

## BOOK REVIEW

# Living the Unthinkable

by Jeffrey Steinberg

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### **My Journey at the Nuclear Brink**

by William J. Perry

Stanford University Press, 2015

278 pages with illustrations, hardcover, paperback, and Kindle, from \$24.95

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Jan 24—Former Secretary of Defense William James Perry (1994-1997) has spent his entire adult life living under the shadow of potential thermonuclear Armageddon. For Perry, it is a deeply personal fact of life, partly as the result of his own choices of career path, partly as the result of being in critical places at critical times.

The net effect is that the former defense industry executive, nuclear weapons analyst, and two-time Defense Department executive has come to believe that the world today is closer to thermonuclear war than at almost any time during the half-century of Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. He finds this reality to be alarming beyond description, and he candidly admits that this situation is the consequence of policy decisions by American and NATO leaders that sabotaged the prospects of genuine partnership between the United States and post-Soviet Russia at critical moments during the 1990s and 2000s.

Secretary Perry cannot be described as “soft on Russia.” Some of his criticisms of Russian policies are harshly inaccurate, in the same way that he is patently wrong in his characterizations of Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). In the latter case, I believe he was simply ignorant of the fact that President Reagan, despite his “Evil Empire” rhetoric, was genu-

ine in his offer to Moscow of a joint development of a global system of ballistic missile defense that could lead to an era of Mutually Assured Survival.

In fairness to Perry, his misunderstanding of the SDI process was likely colored by his close relationship to Reagan’s Secretary of State George Shultz, his Stanford University colleague, who always viewed the Strategic Defense Initiative as a bargaining chip to be traded

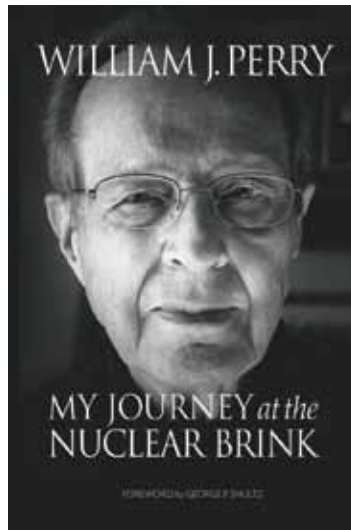
off in exchange for Soviet ballistic missile and nuclear weapons reductions. Shultz was furious when President Reagan refused to capitulate to his and Mikhail Gorbachov’s demands at the 1986 Reykjavik summit, that he abandon SDI and simply agree to nuclear weapon reductions.

Perry was, furthermore, clearly unaware of the role played by Lyndon LaRouche and some of his close colleagues in pursuing back-channel dialogue with Soviet officials throughout 1981-1983 in pursuit of an agreement on collaborative missile defense.

Throughout the book, Perry extolled the virtues of maintaining constant lines of communication with

Moscow (and with Beijing), taking full advantage of private Track II channels of dialogue, when government-to-government relations hit an impasse or crisis. Since leaving government, Perry has devoted most of his time to precisely this kind of personal diplomacy, particularly with Russia and North Korea.

These shortcomings are minor, however, when taken in the context of the whole of the message that comes across in his memoir, *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink*. For Perry, preventing the outbreak of a thermonuclear war of extinction is the first and overriding priority. He worries about the danger of an accidental incident triggering an escalation to all-out thermonuclear exchange.



For this reason, he and some of his closest collaborators, like former U.S. Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, as well as retired Gen. James Cartwright, insist that the United States and Russia should take their nuclear arsenals off of “launch on warning.”

Under launch on warning, both sides in the thermonuclear Armageddon process launch all-out retaliatory strikes at the first indication of a first-strike launch by the other. Perry frets that, in the age of cyber warfare, and with U.S.-Russian tensions back in the fore, launch on warning is a virtual guarantee of a thermonuclear exchange at the strategic annihilation level.

