

Reflecting on the 75th Anniversary of Hiroshima

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00:00: Welcome back, everyone. We didn't want to let this day pass before reflecting on the 75th anniversary of the tragedy at Hiroshima. If you've never read John Hersey's 1946 essay, he interviewed survivors just in the year following the bombing. It's an extraordinary piece, it does help us to frame and put into some perspective the enormity of what happened on August 6th, 1945 at Hiroshima, on August 9th, 1945 at Nagasaki. I think the backdrop to today's panel is that we have a crisis in arms control, nuclear arms control today. We may well be in the most dangerous period for instability among the nuclear weapons powers of any time since the 1960s. The Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty lapsed, the New START Treaty is in danger. The development of hypersonic weapons has destabilized, the effort to balance and limit conflict between nations, and of course, the United States and Russia; the United States and China are at their lowest points of trust in a half century in both cases.

01:11: Vice President Biden said today in a statement that, "We need to recommit to our ultimate goal, a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons." He came out for the extension of New START. President Trump has been talking about the need to bring China into negotiations with the United States and Russia, because China is completely unconstrained. We have two people here who know a lot about this subject. Governor Jerry Brown, former governor of California, and Rachel Bronson, the CEO and President of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. Governor Brown has become the executive chairman of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. I met Governor Brown a couple of years back at a birthday celebration for Secretary of Defense, Bill Perry at Stanford University, and I think it's ironic in the sense that Bill Perry has become one of the leading advocates for Nuclear Zero, for the campaign to end nuclear weapons for all time. And he was even tweeting about that this morning. So we're looking forward to a good conversation between Governor Jerry Brown, and Rachel Bronson of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. Welcome to the Aspen stage.

02:30: Thank you. Nick, thank you so much for that introduction. And it's really an honor to be here with your group today. This is an auspicious anniversary, and one that I'm so glad that you're taking some time to recognize. So let me start, for the audience, maybe in situating this conversation a little bit, and with a question to Governor Brown. Governor Brown, you're known as a long-serving California governor, but your interest in nuclear issues is not so well known. So maybe we can start our conversation. Can you explain how you became interested in the nuclear threat and why you remain so passionate about it today?

03:16: Well, I don't really wanna go back to my ancient history. But I was in the Jesuit seminary. This was before Vatican II, 1958, maybe, maybe a little later, somewhere in that area. And Khrushchev came to California, and my father was... Actually it must've been '59 Khrushchev was governor. There was also a debate between Linus Pauling, and Teller. The Teller debate with Pauling about nuclear fallout and nuclear testing. So those were the things that were going on then, and I got very interested in. Jumping forward a bit, I was Governor of California during the Nuclear Freeze movement. And the Nuclear Freeze proposition to freeze nuclear weapons, was put on the California ballot, and it barely passed, something that surprised me, I thought it would do better. But it did pass, and the result was I was instructed by the people of California to write a letter both

to the president of the United States, Ronald Reagan, and to the leader of the Soviet Union, which I did. And ever since then, I have been worried about this growth of nuclear weaponry. And in fact, I wrote an article once called Nuclear Addiction, in answer to Caspar Weinberger's Buildup with Ronald Reagan there, when Reagan was first elected in the '80s.

04:39: And so I've been concerned that the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States is an addictive relationship, that the more one does, the more the other does. And it constantly escalates, tit for tat, with no ending in sight. And so my interest has always been, can we come to an understanding with the other nuclear power, a major nuclear power, now Russia, and do so? And we seem to be going in the exact opposite direction. My real accelerated interest started with Bill Perry five years ago, when I thought we were just vilifying Putin and Russia, and not talking about the key issues. And ever since that time, five years ago, things are going downhill, first under Obama, and now under Trump. So I think we're not in a good state.

