:

Reflection Questions for Homework:

(To extend the activity, these reflections can also be done in class)

- Petrov made the right call in that situation and is often referred to as "The Man Who Saved the World," but what does it mean that the world relies on one person's judgement? Could stronger global cooperation or communication prevent catastrophe?
- Today we have more nuclear-armed states, faster technology, and fewer arms control agreements. How has the issue evolved? Does that make you feel more secure, less secure, or simply disconnected from the issue?
- How could Country A redesign their command-and-control procedures to integrate more room for discussion and weighing of different options?

- If Petrov's moment happened now, with AI, cyberattacks, and global tensions, do you think the outcome would be the same? What's one factor you think makes the world safer today and one that makes it more dangerous?

Additional Resources:

- *A House of Dynamite*, Netflix, 2025 (2 hour watch)
- "Ethics on Film: Discussion of 'A House of Dynamite'," Kathleen Egan, Carnegie Council, October 24, 2025 (5 min read)
- "Just and Unjust Nuclear Deterrence," *Ethics & International Affairs,* Scott D. Sagan, April 25, 2023 (specifically the sections on the four changes since the Cold War) (20 min read)
- Nuclear Bomb Blast Simulator | Outrider, Accessed April 30, 2026 (Simulation)
- Global Nuclear Stockpiles, Ploughshares, August 31, 2023 (Interactive Map)