

# The Great Simplification

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Nate Hagens (00:00):

Today I welcome back to the program my colleague Chuck Watson. Chuck was a special attaché to Secretaries of Defense, McFarland and Rumsfeld, with expertise in Soviet and Middle East affairs. He was in the Air Force, communications officer. He has a long history of looking at geopolitics and nuclear risks, which is why I called him this morning to find out what was going on when Russia pulled out of this nuclear deproliferation treaty. He told me this has been in the works for a while, but it's worse than that because there have been new tests and new nuclear weapons by the United States in the last few weeks. And I'm like, whoa, whoa, whoa, I didn't know that. Stop. Let's do a podcast conversation on this if you're willing. And he reluctantly agreed to do such a podcast because both of us feel that more people need to understand what's going on, what's at stake.

(01:04):

I'm not an expert in this, which is I'm fortunate to have friends that are experts in these issues. I do host a podcast and the world is converging on the greatest problem. And our geopolitical move from a unipolar to a multipolar world is one of those problems. I hope at the end of my days on this planet I can look back and I was a Chicken Little with respect to nuclear war risk, because I do think that an escalatory exchange of nuclear missiles would be the worst case scenario for complex large life on planet Earth. And so I'm willing to spend a little bandwidth on this channel making people more aware of how this fits together in the tapestry of the human predicament. Please rewelcome Chuck Watson. Hey, Chuck. Good to see you again.

Chuck Watson (02:10):

Well, I don't know, last few times we've talked hasn't, as I said last time, hasn't been such pleasant topics to go over.

Nate Hagens (02:18):

Well, that's the blessing and the curse of having you as a friend and a colleague. You just did a podcast with me two weeks ago updating on the world situation, including Israel and Hamas and what that means for Ukraine and Russia. And then just this morning there's some other news, which is why I'm having you back for an urgent episode to talk about something that most people are unaware of. But maybe before we get into that, you want to just set the context of this conversation?

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Chuck Watson (02:53):

Yeah, thanks Nate. Because you sent me a link to, I think it was an Al Jazeera article about a change in US policy or a Russian reaction to it. First off I want people to really understand something here, is that I served the US government in this country essentially my whole life, and I shed blood for this country. I have many going way back, I've had relatives that served this country. I've had a number of very close friends that actually made the ultimate sacrifice. They lost their life in service of this country. So what I'm about to say, and some of the stuff may rub people a little bit harsh, but understand that one of the figures in American history is Carl Schurz, a Civil War general and later became Senator and Secretary of the Interior.

(03:41):

And he said on the floor of the Senate that, "Yes, my country right or wrong, if she be right, I stand by her. If she'd be wrong, I strive to set her right." I feel normally, as you know, I try to stay very neutral about things and I'll say the US rather than my country. But in this case I feel an obligation to those who did lose their lives for this country to really point out a major, major policy problem and how I don't think we're living up to the standards that those lives deserve.

Nate Hagens (04:19):

Thank you for that. I don't have your history with the government and your service, but I feel the same way as a member of this country and as a member of our species to try and speak truth to power of what's going on. I've known you for 15 years and we don't agree on everything, but I know you to be very knowledgeable, but also a man of extreme integrity, which is why we're friends and why I keep asking you back on this show. So let's start with a brief refresher way back on, I think episode 17 on the Great Simplification last year. You shared, to my naive surprise at the time that the United States was the only declared nuclear nation in the world that did not have a no first use policy. As a backdrop for what we're about to say, can you briefly refresh what that means and why that is?

Chuck Watson (05:22):

The other nuclear powers have all said that they would only use nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear weapon. In other words we're not going to use them first, but if we are attacked with nuclear weapons, we will respond with nuclear weapons. That's

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been the policy of up until recently, the policy of Russia. China has a very clear no first use policy. I believe both the UK, the British government, France both have pretty strong, no first use policies. India, Pakistan, their doctrines are a little fuzzier, but still basically, no, we're not going to use these ultimate weapons unless somebody uses them against us first. The US is amazingly the strong exception to that. We actually, we say we'll use nuclear weapons in response to all kinds of things. We say we'll use them against non-nuclear powers. We say that we will use them in response.

(06:20):

At one time during the Trump administration, we even had a written policy, we would use them against cyber attacks on infrastructure. We would reserve the right to use a nuke against whoever used it. That Biden's backed off on that a little bit, but still the list of reasons we would use a nuclear weapon first is long and actually pretty distressing.

Nate Hagens (06:42):

I don't want to focus overly on this, but I live in the United States and I didn't know that until recently. Does this piss other countries off?

Chuck Watson (06:52):

Absolutely. And in fact, that's something we can talk about in a minute, how US policies and this, we've started using the phrase rules-based order lately, and that has really ticked off a lot of the world, because who makes those rules and who is the arbitrator of them? And what it boils down to is the US says, well, we make the rules and we're the judge of whether or not you're following those rules. And by the way we don't have to follow those rules. And I can give you one of the things I think you want to ask. I'll give you a very specific example of that when it comes to treaties. So yeah, it does. The rest of the world is not happy with us over this attitude.

