

TBWS Stephen Bryen

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.

([00:28](#)):

Well, events continue to escalate in Ukraine with Russia's invasion, and we have reports now of Russia launching missiles into Ukraine. And we also have headlines in the Wall Street Journal on how Ukrainian strategy is running circles around Russia's lumbering military. And we also have other headlines, which my guest today, Stephen Bryen, has offered up, which I think is a little closer to reality, which is Russia aims to bomb Ukraine back to the Stone Age. Which is it? Are the Ukrainians running circles around Russia, or are we looking at Ukraine reduced to rubble?

([01:14](#)):

Back again, returning guest many times, the brilliant Dr. Stephen Bryen. He's a senior fellow at the Center for Security Policy in the Yorktown Institute, and he has over 50 years experience in the securities industry, national security. Senior staff director, US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And it's a long resume, but my favorite summary is that Stephen's been called the Yoda of the Arms Trade. He knows everything cold in terms of what's happening in the world and arms, and as we know arms are in short supply in Ukraine.

([01:52](#)):

So, with that I hope glowing introduction, Stephen...

Stephen Bryen ([01:56](#)):

Very glowing. Thank you.

Bill Walton ([01:57](#)):

... And maybe sobering. [inaudible 00:02:01].

([02:01](#)):

Let's jump into this because as a non-national security, long time veteran, I'm a little confused about what's happening.

Stephen Bryen ([02:14](#)):

Well, I think two things are happening in parallel. I think, one is that the Ukrainians have taken the initiative in the Donbas area, and a little bit in the south, in Kherson, and have been beating the Russians, and then pushing them back a bit. And that's to their credit. They've been very capable fighters.

([02:36](#)):

And the other thing that's happening is the Russians are in the midst of changing its strategy, and a big part of that new strategy is to go after the critical infrastructure of Ukraine, and to make the war

extremely painful for all Ukrainians, and that's what we're seeing right now. The last two or three days have been heavy bombardments of thermal power plants, of command centers, of communication centers, that kind of thing. So, it's going on right now.

Bill Walton ([03:08](#)):

Well, the headline is pretty startling. Except for the obvious fact that they're doing it, do you have any insights into the Russian thinking?

Stephen Bryen ([03:19](#)):

Well, it's been in the Russian press, and if you read it, and we can't always believe everything that's written there, but if you read it carefully, and pay attention, I think they've made it clear that they're saying they're retaliating for the bombing of the Crimean Bridge, and that this is what it's about. But I think it's much more of a bigger strategy, because they appointed a new leader.

([03:43](#)):

He has a record of decimating urban areas as he did in Syria, in the Aleppo mess. And so, that's what they're going to do, because, look, the Russian military right now is in a state of considerable confusion. They have not performed well. I think it's clear, even in Russia on TV, you see them talking about that.

([04:12](#)):

The troops were not properly trained. The Generals and senior colonels who were running the show really are not very competent. They've lost a huge amount of equipment. They have more, but they've lost a huge amount. And of course, they've had high casualties, much higher than Afghanistan, for example, which actually was what spelled the end of the Soviet Union. They have problems, serious, big problems.

Bill Walton ([04:44](#)):

It seemed like the two headlines were not really in conflict. One of them was talking about conventional war and they were talking about tactics going back to World War II, and cited European or British military historians. And at a tactical level, based on what they're doing in the battlefield, maybe that's happening, but in a larger sense, it seems like Russia has still been fighting with one arm behind its back by not deploying things like these missiles so far. Has Russia been holding back and now the mightier weapons are being unleashed?

Stephen Bryen ([05:23](#)):

To some extent, they have been because they thought they could win it on the ground in a conventional fight, with a fairly small army, about 150,000 troops. So, they thought they could win it that way. They did for a while, but now they're getting pushed back, and they've had to go into this special call up of reserves and call up of draft eligible people up to the age of 50.

([05:51](#)):

I would have to get my rifle if I were living in [inaudible 00:05:55]. They're reaching down into the barrel to try and shore up what is supposed to be a special military operation. Not a big deal, but it's turned into a very big deal.

Bill Walton ([06:12](#)):

I assume that Putin appointed general, what's his name, Sergey Surovikin.

Stephen Bryen (06:17):

Surovikin.

Bill Walton (06:19):

And his nickname is General Armageddon.

Stephen Bryen (06:22):

That's right. That's him. [inaudible 00:06:25]. Yeah, appointed directly by Putin. There was even a ceremony in Moscow where he made him commander of the overall operation. He was the commander of the southern part.

