

# A Dialogue of Experts on NATO's History of Threatening Nuclear Strikes

*The following was a part of the dialogue among major speakers at the extraordinary International Peace Coalition (IPC) meeting Sept. 6, with more than 500 attendees on Zoom from 41 nations around the world. This dialogue included former U.S. Ambassador (to the Soviet Union) Jack Matlock; former chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell Col. (ret.) Lawrence Wilkerson; MIT professor emeritus Dr. Theodore Postol; New York independent congressional candidate Jose Vega; and IPC convenor Helga Zepp-LaRouche.*

**Moderator Dennis Speed to Ambassador Jack Matlock:** We've had an extensive discussion about the question of the present danger and how we got here.... And particularly our European guests, Prof. Dr. Wilfried Schreiber from Germany, and Lt. Col. Ralph Bosshard of Switzerland, have given real insight into what this looks like from the standpoint of people outside of the United States, which is an extremely important element.... Could you just give, from the vantage point of your experience—because you were there; you were [there] at the time of the fall of the Wall and then coming in during the Reagan administration and negotiating that situation. Why is it that we have betrayed that understanding, and what has it meant for the world that the United States did not do what you and others attempted to do at that time?

**Matlock:** If you're speaking of the pledge not to expand NATO to the East, yes, I would say that my Secretary of State, Mr. [James] Baker, and the German Foreign Minister [Hans-Dietrich Genscher], the British Prime Minister [Margaret Thatcher] all gave assurances to [Soviet Premier Mikhail] Gorbachev that if he would approve the merger of the two German states—that is the merger of German Democratic Republic into West Germany—that there would be no expansion of NATO. At one point, Secretary Baker actually said, assuming there is no expansion of NATO, “not one inch”, wouldn't it be better to have a united Germany in NATO? And Gorbachev answered, well, obviously any expansion is not permissible. But, he went to say that he could understand the reason we might want to keep

NATO, even with a united Germany.

Now, when it came to writing the treaties, this was not included in the formal treaties. These were, I would say, diplomatic promises. I would say that this promise was given on the background of a prior statement by the first President Bush, who agreed in his meeting with Gorbachev in Malta [in early December 1989], that if the Soviet Union pledged not to use force in Eastern Europe to prevent political change—that is, the democratization—and President Bush pledged that we would not take advantage of the democratization. So, the background was pretty clear that Gorbachev felt he had assurances: There would be no more expansion of NATO.

When the formal agreement was made, there was made an exception for the territory of the former East Germany; in that, although it was allowed to be part of NATO, there could be no foreign troops or nuclear weapons stationed there. That was formally in the treaty.

Now, let me just add, that for Russia, the problem has not been so much the expansion of NATO. That is, the fact that the United States would, in effect, guarantee the security. What they have been most opposed to—and this was pointed out to us in the 1990s—was the stationing of American or other Western bases in these countries. So, we have to remember that President Putin actually did not object to the initial expansion of NATO—well, he was not Prime Minister then—but the additional expansion to the three Baltic countries, when that was proposed, he was in New York, at a meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations, I, believe it was. I asked him directly what he thought about the expansion of NATO in the three Baltic states. He said he felt that was unnecessary, but as long as there were no bases, he had no objection.

So, the problem has been the combination. Then at the same time, it was very clear that there would be a difference in Moscow's attitude toward NATO: You might say, [between] the countries in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, and those that were former Soviet republics and recognized as Soviet republics by the United States and others. So, the idea of expanding



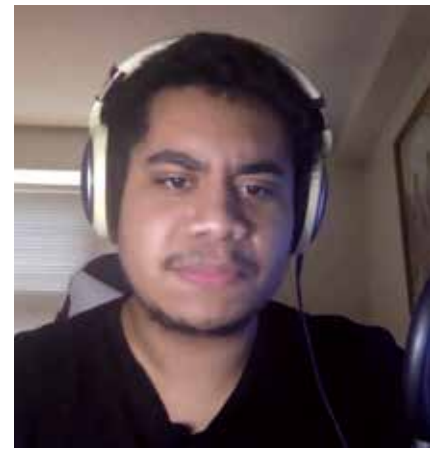
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NATO into, say, Georgia, Ukraine, or Belarus would have been a red line, I think, for any Russian President.