Nate Hagens (07:32):

So when we spoke earlier this week and this week seems like a month already, you mentioned that there have been some recent events between the United States and Russia that have been pretty much overtaken and obscured by the coverage of the Middle East situation, one of which involved the United States performing nuclear weapons tests and developing new weapons during the month of October. Can you tell

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us what the US has been doing and why this is concerning enough for us to do a special episode?

Chuck Watson (08:05):

In a nutshell, there's two things that have happened in the last two weeks actually. The first is on October 18th, the US conducted a non-nuclear test within the Nevada nuclear test range, and it used chemical explosives. There were radioisotopes involved. And so there's allegations that it was what's called a subcritical test. And that gets into the technical details of how nuclear weapons work. But you can learn a lot about how nuclear weapons behave by putting together smaller bits that don't actually start a chain reaction. And so our declared purpose for this was non-proliferation to try to assess and do seismic tests and radioisotope sniffer tests. But these are also the dual use kind of tests that you would need to do if you were going to resume design and production of new classes of nuclear weapons.

(09:10):

So a lot of countries, Russia in particular does not believe, China also has said that they don't believe it. Even some of our allies have said, no, we're not so sure what you're up to here. And the reason for that is based on an announcement that was made October 27th, even though the decision has been kicked around and rumored for months. We're developing a new class of high yield nuclear weapons. It's the B61-13 is the designation. It's an aircraft delivered bomb with selectable yield, but extremely high yields, upwards of 300 to 500 kilotons. Now, there was a trend towards smaller weapons because with more accuracy, and also you don't want to wipe out a whole city, you just want to hit smaller targets. Well, we've reversed that trend by developing this new class and by making it more accurate and more destructive, that's a step away from historical arms control, historical weapons trends, and is a pretty dangerous escalation.

(10:19):

So in response to that, and again, this has been brewing over time, this isn't something that just happened. Russia was warning it would withdraw from the 1996 comprehensive test ban treaty. China has also expressed concerns and said that they would no longer be a party to the treaty. And that's important. The original test ban treaty was done by actually John F. Kennedy in 1963 with Khrushchev. And it was because the atmospheric tests were getting out of hand. And so all this radioactive

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contamination was ending up in the atmosphere from all these nuclear tests. And folks looked around and said, well, wait a minute, this is a bad idea. There's also something called a spearfish test, which was in space. And so to make a long story less long, we realized that nuclear testing above ground is a bad thing because it contaminates the Earth.

(11:17):

And then by the mid 90s, we said, look, let's just stop all nuclear testing, because why do we need new classes of weapons nobody's supposed to be using anyway? So Russia signed it and ratified it, and that's an important distinction. China did as well. The other nuclear powers did. And this gets, and I think maybe this is a good point to talk about.

Nate Hagens (11:38):

In the 1960s, all these nations signed this ratification.

Chuck Watson (11:43):

The initial test ban treaty, partial test ban treaty was in 1963. The comprehensive treaty that banned all nuclear testing was 1996. But there's a catch, Nate, and it gets to the question that you brought up earlier of why countries don't trust us. Well, in the US and under our constitution there's two steps to a treaty. The administration, whoever's president, his administration has to sign it, but then Congress, specifically the Senate has to ratify it. Well, in our system, and you know how dysfunctional we are internally, just look at what's happened in the House of Representatives the last few weeks and between the political parties, getting treaties through the Senate has been a very difficult time. And so the comprehensive test ban treaty was signed in '96 by the Clinton administration. It was never ratified, which means it does not have the force of law.

(12:42):

So the US never actually became a full participant in that treaty. Russia has been warning since 2004 with increasing urgency, look, you need to ratify this treaty, commit to it legally or we're done. We're not going to participate anymore. And after this test, so in, I believe it was in August, the Duma passed a law withdrawing from the treaty. And so their system is actually similar to ours in that the president can't sign or abrogate a treaty on his own. He can sign it, but it's not legal until the parliament, in

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Russia's case, the Duma passes off on it. So in August, the Duma said, okay, we want to withdraw from this treaty. Putin held that in his pocket as leveraged to try to say, look, don't go forward with this test. The US went forward with it anyway, and so Putin signed it, and now Russia has revoked their ratification of the treaty.

Nate Hagens (13:41):

So on the surface those are just words, but it sure seems like that's not a good step in a deescalatory direction for the world. That is a strong move, wouldn't you say?