05:31: And I think it's also well to remember, after Nick Burns told us to think about John Hershey's book on Hiroshima, that in the early days of the bombing, that the United States government censored any information about the after-effects of the bomb. And I think that desire to blind ourselves to the devastating horror of the nuclear weapon continues. And I think it continues because thinking of the apocalypse is not congenial. It's very hard to imagine what isn't happening, but what could happen. It's a great leap, but unless we face the power that humankind has now, we're not gonna take the steps needed. And those steps are pretty clear. Dialogue with Russia, work with the other nuclear powers, and we can't spend all our time finding all the things bad about Putin. 'cause in America, we seem to have a lot of things bad with ourselves, Black Lives Matter, the poor handling of the covid, and all sorts of other things, not even...

06:36: I don't have to list the Vietnam War and the Iraq War, things that I thought were big mistakes. So, I think the big challenge here is to, yes, be honest about Russia and Putin, but be honest about ourselves and the predicament we're in and start having that deep dialogue at all levels, not just the president, but the Intelligence, the military, the diplomatic corps, and then citizen diplomacy as well. We're not doing that at anywhere near the level that the problem and the challenge of nuclear blunder represents for America, for Russia, and for the people of the whole world.

07:18: Great, thank you. You actually brought up a number of really important issues. I know at the Bulletin, one of the ways we're thinking, you'd mentioned covid and social unrest, racial unrest, all of that, Black Lives Matter. What I think is clear is our investments that we're making right now in our security aren't keeping our citizens safe. We're all speaking from our home right now, while at the same time the administration is about to embark on a \$1.7 trillion investment in nuclear weapons over the next 30 years to refashion our entire arsenal into what some are calling Arsenal 2.0. So we're making huge investments in what I see as 20th century threats rather than 21st century threats, which we're all dealing with right now. And one of the things that you've been really targeted on in our conversations, as well as in your public speaking, is the relationship between the United States and Russia. And you and I, the Secretary Perry, and Sam Nunn were on the Hill last year, talking about Russia policies.

08:35: In the last day or two, you and many others signed on to a very important open letter with

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Fiona Hill and Thomas Pickering and Rose Gottemoeller, about a path forward with the Russians. It's in politico.com. The audience can go find it. Can you talk about your concern about US-Russia relations and why it was so important for you to sign that open letter?

[pause]

09:12: Let's see, I think the governor just froze. Let's give him a sec... There he is.

09:15: I'm back on.

09:16: Yeah, you're back on. Yeah.

09:17: Okay, I'm back on. Sorry, we're out here in the country. Internet is not stable. So, Rachel, let me just jump right in there about the recent letter by a very wide variety of American leaders calling for renewed dialogue with Russia, and I think the key point of that letter is the part about serious dialogue addressing the deeper causes of our fear and hostility with Russia. We gotta dig in to what's causing this breakdown, which is now as bad as it's ever been, and some people think maybe even worse. So that's something that I think is very hard to do. Washington loves to bash Putin, and I think we oughta say, "Okay, whatever you want to say about Russia and their misbehavior, and leaving aside our different, but very real misbehaviors, we still have this threat of nuclear annihilation, nuclear apocalypse." And you mentioned about the virus. Some people expected it, the experts, but most people were caught by surprise. The virus has some elements about the nuclear danger. One, it surprised America; B, it hit China and it hit Russia and it hit America and all the other countries.

10:43: So it's a mutual threat, and most of the languaging, most of the perspectives that are publicly expressed about Russia and about the United States is about our security interest versus their problem, but there's another category of threat. It isn't just a nationalistic, it's Russia, America, and zero-sum. No, there are mutual threats, and there are therefore mutual interests. The virus is a mutual threat; the danger of a nuclear mistake or accident, very real, is a mutual threat; climate change is a mutual threat. Having a mutual threat creates mutual vulnerability. Therefore, we have something we can share that is not zero-sum, but we can work on together. To me, what is required is not the idealism, the utopianism, that's gonna bring American democracy everywhere, but a realism, a planetary realism that recognizes that horror can be unleashed by a virus, by climate change, or by a nuclear accident. And we know, if we think about it, these nuclear weapons are held in check by software by human beings. That check of holding them from going off has failed. Well, it didn't fail. It didn't go off, but there was a signal that led people to believe that a nuclear response was called for, so we know that nuclear accident or mistake is possible.

