

Book Essay

Nuclear Weapons Redux

Roger Gran Harrison

Abstract

According to William Perry, the encouraging trends in nuclear weapons control he help to build in the post-Cold War world have begun to unravel. This has only strengthened his conviction that nuclear weapons pose the most ominous threat to national security. While the views of Perry and his colleagues have faded, other voices are being raised repeating arguments for nuclear war fighting that were familiar 50-years ago. Perry hopes to prevent that, and to remind a new generation of the horrors of nuclear weapons.

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My Journey at the Nuclear Brink by William J. Perry. Stanford University Press, 2015, 276 pp., \$85.

At the beginning of William Perry's memoir, *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink*, a nuclear bomb explodes on a busy day in the heart of Washington, DC. Eighty thousand are killed instantly, including the president, the joint chiefs, and most members of Congress. The bombers issue a declaration that more bombs are hidden in five other American cities and will be detonated unless all American troops return from overseas. Billions spent on ballistic missile defense have been in vain; the Washington bomb was delivered in a rented step van. Worse, the talk of a missile "shield" has fostered the illusion of nuclear security and prevented practical steps to prevent the disaster.

Perry's purpose in this "slight memoir" is to shatter that illusion and to warn us that the nuclear danger is growing. Reducing the danger of nuclear weapons has been the theme of his life's "journey," he tells us, since, as a young enlisted man, he stood in the ruins of post-World War II Japan. Eight years later, a newly-minted PhD in mathematics working for Sylvania Electronic Defense Systems, Perry had become part of a team working to assess the "range, accuracy, deployment and numbers" of Soviet missiles. In that role, he was instrumental in debunking fears of a "missile gap," as well as demonstrating that Soviet radars were not

Ambassador Roger Gran Harrison is founder and director emeritus of the Eisenhower Center for Space and Defense Studies at the US Air Force Academy, and publisher of the journal *Space & Defense*. He was ambassador to Jordan during the first Gulf War, and served on the national security staff under Brent Scowcroft and Henry Kissinger.

precise enough to support the effective antiballistic missile system the Soviets claimed to have deployed.

He describes what amounts to a spiritual awakening during these years. He had been asked to assess how electronic jamming of Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) guidance systems might reduce the effectiveness of a nuclear attack. He concluded that jamming might reduce immediate deaths by two-thirds. However, 25 million people would still die in the first minutes, and many millions more from lingering effects in subsequent decades. He drew from this the conviction that nuclear weapons were a moral outrage. There was no acceptable level of nuclear Armageddon.

The lesson was reinforced when, barely in his thirties but already an established expert in the new field of electronic surveillance, he was a member of a small team that confirmed the presence of nuclear-capable Soviet missiles in Cuba with the range to hit Washington and other East Coast cities. The information his team developed triggered the Cuban missile crisis. Perry recalls that he and his colleagues had not detected that warheads for the Soviet missiles were also present in Cuba or that Soviet submarines with nuclear-tipped torpedoes aboard were present off the Cuban coast. With civilian and military aides pressing Pres. John F. Kennedy to attack Cuba, only Kennedy's caution, Perry thinks, saved the world from nuclear disaster. The incident galvanized Perry's own thinking; in the wake of the crisis, "no other path seemed to beckon to me but the one that led into the heart of the challenge to reduce the danger of nuclear weapons." (p. 5)

Was the young Bill Perry quite as certain of this as the octogenarian Bill Perry remembers? Perhaps not. His life, as he recounts it, would follow many other paths—some far removed from the issue of nuclear weapons. Perry was a success at Sylvania but realized the future did not lie with the vacuum tubes in which Sylvania specialized. So, he and some colleagues pooled their savings to found Electromagnetic Systems Laboratory (ESL), doing surveillance and analysis work for the Pentagon as before but now using much more powerful digital tools. It was the dawn of the computer revolution in military affairs, and Perry was both pioneer and advocate. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter's Department of Defense came calling, and Perry left the private sector to become Undersecretary of Defense for Research and Engineering. Incoming Secretary of Defense Harold Brown wanted Perry to leverage digital technologies to "offset" Soviet advantages in numbers of conventional and nuclear forces. Nuclear weapons had been the first offset; technological superiority would be the second. Perry saw the job, he tells us, as a chance to use

his expertise for the “prevention of nuclear disaster.” (p. 29) That meant strengthening deterrence by improving conventional forces, and Perry would become a leading proponent of stealth technology, the man who saved GPS from the budget cutters (although he admits that even he did not grasp its full implications), a major backer of precision guidance and of advanced satellite surveillance—in short, one of the founding fathers of the digital revolution in military affairs.

His drive for complex, technologically sophisticated weapons systems was opposed by the “simpler, cheaper, more numerous” school of weapons theorists, including Pierre Sprey, the designer of the F-16 and all-purpose pundit James Fallows. Perry overcame their opposition, but doing so meant compromising other goals, particularly Pentagon acquisition reform. He did not have sufficient political capital, he tells us, to take on both issues at once. Thus, in effect, he sacrificed acquisition reform on the altar of military transformation. The problem, although he does not say so, was that the complex new systems he favored only amplified the shortcomings of the acquisition system he had failed to reform. The result was programs like the ruinously expensive F-35—years behind schedule and tens of billions of dollars over budget. Perhaps Sprey and his colleagues had more of a point than Perry is willing to grant them.

