

Episode 138: "Thinking Again about the Unthinkable" with Dr. Peter Vincent Pry

Speaker 1 ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to the Bill Walton Show, featuring conversations with leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, and thinkers, fresh perspectives on money, culture, politics, and human flourishing, interesting people, interesting things.

Bill Walton ([00:24](#)):

Welcome to the Bill Walton Show. I'm Bill Walton. Recently, I came across an extraordinary and for me shocking report by past guest on this show, Dr. Peter Vincent Pry. It's called Surprise Attack: ICBMs and the Real Nuclear Threat. It provides an excellent overview of nuclear war, past, present, and future. We don't like to think or even talk much about the possibilities of nuclear war, but they are real. Vladimir Putin's Russia, Communist China, and of course North Korea are implementing comprehensive programs to strengthen their ability to wage nuclear war. Meanwhile, as Dr. Pry puts it, on nuclear matters the US and western strategic culture mostly thinks and acts in a state of denial and unreality.

Dr. Peter Vincent Pry has vast experience in national security. To name just a few roles, he served as executive director of the EMP Taskforce on National and Homeland Security, chief advisor to the vice chairman of the House Armed Service Committee, and the vice chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee and to the chairman of the Terrorism Panel. He was also executive director of the United States Nuclear Strategy Forum. Earlier in his career, he was an intelligence officer with the Central Intelligence Agency, responsible for analyzing Soviet and Russian nuclear strategy.

Peter, great to have you back, although I'm a little terrified of our topic. You've spent your life studying strategic matters, and in particular what Russia has been doing and China's been doing in matters nuclear. What was the impetus for writing this report?

Peter Pry ([02:21](#)):

Well, I'm very concerned that the Biden Administration may ban unilaterally the US intercontinental ballistic missiles, which is critical to the Nuclear Triad that we rely upon to deter nuclear war. The Triad comprises ICBMs, our strategic bombers, and our ballistic missile submarines. The Biden Administration anti-nuclear activists, like Plowshares, Union of Concerned Scientists, Federation of American Scientists, they've become extremely influential, more so than they have ever been in the past, but they've become an important part of the Democrat Party's political base. People from these organizations are being promoted into the Biden Administration with their anti-nuclear views.

Some of the leaders of the Democrat Party, Adam Smith, who's the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee right now, and arguably, well, after the president and after the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, he's the third most important guy, perhaps the second most important guy in our country when it comes to nuclear policy, and he wants to ban the ICBMs, too. The Biden Administration has given our ICBMs a reprieve this year. You know, they're going to continue to fund this thing called the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent, which is a replacement for the Man III ICBM, which has reached the end of its useful service life. It can't be extended any more.

But there's a nuclear posture review coming up in January, next January, that's going to reexamine all these questions, and people contributing to that nuclear posture review are going to be a lot of these anti-nuclear activists. It can provide political cover for the president to then ban ICBMs or to

not provide a modernization replacement for the Minuteman III, which will be in effect the same thing as a ban on ICBMs.

Bill Walton ([04:12](#)):

Now, the ICBMs, we have 400 missile silos located mainly in the middle of the United States, and those are underground missiles that are aimed at firing intercontinentally over to Europe, Russia, China, whatever, in the instance of war. Is that an accurate description of ICBMs?

Peter Pry ([04:32](#)):

Mostly. Yeah. There's 400 Minuteman III ICBMs that are deployed in our force, and they are in hardened missile silos. They would have to attack with a nuclear weapon to destroy them. But they're not aimed at Russia and China. One of the things we have done to try to persuade Russia and China that we're not a threat to them is we have de-targeted our ICBMs, so they're not aimed at Russia or China. They're aimed at broad ocean areas, just in case, for example, there was an accidental launch, that they would go into the sea and they would not strike another county.

Bill Walton ([05:05](#)):

So, the ISBMs are part of what's called the Triad.

Peter Pry ([05:09](#)):

Yes.

Bill Walton ([05:09](#)):

The other two people are strategic bombers and submarines.

Peter Pry ([05:13](#)):

That's right.

Bill Walton ([05:14](#)):

What's the state of our strategic bombing force now?

Peter Pry ([05:18](#)):

Well, most people think that it's like the way it was in the Cold War, where we have bombers armed with nuclear weapons constantly on patrol in the air, but that hasn't been the case for decades. After the Cold War, we grounded the bomber fleet. For a while they were on strip alert, ready to take off on short notice. That situation doesn't exist. The bombers basically don't have nuclear weapons on them. They're not on strip alert. It would take three days to mobilize this strategic bomber force. We used to have over 40 SAC bases, 40 strategic bomber bases. Those have been reduced to three. So, all of our strategic bombers are now concentrated on three bases.

Bill Walton ([06:01](#)):

Most of us, unfortunately, get a lot of our ideas about this from Dr. Strangelove, the movie.

Peter Pry ([06:06](#)):

Exactly.

Bill Walton ([06:08](#)):

There's the image of Slim Pickens flying around on his B-52 with his cowboy hat on. That isn't happening anymore.

Peter Pry ([06:14](#)):

It isn't happening anymore. No. We don't have bombers on day-to-day patrols like that anymore. It would take us three days to mobilize the bomber force. It's called generating the force.

Bill Walton ([06:25](#)):

You mentioned this in your title. We'll talk about it in depth later, but surprise attacks. In the event of surprise, the bombers are not really ready to come into action with any alacrity.