Chuck Watson (13:58):

On its own, the Russian withdrawal is just another step and pretty close to the final step in dismantling this whole framework of treaties around nuclear weapons that got started in '63 with the test ban treaty. And over time, up until the mid 80s, early 90s, we built this framework that it consisted of the anti-ballistic missile treaty. And that was basically saying we don't want either side to develop a capacity to shoot down the other side's missiles because then you start to another arms race. And what's worse is one side may think it has an advantage and launch an attack. The other absolutely vital piece was what was called the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

(14:50):

One of the things you also don't want is for one side to have the ability to quickly launch a nuclear weapon at the other side, and they only have a few minutes to figure out whether it's real and what the target is, because then you get into these scenarios where you get launch on warning or launch under attack, which means you've only got a few minutes to make a decision. Well, Nate, in fact, I think I sent you a picture recently of Putin's visit to China and now following him around, just like in the Cold Wars days, is an officer with a briefcase with the nuclear launch codes, and that hasn't been seen for quite a while. So of course our president always is followed by the officer with a football. We've never really discontinued that, but now everybody's doing it, which that in a nutshell is what's happened, is that in every one of these cases, and again, this is where I get a little bit emotional and angry about it, we started it.

(15:55):

We withdrew from the ABM Treaty under the Bush administration. We withdrew from the INF Treaty, the Obama administration set up the withdrawal process, and then Trump finished it off. We withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, which allowed

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monitoring of each other's nuclear facilities. We never signed the CBT. It really frustrates me that this framework that got us through the Cold War without a nuclear confrontation has all been dismantled. We're almost back to the 50s where it's the Wild West in terms of nuclear weapons development and deployment.

Nate Hagens (16:39):

I had hoped or I had planned this would be a very short podcast, but now as is usually the case, when I talk to you, I learn things that I'd never heard before and I have questions.

Chuck Watson (16:49):

Sorry about that.

Nate Hagens (16:50):

No, no, no, that's okay. That's why we're talking. So on the ratification, since President Clinton all the way to today, have there been groups of senators that wanted to push to get this ratified, or has it always just been swept under the carpet?

Chuck Watson (17:06):

Yeah, every now and then it comes up. And by the way, it's not just in the nuclear realm. The Law of the Seas Treaty, I could name probably a dozen treaties off the top of my head that the US has signed but never ratified. And so that's why there's a Russian expression. It's one of these compound words, [Russian], which basically means not agreement capable. And a lot of other countries are picking up this as well, that how can you trust the US to do a treaty if the president may sign it, but then the next president can say, well, I'm not going to go forward with it until it's ratified by the Senate. It doesn't have force of law. So what tends to happen is whichever president signs up, his party goes, yes, we'll agree to this. Well, you've got to have a two-thirds majority. And so neither party has had a two-thirds majority in forever.

(18:02):

So the other side basically says, well, we don't like this treaty because your guy signed it, so we're not going to sign it. And you get this back and forth thing where because of our internal politics, the treaties don't get signed. That's the big picture. The smaller picture on the weapons side is there's a lot of people in the US, the defense industry,

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various very high-powered lobbying groups that nuclear weapons, man, that's profitable business. So unfortunately that's an aspect of it.

Nate Hagens (18:36):

That all gives me a really bad feeling, and I've had a bad feeling already.

Chuck Watson (18:42):

Welcome to my world, Nate.

Nate Hagens (18:45):

So as far as the nuclear tests, you said there was one in Nevada. Did you ever see the movie Oppenheimer yet, or haven't you gone?

Chuck Watson (18:56):

Yes, I did. Yeah, I thought it was quite good.

Nate Hagens (19:00):

I thought it was quite good. But they had the nuclear tests there in the desert where they put on the goggles and everything. But why do we need to test nuclear weapons like that? Is it because we really want to see if they work so that we can use them? Or is it kind of like two sumo wrestlers that are dancing before they get in the stage? Is it more of a demonstration of flexing to say, we are willing to do this, we have it? Or is it something else?

Chuck Watson (19:28):

I'm trying to remember the biology term for doing threat displays and that kind of thing. The gorilla pounding its chest. That is one piece of it, it's partly for what's called-

Nate Hagens (19:45):

Well, it's sexual selection in biology.

Chuck Watson (19:50):

Sure. Yeah. There's basically three components to it. The first is what's called weapons assurance, so that you pull one out of storage and fire it off to make sure it works.

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That's what we used to do routinely. Computer models and simulations and component testing only get you so far. If you really want to assure yourself that this thing works, you got to put it all together in one piece and light the fuse and make sure it goes off.

Nate Hagens (20:21):

And there are stories out there that are suggesting that as much as half of our nuclear bombs that are in silos around the country are so old that they might not work. I've heard stories to that effect. I'm no expert.