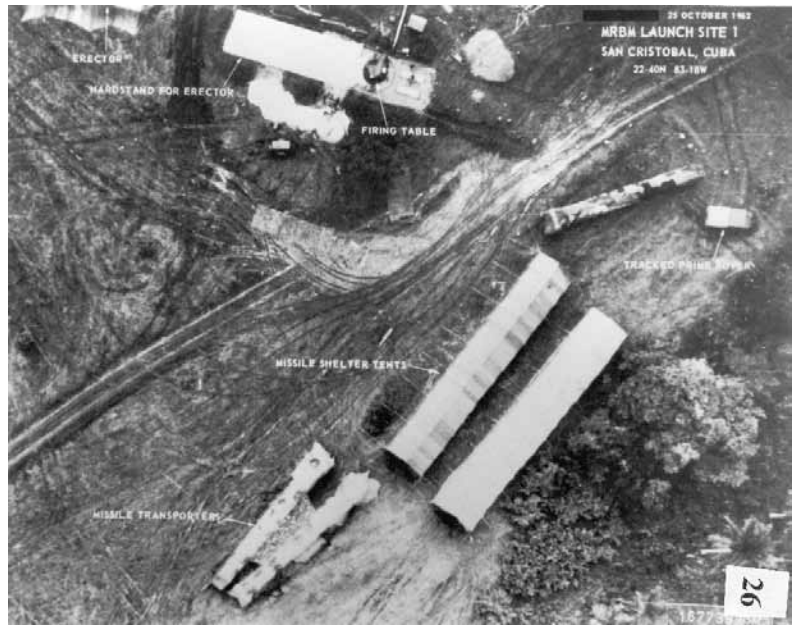
### Perry’s Personal Journey

Perry chose, appropriately, to begin his account in the Fall of 1962, when he received a telephone call at his home from Albert “Bud” Wheelon, then the head of the CIA’s Office of Scientific Intelligence and the Chairman of the Guided Missile and Astronautics Intelligence Committee, a high-level top secret inter-governmental commission that oversaw the monitoring of Soviet nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programs. Perry and Wheelon had served on a number of top secret government panels dealing with the Soviet nuclear capabilities.

Wheelon asked Perry to drop all of his work at Stanford University and at the Electronic Defense Labs of Sylvania/GTE to come immediately to Washington. When Perry arrived the next day, he was shown some of the reconnaissance photographs of the Soviet missile installations on Cuba. Perry had been brought in on the American side of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

For the next eight days, Perry, along with Wheelon and a team of nuclear weapons and missile specialists and photography analysts, did hour-by-hour assessments of the Soviet progress on installing deployable nuclear weapons in Cuba.

The close proximity to the Cuban Missile Crisis had a profound impact on Perry, who was 35 years old at the time. He would recount in his memoir that he later found out that, at the height of the crisis, Soviet submarine commanders carrying nuclear weapons had been given authority to launch nuclear weapons without clearance from Moscow, due to communications difficulties. One Soviet submarine commander had to be



*The Cuban Missile Crisis was one of Perry’s “up close and personal” encounters with the danger of nuclear war. Here, an Oct. 25, 1962, U.S. surveillance photo showing construction of a Soviet missile site in Cuba.*

National Security Archive

dissuaded by other officers from launching a nuclear-armed torpedo at a U.S. warship trailing the Soviet ship convoy steaming towards Cuba.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was by no means Perry’s first “up close and personal” encounter with the danger of nuclear war. In 1946, at the age of 19, Perry had enlisted in the U.S. Army. He joined the Army Reserve as an officer several years later, and was sent to Japan in 1950, as part of the U.S. Occupation, where he saw, firsthand, the devastation of the American firebombing of Tokyo, and the worse devastation of the Atomic Bomb attack on Hiroshima.

Perry completed his B.S. and M.A. from Stanford University and went on to get his Ph.D. in mathematics from Penn State University (he was born and raised in Pennsylvania).

It was the height of the Cold War and the tail end of the McCarthy Red Scare, when a vast majority of Americans were terrified about their job security and the specter of the Red purges. With his advanced degrees in mathematics, Perry was one of those Americans who was drawn into the Cold War drama as part of the privileged segment that were given security clearances to work in the growing American military-industrial complex.

From 1954-1964, Perry worked for the Electronic Defense Labs of Sylvania/GTE in northern California.

He worked on detailed analysis of Soviet missile systems, assessing their accuracy, distance, and potential throw-weight on a number of programs administered by the Pentagon.

In 1964, Perry left Sylvania/GTE to go off on his own, with a number of co-workers. They founded Electromagnetic Systems Lab (ESL), a firm that similarly did highly classified technical work for the Pentagon, both in evaluating Soviet systems and developing counter-systems. Perry was President of ESL, frequently commuting back to Washington for secret consultations at the Pentagon.