And I must say that the Russian government did respect the borders that were agreed upon, until the question of NATO expansion began, and the attempts by the Western powers—certain ones—to interfere in the politics of Ukraine. This was something that anyone who understands the history of this, which is very complex, would understand, that that was going to be resisted by the Russians.

Poland and Romania for anti-ballistic missiles. It turned out that although these were defensive weapons, they could easily be converted to offensive weapons. So, it was understandable that the Russian leader would be quite opposed. And yet, we went ahead, and after progressively withdrawing from virtually every arms control agreement that we had negotiated in the 1980s and early '90s, we began to try to influence the Ukrainian government and to offer NATO membership.

So, I think that this was a complete reversal of the diplomacy we used in the Cold War, and to end the nuclear threats to Europe....



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Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, left, and U.S. President George Bush, sign bilateral agreements during Gorbachev's official visit to the United States. Bush promised Gorbachev not to take advantage of the democratization of the former Soviet states.

None of this means that what has happened has been good, or that I would agree that it should have happened. But I think what we need to understand is that the expansion of NATO, and particularly the bases—and in this case it was the bases that were planned in

**Jose Vega:** First of all, I wanted to extend my thanks to Professor [Theodore] Postol and Colonel [Lawrence] Wilkerson ... for your presentations, as well as the rest of the panel. I'd also like to acknowledge that a lot of the people on this call are not just spectators and listeners, but activists and organizers. I myself have been doing this for ten years; I've been associated with the Schiller Institute for ten years, and now I'm a Congressional candidate running here in The Bronx. I'm proud to say I see lots of names on the attendee list who, I know, are also organizers and activists. I pray that people who listen to these presentations will move and act on this.

I'd like to ask something for the panel, but especially I'd like to hear from Professor Postol and Colonel Wilkerson, and of course Helga. When Daniel Ellsberg saw that the U.S. was threatening war with China over Taiwan in 2021, he posted online, classified documents



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originally copied in the 1970s, that showed that the U.S. military planners pushed for nuclear strikes on mainland China as early as 1958. These were plans that Ellsberg himself was a part of, as he admitted in an interview with CBS. This was supposed to go beyond just China; they wanted to hit every city in the Soviet Union, and every city in China. There was no plan that did not also involve annihilating the Chinese population. They were ready to commit 100 holocausts and get rid of the then-600 million Chinese. I want to contrast that with what we recently found out in the last few weeks, that Biden, back in March, had ordered, or had plans to be ready for a nuclear confrontation between China and Russia.

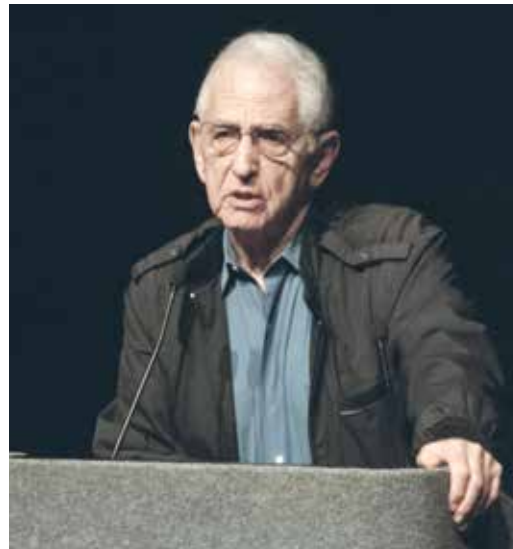
But more importantly, I want to ask, why do we know about these kinds of plans, and why do they get released or leaked to the public? Is there someone in the State Department with a conscience, who is begging the American population to intervene in some way? Is there anyone at all, who makes decisions like this about going to war, with a conscience? And assuming there is somebody in the White House or in the State Department with a conscience: What is it they expect the American people to do?

**Colonel Wilkerson:** At the end of Dan’s life—and

let me parenthetically add, I think Dan [Ellsberg] was one of the greatest heroes in the second part of the 20th Century and first part of the 21st Century—Dan and I had a lot of conversations.

