

Ask an Expert: William J. Perry on Nuclear Nonproliferation



William J. Perry is the former United States Secretary of Defense, having served under President Bill Clinton from 1994-1997. Previously, Mr. Perry was the Deputy Secretary of Defense from 1993-1994. His illustrious career includes time in government, academia, private enterprise, and diplomacy. In recent years he has dedicated the bulk of his efforts towards educating the next generation on the dangers of nuclear weapons.

In this interview, Mr. Perry shares his views on the United States nuclear arsenal, recommends cooperation with Russia on nuclear nonproliferation, offers an assessment of the North Korean nuclear threat, and discusses his plans and methods to educate millennials on the dangers of nuclear weapons.

1. **Current plans call for the United States to spend approximately \$1 trillion overhauling and maintaining the U.S. nuclear arsenal, which you have indicated is excessive. Why should Americans be concerned about the existing overhaul program?**

We should be concerned because first of all it's a lot of money, parts of which could be used for better purposes. Secondly, it puts us back into the arms race mode with Russia, comparable to the arms race we had with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. And that led to almost unlimited arms, we ended up with 75,000 nuclear weapons between us. So an arms race is a bad thing to get into. Finally, there are certain dangers associated with the program; in particular, the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program.

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2. In a [New York Times op-ed](#), you called for phasing out the U.S. intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) force, reducing the U.S. nuclear arsenal from a "triad" to a "dyad." What do you see as the main benefits of eliminating U.S. ICBMs?

Since the ICBMs are known in fixed locations, they can be attacked and we presume that any nuclear attack on the United States would include attacks against those ICBMs. And therefore, we have a policy called launch-on-warning which means if we have a warning of an attack, then the President would be notified and he has the option of launching those ICBMs before the attack actually reaches its targets. Now the danger with that, of course, is that if the warning of attack is wrong, if it's a false alarm, and the President actually launches the ICBMs, he will have no way of calling them back or destroying them in-flight if in fact the alarm is a false alarm. So the problem with the ICBMs fundamentally is that if we get a false alarm and the President launches the ICBMs, we will have started a nuclear war capable of ending civilization based on a mistake, based on an accident, based on a false reading. That is not very likely to happen - it's a low probability - but a low probability with a very, very high consequence. So that's my concern with the ICBM program and it's a fundamental concern; as long as we have ICBMs, there will be the possibility of the President launching them in response to a false alarm.

(Click [here](#) to read about a false alarm Mr. Perry experienced. Read about other nuclear close calls [here](#).)

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3. **Supporters of ICBMs often argue that without hundreds of these missiles dispersed across the American heartland, an adversary would only need to hit a handful of targets to dismantle the U.S. nuclear apparatus. Thus, they say, eliminating ICBMs makes the United States vulnerable to attack. How would you respond to this criticism?**

Well anybody, any country that were to attack us has to be concerned about a response, even if they thought that they could attack all of our other nuclear facilities, they would have to be concerned that they would miss some. It doesn't take many of our deployed weapons to cause catastrophe on whichever country has attacked us. And in particular in the case of a massive attack from Russia, which is the only country which has a large enough arsenal to pose that danger, they would have to convince themselves that they could destroy our nuclear submarines at sea, our submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and even if they think they have some way of detecting all of our submarines at sea, which I think is very doubtful, this requires a huge leap of faith on the part of the attacker, that he would in fact be able to destroy all of these. If they would miss only one submarine, the consequences on their country would be catastrophic. One of our submarines with all of its missiles and all of its warheads could cause devastation in any country which it attacks. So in short, it requires a huge leap of faith on any attacker to believe he could actually destroy the majority of our missiles as they are deployed, in particular our submarine missiles. It only takes one submarine to cause a huge devastation in the attacking country.

4. **Do you agree with Secretary of Defense Mattis that the U.S. should clearly identify its nuclear strategy to establish the purpose, whether deterrence or otherwise, for our nuclear arsenal?**

Yes, I do.

5. **Are you concerned that elevated tensions between nuclear powers will weaken the ability of deterrence theory to prevent a nuclear exchange? If so, what would you recommend as immediate steps that can be pursued to reduce tensions?**

The steps which I recommended the previous President take, and I would also recommend to President Trump is that whatever disagreements we have with Russia, and there are many, we have common interests in preventing a nuclear catastrophe. We have common interests obviously in preventing a nuclear war. We have common interests in dealing with nuclear terrorism. We have common interests in preventing proliferation. So I would recommend that we separate out those issues with Russia with which we disagree and those where we have common interests in the nuclear field. And we ought to be able to talk with them about those issues, nuclear issues, try to reach an agreement which will be in our common interests, even while we maintain our disagreement in other areas. We did that with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, we ought to be able to do that with Russia today.