Bill Walton (06:37):

Is Putin losing control of events in Russia? Is he losing support among the people around him? What's happening with the... [inaudible 00:06:47].

Stephen Bryen (06:46):

Well, if you read the Western press, he's lost control and he's probably dead because he has all these diseases. [inaudible 00:06:56].

Bill Walton (06:55):

That's one of the reasons I wanted to talk with you, is you tend to look past the...

Stephen Bryen (07:00):

Well, he's very much alive. He's getting older, and you can see some of that aging. He's getting stiffer, but so am I. That happens when you get older. But I think he's still very much in control. I don't see any immediate, imminent threat to him.

(07:21):

But again, you're reading tea leaves. It's like Criminology II, because we used to see who was standing on the wall, in the Soviet times to try and figure out who was ascending, and who was descending. Now, we don't have that. We could use the wall, it would be nice. But without it, we have to kind of guess. But it looks to me like from everything I hear that he has managed to turn the corner in terms of getting popular support for the war.

Bill Walton (07:52):

Do you think Putin's doing this to try to bring us to the negotiation table?

Stephen Bryen (08:01):

He says he is. He says it very clearly. [inaudible 00:08:03].

Bill Walton (08:04):

But the Biden administration has not been willing to talk to him from the outset of this. It seems to me that Victoria Newlan, is that our strategist? She seems bent on regime change, and from the very beginning they've been thinking they could get rid of Putin. I don't think United States does regime change very well, looking at our track record. I don't think this is going to be any different.

Stephen Bryen ([08:32](#)):

Well, and of course, change to what? I mean, no one can say... Suppose that Putin had a heart attack tomorrow morning. It could happen. Anyone could, or he is disabled and they have to replace him. What are you going to get? Some people say, "Well [inaudible 00:08:54], just another KGB guy. He'll take over." Which is possible. But maybe some General will take over. It's just impossible to say what you would get. So, if you want to play regime change games, you could get much worse. You could get some xenophobic, crazy, right wing lunatic that takes over and says, "Well, I'll just use nuclear weapons. To hell with this war." I mean, Putin is at least somewhat responsible in that sense.

Bill Walton ([09:23](#)):

Well, I know neither you nor I feel like the Putin Administration's handled this remotely in a very... Not been very clever or smart about this. But what's their thinking today? Do you think that they might be reassessing the idea that they're going to try to do a regime change, and might think, "Well, maybe we ought to wrap this thing up?"

Stephen Bryen ([09:46](#)):

You're talking about the Biden Administration.

Bill Walton ([09:48](#)):

The Biden Administration.

Stephen Bryen ([09:50](#)):

Who are really responsible for this whole war. I mean, they caused this war. It didn't have to have a war.

Bill Walton ([09:58](#)):

Explain that. [inaudible 00:10:02]. This is an American war, these Ukrainians as proxies. That's clear. The Ukrainians wanted to kick the Russians out too, no doubt. And they've been working at it for a number of years. It's not entirely Washington. But Putin wanted to negotiate based on the Minsk agreements, Minsk II specifically, which had a clear provision that said that the goal of this negotiation was to create autonomous zones, Russian speaking zones. They would still be part of Ukraine and it would still be under Ukrainian law and the Ukrainian constitution and subject to the Ukrainian parliament. That's clearly in the agreement.

([10:51](#)):

Putin wanted to negotiate that. And he sent two letters before they invaded, back in 2021 in December. He sent two letters. One letter was sent to Biden or to his Secretary of State, and the other was sent to the NATO headquarters to Biden. He was saying, "Let's negotiate this. We're ready to do that. You convince the Ukrainians to join us in this kind of negotiation." And the other letter was about European security and Russia's claim that it needs to be re-looked because of the nuclear problem. They saw the US might be putting nuclear weapons in Poland.

([11:36](#)):

And I don't think they were right about that, but that was their perception. That had to be settled. That issue had to be worked. And the US rejected the Biden letter said, "No," and then NATO rejected the reassessment of security letter. They said, "No." And there was no negotiation. They slapped Putin in the face and they said, "We're going to keep promoting Ukraine and arming Ukraine." And he had these

forces sitting there on the border, so he moved them over. That was the special operation. Washington was directly responsible for this.

Stephen Bryen ([12:14](#)):

The Ukrainians are again asking for more military supply, the whole gamut. You know our arsenal about as well as anybody. I mean at what point do we say, "Look, the cupboard's bare here and we can't continue to support you the way we have?"