Chuck Watson (20:40):

And there's also a set of people who say, well, none of the Russian nuclear weapons work. Okay, how many does it take? One, 10, 20 out of several thousand? That's not particularly comforting to me, but people have been arguing that on strategic grounds to say, yeah, let's go ahead and start something with Russia, because none of their nukes work anyway, so just insane. And I also think wrong, because they do similar things to what we do, which is component testing. So they'll take the core out of the weapon and then just light off. So it's everything except the nuclear component. And so they do similar kinds of testings, and a lot of that, of course, is classified you can't get into, but there's a lot of testing that goes on.

(21:22):

So the first thing is if you really want to know it works, you've got to light off the whole thing. The second component is, yeah, it's the threat display. It's to show, yes, we still have it. We can still do it. The third one is weapons design. It's been 20 years since we've fired off a nuke. We've learned a lot. We've done a lot of simulations. We're developing these new classes of weapons. We think they work theoretically, we've done lots of computer models and simulations, but are you really that confident a sophisticated design is going to work? So if you go back to Oppenheimer, and that's actually a really interesting case, because the little boy bomb, the uranium bomb, very simple device, very simple design, they did subcritical tests. Everybody was so sure that that would work. And we also didn't have a lot of uranium at the time, that they were willing to risk using the first one and dropping it.

(22:28):

But the plutonium bomb we tested, much more sophisticated design, much more complex design. And so as you increase complexity of the weapon system, you start to

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reach a point where you need, and plus we're talking high energy physics under extreme conditions. And so we've learned a lot about nuclear weapons during the testing, but we've now got a lot more sophisticated systems. And so if you put your Dr. Strangelove hat on, you go, well, of course we've got to test these things to make sure they work right. And who knows what we'll learn. And you can even argue, hey, we could learn something to solve our energy crisis by resuming nuclear testing. And you can say that with a straight face.

Nate Hagens (23:14):

In the meantime it's good for GDP.

Chuck Watson (23:16):

Sure.

Nate Hagens (23:18):

How many do we need though? There's like 12 or 13,000 warheads, 100 of them would do in our entire civilization. Why do we need more? It's just so maddening to me.

Chuck Watson (23:30):

Well, and that's an interesting thing. Because if you look at the Pentagon press release from the 27th, it makes a big point. We're not changing the number of weapons. Okay. And nuclear weapons are so complex. If I can use a brief analogy with, if you've got say a manual bolt action rifle and you've got 10 bullets, okay, that's got a certain risk level and means something. If you have 1,000, okay, that means a little bit more. If you've got 10,000, what's the point? You can only fire 10 or 15 rounds a minute. At a certain point, it's just pointless. But then what if you've got a semi-automatic, oh, well now you can shoot 80, 100 rounds per minute. You have a full auto, you can unload a whole magazine in a few seconds.

(24:18):

Well, the other piece of it is what are those bullets? If it's just a simple lead being solid core, okay, that's maybe you can do target practice, you can maybe hunt with it, a soft point. Well, maybe that's better for hunting. What if it's an armor piercing incendiary bullet? Well, okay, there's not a lot you can do except blow holes and things and set them on fire. So if my next door neighbor has 1,000 rounds and a semi-automatic rifle

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and it's deer season, and I know he hunts every year, I don't care. If he's got a bolt action rifle with a couple dozen armor piercing incendiary rounds and a map of all of the local gas stations, okay, all of a sudden I'm worried. So the point is obviously with nuclear weapons and aircraft and submarines and missiles, it's a lot more complicated, but it's the same basic principle. There's two pieces.

(25:11):

The number after a certain point becomes irrelevant. What you care about is what are the capabilities of the bullets? What's the capability of the gun? So what's the capability of the nuclear weapon itself and what's the capability and characteristics of the weapon system, the thing that shoots that nuke at your desired target?

Nate Hagens (25:32):

I'm an energy systems, finance, ecology guy, and this is not my area, which is why I'm grateful for your expertise on this, but it sure feels that we're slouching towards Bethlehem, to use Yeats poem. I don't understand how this is not more widely in the news, because it seems to me, and please explain, are Russia and the United States are both of defacto becoming more aggressive, more escalatory via this dismantling of the treaties and these protections that were built consciously 50, 60 years ago against the use of nuclear weapons? Are we on a really scary path here?

Chuck Watson (26:30):

Without the American public, and I would say probably without 90% of our elected leaders knowing it, we reentered a nuclear arms race with Russia in 2004, 2006, somewhere in that timeframe when we withdrew from ABM. And you can go look at individual decisions in isolation like withdrawal from ABM. If you look at why we say we did that, it was because, well, Iran, North Korea, all of these smaller parties are developing missiles that can send chemical or even just regular old conventional weapons, and we need the ability to shoot them down. And that interferes, the ABM Treaty was interfering with that. Okay, well, Russia said, look, we agree. Let's renegotiate the treaty and come up with a joint system for dealing with that threat.

