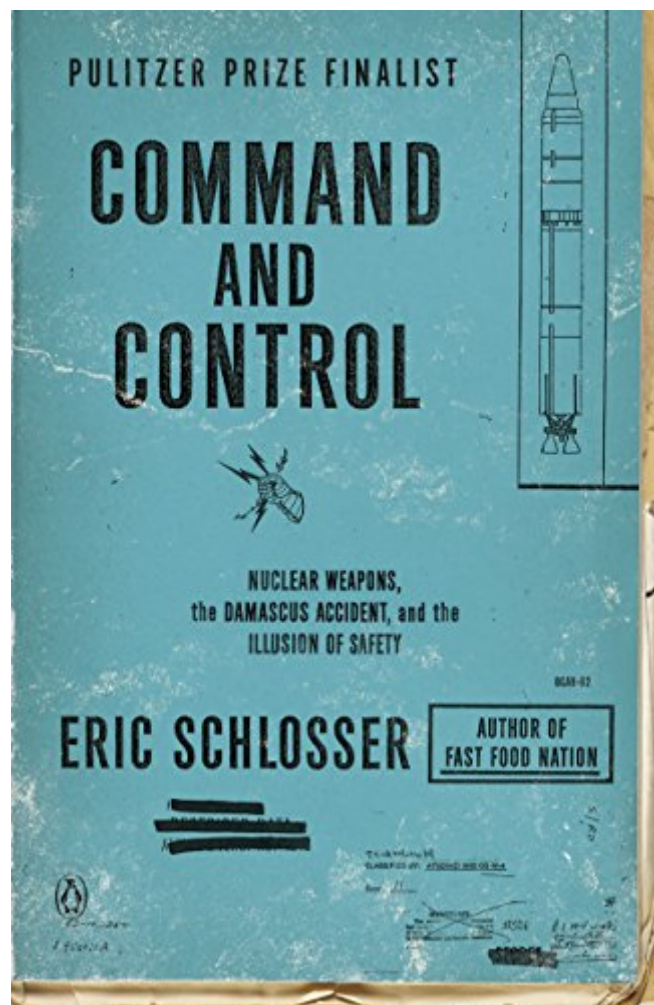




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# Command And Control: Nuclear Weapons, The Damascus Accident, And The Illusion Of Safety (Ala Notable Books For Adults)



## Synopsis

**\*\*The documentary** *Command and Control*, directed by Robert Kenner, finds its origins in Eric Schlosser's book and continues to explore the little-known history of the management and safety concerns of America's nuclear arsenal. **\*\*** The documentary will air on PBS's American Experience on January 10th. A myth-shattering exposé of America's nuclear weapons. Famed investigative journalist Eric Schlosser digs deep to uncover secrets about the management of America's nuclear arsenal. A groundbreaking account of accidents, near misses, extraordinary heroism, and technological breakthroughs, *Command and Control* explores the dilemma that has existed since the dawn of the nuclear age: How do you deploy weapons of mass destruction without being destroyed by them? That question has never been resolved and Schlosser reveals how the combination of human fallibility and technological complexity still poses a grave risk to mankind. While the harms of global warming increasingly dominate the news, the equally dangerous yet more immediate threat of nuclear weapons has been largely forgotten. Written with the vibrancy of a first-rate thriller, *Command and Control* interweaves the minute-by-minute story of an accident at a nuclear missile silo in rural Arkansas with a historical narrative that spans more than fifty years. It depicts the urgent effort by American scientists, policy makers, and military officers to ensure that nuclear weapons can't be stolen, sabotaged, used without permission, or detonated inadvertently. Schlosser also looks at the Cold War from a new perspective, offering history from the ground up, telling the stories of bomber pilots, missile commanders, maintenance crews, and other ordinary servicemen who risked their lives to avert a nuclear holocaust. At the heart of the book lies the struggle, amid the rolling hills and small farms of Damascus, Arkansas, to prevent the explosion of a ballistic missile carrying the most powerful nuclear warhead ever built by the United States. Drawing on recently declassified documents and interviews with people who designed and routinely handled nuclear weapons, *Command and Control* takes readers into a terrifying but fascinating world that, until now, has been largely hidden from view. Through the details of a single accident, Schlosser illustrates how an unlikely event can become unavoidable, how small risks can have terrible consequences, and how the most brilliant minds in the nation can only provide us with an illusion of control. Audacious, gripping, and unforgettable, *Command and Control* is a tour de force of investigative journalism, an eye-opening look at the dangers of America's nuclear age.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When Mr. Schlosser initially contacted me several years ago I was skeptical with respect to what his intentions were. Other stories and articles have been written about the incident at Damascus, AR. To many of us who experienced it on site that night it seemed there was no one who "got it right". To put to rest any concerns I had I contacted Al Childers after learning he had spoken to Mr. Schlosser. I have always had the highest regard for Al and his opinions; hence I participated in the project. After leaving Little Rock AFB we both were transferred to Vandenberg AFB and worked in the same building. I appreciate the integrity of Eric Schlosser who did what any good writer, or investigator, should do. He collected the facts and reported them, how refreshing is that in this era where so many run off and write, or report, half cocked. This entire book was researched in more detail than I ever imagined. Although I was there that night Mr. Schlosser reported things I didn't know simply because I didn't have the right or need. I have read several reviews in which the writers refer to the incident at Searcy, AR as being more serious. I would like to take this opportunity to simply say that while the loss of life is never to be taken lightly, the circumstances between these two accidents were as different as night and day. Sometimes it seems those writing the reviews forget that the