Bill Walton ([12:35](#)):

Well, we're already pretty close to that. Now, I think we have to start yanking the equipment from active forces to supply Ukraine. The high Mars, for example, we can't produce those in time for Ukraine. So, we have to yank them from marine units and army units, and send them to Ukraine, which puts us in some trouble in the Pacific where we need high Mars. So, it's very dangerous, and that's just one example, air defenses. The Ukrainians are saying we need air defenses. Where are we going to get them? We would have to take them out of our inventory, of active systems and move them to Ukraine.

([13:20](#)):

And even then they're not going to do that... These are mostly patriot missiles. They're not going to do a great job. They don't do a great job now, so don't expect much. But the Ukrainians want them. The Europeans, the Germans just shipped in Irish tea, a missile system, but they've taken it out of... The German army doesn't have any, because they were expecting it, but they ripped them out and sent them to Ukraine instead. I mean, this is a little crazy. You don't really want to weaken your security that way, and it's not necessary either.

Stephen Bryen ([13:56](#)):

Well, what do you see from Germany and the rest of Europe? Because it's about to get very cold in Europe, and one of the real prices that we've paid for this is the shutting down of the natural gas shipments to Europe and Germany's, what, roughly 40, 40% or so dependent on Russian gas, which is not coming. Particularly now that someone, we can speculate who, blew up or sabotaged the Nord Stream pipeline, right? We're going to have a cold winter. At what point do the European politicians say, get a rested populous that says, "You've got to cut this thing out. You've got to get the United States to help you bring about some sort of negotiation."

Bill Walton ([14:48](#)):

Well, I think that Schultz in Germany and Macron and France are in trouble. I mean, I think they're in trouble and the trouble will really get bad in December when it really gets cold in January and all that. They're on the precipice of a political revolt in those countries. I think that's pretty clear. But they're under great pressure from Washington who have stepped up LNG deliveries to Europe to try and compensate in some way for the missing natural gas. They won't do it, not enough. I think they're in a very difficult circumstance. I don't have a crystal ball in this, but if I were guessing their tolerance for staying in the Ukraine war is going to become very limited in month or so.

([15:42](#)):

At what point does Russia move from the... Nobody knows the answer, but could you explain again what a tactical nuke is? My understanding is it's different in degree, but not in kind. A nuclear weapon is a nuclear weapon. I mean, is this something that...

Stephen Bryen ([16:01](#)):

They're calling tactical nuclear weapons at 15 kilotons tactical. The bomb that destroyed Hiroshima was 11 kilotons.

Bill Walton ([16:11](#)):

Yeah, that's my understanding.

Stephen Bryen ([16:14](#)):

So, come on, there used to be things like tactical artillery, which had smaller yields, but we've gotten rid of all that. I don't think the Russians have with either anymore, but they have missiles with nuclear weapons on them. I don't believe in this distinction, actually. I mean, nuclear war's, nuclear war. If we get into a nuclear war, the chance of global nuclear war is very high, indeed.

Bill Walton ([16:45](#)):

Well, why is it that we have so many people here in Washington who seem to think... Then there's some of my favorite smart generals are saying things like, "Well, if they deploy tactical nuke, we'll just go in and we'll wipe them out conventionally."

([17:00](#)):

I mean, when people say that, I think in what planet have you been dwelling recently? I mean, one of the things I think people fail to... I mean, on one hand we've got people in the conservative world or maybe America first world, and I would put myself among them that says, "We've got to be very careful about these involvements because of what it does to America." But also, we also have got to think about the reality of the Biden administration and how they've been systematically deconstructing our military, and what they're doing with vaccine mandates to get people out and all sorts of other things they've done to seemingly weaken our ability. And yet we act like we can rev up that old army from the good old days and go in and settle this thing. I don't think we've got that capability.

Stephen Bryen ([17:53](#)):

Well, we have a lot of capabilities, especially air power. So, if we enter the war, we're going to have a war with Russia. It's not going to be just Ukraine.

Bill Walton ([18:05](#)):

Well, how do we end up with [inaudible 00:18:06]. One thing that remains conventional though...

Stephen Bryen ([18:10](#)):

Let me make one thing reasonably clear. There's no sign that the Russians have put any nuclear weapons anywhere near Ukraine. Those weapons are still in Russia and there's just no evidence, whatever, to suggest that they have any intentions of doing that. Now, that's sort of the good news. Now, the not so good news is that most of Russia's missiles are dual capable. That is, they can have a conventional warhead or they can have a nuclear warhead. If they move the nuclear warheads into position, they haven't done it. But if they did that they have the wherewithal to carry out a nuclear attack.

