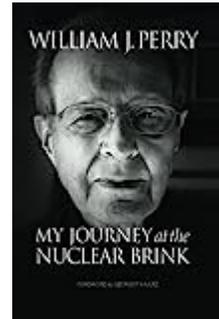




William James Perry. *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. 276 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-9712-2.



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When I was asked to write this review I gladly accepted, for two main reasons: first, I usually enjoy reading memoirs of protagonists of the international scene, especially from the last century; secondly, I had already developed a favorably biased curiosity toward the author, whom I met in September 2014. I was in Stanford, with a group of PhD students selected among the participants to the Nuclear History Boot Camp[1] by David Holloway—one of the senior instructors there—and I had the chance to attend to a few meetings that Bill Perry in particular used to convey the message of his preoccupation with nuclear arsenals. Actually, our whole week in Palo Alto was conceived and organized with the purpose of creating a unique opportunity: have two of the main protagonists of the debate on nuclear global zero—Bill Perry and George Shultz—meet, and listen to the research of some of the most brilliant, young students of nuclear proliferation around the world. In my expectation, the meetings would be especially meaningful for the PhD students who were given the chance to talk to two very prominent, experienced, and knowledgeable policymakers whose choices had been determinant in shaping the course of some of the events they were investigating. Instead, and beginning with the first discussion, featuring the former president Bill Clinton’s defense secretary, I realized that from

both Perry’s and Shultz’s perspective it might be the other way around.

In Stanford, I listened to Perry talk at length of his project for educating and engaging the public on the dangers of nuclear weapons. His was clearly a full commitment to the cause of nuclear disarmament that I found striking at the time and whose consistency and relentlessness has been confirmed by this book. Indeed, Perry’s volume lacks what I would call the purposefully endearing narrative that usually characterizes this kind of literature. His language is straightforward; his style clearly holds back from any rhetorical artifices; his account seems much more intended to provide a series of elements for a careful assessment than to seduce the reader. In other words, his memoirs have not been written in a quest for praise, though, in my opinion, that might easily become their ultimate result. In fact, as Senator Sam Nunn notes in his short comment on the back cover of the volume, “Bill Perry has the highest A to E ratio (accomplishments to ego) of anyone I have ever known.”

This does not mean that throughout the book there are no glimpses of his private life or tributes to his wife’s essential role as the loving partner in a life partly spend

under the public eye. Likewise, Perry shows appreciation for humorous situations, as when, with a good deal of self-deprecating attitude, he tells us about the young US marine who, at Dulles Airport, asked him for an autograph and, while Perry was signing, accidentally revealed that he was confusing the former secretary of defense in front of him with one of his Republican predecessors—Dick Cheney (p. 145). Even so, as he clearly states in the preface, “this book” tell[s] the story of my own conversion to a life with a compelling, overriding objective—to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used again” (p. xiv); and indeed, there is no doubt that Perry’s constant preoccupation is to live up to those words.

As the appropriate inception of a lifelong experience acquired through a series of crucial roles played in the evolution of the US security apparatus, his story starts with the most notorious episode of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, which for him marked the beginning of a successful career in the Pentagon. Then, he goes back to the years when that conversion was still to come and, after completion of his higher education, he was offered the position of senior scientist at Sylvania’s Electronic Defense Laboratories (SEDL) in California. He defines those years as the time “devoted to obtaining “the hard-won, detailed knowledge” of what nuclear weapons could do” (p. 11). Indeed, the kind of work Perry carried out at SEDL and, since 1964, as the co-founder of Electromagnetic Systems Laboratory (ESL), made him fully aware of the delusory attempt to create an effective defense against a nuclear attack. In spite of such a dreadful realization, what surfaces in the chapters he devotes to his pioneering experience as one of the first entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley is the enthusiasm characterizing that personal and professional adventure. He rightly claims the importance of the cutting-edge technology that his newly created company was ushering in, though in the era of a deadly struggle between two ideological enemies the self-sustaining logic of the Cold War was bound to neutralize any serious attempt to reduce the political and military relevance that both superpowers ascribed to nuclear arsenals. In fact, as undersecretary of defense overseeing research and development of defense systems in the Jimmy Carter administration, Perry was to succeed only partially in his endeavor to downplay the importance of comparative counting between US and Soviet forces, using the United States’ “superior technology to offset the Soviet’s numerical advantage” (p. 45).

This is what he calls the “new thinking” (p. 45) that

was eventually adopted only for US conventional forces undergoing a modernization program. As for the nuclear arsenal, instead, the “old thinking” turned impossible to be displaced. Rather, in the early 1980s, the new administration, led by Ronald Reagan, reaffirmed the old thinking through, in particular, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) proposal, which the US president launched in March 1983. In one of the most illuminating chapters of his book, Perry highlights how foolish the whole concept of waging a war in the nuclear era is, just because nuclear systems are basically designed to be used only once. Therefore, he underlines, although SDI was “superficially resembling new thinking” (p. 65), it in fact proves that Albert Einstein was right when he observed that “the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking” (p. 68). With that specific awareness, Perry spent the last years of the Cold War teaching at Stanford University and trying to bring into the classroom the outlook he had acquired while at the Pentagon. But the commitment he felt toward younger generations, however important, did not keep him away from a more direct engagement in diplomatic efforts. On the contrary, for the rest of his life, when he was not a member of the US administration, he was to try to complement the activity of US government officials, recurrently participating in the so-called Track 2 diplomacy with the purpose of helping decrease the reciprocal suspicion that, within official diplomatic circles, might not have been easy to shelve.