Out of government in the Reagan years, Perry was a prominent critic of Pres. Ronald Reagan’s “Star Wars” ballistic-missile defense program, which was, he thought, needlessly provocative, ruinously expensive, and technologically infeasible. The dream of a Star Wars shield against major powers has long since morphed into a much less-ambitious defense against “rogue actors” without changing Perry’s conviction that the idea of defense against a determined nuclear attacker is a dangerous fraud. Perry also became an avid participant in “track two” meetings, informal gatherings of ex- or would-be officials that play to the particularly American persuasion that, if we can only escape the confines of formal diplomatic exchanges and deal as people, we can solve the intransigent problems of the world.

Perry was to have a second tour at the Pentagon, this time in the Clinton administration, first as undersecretary and then as secretary of defense after Les Aspin was fired. But this time around he seems to have been out of step with the administration he served. There were successes: the corralling of “loose nukes” left behind when the old Soviet empire receded and a new emphasis on the living conditions of senior enlisted men and women. But on key policy issues, Perry was now more often on the losing side. He thought that the new Russian Federation could be

brought into a grand alliance with the West. But that required that the United States to take Russian security concerns into account. Instead, Perry argues, we ignored those interests in the Balkans and pressed heedlessly toward Russian borders with the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and programs to deploy antimissile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. Perry also failed to convince Clinton to submit the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to the Senate for ratification.

Perry describes a particularly stinging personal defeat on the issue of NATO expansion. He favored it, beginning with Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic nations. But he thought it should wait until the new Russian Federation felt more secure and democracy in Russia was on firmer ground. Sensing the momentum on this issue was against him, he called for a meeting of the full National Security Council. But Richard Holbrooke made short work of Perry's arguments, and Clinton decided to move ahead. Perry considered resigning.


He continues to think the NATO enlargement decision was in error and brought much unnecessary tension and disruption in its wake. Still, even describing this low point in his career, he offers no criticism of the president, or even of Holbrooke. Unique among recent secretaries of defense, he is not, here or elsewhere in this memoir, to settle scores.

Perry has now been out of government for two decades, and some of the encouraging trends he helped to foment to defuse the danger of nuclear weapons have begun to unravel. This has only strengthened him in the conviction that nuclear weapons pose an immediate and existential threat to civilization. Skepticism about nuclear weapons seems to increase as one nears the inner circle of decision making. So it was with President Kennedy and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis. So it was with President Reagan, who came to power as the supposed champion of the nuclear hawks but instead set the pattern for nuclear reductions that has been followed by his successors. And so it has been with the so-called "Gang of Four": George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, and Bill Perry. Now they write and lend their names to editorials and articles urging gradual moves toward nuclear zero. As first steps, the propose securing nuclear materials, increasing decision time for national leaders, accelerating nuclear reductions, and increasing transparency. This book is part of that campaign.

Obama's Nuclear Posture Review of 2010, with its emphasis on further nuclear reductions, seemed to fulfill all the hopes of the Gang of Four. But the breakthrough proved illusory, and Perry now fears we have begun a "long backward slide" toward nuclear confrontation. He

predicts that the Russia will soon withdraw from the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and begin testing warheads for its new generation of ICBMs. That will bring irresistible pressure on the United States, which has never ratified the CTBT, to begin testing new warheads of its own. Other nations will follow, and the structure of nuclear restraint painstakingly built over the seven decades since Hiroshima will be shattered.

Late last year, just as this memoir was appearing, Perry went public in a *Washington Post* op-ed with his opposition to nuclear-armed cruise missiles, which he described as both unnecessary to deterrence and destabilizing. He argued that the latest iteration of the B61 nuclear bomb carried by the new generation stealth bomber is a better option. But many current and former Obama administration officials oppose the guidable, dial-a-yield B61 as the “new nuclear weapon” President Obama had pledged not to develop. They argue it will weaken, if not erase, the nuclear threshold. If so, the two great themes of Perry’s life—opposition to nuclear weapons and support for technological innovation—have come together to produce a great irony, for as much as Perry fears nuclear war, the technological innovation he has always championed has been moving his country inexorably forward (with his support) toward the deployment of smaller, more adaptable, more *useable* nuclear weapons. George Orwell called it “doublethink,” and it has always been at the heart of nuclear strategy—so much so that even someone as dedicated to the eradication of nuclear war as Perry seems not to notice the contradiction when he goes on record in support of weapons that will (as supporters and opponents agree) expand a future president’s “nuclear options.”

Perry’s memoir is a fair-minded, professionally generous and deeply informed book. I put it down with admiration for its author and thankfulness for his contribution to national security but also with the feeling that, given the dangers he describes, he ought to have been a little less fair minded, a little more willing to breathe fire. Much of what passes for new thinking about nuclear weapons is really old thinking dressed in new jargon, and Perry should have said so. If he had, his book would have reached a wider audience than it is likely to, and his message would receive the national attention it deserves. 

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