([18:59](#)):

I don't see, first of all, I think they realize that could trigger off a whole set of horrible events that would destroy Russia as much as everybody else. So, they're not likely to do that. Russia has been, throughout all the years during the Soviet period, during the times of their greatest military buildup, all that, they've been pretty responsible about nuclear weapons. Not perfect, but pretty responsible. The one mistake they made was in 1962 when they moved missiles into Cuba, and that was a mistake and it was very dangerous.

Bill Walton ([19:40](#)):

You're following this quite closely. I haven't heard it. Has the Biden administration articulated what they think their endgame is, when they think this is over? I mean, are they driving towards unconditional surrender, and Russia abandoning all its gains in Ukraine is a condition for...

Stephen Bryen ([20:01](#)):

Seems like it. Seems like that's their condition. That's why they don't want any negotiation. I mean, if you negotiate then you have to make a deal. Now, you could try and humiliate the Russians and drive them out and then have a negotiation. But that's not really a negotiation, that's just a surrender. But I don't think that's going to happen. I don't understand what the Biden administration thinks it's doing, but I think what it's doing is counterproductive to the interest of the United States, and honestly it's counterproductive to the interests of Europe, and it's counterproductive to the interests of the Ukrainian people.

([20:46](#)):

How many Ukrainians have to die before they sort this thing out? What's the end game here? The real problem in Ukraine, if I understand it correctly, is the Russian speaking populations, which are mainly clustered along the border with Russia in the east and the south, and their ill treatment. And it was ill treatment, even continuing today by Ukraine, which didn't treat them as a respective minority. Now, nothing new in that, but that was the cause of all this conflict. The Russians tried to support the local forces, which they effectively ran. They did a bunch of, I think, fairly bad things over the years and so did the Ukrainians. What do we get out of this? Can you tell me that? I don't know the answer.

Bill Walton ([21:51](#)):

Well, that's... Sorry. But that's why I wanted to talk with you and you're not making me feel much better because that's pretty much where I am with much less background? I don't see where [inaudible 00:22:05].

Stephen Bryen ([22:05](#)):

Look, I think the Ukrainian people have proven, and certainly the military has proven themselves very courageous, very strong, certainly very committed, at least the ones that are doing the fighting. But that doesn't take away from the fact that they have an internal problem that has to be resolved. And that's what Minsk II was all about. And I happen to think Minsk II was a pretty good deal, frankly, it could have worked, still could've work. But it's much difficult, more difficult now because Russia is [inaudible 00:22:47] areas. It's like they did earlier with Crimea. So sorting this out's going to be quite hard, but the lack of trying is very concerning.

Bill Walton ([23:00](#)):

Well, you've written, and I've been looking in my notes here to see if I can find the title, but I think one of your most recent works is overseeing a strategic doctrine about China and Taiwan, and what we do there. And it seems like the elephant in a room here. Somebody watching this with much interest would be China. Because to the extent we get ourselves completely enmeshed in Ukraine, we're really not paying much attention to what could happen in Taiwan. We've got President Xi, who's about to be anointed president for life next week, it looks like.

Stephen Bryen ([23:38](#)):

Looks that way.

Bill Walton ([23:39](#)):

Or something like that. And China looms is a much, much, much bigger strategic threat to the United States than Russia. So again, is anybody thinking this through?

Stephen Bryen ([23:57](#)):

Well, we're also neglecting what we need to do in the Pacific. There's a lot of needs there in terms of strengthening our military, in terms of getting the Taiwanese up to snuff, in terms of military capabilities, in terms of training, which we're not doing very much of.

([24:14](#)):

We lack a common command structure for the whole region, which is putting us in a... We're putting ourselves in a bad position on unnecessarily. So, I think the Pacific problem, this really does affect US interests because our trading interests, our economic interests, our security interests are all in that direction.

([24:35](#)):

Ukraine was not a factor in any of this.

Bill Walton ([24:38](#)):

Say what again?

Stephen Bryen ([24:40](#)):

Ukraine was not a factor. I mean, Ukraine was never of strategic importance in the United States ever. We have no treaties or agreements with Ukraine. We have a defense treaty with Japan. We have a defense treaty with Korea. We support Taiwan, we have the Taiwan Relations Act. Nothing like that exists when it comes to Ukraine. Zero.

Bill Walton ([25:00](#)):

You said something that's... No common command structure in the Pacific. By that you mean something that would tie the interested countries, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Vietnam? China's not surrounded by friends [inaudible 00:25:20] by people who are very threatened by them. And we haven't pulled that together.

