

## Thinking Through the Minot Nuclear Incident

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The disclosure by Military Times that a B-52 bomber mistakenly was loaded with half a dozen nuclear-armed cruise missiles on a flight last month between North Dakota and Louisiana has triggered a flurry of news reports and caused many to ask how such an incident is even possible in a post-9/11 era. How can we hope to keep nuclear weapons out of the wrong hands if we're not always 100 percent certain about where our weapons are?

The Air Force has started an investigation but already assured people that there was never a threat to the public, that safety is paramount in every munitions activity, and that all evidence so far points to an isolated mistake.

But safety is only part of the issue, and Congressional oversight should not end there. An equally important question is how the mix-up of nuclear and unarmed cruise missiles on a bomber relates to strike planning. This flight was a domestic transport but imagine if the B-52 had been part of a strike in the opening phases of a war.

The Navy has proposed replacing some nuclear warheads on sea-launched ballistic missiles with conventional warheads, and co-deploying nuclear and conventional missiles on the same submarines. Congress already has raised concerns about that scenario, but try adding to that nuclear custodians who do not always know with 100 percent certainty which weapons are nuclear and which ones are not. That raises some profound questions about crisis stability and the risk of accidental nuclear war.

“Sorry, Mr. President, we thought they were conventional.”