12:22: The only way we can prevent that is deeper working and agreements with Russia and then with the other nuclear powers in the world. And we're not doing that. Most of what we do is get upset when Putin does his hacking or his people get into our emails, when he does stuff in the Ukraine or Syria or Libya. Okay, bad, bad, bad, but we gotta be able to chew gum and jump rope, something people said Gerald Ford couldn't do. Well, he did a pretty good job in many respects. We've gotta talk at every level. Now, this is not just Republican/Democrat. President Obama pulled back our diplomats to punish Russia, but we gotta get off the punishing in the form of stopping to

talk. We need to not only talk, we need deep understanding, and I'd say the first step in understanding is humility, and there's a tremendous arrogance of power, an ethnocentrism, that blinds us, just like the Greek tragedians talked about hubris and that tragic flaw or blind spot. We've got to see our predicament with clarity, with polar lucidity, where are we in the world? And where we are is facing not just the dangers of an aggressive Russia or China, which are very real. We're facing the danger of apocalyptic outcomes, like the virus. We should know not apocalyptic, but it's pretty bad and planetary, but the weapon... Mistakes that can be made, and the climate change. And that oughta be the occasion for mutual engagement, but it isn't.

14:17: The virus, instead of getting Russians and Chinese and Americans closer together, has been an occasion for more name-calling and more, as President Trump says, "the China virus." Well, we don't look at the American virus informationally, which has given out the false information on the nature of the virus. So all I'm saying is humility, clarity, honesty about where we are, where they are, not utopian, not naive, not blind, but facing the predicament, and we are facing the edge of the apocalypse right now. That's why the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the scientific committee, and the whole board moved the doomsday clock 20 seconds closer to the end, towards a big nuclear exchange. Wake up, people. And we're not awake, it's sleepwalking, in my opinion, just like before 1914. People feel comfortable.

15:23: Well, we have to get uncomfortable because humankind has created this power, and this power that can do so much good also has the power to destroy, and I'm not just talking about nuclear, I'm talking about the full range of technologies, quantitative computing and artificial intelligence, and bioengineering and all of the different techniques that human beings have invented. All of these represent the possibility of good or of horror, and the only way we can handle it, if we can, which is not completely clear to me, is to start the conversation, serious, and we don't have that. We're really getting caught in a little silo of excitement, getting off on our own "bad, bad, the other guy," and it does remind me of the Gospel saying, "Don't forget the big spot in your own eye while you look at a tiny speck in the other." That was good advice 2,000 years ago. It's good advice right today.

16:35: Thank you. It was really striking when we were in DC talking about this, about how complicated creating a strategic dialogue with the Russians would be. For the Republicans, they're vulnerable because of the Russian hacking and everything we've heard about, and their role in our elections. And the Democrats, it's a juicy target for them to go after, and they themselves would feel uncomfortable about perhaps engaging with the Russians. Now do you have any thoughts on that? About even if the strategic dialogue was desirable, how politically we get there. How do we create that space? The way we treat diplomacy is like it's a gift rather than a necessity, but I'd love your thoughts on that.

17:25: Well my thought is, it goes back to pride versus humility. Today, whites and others... Whites, well that's a broad category, has to reflect on privilege, on what's happened to African-Americans over the last 200 years in America, and what's still happening. So we have flaws, we're not a perfect society. This is not the New Jerusalem, despite what the Puritans might have thought. And we're in this world where we seem to be blank, we focus on all the evil that's out there. But if we would just reflect on the fact that the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was highly distorted, misrepresented, and that was the base of our bombing, and 2 million people were killed in what a

lot of people think, although not all, a civil war. We had Richard Nixon tell us he had a secret plan. That was an absolute lie. We had George Bush tell us there was all these weapons of mass destruction, even though there was great question about the intelligence. And then we had this terrible event in Iraq, we killed these people, and then we had ISIS and hundreds of thousands of people have died. And we could take the Libya decapitation of Gaddafi.

