# Near misses with nuclear war highlight urgent need for disarmament reforms



The global community has faced multiple instances where accidental nuclear war nearly unfolded, with one of the most alarming episodes occurring in January 1995. On that occasion, a Norwegian rocket launch intended for scientific research on the Northern Lights was misinterpreted by Russian early-warning systems as a United States missile attack. This incident brought the world precariously close to nuclear conflict.

Despite the Norwegian government notifying Russian authorities in advance to prevent confusion, the warning failed to reach Russian military personnel. The early-warning alert escalated rapidly, eventually reaching Russian President Boris Yeltsin. At that critical moment, President Yeltsin accessed his ‘nuclear briefcase’, which holds the launch codes, preparing to initiate retaliatory measures. Simultaneously, submarine commanders were placed on high alert, prepared to execute a potential counter-strike. Fortunately, the absence of subsequent missile launches detected by satellites led to the conclusion that the alert was a false alarm.

Instances of close encounters with accidental nuclear conflict are not isolated to this event. In June 1980, a computer chip malfunction caused the US to mistake a simulated nuclear attack for a real one, signalling the launch of 2,200 Soviet missiles. US defence officials only discovered the error before contacting then-President Jimmy Carter for nuclear response authorisation. Russian systems have also experienced frightening false alarms. In September 1983, Soviet early-warning satellites misread sunlight reflecting off clouds as five incoming US ballistic missiles. This was defused by a Soviet officer who doubted the accuracy of the readings and prevented immediate retaliatory action.

Other incidents include a security lapse in 2007 when six nuclear-armed cruise missiles were mistakenly loaded onto a US B-52 bomber and transported from North Dakota to Louisiana without proper safeguards. The live weapons remained onboard for 36 hours without detection.

Reflecting on these events, commentators have emphasised the necessity of reducing the risk of accidental nuclear war. One significant suggestion is the removal of nuclear weapons from ‘hair-trigger’ alert statuses that favour rapid launch responses, particularly employed by the United States and Russia. Another recommended change involves ending the US policy of ‘launch-on-warning’, where nuclear weapons could be deployed almost immediately upon the first confirmed indication of an incoming attack. These adjustments could be implemented relatively swiftly and verified internationally, lowering the probability of inadvertent conflict.

Despite the gravity and complexity of nuclear disarmament, some advocates draw parallels with other global challenges, such as climate change, where shifts in awareness and policy have gradually mitigated existential risks. As one commentator noted while discussing the campaign group Global Zero's broad approach to nuclear violence—including connections to systemic issues like white supremacy and patriarchy—there is debate about whether such frameworks resonate universally, especially considering nuclear armaments in countries like North Korea. The commentator cautioned against allowing expansive ideological criteria to restrict participation within disarmament movements, suggesting that an inclusive focus on the prevention of nuclear war, rather than an expectation of achieving global peace, might be more pragmatic.

These historical near-misses and ongoing discussions highlight the persistent dangers posed by nuclear arsenals worldwide and the continuing efforts to manage and reduce these existential risks.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norwegian_rocket_incident> - This Wikipedia article describes the Norwegian rocket incident in January 1995, where a scientific rocket was mistaken by Russian early-warning systems for a U.S. missile, nearly leading to nuclear conflict. It supports the claim about the misinterpretation of a Norwegian rocket launch.
* <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/when-russian-radar-mistook-a-norwegian-scientific-rocket-for-a-us-missile-the-world-narrowly-avoided-nuclear-war-180985836/> - This article elaborates on how the Russian radar mistook a Norwegian scientific rocket for a U.S. missile, highlighting the world's close brush with nuclear war in January 1995. It also explains that despite prior notification, the warning did not reach Russian military personnel.
* <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/russia/closecall/> - This PBS Frontline article provides details about the Norwegian rocket incident, focusing on how it led to the activation of Russian nuclear alert systems. It describes the rapid escalation that reached President Boris Yeltsin.
* <https://blog.ucs.org/david-wright/nuclear-war-and-the-science-experiment-of-january-25-1995-603/> - This blog post from the Union of Concerned Scientists describes the incident where Russian early warning systems detected a Norwegian rocket as a Trident missile, triggering a nuclear response preparation. It emphasizes the role of coincidence and the risks associated with nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert.
* <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-nuclear-missile-accidentally-flown-over-us-in-2007/> - This article covers the 2007 incident where live nuclear-armed cruise missiles were accidentally transported without safeguards, highlighting other security lapses in nuclear handling. It supports the claim about the security lapse in 2007.
* <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/a1954/1983-stanislav-petrov-soviet-officer/> - This article discusses a 1983 incident where Soviet early-warning satellites mistakenly identified sunlight as incoming missiles. It describes how a Soviet officer’s skepticism prevented a nuclear response, supporting the claim about the September 1983 false alarm.
* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14651771/scientific-rocket-launch-study-Northern-Lights-ended-armageddon.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data