Dan and I had some of these conversations about some of the revelations that you just pointed out. One of the things I tried to temper his anxieties with, was that the U.S. military, in its war-planning divisions, plans for all manner of contingencies. It plans for things that you would probably not believe. For example, it plans for war with Britain; it plans for war with Germany; it plans for war with almost every country in the world with a capacity to do some harm to the United States. These plans are not firm plans that are—as we say today in modern terminology, ‘tip-fitted’ [for] time, phase, force, and deployment data [TPFDD]; in other words, ready for execution. They’re just the plans that militaries all around the world, I suspect, do, but certainly the United States does.

We’re the only country in the world that divides the world up into fiefdoms, and puts a four-star general or admiral in charge of each fiefdom. I don’t think there’s any empire in human history that’s done that. We are also the only country in the world that has 800 overseas bases. China and Russia, for example, together don’t even have 80.



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*The late Daniel Ellsberg, a friend and collaborator of some of the panelists, exposed U.S. military planners’ plans for the use of nuclear weapons.*

All this planning sometimes gets leaked, and it gets leaked in various ways. It might be a Julian Assange, it might be another journalist. And when it comes out, it looks dramatically dangerous.... But a lot of the things that happen with regard to China and Russia in terms of war-planning, that have somehow leaked out afterwards—that Dan was referring to—were things that were not contemplated by the leadership for execution. They were simply contemplated by the military planners, for the contingency that one of the leaders—the Secretary of Defense and the President—in the civilian chain of command would ask to be implemented or would ask to be taken off the shelf and dusted off and possibly implemented....

For example, there was a plan—and Dan and I talked about this—there was a plan for dropping nuclear weapons on Korea right after the Chinese had intervened, 400,000-some odd volunteers, and we were thoroughly routed. People in Washington were talking about abandoning the peninsula. General MacArthur put forth the provision to drop nuclear weapons all across the main axis east-to-west in North Korea, and therefore no more forces could pour down because it would be too radioactive. Well, that was a plan, that was a suggestion by the commander of the entire theater. It wasn't even looked at seriously by the civilians, at least the record doesn't reflect it.... Because this is what empires do; they plan to fight everybody in the world at one time or another, or anyone with the capacity and possible intentions to do harm to them all the time.

That takes on its own life. And I daresay that those like General Wesley Clark, who told me—and I saw some of the signs of this myself, before I was prohibited to go to the Pentagon by Donald Rumsfeld, the then-Secretary of Defense—we had plans for going after Syria; we had plans for going after Iran; we had plans for going into Lebanon; we had plans for the entire Levant. I think, and I think General Clark would back me up on this—former NATO commander—we were going to implement those plans if Iraq went really easily in 2003....

Did we execute those plans? No, because in this case, I think the primary reason was Iraq was not an easy target; and it still is roiling with problems because of what we did....

Anyway, Dan was a great guy: He was a hero. Some of the stories Dan told me about what he did in the height of the early nuclear situation were just— He drove a

Jeep out through the wire out in Nevada, with another man in the Jeep with him. He drove a Jeep through that wire and out to Ground Zero, to prevent Ronald Reagan from doing a nuclear test that day. He went out to the test site in a Jeep with one other person—that's all there was. And he stopped that ... nuclear detonation. He was an American hero *par excellence*.

**Professor Postol:** I'd like to say that I agree with everything that Colonel Wilkerson said. But I have a somewhat different view of this, because I don't have the benefit of being a soldier. But I do have the benefit of being trained as a scientist. I also had the great privilege of working very closely with a lot of great soldiers when I was in the Pentagon, so I have a glimpse into that world, although I would not claim the kind of expertise these very skilled and capable soldiers who I worked with have.

But one of the things I would say is different, about nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons planning, is that there is a problem conceptualizing the true capabilities and effects of these weapons if you don't have special training and you don't put in special effort to understand what is actually going on. In other words, the physical effects.

There are a lot of people who say, "I'm a scientist, I know." Nonsense; they don't know. But if you are a scientist and you're trained as one, and you seriously do some work, you should have a reasonable grasp of the effects of these weapons.