Peter Pry ([06:37](#)):

The bombers would be completely destroyed in a surprise attack, and even North Korea could do it, because there's only three targets.

Bill Walton ([06:45](#)):

Then the other piece, the third piece are the nuclear submarines. We have, what, 20 nuclear submarines, 16 nuclear submarines?

Peter Pry ([06:52](#)):

No. We've got 14.

Bill Walton ([06:53](#)):

14.

Peter Pry ([06:54](#)):

During the height of the Cold War, we used to have about 35 to 40. Okay? Which meant that we could have about a third of that force on patrol, about 13 to 14 constantly on control. Now, we only have 14, which means that we on a daily basis have about two or three of them on patrol in the Atlantic or Pacific. The rest of them, 10 submarines, 11 sometimes, are in port, where they could be destroyed in a surprise attack.

Bill Walton ([07:22](#)):

Well, this seems-

Peter Pry ([07:24](#)):

There's also only two ports to attack, so even North Korea could do that, too. It takes only five weapons to destroy the bomber force, which is not alerted, and to take out two thirds of the ballistic missile submarine fleet when it is not generated. Five weapons. North Korea could do that.

Bill Walton ([07:42](#)):

North Korea and China could also do it?

Peter Pry (07:45):

Oh. Of course. Russia could do it.

Bill Walton (07:45):

And Russia could also do it?

Peter Pry (07:45):

You know, even Iran could do it, even though they don't have nuclear weapons, because the bombers are not hardened facility and neither are the submarines. Iran, for example, has the Club-K Missile from China, so it could turn any freighter into a potential missile launch platform and use anti-ship missiles, for example, to destroy those submarines in port. It could use, similarly, missiles like that to go after the bomber bases and destroy the bombers where they are with conventional weapons.

Bill Walton (08:16):

Well, there's the talk about ... I want to get your term right about the nuclear balance or the arsenal we have. One of the points you make is we've got a theoretical arsenal of 5,000 warheads or whatever, compared to China's number and Russia's number. Now, those headline numbers are not the real numbers.

Peter Pry (08:36):

Those are not the real numbers. Those are the numbers the press usually cites, because those are the numbers that our usually put out by anti-nuclear groups, like the Federation of American Scientists or the Union of Concerned Scientists, because they like to make it sound like the United States and Russia, certainly the United States, has got a lot more nuclear weapons that are operational than it really has. Those are what are called stockpiled weapons. Those are the weapons in a stockpile. In other words, we have something like 5,000 weapons in the nuclear stockpile, but those weapons are not operational. They're not available to bombers. They're not available submarines. They're not on ICBMs. They're warehoused someplace, many of them waiting dismantlement. Many of them are too old, and they're being used to keep the other nuclear weapons that are operational operational.

Most Americans don't realize that the nuclear weapons that are on our ICBMs, bombers, and submarines are older than the Reagan Administration. They're the same weapons that Ronald Reagan built, or before the Reagan administration. These weapons are way past their design life. You know? They should have been retired a long time ago. We keep them alive by patching them up and taking parts from the stockpile to keep those nuclear weapons active. We really have, oh, about ... under the START Treaty, the New START Treaty, we're permitted 1,550 strategic weapons, operational strategic weapons. We have less than that in operation. We've got 1,300 to 1,400 operational strategic weapons on our bombers, ICBMs. The numbers that are actually available are much less than the stockpiled numbers.

Bill Walton (10:20):

Well, if they've just been sitting there, how do we know they'll work?

Peter Pry (10:24):

Well, that's a matter of great controversy. There's this thing that was established during the Clinton Administration, called the Nuclear Stockpile Stewardship Program. I wrote a report on this when I worked on the House Armed Services Committee. The late, great Floyd Spence, who was the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, didn't want that. He didn't want the Nuclear Stockpile Stewardship Program, science based so-called, because what it did is it ended nuclear testing. You see, Bill Clinton wanted us to sign onto the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and do no more nuclear testing, but in order to do that, they had to make a case, well, we can continue to maintain and have confidence in our nuclear deterrent by not testing them, but by having scientists look at the bombs, and examine the bombs, and do calculations, and use computer models to certify that these nuclear weapons will still work. That's what we've been doing for 30 years.

It's kind of equivalent. Supposed we were talking about an airliner, instead of a nuclear weapon, and supposed you had a Boeing 747 and you said, "Well, I'm not going to fly that Boeing 474 for 30 or 40 years, but I'm going to have people who are smart engineers, and engineers who didn't develop that 747, mind you, because those people have passed away or are in retirement, but we'll have some smart kids with their pocket calculators, and computers, and models of how a 747 is supposed to work inspect the parts, never turn it on, never fly it for 30 or 40 years. Then we're going to certify to Congress that this thing will still fly, based on this kind of scientific analysis." I would not get in that 747 and trust my life to it after it hasn't flown for 30 to 40 years. I don't think any normal, intelligent person would do it. But that's what we're expecting with our nuclear weapons.

Many of our best scientists, like Dr. John Foster and Lowell Wood ... Dr. Foster, by the way, designed most of the nuclear weapons that are in our current missile inventory. ... have said the Science Based stockpile Stewardship thing doesn't work. This is really dangerous. Every year that goes on decreases the confidence that these weapons will actually be safe and reliable and work. People who have worked in the Stockpile Stewardship Program, after they were retired from Los Alamos or Livermore, have written articles warning that we were in this program, and we're concerned that the credibility of these weapons is decreasing.

