Established in 1947 by the board of directors of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists at the University of Chicago, the Doomsday Clock warns of the danger of global catastrophe.

Despite the end of the Cold War, the timekeepers maintain the world still teeters on the brink. In 2011, the United States and Russia can still annihilate one another -- and the rest of the globe -- in a matter of minutes.

North Korea and Pakistan have nuclear weapons and have exported the technology to other weak states. Iran is building bombs and making noises about using them. Little wonder that the clock is set at six minutes to midnight.

Journalist Ron Rosenbaum explains in chilling detail why we should worry as much, or more, about nuclear war than we do about acts of nuclear terrorism.

Drawing on unclassified and declassified documents and interviews with experts inside and outside the defense establishments, he argues that the absence of war between the United States and the Soviet Union was "a lucky accident."

Today, flaws in "command control" make an accidental launch of nuclear weapons a distinct possibility, he believes.

In another scenario, "sooner or later," Iran will attack Israel, or Israel, determined not to repeat the "wait-and-hope passivity" that fueled Nazi genocide, will risk starting World War III by making a preemptive strike on Iran.

An inspired investigative reporter who has written about this subject for decades, Mr. Rosenbaum deconstructs nuclear policies regarding deterrence and retaliation, skewering the (intentionally) opaque and obfuscating language of diplomats, military personnel, and intelligence officers in the process.

When used by the CIA, he demonstrates, "low confidence" doesn't mean deep doubt. The phrase allows the agency to make claims it believes to be facts, while retaining cover in case (as with "weapons of mass destruction") they turn out to be wrong.

Mr. Rosenbaum reveals officials knew that the National Intelligence Estimate of 2007, issued with "high confidence," (presumably to defuse tensions in the Middle East) that Iran had "halted its nuclear weapons program," was misleading at best.

They did, indeed, believe that Tehran had stopped warhead design projects (perhaps because it had already been completed), but remained convinced that nuclear enrichment and work on long-range missile-delivery systems continued.

Although the author wants desperately to rid the world of nuclear weapons, he acknowledges that, given the challenges of verification, "the more you envision Zero the more like a mirage it seems."
Nonetheless, he insists that since the "experts" have "gotten us into this jam," it's entirely appropriate for "amateur students" like him to design policies to reduce the chances of a nuclear holocaust.

A relic of the Cold War, the programming of specific targets into missile software (to facilitate an instantaneous launch) should cease, he argues.

Green-lighting massive nuclear attacks should no longer be a "one-button" option in "the nuclear football" of leaders. Land-based missiles, less subject than bombers and submarines to "human control in a crisis," should give way to submarine-only deterrence.

Most controversially, Mr. Rosenbaum thinks the United States should consider (in concert with other "responsible nations") destroying the nuclear weapons and nuclear facilities of rogue nations.

Mr. Rosenbaum is a pessimist. He believes that our luck is likely to "run out" before we can escape the Faustian nuclear bargain we made during World War II or push the nuclear genie back into the bottle.

"But to give up and give in," he concludes, gamely, "is not like us." In a democracy, he reminds us, "we're all responsible for what's done in our name."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.