18:49: So, I don't wanna say, "America bad," I wanna say, "America human." And I wanna say, "Russia is also human, along with all the other bads." We've gotta get off of this deeply moralistic, not moral, moralistic distortion of our perception of the world, and the accurate reception, the polar, lucid, reality that we oughta be able to see is there's great danger, and the only way outta the danger is dialogue. It's meeting on a plane of equality 'cause we're all equally vulnerable to the virus, to the bomb, to climate change, and we have to sit down and start talking.

19:34: Nixon went to China. Mao is responsible for tens of millions of deaths, and they're still over there clinking their champagne glasses. Now there are people today who said they were beguiled, but nevertheless, that was a move that Richard Nixon was able to make, alright? And the same thing, Nixon went to the Kremlin, he stayed overnight at the Kremlin with his wife and Kissinger. That would be unthinkable if Trump and his wife went over there to the Kremlin, spent the night with Putin, it would be crazy. But Nixon did it. He got to detente, and the detente blew up, and we had the massive, massive nuclear build-up, and then Reagan sat down with Gorbachev and said, "A nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought." So now we're in the third round of the nuclear build-up. We oughta look back at the two previous rounds where the US and the Soviet Union were able to come to an agreement. We have to do that again.

20:40: And the cheap political shots that the democrats make on Trump are not helpful. And Trump's unstable, wild behavior is not helpful either. So we need whoever are left of the wise men and women in this country, they are desperately needed to come forward. And I think Thomas Graham and Pickering and Rose Gottemoeller have begun that with their open letter, which I don't think will be published. I don't know that the major papers give a damn. And I would single them out: Washington Post, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, the reporting is infinitesimal compared to what is needed to wake us up, and to give us a knowledge and understanding of where we are. So I would say, plenty of work to do on all sides, regardless of party, regardless of country. Humankind, to make it, is going to have to make a real turn here. And that turn does start with humility and clarity of perception, because the doors of our perception are very closed, and very cloudy and obscured.

21:54: So we're starting to come to the end of our time and I know this is something very much on your mind, and we've talked a bit about climate change and the pandemic, but certainly compared to those two, the danger of nuclear weapons really hasn't registered as a... Certainly a campaign issue, or as you were saying in the press, and yet... There's a great piece in The New York Review of Books by Jessica Matthews, talking about the threat just recently, our doomsday clock is at 100 seconds to midnight, generating a global conversation about these issues, but why doesn't it receive more attention? It did 40 years ago, but why isn't it... What can be done to change that?

22:38: Well, I'd say the following. Number one, just like the people on the Titanic were drinking, some of them there were supposedly in their finest outfits, the music was playing, they didn't see it.

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It was inconceivable. In fact, some people said that the Titanic was built so well it could never sink. Well, it did sink, and thousands died. Alright, well we're on kind of a Titanic, very hard to imagine the unimaginable, thinking the unthinkable. But we know that's hard. It's called apocalyptic thinking. And if you engage in it, people say you're a nutcase, a nutjob. Well, we have to be able to see the power that humankind has now marshalled through its science and technology. So number one, be able to entertain the possibility of these horrors that are not on, but they could be, just by pushing a couple of buttons. Alright, that's number one.

23:39: Number two, there's inertia. Things at rest tend to stay at rest. Things in certain motion tend to keep that motion. The activity in Congress by both Democrats and Republicans, with a few exceptions, is just moving ahead with the trillion-dollar modernization program, moving along with a \$740 billion military budget, with the 700 bases all over the world, all the stuff we're doing. Well we have to take a pause and reflect on, "Where are we? What's counterproductive? What's dangerous?" And we don't like to do that.