Stephen Bryen ([25:23](#)):

We haven't even tried.

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

So, we don't have a NATO version. We don't have a version of NATO in the Pacific.

Stephen Bryen ([25:29](#)):

No, we do not. And even if we wanted... If some conflict starts and say Taiwan puts its air force in the air, which they do almost every day now, because the Chinese keep flying over their territory, and the Japanese put their airplanes in the air because they're worried about what the Chinese may do, and we put our airplanes in the air. We can't speak to each other. We don't have any system. There's no common command, no identification friend or foe system that's common. There's the equipment that's common, but you have to have it coordinated, and we haven't done that. So, the whole thing's a mess. And it's really a shame that it's a mess. It doesn't have to be a mess.

([26:13](#)):

And this is not big money. In fact, very little money. What really has to be done is a serious effort to put these capabilities together, which then really gives China a problem. I like deterrence and deterrence in that region is going to get harder and harder, and China is getting stronger and stronger, and we've been slow. I mean, slow is a nice word for it. We've been absent.

Bill Walton ([26:40](#)):

Well, just on a personal note, I started doing this webcast several years ago, a few years ago, because I wanted to learn more about what was going on in the world, and I wanted a chance to talk to very smart people like Stephen Bryen and with long experience about what's actually happening in the world. And my personal experience of this show is it's much worse than I suspected.

Stephen Bryen ([27:12](#)):

We're in a very dangerous moment, let's be honest. We have an administration that, in my opinion, is irresponsible in my opinion. They are war mongers, because they're trying to create a war where we don't need to have a war. The Russians are not much better. I don't want to give them any credit, whatever. They didn't need to do this. They made a big mistake doing it. They'd made a big mess, all that. But we're supposed to be the big boys on the block, the responsible power, the great superpower.

([27:44](#)):

Russia is no longer a superpower. Just years ago in 1985, Gorbachov went to Paris to meet with then French president Francois Mitterrand. And he told him, "Hey, look, we're an underdeveloped country. We are like an African country. We don't have anything except we have nuclear weapons." And he was speaking the truth. No one believed him then. "Oh no, now you've been building up your military. He's becoming very dangerous." But maybe he knew more than what we understood at the time.

([28:26](#)):

And I think that dealing with the nuclear power requires a level of maturity, especially on our part, that I don't see, I simply don't see it and it greatly concerns me. This is not a Nintendo game. This is a deadly, serious, dangerous, globally dangerous situation, and we're not handling it responsibly. I think these people are juveniles. They're just not capable of clear thought. They don't have a strategy. They just think throwing weapons at the Russians is what they're going to do, and bleed them and all that stuff. It's nonsense. It's complete nonsense. They're making the situation more and more dangerous, and everyone's going to pay the price for it, not just through Ukrainian people, but everyone.

Bill Walton ([29:23](#)):

Well, Stephen...

Stephen Bryen ([29:24](#)):

A cheerful note, right?

Bill Walton ([29:27](#)):

Let's end it right there. I've got you on speed dial. As events develop, I'd like to have you back on to see whether we can figure out any kind of line of action. Some of the people I've talked with that are like-minded and say we think we know, we've got some insights into this, but unfortunately we cannot get anybody in the Biden administration to listen to us. Nor for that matter, a lot of the Republican establishment like Lindsey Graham, who seemed to be as reckless as reckless can be.

Stephen Bryen ([30:03](#)):

Well, I think that if I was to give you a prescription of some sort, it is that we have to speak up. The more people speak up about this, the more Biden will have to listen, and the Democrats will have to listen and some Republicans will have to listen. It's not just Democrats. And say, "Hey guys, this is really dangerous. You're doing bad things. Fix it."

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

Okay, we've got our marching orders. You and I have got to get the bullhorn out and start wrapping people up in DC, and I think a lot of other of us are working on the same thing. Near term, we'll get this webcast out and hopefully a lot of people will take it in. So, let's wrap up for today, but to be continued, we hope. We hope.

([30:52](#)):

And we've been talking to today with Stephen Bryen, senior fellow at the Center for Security Policy and the Yorktown Institute. And as always, a lot of tremendous insights into what's going on in the world.

([31:06](#)):

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([31:35](#)):

Anyway, so thanks for joining. And Stephen, thank you for...

Stephen Bryen ([31:38](#)):

My pleasure.

Bill Walton ([31:39](#)):

For your insights.

Speaker 4 ([31:42](#)):

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