6. **You wrote an op-ed in [The Washington Post](#) with former Assistant Secretary of Defense Andy Weber calling for the President to cancel the new nuclear cruise missile (known as the Long Range Standoff Weapon or LRSO), which you described as destabilizing and unnecessary. Secretary of Defense James Mattis was adamant about supporting all aspects of the current U.S. nuclear modernization program, but he showed hesitation about the LRSO. What would you say to Secretary Mattis' about the new nuclear cruise missile?**

I would recommend that he read our op-ed in the Washington Post because I think we said what we wanted to say in that op-ed and that would be our advice to him.

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7. As part of your career, you helped implement the Cooperative Threat Reduction program to reduce the threats posed by nuclear weapons and materials left over after the Cold War. Unfortunately, the United States and Russia, the two countries with the largest stockpiles of nuclear weapons and materials, have ceased nearly all cooperation on this issue due to disputes in Crimea, Syria, and elsewhere. Do you believe the United States and Russia should resume cooperation on efforts to counter nuclear terrorism?

Yes, I do not believe we have to agree with Russia on all issues in order to see the advantage of cooperating on nuclear issues. So we ought to in our minds, and in the Russians' minds, separate out those issues where we have common interests and that's certainly true in the nuclear field.

8. Recently, you wrote an op-ed in [Politico](#) recounting your experience negotiating with North Korea at the end of the Clinton administration. In the piece, you advocate for multilateral negotiations with North Korea with the hopes of freezing Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program. Critics believe that any negotiations with North Korea amount to legitimizing an abhorrent regime. What did you learn from your negotiations and why do you believe directly engaging with North Korea is so critical?

I believe that North Korea has its primary objective as sustaining their regime in power, the secondary objective is gaining international respect, and in order to get those objectives they are willing to sacrifice the third objective, which is improving their economy. But they do want to improve their economy. They believe that their nuclear weapons satisfy their primary objective which is preserving the regime in power and they are not willing to give those up in order to get economic improvement. I think that a negotiation with North Korea should recognize that fundamental fact. So that means we probably at this stage are not able to negotiate away their nuclear weapons. We had an opportunity to do that back in 2000-2001, but we did not go through with it; that was before they had a nuclear arsenal. Now they have a nuclear arsenal, they are not likely to give it up for economic reasons. Therefore, if we proceed forward with them in negotiations we have to do that understanding that reality.

The goal of our negotiations I believe, should be to get them to cease testing their nuclear weapons, cease testing long-range missiles, and have a verifiable agreement not to export their nuclear technology or assistance

There are still some benefits we can get through negotiations, which is while not expecting them to give up their nuclear weapons, we can do many things to reduce the dangers of their nuclear weapons. The goal of our negotiations, I believe, should be to get them to cease testing their nuclear weapons, cease testing long-range missiles, and have a verifiable agreement not to export their nuclear technology or assistance. If we could get those three objectives, they improve our security, they lower the danger, and I think we could perhaps be able to get those objectives offering economic incentives. That's the best we can do with North Korea. So if we proceed on negotiations, we ought to understand that that's the best we can do and if we are not willing to make that trade-off, then there is no point in negotiating with them. If we are willing to do that, then I believe the benefits of freezing their program would be worth some economic incentives.

9. Lastly, since millennials have spent their formative years growing up after the end of the Cold War, what would you say to younger generations to convince them that the threat of nuclear weapons is still important?

They will come to that conclusion only after they become educated on what the nuclear dangers are. So I have concentrated nearly all of my efforts on the process of education. A mass educating program has to be over the internet. The books that I write, the papers that I write, the courses that I teach are not sufficient. So I'm spending most of my energy today on taking the ideas in my book and the ideas in my courses and putting them on the internet in the form of [massive open online courses](#) (MOOCs). The purpose of that is to educate the millennials on the dangers of nuclear weapons. I think if they understand those dangers, then they will take the actions which are appropriate.

To learn more about Mr. Perry's work, visit [The William J. Perry Project](#).