(27:28):

But the US, and again, Nate, I'm saying this out of love for this country, it pisses me off that we come in as, no, we're going to do things our way and we don't want to talk to you and we don't care what you think. And so when you do that, okay, we could get

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away with that from the 90s through the 2000s because we were the uni power, we were the strongest country in the world. We're reaching a point where I don't think we can get away with, first off, we never should have done it on ethical grounds, but now practically it's very difficult. We didn't take into account Russia's concerns or China's for that matter. They also expressed concerns about it. China was talking about wanting to enter some of these treaties that were bilateral.

(28:14):

They wanted to enter INF and the ABM treaties, which were just between the US and Russia. But we said, no, we're going to dismantle that. And part of it, our argument is, well, we don't trust treaties. Well then why do we insist on other countries following their treaty commitments? It's a mess.

Nate Hagens (28:38):

Here's another naive question. Is this like the bully who has very high status because he's the strongest guy in the playground, but then he gets a little older and he is not in the same popular group? And that in order to maintain our optionality advantage in the world with dedollarization and stuff going on in the Middle East and all the biophysical phase shift, that the only way we can do it is through military power and the only way we can do that is through better, bigger, more nukes? That's a simplification, but is that the direction?

Chuck Watson (29:22):

I don't think so. I don't think there's a plan. I don't think that it's thought through that well. Honestly, the thing to remember is the people that are doing this aren't evil. They're not Dr. Strangelove. That would make our discussion so much easier because you could just point the finger and say, these guys are crazy. The problem is they're not crazy. This is a symptom of something that, Nate, we've talked about for years, going back 15 years probably, that people get stove piped. And so as you know, economists only talk to economists, they don't talk to energy people. And the energy people don't talk to the biodiversity people. And so if you look at this in that context, you can look at just the ABM Treaty and convince yourself from the standpoint of the US that it doesn't make sense. We need to withdraw from it.

(30:16):

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But that's losing sight of the secondary and tertiary, much less quaternary ramifications of doing that. And so I don't think we are bullies. I get mad and use that terminology sometimes, and I really shouldn't because I don't believe that we're bullies. I don't think that's our philosophy. I think that the problem is we look at the world, we know that we have tremendous military capability. And I think a lot of our actions, and when I talk to people in a nice quiet moment, senior people, you know what the real driver is? It's fear. It's fear of losing control. You'll see that in the current things around Israel or around Hamas or a lot of these, it's driven by fear. We have a very hard time trusting. And the problem is trust leads to trust and fear leads to fear.

(31:17):

And so that's unfortunately we are now in a fear spiral, whereas through the 70s, 80s, 90s, up until probably the early 90s, we were in a trust spiral. And so that's now broken and we're in a fear spiral.

Nate Hagens (31:35):

And a fear spiral is you become more insular and less cooperative and more defensive and more risk averse. And so all those things make some of these military movements a little more understandable. Let me move on to this. You mentioned there was studies in the 80s on previous podcasts called Proud Prophet and others that show once you use even one nuclear weapon, that the incentive is to keep escalating using more and bigger nukes, which eventually results in something called nuclear winter. Yet now as you've articulated, we're making bigger, more advanced weaponry, and there's a spiral of nuclear weapon modernization that can never really be used without getting on this pathway of destroying much of life on Earth as you've articulated in the past.

(32:34):

Where are the voices within our country raising concerns about nuclear modernization? And why do they, from this naive podcast observer seem so silent? Note this morning when I called you, I didn't find that Russia news that they had pulled out of the treaty except I found it on an international news source. It wasn't anywhere in the US that I could see.

Chuck Watson (33:06):

Again, I think that, why isn't it being discussed? There's a couple of things. First off, there's an insidious level of security around any nuclear issues. So security, as

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rightfully, because you don't want somebody learning something and building a nuke in their backyard. That level of security makes sense. But when security becomes paranoia, that's a bit of an issue. And particularly around doctrine and weapon systems, I tend to think more transparency is better, because then you can talk about it. But there is a fear around that and it's a catch 22. A lot of these things tend to not be discussed because of security issues. The other issue is it's very technical, requires a lot of knowledge. Just think about, okay, we were going to talk for 15 minutes and now we're pushing 40. And a lot of it's because you start going down these rabbit holes because nobody knows about it. It's just not there.

Nate Hagens (34:08):

But there was a huge anti-war movement 50 years ago, and that's almost non-existent.

Chuck Watson (34:15):

Well, and part of the reason is we went through that phase where there was Russia scared us with Sputnik in particular. And there we suddenly realized, wait a minute, it's not just this backwards, primitive bunch of serfs living under communism. All of a sudden they had satellites and we didn't. They had the first man in space and we didn't. Even going back into the 50s with the nuclear bomb scares, we thought we had a monopoly on them, and then all of a sudden, oh, wait a minute, the Soviet Union has nuclear weapons. We got scared. Now, what happened in the 80s, we were scared. And in fact, fortunately our president was scared. Ronald Reagan went through Proud Prophet and it terrified him. He said, I'm going to do something about this. And he did.