Titan II at Searcy was not on alert meaning it had no warhead. The Titan II at Damascus was on full alert and armed. Mr. Schlosser got it right and was not swayed by the loss of life vs. the reason for his book! Several of my fellow airmen who went back on site that night have passed away. I hope we, as a nation, never forget what they did that night while the nation slept, unaware of the risks those men were taking. I hope their families will have an even greater appreciation for what they did to try and save a resource as well as each other's lives. Finally thank you Eric Schlosser for getting it right and Chuck Wilson for the countless hours he spent with me fact checking. D. Green

Command and Control reads like a techno-thriller. Eric Schlosser takes the most destructive and scary nuclear accident in American history and uses it as a needle to thread a narrative about the sloppiness and inflexibility of America's nuclear weapons program that almost guaranteed that nuclear weapons accidents were fated to occur. That we haven't had a vast, deadly, nuclear weapons incident is due mainly to luck and God - and mostly to God according to some weapons analysts. The scariest incident occurred in 1980 when a Titan II missile exploded in its silo in Damascus, Arkansas (back when Bill Clinton was governor) and blew a live nuclear warhead over 200 yards into a ditch. He tells this story in detail through eyewitness accounts and good research and interrupts the story throughout the book with sections on nuclear weapons history, other incidents, and a superb explanation of American and Soviet nuclear strategies in the Cold War. Schlosser shows how ramshackle the atomic weapons program really was and how and why these weapons were eventually removed from civilian control under the Atomic Energy Commission and turned over to the military (and it's not because the military were more competent). He traces this history back from the 1940s right up to the Obama administration's lukewarm proposal to ban all nuclear weapons. He shows that we have come through some pretty tough stuff in atomic history and we are a little further from the brink - but we should be very afraid when we consider that India, Pakistan, China, and the other members of the nuclear club may have less ability or incentive to try and contain atomic weaponry as we finally learned to do. He doesn't preach or analyze. He is a brilliant reporter and has written a gripping and fascinating story. And it's all true.

Overall, a very informative book! As a former USAF member, and having worked (as a civilian) with a former member of Little Rock AFB (also a civilian when we worked together) who did missile maintenance at the time of the disaster, I thoroughly enjoyed the fascinating detail presented in this book. Mr. Schlosser is obviously a tenacious researcher, who works around all the road blocks the federal bureaucrats threw up to get the info needed for this book. Very impressive! The reason for

giving it 4 stars instead of 5 is the organization of the book. Interleaving the Titan disaster with the history of the nuclear program and other nuclear disasters made for a very disjointed reading experience. Just as I would mentally get comfortable with a theme, the gears would grind, there would be a lurch, and BAM!, the book would transport me 2 or 3 decades forward (or backward) from what I had just been reading. I bet I was half way through the book before I could make the time warp shifts without much pause to figure out where I was time wise. Maybe a calendar heading at the beginning of each chapter would have helped, such as "Jan 1950" or "Sept 1980". The book does an excellent job of documenting in super detail just how close this country has come to having accidental multi-megatonnage thermonuclear weapons blasts. After reading this book, I feel that one day a thermonuclear weapon will be accidentally discharged, even with the extra layers of safety that have been added over the decades. I will read this book again, to better absorb the information Mr. Schlosser so painstakingly researched and documented.

As a former Titan II Missile Facilities Technician, this was a page-turner for me. The author got it right in his descriptions of the attitudes and culture in the missile career field, the systems in use, even the music we listened to back then. It is rare for a military themed book written by a non-military writer to be so spot-on (IMO). The descriptions of some of the close calls we (we citizens) had with H-bombs are chilling, and the story about the Damascus Arkansas Titan II explosion was weaved in perfectly throughout the book. Time well spent.

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