Now, to add that cherry on top of this story, it turns out last year the State Department, which is always the last one to admit when an arms control treaty is being violated, the State Department finally admitted last year that Russia and China have been violating the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty for 30 years, and they've been conducting low yield testing all this time that we haven't been doing the testing. This has given them an enormous technological lead over us. We're basically 30 years behind Russia and China in developing new technology, advanced nuclear weapons.

Bill Walton ([13:31](#)):

You're watching the Bill Walton Show, and I'm here with Dr. Peter Vincent Pry. We're talking about really it sounds like the deplorable state of our nuclear arsenal and how we've let things deteriorated over the last three decades. It seems like, principally because of ideological reasons, we've decided to unilaterally disarm. Is that a fair way to talk about this?

Peter Pry ([13:56](#)):

Yes. I think so. It's a bipartisan fault, too, because this has happened across Republican and Democrat administrations. I think with this new administration ... With the Obama Administration and this new administration, the Biden Administration has been worse on this. But for both parties and the strategic culture in Washington and America's whole, among people who tend to think about this, is nuclear war is unthinkable anyway. We'll never have a nuclear war, because it's unthinkable. You can't win a nuclear war. Therefore, we can afford to neglect this area. Except for people in strat com and who are really

specialists in this. Your average person in Washington who's involved in the National Security Committee thinks that way. That's part of our strategic culture, but it's not part of the strategic culture of our potential adversaries. In their military doctrine, they write about how to fight and win nuclear wars. You know? They don't buy into the US/western view that nuclear weapons are unusable. They can only be used for deterrent.

President Biden just yesterday had a public statement now with Vladimir Putin saying, "Oh. Nuclear war can't be won, and we must never have one," in a public statement. On the Russian side, that's a lie, because in the Russian military doctrine and strategic forces exercises that they constantly conduct, in which Vladimir Putin personally participates in launching forces, unlike on our side, they play out games where they fight and win nuclear wars.

Bill Walton ([15:36](#)):

Why? How did we come to this point? I must admit, until I read your report, I was in the category of, well, nuclear war is not going to happen. It's unthinkable. Everybody understands you can't win one. While they've been testing their weapons, they've also been developing new weapons, which are a lot more lethal, stealthy, tactical almost than we think of as the bombs that went off in World War II.

Peter Pry ([16:03](#)):

That's right. They have a wide range of new weapons, as do the Chinese, but especially the Russians, ranging from ultra low yield tactical nuclear weapons that might have a yield of one kiloton. That's equivalent to 1,000 tons of TNT. It's like one twentieth the power of the Hiroshima bomb. That is pure fusion, and so it produces no fallout. It could be used, for example, to destroy a bridge or take out an adversary's armored division. Then you could just roll your tanks right through that area, through the blasted enemy lines. Things like neutron weapons, ultra low yield neutron weapons, which are designed for taking out armored units or would be great for anti-aircraft and anti-space purposes. X radiation weapons, which was another way of arming anti-ballistic missile systems.

One of the ones that I find most worrisome is super EMP weapons. These are weapons designed basically to put out gamma rays. They can have a very low yield, but they put out extraordinarily powerful electromagnetic pulse fields that can cover a huge area and fields that are more intense, for example, 100,000 volts per meter that exceed the hardening, the military hardening standard, which is 50,000 volts per meter on our side. Theoretically, and the EMP commission warned about this, you could use a super EMP weapon to win a nuclear war, potentially with very few weapons, maybe even just one, because it could fry our ICBMs in their silos, the bombers on their bases, the ballistic missile submarines, and cut off our means of communicating with the submarines at sea, the small number of submarines at sea, so that they couldn't receive emergency action messages, which are necessary for them to execute their forces. They need to get unlocking codes or the missiles on the submarines are useless.

Bill Walton ([17:59](#)):

We hear that nobody can win a nuclear war. You disagree.

Peter Pry ([18:03](#)):

Yes. Not only I disagree, but the Russians and Chinese disagree, too. You can tell by reading their military doctrine. It's really just a matter of common sense. You don't have to be a nuclear strategist to understand that. For example, World War II was nuclear war. Hiroshima and Nagasaki happened during World War II. We won that war. This establishes a principle that anybody should be able to understand,

that a nuclear weapon state, a state that has nuclear weapons, is clearly going to be able to defeat, win decisively against any state that doesn't have nuclear weapons. Now, that's most of the world. Most of the world doesn't have nuclear weapons, and so that gives North Korea, China, Russian, Iran ... I believe Iran already has nuclear weapons, but when they get nuclear weapons, they're-

Bill Walton ([18:52](#)):

Does China believe they could win a nuclear war against the United States?

Peter Pry ([18:56](#)):

Yeah. I think they do. I think they think they could. Another aspect of winning a nuclear war that I would like to explore here, because this is not ... Another issue that isn't widely understood is one of the things that's most attractive about nuclear weapons and makes them strategic weapons is you don't actually have to use them to win. Okay? The late, great Colin Gray, who was one of the West's greatest strategic thinkers, argued, and I think correctly, that since the invention of nuclear weapons, that every war that has ever been fought, either between the superpowers or between allies involving the superpowers, has been in effect a nuclear war, because when military and political leaders engage in these wars, always looming in the background, shaping the mental and psychological geography or the conduct of that war is the reality of nuclear weapons. They're planning, and what they do is greatly influenced by that.