(35:14):

So then we get to the 90s, Soviet Union collapses. We took all of our weapons off of standby. We forget the days, we kept aircraft. Nuclear arm B52s constantly in the air because we were afraid they would get destroyed on the ground. In the 90s we took our weapons off of alert. People started joking about Russia. Well, they're just a gas station with nukes, but they never took the nuke part seriously. And so we then got wrapped into the war on terror. And so we lost another 10 years basically of losing our fear. Nobody cared much about nuclear weapons, and the US became the world's dominant hyper power. And so the average person never experienced that fear and we're losing that generation that went through World War II in Korea.

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(36:19):

The average American does not know what a destroyed city looks like. Now, sure, we're seeing stuff of Gaza right now. Do you realize that the destruction you're seeing in Gaza, we've put about, I say we, the Israelis have dropped about 20,000 tons of bombs on Gaza. It's taken them three weeks to do it. You could do that in one nuclear weapon in 18 milliseconds. That fear-

Nate Hagens (36:48):

20,000 tons, that's 20 kilotons?

Chuck Watson (36:52):

20 kilotons, yeah. A little bit bigger than the-

Nate Hagens (36:54):

And you were just saying that these dial a yield on some of these new nukes is up to 500 kilotons, did you say that?

Chuck Watson (37:00):

Yes. 330, I don't want to say the exact number, but the way you classify-

Nate Hagens (37:06):

In the 100s.

Chuck Watson (37:06):

... nuclear weapons, 100 to 500 is considered a very large strategic nuclear weapon. Over 500 is, and there are-

Nate Hagens (37:18):

Over 500 is...

Chuck Watson (37:19):

Over 500 are the largest. And we've had on alert Megaton scale weapons, which are catastrophic.

Nate Hagens (37:32):

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Do you think Secretary of State Blinken grasps the true threat of nuclear weapons given his position on bringing Ukraine into NATO and his position on the Middle East War and Israel?

Chuck Watson (37:48):

That's a really interesting question. I don't know what Tony Blinken thinks personally or what his level of understanding is. I'm going to broaden that out to say the US government leadership. And again, I want to go back to a key point. I don't think they're afraid of nuclear weapons. I think that they have increasingly seen them as just something else in the weapons mix. I think they don't want to use them in the sense that if there was another way to do it. But the thing about a nuclear weapon is they are, and I'm going to use Dr. Strangelove terminology here, they're attractive. You can cause tremendous, if your goal is to rapidly reduce an enemy to the point where they can no longer fight back, obviously the objective of war is to bend the enemy to do your will, which is from Clausewitz's.

(38:46):

And so if you want to do that, a nuclear weapon, it's very efficient. Doesn't take very many of them. They're actually fairly inexpensive in the great scheme of things. It's easier to, if you're talking about say, destroying a city, well, it's a heck of a lot cheaper to do that with a couple of 300 kiloton weapons than it is to do it with any other means. I think that it is kind of a dangerous place if you don't have the fear of them. And we've kind of painted ourselves into a bit of a corner by creating more usable weapons in the sense that they're more accurate and we can convince ourselves, well, we're only going to use it against a military target. Well, okay, but then what about fallout environmental effects? We could talk about the Geneva Conventions and Accords and Annex one and how we, you're not supposed to blow up cities, but that's kind of a whole separate rabbit hole that we probably don't want to go into.

(39:50):

But so I think the biggest issue is that I don't think US policy right now, our foreign policy has been geared so much toward the military. I am concerned specifically about Secretary Blinken, assistant Secretary Nuland and others. They are more militaristic than the Defense Department. And so rather than looking at treaties and negotiations, they tend to look at application of military force as an early option rather than a last or late resort. And that's a huge change in US foreign policy over

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the last couple of decades. And I think it grew out of the war on terror, because we looked at that and now we've got this whole, and it's hard to, we just had the 23rd anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and the 20th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq.

(40:50):

And I look at myself and I go, in one sense I go, I'm not that old. And then I see the gray and it's like, well, maybe I am that old. But so you remember people like Blinken, Nuland and Jake Sullivan, our national security director, even General Austin, they grew up in an era where the US was by far the dominant power. They also grew up in an era when, how do you negotiate with Al-Qaeda or the Taliban? I disagree. I think there are things that we could have done, but it's just like Israel is doing, and Gaza right now, their attitude now is there's no use talking to Hamas because we're mortal enemies. One of us has to die. It might as well be them. I don't mean to joke about that, but that's kind of the attitude that you get to.

(41:41):

And we couldn't afford to do that with the Soviet Union because we knew they had enough nuclear weapons to kill us. So we felt like we had to talk to them. And I think that dual thing of not being as afraid of nuclear weapons and not having that realization that if we don't talk to them, it's the end of the world. And so those two things have got us where we are.