I was involved in nuclear planning; I had oversight responsibilities, so I could see things being done. And what struck me was that the planning process was a very ritualized process. People would have these little circular keys and you put them over a target and you move it around a bit, and maybe you can adjust the nuclear detonation point. But they really did not know what the true effects of the weapons were, because they weren't trained to know these effects. They were soldiers; they were brought in from being highly-skilled tank operators, pilots, navigators, ship commanders. But their training really did not include any details of nuclear weapons.

I used to give a talk I called my "Shake and Bake" talk, which was a very deadpan, detailed description of the effects of nuclear weapons. I would give it when I was at Stanford.... I would get students writing me notes after the classes that they had nightmares after

that class. And of course, quite frankly, I was glad. I wasn't trying to overstate; I was trying to very candidly, and in a way that was easy to understand, show people what the effects of nuclear weapons would be if they were used. It was a talk I put great effort into.

But one of the phenomena I experienced several times were young soldiers who happened to be in the audience—they were probably visiting these military exchange programs—coming up after the talk and saying to me, “I didn't want to do anything like this. That's criminal. This is against my oath as an officer to not murder people arbitrarily. I'm horrified by what you're showing. I just want you to know I would never knowingly be involved in this.”

I was already at Stanford, but I had been involved in the nuclear war planning, and had observed this rote way it was being done. And I realized that these were soldiers who were simply doing what they were told to do, without enough of a technical background to explain to them the full consequences of what they were doing. And they had very strong moral and ethical standards. But they had no idea what was really going on.

And I think that is the case with nuclear war planning in general. I think that the fact that Dan [Ellsberg] made these plans known, was a courageous thing to do. And I think those plans would have been executed as they were planned, if a series of events created a situation where a decision was made to use nuclear weapons.

I wrote a paper that caused a lot of trouble—fortunately—which is what I hoped to do. It was given at a National Academy of Medicine symposium in Washington, which was a good forum, because it was covered by the international press. I called it “Casualties from Super Fires from Nuclear Attacks on Cities.” What the paper did—it's still available from the National Academy of Sciences for those who want it, or I could make it available to your people. What it showed is the fires produced by the flash of a nuclear weapon—a nuclear weapon initially has a temperature of 100 million degrees Kelvin, and it creates this fireball that's so hot, it's hotter than the surface of the Sun for fractions of second, and sets fires for an enormous range.

If you have a city of 200 or 400 or 500 square miles simultaneously on fire, you're going to see an environment like Dresden [German city carpet-bombed in 1945—ed.], but more intense. Because all this heat

from combustion causes an up-flow of air, and an in-flow of cool air from around. And you have hurricane force winds on the street, that are above the temperature of boiling water. Nobody survives that; nothing survives that.

So, you would have city fires on hundreds of square miles at a time; and that is not included in the war planning. I had a long discussion with Dan about this one time, when I was in Germany, in fact, where this phenomenon was not even included. He was unaware of it until I wrote this paper.

It's still not included in American war planning.... So, it's a very dangerous situation. And of course, the nature of nuclear war-planning is that it's very secret. It's very hard to get access to this planning process. Civilians really don't get any of it. Civilians who are in charge at the Pentagon, whom I met, were largely, what I would call, not very sophisticated political scientists, who were committed to repeating in a monkey-like fashion arguments that made no sense; that were completely unrelated to the realities of what would actually happen if you used these nuclear weapons....

So, there's this extra feature that Lawrence didn't include in his discussion, because the soldiers aren't aware of this because the system is unaware of it. So, it doesn't educate the soldiers to these effects. You take a soldier and you give him a munition. That soldier knows what that munition will and will not do; they're trained very well. They have extraordinarily sophisticated understanding of what they're doing. With nuclear weapons, you can't assume anything; so there's this layer of, I'll call it illusion that's associated with the whole planning process that's extraordinarily dangerous.

**Colonel Wilkerson:** I just want to say one thing. As far as I know, we still operate on the principle of civilian control of the military. Second, and I say that with some guarded cynicism, because I've seen things different in the last few years. But my experience with 31 years in the military was, I was more frightened of the civilian leaders than I was of my military bosses....

**Helga Zepp-LaRouche:** Very briefly: As far as I know, Daniel Ellsberg, in one of the last interviews he gave before he passed away, had called on people in the Pentagon to report about what the actual discussion is about the use of nuclear weapons. I think maybe we should repeat his request.