Bill Walton ([20:04](#)):

Well, that influenced our conduct in the Vietnam War.

Peter Pry ([20:07](#)):

Sure. Lyndon Johnson wouldn't invade North Korea, excuse me, North Vietnam, because he was afraid, as in the invasion of North Korea in the Korean War, it would bring in China and get us into a nuclear war with China. So, we lost the Vietnam War due in part to the nuclear concurrence of China. We managed to avoid both of the Berlin crises from becoming world wars, because of our tactical nuclear weapons and the strategic weapons that we had. John F. Kennedy managed to keep the Cuban Missile Crisis from becoming a thermonuclear war, and he won the Cuban Missile Crisis, because we had a five to one superiority over the Soviet Union at that time in ICBMs. You know?

Why has nobody done anything to, except economic sanctions against, Russia for seizure of Crimea and for in effect seizing part of Ukraine, even though we have given security guarantees to Ukraine. It's because they're a nuclear weapon state, and so we are deterred from pushing too hard or pushing back too much against Russia, because they're a nuclear weapon state. There are many cases you can go through, examples of historical precedence where the fact, the existence of nuclear weapons has shaped decisions and in effect people have won wars, or gotten away with crises, or engaged in aggressive behavior successfully, because of nuclear weapons.

The put down by the Soviet Union of the Hungarian Revolution in the 1950s, their put down of the Czech Revolt in 1968, why didn't we do anything? Why didn't we go in and help the Hungarians and the Czechs? Because we didn't want to get in a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Our very victory in the Cold War, they had a five to one superiority in tanks. If it was just a matter of conventional forces, the Soviet Union during most of the Cold War could have concurred NATO and gone to the English Channel. They didn't do it. Why? Because they were deterred by US nuclear weapons. In the end, our intelligent use of nuclear deterrents, our intelligence use of nuclear strategy enabled us to prevail and defeat the Soviet Union without it becoming a thermonuclear war, almost bloodlessly, because they were crushed, because communism didn't work. They were crushed over the burden of their own

economy, but they didn't roll the dice on trying to reverse their verdict of history, because of nuclear deterrents.

We won that, but we seem to have, as in so many cases with wars, we seem to have forgotten the lessons of why we won the Cold War and the role that nuclear weapons played in that. But they have learned that that nuclear advantage, the role that nuclear weapons play in a US victory in the Cold War is something that they need to take advantage of in the new Cold War that we're currently prosecuting. Unfortunately, we've allowed the strategic balance to get very much in their favor, very much in the favor of Russia at least. I think it's actually in the favor of China, too, because I think we're grossly underestimating the size and competency of the Chinese nuclear arsenal.

Bill Walton ([23:19](#)):

Well, talk about the Virtual Great Wall in China.

Peter Pry ([23:25](#)):

Right. The Underground Great Wall. Right? We didn't know about this for many years. I think some of the best analysis on this doesn't come out of our intelligence community, which often produces. It has people who are ... Well, maybe I shouldn't get into beating up on my old agency. But I do think that the process that happens-

Bill Walton ([23:49](#)):

Your old agency being the CIA?

Peter Pry ([23:50](#)):

Right. Right.

Bill Walton ([23:51](#)):

We did a show a few weeks ago on a woke CIA.

Peter Pry ([23:54](#)):

Oh my goodness. [inaudible 00:23:55]

Bill Walton ([23:56](#)):

Which is a broke CIA.

Peter Pry ([23:58](#)):

That's right. I don't know how we are going to be able to survive without a really competent intelligence community.

Bill Walton ([24:04](#)):

Anyway, [inaudible 00:24:05] interrupt, but I want to get you ... Continue.

Peter Pry ([24:07](#)):

Well, one of the great failings I think of intelligence community analysis and why they so often get things wrong is that in the intelligence community culture, there's an insistence on a corporate view. They have

to establish a corporate view. You have to have a majority of analysts, for example, agree on an assessment. In any organization, you've got a few brilliant people, a lot of average people, and then a few stupid people. Okay? When you average it all out, what you come out with is a mediocre assessment. It's a middle of the road kind of an assessment on those things. But the brilliant people, they don't prevail. Okay? It's a middle of the road kind of an assessment.

When you're dealing with independent analysts, however, there are brilliant people who get to say what they really think. They usually tend to be right. At least I think the historical record shows that. There was an experiment called the B Team Experiment. Richard Pipes, for example, the Harvard expert on the Soviet Union of Russia, was a member of the B Team that was brought in to assess during the Cold War whether the intelligence community was right about Russian military strategy and how they thought about things, because the intelligence community was saying, "Well, the Russians and the Soviets tend to think the way we do. They believe in mutually assured destruction, that you can't win a nuclear war." The people who were saying that were unread in the literature I think, or they were in denial.

The B Team demonstrated that they were wrong about this. In the aftermath of the Cold War, when we got ahold of the Soviet archives about what did they really think and what were they planning, it turned out the B Team was right. Today, on the issue of China, there was a brilliant guy named Phil Karber who broke the story on the Underground Great Wall and said, "You know, when you look at the size of the Chinese nuclear arsenal, we're saying they've only got 200 weapons. They can actually fit a ballistic missile force that could carry 3,000 weapons in the Underground Great Wall, which by the way, belongs to China's Strategic Rocket Forces. It's part of their nuclear deterrent. Why do they have an Underground Great Wall?"