Nate Hagens (42:05):

So since this was not limited to 20 minutes, I'm going to ask you a penultimate question and then a final question. You just mentioned Israel, I think it's pretty clear to the world now that a two-state policy, that that ship has sailed, and that's not going to happen, especially after the events of the last month. If it doesn't happen, this looks like it's going to be a long, drawn out Israel and her supporters versus the Palestinian people, Hamas and their supporters with all kinds of possibilities and risks. What is the situation with nuclear weapons in Israel? Are they also non first use, or is that complicated, or what's the deal there?

Chuck Watson (42:59):

Israel hasn't said a whole lot about their nuclear use policy. So what I'm saying is based on personal discussions and impressions from what their doctrine has published and what is believed to be their weapons mix, they probably have on the order of 50

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to 100 of tactical nuclear weapons, they may have a few larger scale in moderate, which would be up to 100 kilotons or so, and probably a few above that. They certainly have the means to deliver them either from submarine launch missiles, intermediate range. I don't know that they have any strategic nuclear missiles, but they do certainly have intermediate range missiles that could reach Europe, Iran, the key players that way. And of course, aircraft delivered weapons.

(43:53):

I suspect that their doctrine is very similar to the US doctrine, in that, and actually we know that they do not have a no first use doctrine. In other words they are willing to use nuclear weapons first. They've essentially said as much, it's one of these things where-

Nate Hagens (44:17):

So it's not just the US, it's just the US and Israel?

Chuck Watson (44:21):

US and Israel. And the only reason I didn't mention them at first is because technically Israel has not declared itself to be a nuclear power. They have them. And what they do is they play, their goal is what's, and it's a tactic that I have qualms with, but I understand why it's used. It's called strategic ambiguity. They don't want to get tied up in all the treaties around nuclear weapons. And if they said they had them, that triggers all kinds of stuff with the UN and with various treaty conventions that they don't want to do. But I think it's an important point to say that Israeli officials have actually said, well, if we had nuclear weapons and a large Arab army came to attack us, we would use them. So that to me is solid as US doctrinal statements of saying that we would use a nuclear weapon in the event of X, Y, Z.

Nate Hagens (45:22):

So dumb question, is a use of a single tactical nuclear weapon, does that break the seal as it were, and constitute a nuclear weapon? And therefore the countries like Russia and China that did sign the non-first use, that was a first use even though it wasn't a huge one?

Chuck Watson (45:43):

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I think it does. For one thing, I've heard it said by people who really need to go back to school and study military strategy and tactics if I can be so blunt as to say this. Nuclear weapons make a tremendous difference on the battlefield. If you, for instance, you could concentrate, say a brigade or division level force to assault, and you look, for instance, look at what the Israelis did with Gaza. They concentrated several hundred thousand troops there in a very limited area to attack Gaza. Well, if Hamas has lost, somebody had a credible nuclear deterrent, you might not want to do that because that would be a prime target to use a tactical nuclear weapon to wipe out that formation. So it means you have to disperse your forces. It means you have to what's called MOPP up. MOPP is a military technical term of using protective gear. It really changes the whole pace of warfare.

(46:45):

So that's one aspect of it. The other is once you cross the line, so you use a 10 kiloton to attack an air base, well then I go, well, I'm going to use a 25 to take out a port. And then you go, well, you just destroyed a port. We're going to destroy this factory, yet happens to be sitting in a city, but it's important to your war effort. So we're going to use a 200 kiloton to wipe out that industrial center. Well, now you've just escalated pretty quickly into hitting strategic city targets. And so yeah, once you break the seal, as you said, it opens the whole range of it's very hard to show. And this was what the exercises in the 80s, and I hope they're still doing them now. That's what those exercises showed. When you have two guys sitting around playing, gaming it out, once somebody uses a nuke, you start going back and forth and it escalates.

Nate Hagens (47:46):

And that's why I keep highlighting your words and your experience on this, because all the other things that we are working on and concerned about, biodiversity and plastics and global heating and the energy transition and sustainability, all of that work goes out the window if that seal is broken, because then we're in a different world.

Chuck Watson (48:12):

Yeah, we are. And okay, one or two, even a few nuclear weapons, the environmental effects are local. We talked about this in the past. You start to get-

Nate Hagens (48:25):

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Right. But the economic effects are a huge domino.

Chuck Watson (48:27):

And it crashes the entire global system of international relations and governance, because once you cross that line, there's no more taboo. Well then what? You mentioned Israel, one of the scary things is, let's say that Israel gets desperate, suppose Hezbollah comes in and starts moving in and they start losing territory and they decide they need to use a tactical nuclear weapon to stop it. How does Russia react? How does China react? Do they decide, look, these guys crossed the line, we have to take them out to make a point that nobody should ever use a nuclear weapon again? How does the US step up? The whole thing unravels. And again, I want to be really clear here because this is something that came up after our last podcast. I think that Israel would be very reluctant to use a nuclear weapon except under two circumstances.