In 1977, Perry was summoned to Washington by Harold Brown, one of his close associates on some of the top secret Pentagon panels. Brown had been named Secretary of Defense by the newly elected President Jimmy Carter, and Brown asked Perry to take the job of Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, a post that would put him in the very center of American work on bolstering deterrents against possible Soviet nuclear attack. Perry reluctantly took the job, serving out the full Carter term in office.

Perry's number one priority as Assistant Secretary of Defense was the Soviet nuclear weapons threat, which he worked on tirelessly. Perry was credited at this time with developing a strategy to offset Soviet advantages through asymmetric U.S. capabilities. Perry found, as soon as he arrived in Washington, that, as the Soviets achieved parity with the United States on strategic nuclear weapons and ICBMs, the United States was increasing its reliance on tactical nuclear weapons, to deter a Soviet ground invasion of Western Europe. He thought that this idea of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe was madness. Along with Harold Brown, Perry put the top Pentagon scientists to work on the original development of stealth technology, reasoning that if the United States had the ability to penetrate Soviet air defenses, it would offset the Soviet conventional advantage over NATO in Europe, without posing the immediate risk of nuclear war triggered by U.S. use of tactical nuclear weapons to block a Soviet conventional move. The result was the F-117 stealth bomber.

During that tenure in the Carter Administration, Perry also promoted the development of "smart" conventional weapons, as another means of abandoning the reliance on tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

The third prong of his "offset" strategy was the investment in the Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) system, a program that had fierce resistance from within

the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and on Capitol Hill. Perry won that battle with a few small compromises, and GPS went ahead.

After Carter's re-election defeat, Perry returned to Stanford University, but continued to serve on Pentagon study boards, including the Packard Commission on defense acquisition reforms.

When Bill Clinton was elected President in the 1992 elections, Perry was summoned back to Washington, this time as Deputy Secretary of Defense under Les Aspin. By now the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact had dissolved, and one of the great concerns in those harrowing transitional days was the danger of loose nuclear weapons or fuel getting in the wrong hands.

In 1992, Congress had passed and President George H.W. Bush had signed the Cooperative Threat Reduction Act of 1972, otherwise known as the Nunn-Lugar Act, named after the two Senators who had co-sponsored the bill. Under Nunn-Lugar, the United States pledged to fund programs in the former Soviet states to dismantle and secure the vast arsenal of nuclear warheads, enriched uranium, and ICBMs. Many of those systems were stored in post-Soviet independent states, including Ukraine and Kazakhstan, with few resources to secure or dismantle those systems.

On Dec. 15, 1993, Perry was in Moscow, participating in a meeting of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot pulled Perry aside to tell him that the President had asked for Aspin's resignation, over the "Black Hawk Down" incident in Somalia. The President nominated Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, former director of the National Security Agency (NSA) and Deputy Director of the CIA as Aspin's replacement.

But after a torrent of neoconservative media attacks on the retired four star Admiral, Inman announced he was withdrawing his name from the nomination. President Clinton, at Inman's urging, named Perry as the new Secretary of Defense. Perry and Inman had been close collaborators during the Carter years when Perry was at Defense and Inman was at the NSA. Inman told President Clinton that Perry was the only person capable of achieving the urgently needed procurement reforms and other crucial changes in the U.S. military posture, during the period of "peace dividends" after the fall of the Warsaw Pact.

Perry did succeed in pushing ahead with the Nunn-Lugar dismantling of all of the former Soviet nuclear weapons located outside Russia, and was able to do it in



DoD/Todd P. Cichonowicz, USN

*Secretary of Defense Perry worked closely with military officials of Russia and the newly independent states to dismantle nuclear arsenals outside Russia in the 1990s. Here, Perry (right) clasps hands with Ukraine Defense Minister Valeriy Shmarov (center) and Russian Defense Minister Gen. Pavel Grachev (left), as they plant sunflowers where a missile silo had been.*

close partnership with the Russian Ministry of Defense and armed forces.

Perry focused on outreach to Russia and the former Warsaw Pact countries, promoting the Partnership for Peace, while opposing NATO expansion, until the United States and Russia had achieved a durable and lasting partnership. In his memoir and in other recent writings and speeches, he has continued to hold the United States and NATO responsible for the collapse of collaboration with Russia. Some of the most poignant segments of his book deal with his close working with Russian military officials in the dismantling of the Soviet nuclear arsenals spread across the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union states that were now independent, and going through hard economic times.