Bill Walton ([26:30](#)):

So, the Underground great Wall is part of their Space Force.

Peter Pry ([26:33](#)):

Well, it's part of their nuclear missile [crosstalk 00:26:35].

Bill Walton ([26:35](#)):

Okay. You're watching the Bill Walton Show. I'm here with Peter Pry, and we're talking about the failure of our intelligence community to very often understand the nature of the true threats we face, first with Russia and now with China. We're learning about the Virtual Great Wall, which as I understand it, is 5,000 kilometers long, 3,000 miles.

Peter Pry ([26:35](#)):

That's right.

Bill Walton ([26:56](#)):

That's extraordinary.

Peter Pry ([26:57](#)):

What we've been able to verify. Yes. We don't know what we don't know, but we do know it's at least that big.

Bill Walton ([27:06](#)):

So, we don't know. We didn't know about that. Now, we knew about that because of an entrepreneurial, independent analyst that found it out. Where was our CIA on this one? Did they not see this?

Peter Pry ([27:18](#)):

They weren't looking for it, because during the Cold War most of our, an overwhelming amount of our attention was focused on the Soviet Union. China during the Cold War was a US ally. There has also been a tendency in the intelligence community, which is a problem that exists today I think, to have so-called panda huggers in charge of the China desk. They tend to take a very sympathetic view toward China. We saw this at the end of the Trump Administration, where there was a great debate over the nature of the threat posed by China. The China analysts in the intelligence community tried to soften it down and soften the assessments about how much of a threat China was to the United States.

Bill Walton ([28:10](#)):

Swinging back to the ICBMs, because I wanted to get some context before we went into why it would be such a catastrophe to get rid of them. Three pieces of the Triad, bombers, ICBMs, submarines. Submarines, there's not that many out on the water. They could be really cut off with an EMP event that would shut off their communication. We couldn't get to them. Bombers are sitting on the ground unarmed. But what people say about the ICBMs is they could be a hair trigger and that the greatest danger is not Russian [inaudible 00:28:45], but a US blunder. Somehow these ICBMs sitting there ready to go and the doctrine of mutually ensured destruction, which is once something starts, both sides are going to be destroyed. All those things are part of this push right now to get rid of the ICBMs.

Peter Pry ([29:03](#)):

Yes. That's right. The very virtue of the ICBMs, the fact that they are on such a high level of readiness, over 95% of those ICBMs are Minuteman III ICBMs, are ready to go in a few minutes. Three minutes after they get an emergency action message from the president they can launch. The reason that's necessary on a day to day basis is that they are really our only defense against a surprise nuclear attack from the other side. They're intended to deter the other side making a surprise nuclear attack, how we try to deter them from launching this first strike. It has worked so far, all through the Cold War up until today, because they know those ICBMs are ready to go. Can they beat us to the draw? Can they strike those ICBMs and take them out before we can launch them? That's the issue.

Now, how much of a hair trigger is that? We've gone to extraordinary lengths to try to ... I think it's really exaggerated, the idea that our ICBMs pose this kind of a hair trigger threat to nuclear war. First, the United States, our political leaders and military leaders believe in nuclear deterrents, not nuclear war fighting, not striking first. We don't do nuclear Pearl Harbors. Okay?

Bill Walton ([30:22](#)):

Our armaments is all defensive, to deter, and theirs is offensive, to strike.

Peter Pry ([30:27](#)):

Yes. That's right. That's the doctrine. I think it's reflected in the characteristic of the forces. To go back to our Minuteman III, to just make a couple points about this. As I mentioned earlier, our Minuteman III force is de-targeted. It's not aimed on their missile silos and bomber bases. It's aimed on broad ocean

areas, so in case there is some kind of a mistake, the missiles would go into the ocean. But emergency action messages to launch missiles, we go through a threat conference. There's a process where we need dual phenomenology. You've got to have radar confirmation. You've got to have satellite confirmation that the United States is under attack. That's why we have NORAD, our best experts, looking at an incoming threat to assess whether the threat is real or not. We would not execute those forces lightly. Moreover, we have downloaded ... The Minuteman used to be MIRV. It carried more than one warhead, had three warheads. Okay? But we've de-MIRV-ed it, so that each warhead could attack a different independent target.

Bill Walton ([31:34](#)):

MIRV stands for multiple-

Peter Pry ([31:36](#)):

Multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle. We deliberately downloaded it to one warhead. That's not optimal for making a first strike, because that means only one missile can only destroy one target. There are more strategic targets in Russia and China than there are Minuteman Missiles to execute that first strike. But look at what the Russians and Chinese are doing. They have not followed our lead. We have reasons to believe they cheated on the de-targeting agreement, by the way, and they have heavily MIRV-ed their ICBMs. Russia's newest ICBM, the DF-41, carries 10 MIRV-ed warheads, and it's mobile. It's kind of equivalent to a mobile peacekeeper missile. China's new ICBM, called the Satan II by NATO or the Sarmat by the Russians, is capable of carrying up to 40 MIRV-ed warheads. Why do you heavily MIRV? Because one missile can take out many target. There's basically the 400 ICBM silos, three bomber bases. There's a lot less than 500 strategic targets in the United States for counter forces to attack.