(49:23):

The first is desperation. They're being overrun. And they did in 73, they had, we believe, three nuclear weapons at that time. And there's a good authority from internal documentation that they had them prepped and ready to use when their armies were being defeated. So under desperation I think they would. I think they might against Iran, if they thought Iran was on the verge of getting the nuclear weapon, I think they might in cooperation with the US, I think that they would use one in desperation regardless of what the US said. Against Iran they might do it in cooperation with us to make a point, but also to ensure Iran never got nuclear weapons. That second one is I think a fairly low probability scenario. I don't want folks to think that the Israelis are foaming at the mouth and have their finger on the switch. But I think that their calculus is such that there is a very real risk in certain circumstances of them going nuclear.

Nate Hagens (50:40):

Thank you. Just to clarify my previous point, I didn't think that a few tactical nukes would have a huge impact and destroy the environment, but I think it would because of the ripple effect, destroy the environmental movement.

Chuck Watson (50:58):

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I actually think it would. I think you're right. You just left a step out. I think a few nuclear weapons would ultimately destroy the environment because I have a hard time seeing how it stays limited, unless if it's between the US and China or US and Russia, I have a hard time seeing how it stays limited. India, Pakistan or Israel and some potential Iranian exchange where you're talking a dozen or so. Yeah, that could stay limited just because the physical numbers. But I think once you get the major powers involved, I don't see how it stays limited.

Nate Hagens (51:34):

And this is why I've had you back with only two weeks in between, because there's so much going on. Okay. So what should people listening to this, watching this and in the halls of power in our nation or in the world, be thinking about and working towards, given the implicit unbelievable gravity of the risks that you are outlining here?

Chuck Watson (52:00):

Well, I think there's two aspects to that. I think the first is, doesn't involve nuclear weapons at all. Americans need to be much more engaged, aware, conscious of what our government is doing in the realm of foreign policy. We need to push hard for our elected leaders to participate in global governance structures. Yeah, it's inconvenient, it doesn't always go the way we want to, but the alternatives are what we're seeing now, chaos. So that is the first big step is we're not always going to get our way. We can't always be the hegemon. We are not going to be the world's hyper power, and politicians that say that need to be voted out of office quite frankly, I don't care which party they're in and they're in both parties unfortunately. We need to have people who see international affairs first through the prism of diplomacy.

(53:00):

And yeah, you're going to have to deal with unsavory characters, but it's got to be diplomacy first, not diplomacy as an option. Then you can start to talk about what kind of a military and what kind of doctrine we need to fulfill that goals. What are the real threats? What are the real risks? Do we really need things like more bigger nuclear weapons or are we really secure with the weapons mix that we have now? Should we be abrogating these treaties or should we be engaging with other countries? We dealt with the Soviet Union, the evil empire. Ronald Reagan negotiated with the evil empire. A modern Russia, modern China are, despite the rhetoric,

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nowhere near the level of ideological confrontation we had with the Soviet Union. And if Ronald Reagan can talk to Yuri Andropov, my God, we can certainly talk to Putin or Xi, because they're in a different class in my view.

(54:05):

So again, what can you do? First, don't just let foreign policy be the realm of experts. Be aware of what your country is doing, push for rational foreign policy that involves diplomacy. And the second is be aware that we're talking about horrific destruction, not in another country. It can happen here. Those scenes you're seeing in Gaza, that could be Minneapolis or Savannah or Atlanta or whatever. And again, think about it, three weeks to turn Northern Gaza into rubble, 18 milliseconds to turn a city into rubble.

Nate Hagens (54:47):

Thank you in quotes, and I really appreciate your wisdom and expertise, and I'm hoping that we don't have another podcast for many years.

Chuck Watson (54:57):

Well, we could always, you could make me co-host so that whenever one of your guests says something, I can chip it and go, wait a minute, it's worse than that.

Nate Hagens (55:07):

You could be the systems ecology. Who was the guy on the Johnny Carson show that would always laugh? I forgot his name.

Chuck Watson (55:18):

Oh gosh.

Nate Hagens (55:22):

Ed McMahon.

Chuck Watson (55:22):

Ed McMahon.

Nate Hagens (55:23):

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You can be Ed McMahon of the podcast.

Chuck Watson (55:24):

You're doomed.

Nate Hagens (55:28):

I'm glad we can still laugh about it, but thank you. I called you this morning to wonder what was going on with this Russian news, and here we are having a conversation about it. To be continued, my friend. Thank you.

Chuck Watson (55:39):

Absolutely. Thank you and appreciate you doing this, Nate, because I know a lot of your listeners may look at it and go, this is an ecology, energy, economics, but as you said, and I really want to emphasize, none of that matters if we blow ourselves up.

Nate Hagens (55:56):

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