Perry saved special harsh words for President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, for their cancellation of all negotiations with North Korea, from the moment they came into office in Jan. 2001.

Although Perry had left the Clinton Administration after the first term to return to Stanford University, he remained active in Washington diplomacy and particularly on the North Korea front. In Clinton's second term, he served on a commission that visited Pyongyang several times, to revive the 1994 nuclear disarmament agreement. By Perry's eyewitness account, in 2000, as the result of persistent diplomacy, the United States and North Korea were about to sign a landmark

agreement, formally ending the Korean War and assuring that North Korea's plutonium program, a potential nuclear weapons program, would be dismantled with tight international supervision.

At that time, North Korea had no nuclear bombs, and was prepared to forego future nuclear weapons, in return for normalization of relations with the United States and U.S. regional allies. It was a "win-win" situation which was shut down the day that Bush and Cheney took over the White House. Today, North Korea is believed to have a small arsenal of nuclear weapons, and delivery systems that can reach targets in the region.

It is these kinds of failures of sane diplomacy that have convinced Perry that he must take a stand,

beyond his low-profile, throughout his career in government.

In the past months, Perry has been more vocal and public about his concerns that Obama Administration policies are driving a dangerous wedge between the United States and the Russians, and the ultimate consequences of these policy disasters could be nuclear Armageddon. Perry has appeared on television, at public events, and at book events all over the country, and his message is always the same: The United States and Russia must find a path for de-escalating the conflict and reviving the spirit of true collaboration around common objectives.

It is clear that his decision to write his memoirs, and to write them with the points of emphasis that he chose, is the most significant contribution he is making to the prevention of a thermonuclear war. As a member of the World War II generation, who served in the armed forces and then went into the world of security clearances, top secret intelligence, and nuclear war planning, he has approached his war-prevention intervention with a degree of humility and under-statement, which makes his dire warnings today about the imminent danger of thermonuclear war all the more powerful.

William Perry is the kind of person to be taken in dead seriousness, when he says that thermonuclear Armageddon is closer now than at any time in his 89 years on Earth.

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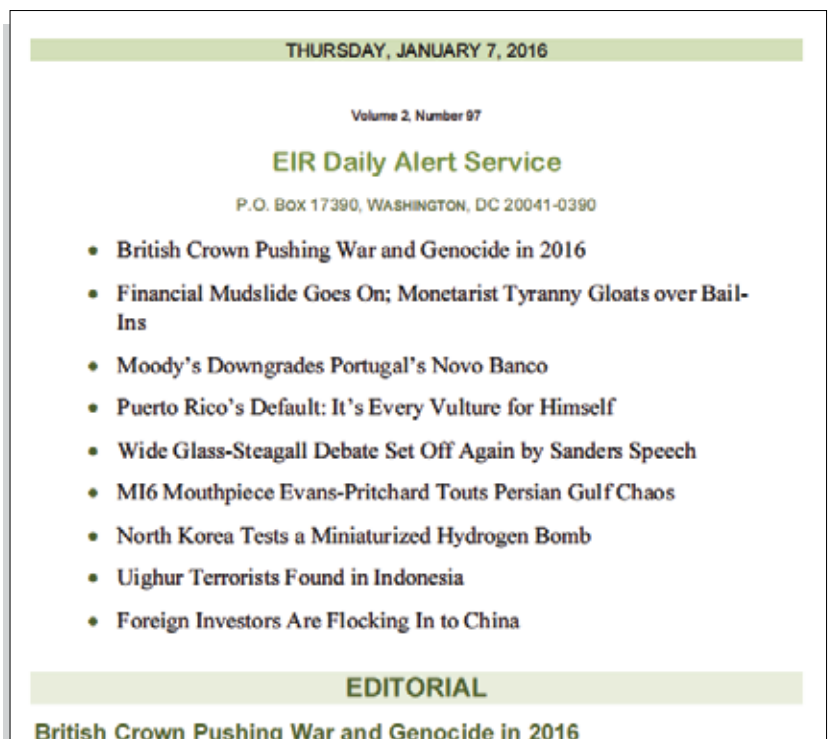
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