Bill Walton ([32:49](#)):

And how many could North Korea reach? They could get the bomber bases and the submarine bases.

Peter Pry ([32:54](#)):

They could get the bomber bases and submarine bases. They don't have the capability to take out our ICBMs yet, because they've only got about 60 warheads. I think they've got more than that. But even my estimate, that's not enough to do that, unless they do a super EMP attack. It's possible, because a super EMP-

Bill Walton ([33:12](#)):

Quickly describe EMP. We did a show on it, but just ... Electromagnetic pulse, what that does, you explode something. It really shuts down all the electronic communication devices.

Peter Pry ([33:23](#)):

Right. It's not detonating on a city. The weapon is detonated in a high altitude. For example, at 300 kilometers altitude you could put an electromagnetic field over North America with a single weapon. If you can raise the intensity of that field high enough, it can exceed the military hardening standard, which is 50,000 volts per meter. You know? That's what we hardened our forces to. The EMP Commission, this isn't just my opinion, but gave testimony to Congress back in 2008 that North Korea has super EMP weapons. Because these weapons can generate extraordinarily powerful EMP fields, 100,000 volts per meter. For example, they could attack each of the Minuteman wings with one of

these. There's only six. Even during the Cold War, we only had six Minuteman wings. If you put a field down on each of those wings, you could potentially fry the electronics in the missiles, and the bombers are usually co-located with these things.

Potentially, possibly, it's conceivable North Korea could win a nuclear war against us by means of EMP attack, by disarming us. By winning a nuclear war I mean making a disarming attack. They wouldn't be attacking our cities, but they'd be attacking our forces and disarming our forces. How would we respond to that? Would we be able to respond? Maybe we wouldn't even be able to launch our ballistic missile submarines, the two or three of them that are at sea, because they would be disconnected from emergency action messages.

Bill Walton ([34:55](#)):

Let me do some conventional wisdom here.

Peter Pry ([34:58](#)):

Sure.

Bill Walton ([35:00](#)):

Conventional wisdom was forever China was okay, because we're helping China become more democratic. We're helping them become wealthy. We're having them enter the western, liberal world. Now, in the last several years, particular since Xi became so aggressive, it's now clear that that's not what they have in mind. The Chinese Communist Party is very aggressive, and they have plans, particularly territorial plans with regards to Taiwan. Russia, conventional wisdom I thought, well, the Soviet Union fell. It's been a kleptocracy. Putin's a thug, but they've got no industrial capability to speak of, and they're not modernizing their weapons, so therefore we don't really have to worry about Russia. North Korea, it's run by a little mad man. We don't have to worry about him, because the capability they brag about is not real. I'm sitting here listening to Peter Pry, and with a sinking feeling I'm realizing, now, wait a second. All three of these entities are serious threats.

Peter Pry ([36:05](#)):

Yes. That's right. All three of those entities are potentially mortal threats, existential threats, far more serious than climate change is to the existence of the United States.

Bill Walton ([36:16](#)):

Well, climate change.

Peter Pry ([36:20](#)):

And the western democracies. The conventional wisdom, we have always been disadvantaged when it comes to totalitarian states, when it comes to weapons of mass destruction, and particularly nuclear weapons, because of our strategic culture. There's kind of no getting around that. The strategic culture of the western democracies doesn't like to think about world wars, nuclear wars, end of the world. We're a culture of optimists. We believe tomorrow is going to be better than yesterday. Anything that tends to contradict that comfortable assumption we tend to want to deny it. This was true even before the invention of nuclear weapons.

If you look at the thinking of the western democracies, including the United States, before World War II, you had people who were pacifists, who were just as aggressive not against nuclear

weapons, but against any weapons. They were against the western democracies arming up to be able to deter Hitler, and imperial Japan, and Mussolini. They believed that World War I was caused by the merchants of death. They believed that weapons of mass destruction at the time, that the machine gun and the invention of the strategic bomber, the conventional strategic bomber, would be the end of the world for everybody, because World War I looked like the end of the world from the point of view of the western democracies. There were so many casualties. How could any rational person think about a World War II? That was the attitude, that World War II was unthinkable to 90% of the intellectuals and political leaders that lived in that interwar period. Only Winston Churchill and a handful of strategic expert who surrounded him saw what was coming.

The situation I think is analogous to today, where we want to blind ourselves, and [inaudible 00:38:16] ourselves, and not think about nuclear war fighting, nuclear strategy. We want to deny. We want to say nuclear weapons and nuclear warfare is unthinkable. There's an additional aspect to this that makes us particularly vulnerable, because the truth is that internuclear weapons are antithetical to the fundamental philosophies of free societies. Our greatest value is to serve the people. The people are the most important, valuable thing. Weapons of mass destruction, like nuclear weapons, are really antithetical to our most fundamental values. We were always sort fated to lose an arms race in nuclear weapons to adversaries who are not free systems, who are centralized, totalitarian systems, and whose highest value was placed, because they are totalitarian states, on being able to destroy their adversaries and control their adversaries, and win with or without nuclear war.

