INTRODUCTION

With the exception of the relatively few British nuclear weapons committed to the alliance the United States was the nuclear armourer of NATO. It supplied not only the bulk of nuclear weapons for the alliance but also all of the nuclear weapons intended for use by the NATO allies through bilateral nuclear-sharing agreements. Understanding the command and control of these weapons is consequently pivotal to understanding nuclear command and control in the NATO alliance as a whole.

This chapter attempts to provide this understanding. It is organised into five sections. The first looks at the political control of US nuclear forces focusing on the dominant role of the President. The second considers the strategic command and control apparatus which was in place to support his authority. The third discusses the connectivity between the National Command Authority (NCA) and US nuclear forces in Europe and looks at the only US strategic force permanently assigned to NATO, namely the ballistic missile submarines. The fourth looks in detail at the arrangements for the use of US theatre nuclear weapons in Europe by US forces. The fifth considers the command and control of US theatre nuclear forces in Europe which were at the disposal of bilateral NATO forces.

POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Under American constitutional law the command of US nuclear forces was explicitly placed in the hands of the US President:

Under existing law, the President alone has the basic authority to order the use of nuclear weapons. This authority, inherent in his constitutional role as Commander-in-Chief, may be delegated to subordinate officers in the chain of command virtually without
limitation . . . The President's authority to order the use of theater nuclear weapons in the event of a war involving NATO, while subject to certain procedural arrangements, is similarly unlimited.1

Although Presidential control over US nuclear weapons was formally absolute, in practice it was modified, to some degree, by the limitations of the President's role in US government and his relationship to the Legislative and Judicial branches of government,2 by the limitations of his role as Commander-in-Chief,3 and by his commitment to consultation with allies, each themselves subject to certain caveats.

Although the President had the sole authority and responsibility to order the use of nuclear weapons the control of nuclear weapons operations was exercised by the NCA which, according to the 1971 Department of Defense Directive 5100.30, consisted only of 'the President and the Secretary of Defense or their duly deputised alternates or successors'.4 The NCA could also be widened to include the most senior US military officer the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and possibly the other Joint Chiefs.5 The sharing of operational control – if not authority – enabled even this most senior level of decision-making to meet the 'two-person' rule which governs all US nuclear weapons activities. This rule stated that all decisions, procedures or processes involving nuclear weapons had to be carried out by at least two individuals, and was intended as a hedge against unauthorised or irrational action by anyone in the command chain.

The President exercised his authority over nuclear weapons through the possession of electronic codes which provided the authorisation to use nuclear weapons and the means to enable (i.e. allow to function) the weapons at his disposal. In the event that he needed to authorise the use of nuclear weapons the President would pass the codes – termed the Emergency Action Message (EAM) or 'go codes' – to subordinate commands for onward transmission to the nuclear forces.6

The EAM could be passed to selected forces for limited nuclear options or to all forces for general response. To provide the President with flexibility he was accompanied at all times, irrespective of his location, by a military aide (usually a warrant officer or equivalent) carrying a briefcase known as the 'football'.7 The football contained a 75 page black book detailing the SIOP nuclear options available to the President, the EAM codes, a list of the classified sites to which the President could be taken for safety in an emergency and a description of the procedures for the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS) by which the President would address the American nation.8