His first experience with unofficial diplomacy goes back to the last decade of the Cold War, when, after Reagan took office, the dialogue with the Soviets seemed unable to gain momentum. Perry’s memoirs devote a good deal of attention to the relationship between Washington and Moscow, including some brief, somber considerations about their current state and foreseeable worsening future. I found that the most interesting part is the section in which he gives a rather detailed account of his years in the Bill Clinton administration. In 1993, he started as deputy secretary of defense and became secretary in January 1994, after Les Aspin left. Back at the Pentagon, where he intended to stay no longer than one term, Perry’s ambition was still to “decrease the role of nuclear weapons” (p. 81) and to improve the chances to implement an effective offset strategy. But in the aftermath of the Cold War, the most dangerous, tangible legacy that required deliberation and action by the US government was the huge strategic arsenal that the demise of the Soviet Union left under the control of a small group of newly independent, and still shaky, re-

publics. Perry especially praises the Nunn-Lugar legislation and the commitment of his highly qualified team to the cause of avoiding the risk of loose nukes—and loose fissile material—for the success the United States attained in the field of nonproliferation over the 1990s. He clearly implies that the dismantlement of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus was one of his most important accomplishments as secretary of defense.

A pronounced self-criticism, instead, characterizes the assessment Perry makes of his attempts to develop a comprehensive and long-lasting cooperation with Russia. From this standpoint, the years he spent at the Pentagon were marked by the positive results achieved with the launch of the Partnership for Peace (PFP) and the prospective establishment of the NATO-Russian Permanent Joint Council (PJC), which entailed better coordination between NATO and Russia on a series of security matters. Yet, the political climate that in Bosnia had made possible the successful implementation of NATO-Russian partnership was bound to vanish under the blow of untimely NATO enlargements toward the East. According to Perry, "NATO [first] expansion was the first step" (152), though not the only one, in the direction of a decisive downturn in US-Russian relations, since it happened when Moscow still saw the Western alliance as a potential threat. Perry blames himself because, in 1996, at the National Security Council meeting the president called to discuss the issue of enlargement, he "didn't fight more effectively for delay of the NATO decision" (p. 129). He understandably regrets the opportunity that both Washington and Moscow missed to favor cooperative behavior instead of yielding to "ancient predispositions" (p. 113). Moreover, any real progress in arms control was possible only on the basis of reciprocal trust. During Clinton's second term, however, such a condition became increasingly difficult to recreate, with the consequence of producing, in the next decade, only a tentative commitment on the part of both the United States and Russia to significant reductions of their respective nuclear arsenals.

Interestingly, writing about his experience as secretary of defense, Perry clearly abstains from any direct or indirect reference to his own overall appraisal of the Clinton administration. Indeed, I would have been very surprised if that were not the case. In fact, Perry is much more focused on, and interested in presenting the stand-

point of a government official who served his country with the goal of enhancing the US defense capabilities, while reducing the reliance on nuclear weapons and improving the living conditions and operational capacity of American troops. The approach he adopts in this book is inherently noncontentious because his main goal is to advance the cause of nuclear disarmament, not to raise or openly initiate a debate on other issues, if any exists. Accordingly, even when Perry describes his frustrating experience as a negotiator with North Korea in the last years of Clinton's second term, he is never tempted to deflect from this course. He well explains why he acceded to the US president's request to lead the North Korean Policy Review that followed the crisis of the Agreed Framework, in 1998. He also outlines the alternative strategies that he and his Japanese and South Korean partners envisioned to bar the North's introduction of nuclear weapons, apparently with some chances of succeeding in 2000. Still, when those hopes of solution were definitely doomed by the George W. Bush administration, which took office a year later, Perry admits that he felt "confused and angry," as a "long and carefully conducted diplomacy" was "summarily rejected" (p. 168). Nonetheless, even when he voices his disappointment for what he believes was a missed opportunity of fruitful dialogue with Pyongyang, he skillfully avoids revealing any personal or ideological dimension to his frustration.

A personal dimension characterizes, instead, the last section of Perry's memoirs, wherein he describes what I would call the last stage of his conversion, namely the embracing of a maximalist goal complemented with a pragmatic approach. What emerges here is first and foremost the plausible rationale that lays behind the adoption of the maximalist goal of the nuclear global zero. In fact, Perry turns out to be fully persuasive in arguing that to deal with the problem of an absolute weapon we, as international community, need to cultivate the vision of an absolute purpose. In between are the endeavors of those committed to raising public awareness and advocating solutions against the threat of nuclear arsenals.

Note

[1]. The annual summer school organized in Allumiere (Italy) by the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/nuclear-history-boot-camp>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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