I would say that we're actually engaged in a nuclear war right now with Russia, and China, and North Korea, and we're losing it. We're losing it at the diplomatic level, because nuclear weapons, as Colin Gray observed, are used not ... Part of their greatest value is to actually employ them as diplomatic tools for blackmail. That's how we won the Cold War. We didn't actually detonate a nuclear weapon against the Soviet Union, but we deterred them for long enough, so that they collapsed from their own internal contradictions. Look what's happening in the Pacific just against North Korea. How credible are our security guarantees to Japan, South Korea, the Philippines? How credible? Are we winning against China in terms of the South China Sea? They have in effect annexed the South China Sea. We protest. We complain about it. We haven't done anything about it, because they're a nuclear power.

The strategy here is, for example, for China and North Korea, is to make the risks of underwriting our security guarantees to our allies in the Pacific so dangerous that they will lose faith that we would deliver on those security guarantees and that we might eventually withdraw from the Pacific. Indeed, it didn't get a lot of attention, but one of the biggest pieces in the chess board of the Pacific is that we had B-52 Bombers based in Guam, basically a wing of B-52 Bombers that was a core of credibility for us, and we took them out, because of the North Korean nuclear threat, and pulled them back to I think it was [inaudible 00:40:54] Air Force Base. The Air Force position was-

Bill Walton ([41:02](#)):

We pulled them back because we thought they were a target, or we pulled them back because we didn't want to seem too aggressive?

Peter Pry ([41:05](#)):

We pulled them back, because we knew they were a target. Kim, in 2019, during the nuclear crisis under Trump, threatened to strike Guam. We knew the Chinese had the ability to strike Guam.

Bill Walton ([41:15](#)):

Why aren't we hearing more about this? I mean, there have got to be a lot of people like you who are close to this whole national security apparatus. Where are the voices? Why is this not ...? In so many other areas, if you get into politics, there seems to be a blackout on things, talking about things like January 6th or the election. But there seems to be a news blackout on reporting this kind of risk.

Peter Pry ([41:41](#)):

Yeah. I think it's explainable in part by our strategic culture. The left wing mainstream media certainly is anti-nuclear on everything. They're always against any kind of modernization of the US [crosstalk 00:41:55]

Bill Walton ([41:55](#)):

They call you the root of all evil. I'm reading-

Peter Pry ([41:58](#)):

That's right.

Bill Walton ([41:58](#)):

... the letter from the head of the Physicians For Social Responsibility.

Peter Pry ([42:03](#)):

Right. Yeah. People like me are the root of all evil, because we won't give peace a chance by making a unilateral gesture of, for example, banning our ICBMs.

Bill Walton ([42:14](#)):

It seems to me like you've just described 30/40 years of unilateral gestures.

Peter Pry ([42:19](#)):

Yes. In that letter-

Bill Walton ([42:19](#)):

We've been making them time after time after time.

Peter Pry ([42:21](#)):

We have. We have. Starting with tactical nuclear weapons, right across the board. In that letter, I explained. We gave peace a chance after the end of the Cold War.

Bill Walton ([42:31](#)):

This is a letter back to Dr. [Irwin 00:42:33], whatever.

Peter Pry ([42:34](#)):

Right. I don't want to mention the last name. The Presidential Nuclear Initiative. Russia and the United States agreed that we were going to dismantle our tactical nuclear weapons. We had 15,000 tactical nuclear weapons during the Cold War. We've reduced the number to 180. Russia didn't do that. They cheated on the Presidential Nuclear Initiative. Now, they have an at least 10 to one advantage in tactical

nuclear weapons. Plus, they cheated on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, as I noted before. We haven't tested in 30 years. They did, China and Russia both. Now, they have advanced technology, tactical and strategic weapons. We have no counterparts to them in our inventory.

The Intermediate Range Nuclear Forced Treaty was supposed to banish, abolish a whole category of weapons, intermediate range nuclear missiles. We dismantled our Pershing II's and our Glicums. They no longer exist. It turns out that Russia cheated on that, too. They have a unilateral advantage in intermediate range nuclear forces. They're probably cheating on the New START Treaty. The State Department is always the last one to acknowledge when these arms control treaties are being violated. They are still contending that Russia is in compliance with the New START Treaty. But independent experts, people whose judgment I trust most on these things, assess that Russian is probably cheating on the New START Treaty and probably has a two to one advantage in long range strategic nuclear weapons, at least, over us. It's not hard to see why you should draw that conclusion, because the verification provisions in the New START Treaty are abysmal. We really can't verify that treaty.

Bill Walton ([44:18](#)):

Well, after all of these series of I guess strategic blunders, tactical retreats, whatever, through the last three or four decades, you're saying we're now though at an even more ...? What's your phrase for the point of time we're in now with regard to the ICBMs?

Peter Pry ([44:33](#)):

Oh. I liken it to the hinge of fate. The decision we're making now about do we modernize the Minuteman III, replace the Minuteman III with a new ICBM, the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent, which is the replacement for the Minuteman III, do we do that to keep the Triad alive, to try to keep, sustain the credibility of the Triad of Nuclear Deterrents, which is what enabled us to prevail in the Nuclear Cold War without having a World War III? Or are we going to be so foolish and blind that we're going to get rid of those 400 ICBMs and their hardened silos, which will make it possible for even North Korea to win a nuclear war against us by a surprise attack?

Bill Walton ([45:21](#)):

What about the votes? Is this something that Congress votes on, or is this something that happens in the Defense Department? What's the political process towards this decision?

