

Shakeup continues in US nuclear command

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The US Air Force announced Friday that it has relieved Major General Michael Carey of his command of the 20th Air Force, which is responsible for all 450 of the service's intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The high-level sacking marked the second time in three days that Washington has felt compelled to remove a senior commander in its nuclear warfare command. On Wednesday, the Navy announced that President Barack Obama had ordered the reassignment and demotion of Vice Admiral Tim Giardina, the deputy commander of the US Strategic Command, which has responsibility for all US nuclear forces, including land-based missiles, bombers and nuclear-armed submarines.

This unprecedented cashiering of top nuclear warfare commanders was attributed in both instances to "personal misconduct." In explaining Giardina's case, the Navy said he had been caught using counterfeit gambling chips at a casino in Iowa, near the Strategic Command headquarters in Omaha.

Air Force spokesman Brig. Gen. Les Kodlick stated that the removal of General Carey stemmed from an investigation into an episode of "personal misbehavior" during a temporary duty assignment last summer. He added, "The allegations are not related to operational readiness or the inspection results of any 20th AF unit, nor do they involve sexual misconduct."

Unnamed officials cited by the Associated Press claimed that the charges were "linked to alcohol use," a rather common phenomenon in the US military.

Air Force Gen. Robert Kehler, the top US nuclear war commander heading the Strategic Command, told the AP that the two officers' dismissals were merely a matter of "unfortunate behavioral incidents." He insisted that he still had "100 percent confidence that the nation's nuclear deterrent force is safe, secure and effective."

In point of fact, the top-level firings are only the

latest indications that there is ample reason for concern that a force capable of destroying the world's population many times over falls well short of being secure—although one can assume that as a means of mass extermination, it remains all too effective.

Last March, missile launch crews at the 91st Missile Wing at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota were given a "D" grade on missile operations. In May, 19 missile officers at the base were removed from their posts, sent into retraining, and saddled with additional inspections.

A commander at the base complained that there was "such rot" in the command—where individual squadrons have adopted names such as "Vulgar Vultures," "Gravehaulers," and "Wolf Pack"—that there were willful violations of safety procedures and a possible compromise of launch codes.

Then in August, the 341st Missile Wing at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana failed a safety inspection, with the commander of its Security Forces Group, Col. David Lynch, relieved of his command "due to loss of confidence in Lynch's ability to lead his group," according to the Air Force.

Noting that Carey did not report directly to Giardina, the AP report included one chilling connection between the two sacked officers. "The ICBMs under Carey's command would, in the event of war, receive their launch commands from Strategic Command, where Giardina had been the deputy commander since December 2011." The two men, the article notes, "are associated in the chain of responsibility for US nuclear weapons."

There is every reason to be skeptical of the Pentagon's assurances that the sacking of two senior US nuclear war commanders in one week is merely coincidental and based solely on unrelated personal behavior issues.

The removal of two high level officers who hold key

command posts invites suspicion that political issues are involved, perhaps relating to relations between the civilian and military authorities.

Under the present conditions of extreme crisis and instability within the US government, catastrophic threats from within its gargantuan military apparatus can by no means be excluded.

The threat posed by poor missile maintenance alone was highlighted in a report last month that a hydrogen bomb nearly exploded over Goldsboro, North Carolina in 1961, after falling out of a B-52 that broke up in mid-air. According to classified documents uncovered by a Freedom of Information Act request by investigative journalist Eric Schlosser, three of the four safety mechanisms designed to prevent unintended detonation failed to operate.

“One simple, dynamo-technology, low-voltage switch stood between the United States and a major catastrophe,” wrote Parker Jones, a senior engineer at the Sandia national laboratories, at the time. If it had gone off, the bomb would have deposited radioactive fallout as far as Washington, DC and Philadelphia.

As of October 1, the US had 1,688 deployed strategic nuclear warheads. The total number of such weapons in its active stockpile was reported in 2010 at over 5,000. Another 4,600 had been “retired” and scheduled for dismantlement.

The Obama administration has increased the budget for the US nuclear weapons complex significantly over what had been allocated under Bush, inaugurating a major modernization program for the country’s warhead stockpile. In the 2014 budget, the administration proposed shifting half a billion dollars from nuclear non-proliferation efforts to modernization programs for bomber and missile-based warheads, bringing the total amount allocated for this arms program to over \$7.7 billion.



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