Peter Pry ([45:32](#)):

There are votes that have to be taken, and there's negotiations that are going to happen this summer between the House Armed Services Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee. House Armed Services Committee that has been shared by Adam Smith, they want to ban ICBMs. They want to get rid of them or not fund the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent, which is the same thing as eliminating our ICBM force, because the Minuteman III is at the end of its service life. It can't continue and be a credible deterrent. This issue will be decided this summer.

Now, I think we'll win this time, but only because the Biden Administration has not come in on the side of the anti-nuclear forces in Congress and said, "Yeah. We're defunding the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent." They've allowed funding to be there. Still, who knows what's going to happen? The argument, the battle is going to go on this summer, and negotiations are going to continue. My concern is that there's going to be a nuclear posture review under the Biden Administration in January, and they're bringing in all kinds of anti-nuclear people.

Bill Walton ([46:37](#)):

January 2022.

Peter Pry ([46:39](#)):

January 2022. A new nuclear posture review. They're bringing in all kinds of anti-nuclear people from the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Nuclear Threat Initiative, who have senior positions in the nuclear enterprise, who will no doubt inform and participate in the new nuclear posture review. I'm very concerned that the new nuclear posture review will give the Biden Administration the political cover it wants and needs, so that it can make this unilateral grand gesture that the anti-nuclear forces want and say, "Well, we're going to abolish US ICBMs and hope that China and Russia follow our leads," or, "We're not going to fund the follow on ICBM, the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent, and we're going to extend the Minuteman II," which is another possible way of basically banning ICBMs while pretending to have a functional ICBM force.

Bill Walton ([47:30](#)):

So, what should we do, people, those of us listening and watching? What's our line of action here?

Peter Pry ([47:38](#)):

I think people should reach out to their members of Congress and to their Senators and say, "We want you on the right side of this. Our lives are at stake in this. The future of America and the western democracies are at stake. Do not defund the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent. Replace the Minuteman III with a new ICBM." I would like to even go beyond that. One of the things I recommend in the report is that we finally realize Ronald Reagan's dream, because I too have reservations. I break company with a lot of my nuclear hawk colleagues on how long can we go with nuclear deterrents without getting into a nuclear war?

I think it's increasingly unstable, because of the kinds of technologies that are being developed increasingly favor striking first and achieving surprise attack. Hypersonic warheads is just one example. Here are weapons that can basically evade our radars, greatly reduce our strategic warning time, maneuver so that the existing national missile defenses can't intercept them, and have extraordinary accuracy, so you can basically blow up a hardened target with very low yield. This is the dream that people who believe in nuclear war fighting, and nuclear war, and winning their wars in Russia and China have been waiting for. Eventually, I'm afraid of us getting into a 1914 or 1940/1939 type scenario, where the temptation to strike us will be so great, because the advantages of the offense will be so great that Russia, China, or North Korea will find it irresistible.

The way to get out of the nuclear deterrence trap is not by disarming yourself and making futile gestures of unilaterally disarming yourself. The way to do it ... There is a way out. Ronald Reagan had that vision. It's the way historically you can render military technologies obsolete by coming up with a better, more stable military technology. Reagan's vision of a space based missile shield to render nuclear missiles obsolete, that's the way out. Come up with a better system. We did actually. It was called Brilliant Pebbles. It was ready for deployment during the Clinton Administration. This was the fruit of Reagan's strategic defense initiative that the mainstream, left wing press never likes to talk about, because they're also against missile defenses. So is the Physicians For Social Responsibility, by the way. They don't want us to defend ourselves or deploy missile defenses.

But space based missile defenses, we still have great technological capabilities, I believe still have an advantage over our adversaries. This is the way of rendering mutually assured destruction obsolete. I talk about replacing it with a new strategic doctrine, called Strategic Assured National

Existence, or SANE. The American people don't want to be avenged in the event of a nuclear war, after our children and our cities are destroyed. They want to be protected. How can anyone be against? But they are. How can anyone be against the system that kills nuclear missiles and not people? That's how we can transition out of it. Reagan even wanted to share the technology. I wouldn't be against that, because if you get into a strategic defensive arms race, all the sides become safer and more secure. It makes more and more obsolete the offensive strategies and offensive weapons that are currently putting us at such great peril.

Bill Walton ([51:24](#)):

Peter, thank you. You've been watching the Bill Walton Show. I've been talking with a serious man, Dr. Peter Vincent Pry, on a serious topic, which is nuclear warfare. I think we've made some progress to understand what's at stake and what we can do about it. Peter, thanks for offering up a solution. I'd like to have you back at some point, some time, to get into this a little further, to see where we can take it, because this is one of the most vital issues Americans will face, much more important than a lot of the silly things we've seen in headlines. Stay tuned to this and future shows on this topic. Peter, thank you.

Peter Pry ([52:04](#)):

Thank you so much for having me.

Bill Walton ([52:06](#)):

Okay. Great. Thank you. Thanks for joining. I hope you enjoyed the conversation. Want more? Click the subscribe button or head over to thebillwaltonshow.com to choose from over 100 episodes. You can also learn more about our guest on our interesting people page. Send us your comments. We read every one. Your thoughts help us guide the show. If it's easier for you to listen, check out our podcast page and subscribe there. In return, we'll keep you informed about what's true, what's right, and what's next. Thanks for joining.