24:17: And number three, which is maybe the elephant in the room, there is a group of human beings that are part of the arms industry: General Dynamics, Boeing, McDonnell... I know McDonnell Douglas has now merged with others, that's a good California company. But they're making money, billions, and they profit. They have a conflict of interest on trying to end the arms race, because they're making money. So don't ever mistake the money, the money that goes into think tanks to keep them going, the money that goes to congressional campaigns, the money that goes to lobbyists. The money. Follow the money, as was said in Watergate. So that's real. I don't think it's polite. I don't think many people at the Aspen Institute are really gonna talk about that. But it's real, folks, along with the inertia, along with the unthinkable.

25:16: I think Herman Kahn wrote a book called Thinking about the Unthinkable. Well, he was talking about having a nuclear war. But it's still a big unthinkable thought of how to prevent a nuclear war, or even to think it's even possible. And I would say... 'Cause I'm not a scientist, but I've spent my entire life around politicians, I would say, for the most part, the complacency is pervasive, it is deep, and from my perspective, shocking. And how we awaken ourselves from this deep pervasive complacency is anyone's guess. But I think the fact that we're here, others are talking about it... You mentioned an article in The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, or rather the New York Review of Books. Good, but it's not the front page of the major papers or the local papers. So we have a lot of work.

26:13: And as a former Jesuit Seminarian, I would almost call it missionary work. We have to do the Lord's work to wake people up. And the ears are closed, the eyes are covered. We gotta open up the ears and the eyes. Where are we, folks? And now, what practically, realistically, with security in mind, do? And I think we can do a hell of a lot, and there are many people in Washington who wanna do the right thing and know what to do, we just gotta give them the support and the boost. And I hope all you Aspen folks who are watching, you don't have to agree with me, but for a moment, just assume, just imagine maybe what I'm saying has a real element of truth. And if it does, then what can you and what can we all do about it? I think we can do a lot.

27:08: Thank you. We've come to, or coming to the end of our time, and before I flip it back to Nick Burns to close us out, I did just wanna focus us again on the 75th anniversary and maybe how

to think about it a little bit. What's the takeaway? And there are so many takeaways, but one in particular. Nick started with a reference to John Hersey's book and I'm reading Lesley Blume's book right now on fallout, which goes through Hersey's writing... Exposé. But what's clear is, Hersey believed that it was actually his exposé, and it was the closeness that we had to Hiroshima and Nagasaki that galvanized the globe to try to make sure nothing like that ever happened again. 75 years on, we're far from that, the survivors are... Just a few of them left, our parents and grandparents who could tell us about what it was like at that time, are gone. And so the tools, in many ways, that we relied on to keep focused on this issue have been spent, are behind us. And so we, as a community, really, need to think about what's gonna motivate us to stay engaged on this issue, because expert after expert is telling us, with everything they know, it is a very, very dangerous time. And we don't have the arms control tools, we're investing very heavily. It's very reminiscent of the earliest days of the '50s and '60s at the height of the Cold War.

28:52: Well, Rachel, let me just interject, I see we only got a minute left. Look, you mentioned John Hersey's book, so did Nick Burns. What was the big thing about that book? Number one, the New Yorker broke the story. They had to, because it was being covered up by the United States government. They broke the story. What's the story? It was the human suffering. We have to imagine what these bombs do. All this security interest talk is very dehumanized, it's not opening up our imagination to the truth, to the reality where we are. And that book, yes, we read that book, think about those six human beings and what happened and their stories. This is about the story of people whose flesh is melted, whose bodies are ripped apart by the shrapnel or the radiation. We've gotta meditate and reflect on that. Anything less won't get us out of the problem. This is not about some RAND Corporation analysis of cost benefit, or the latest in the security interest rhetoric, this is about the truth, the fact of where we are, and we're sharing it, this is about planetary realism. We are in the same boat with Russia and China and the rest of the world, and we have to see what that boat is. Where is it and what do we do about it? It's an exercise required of imagination, of truth-telling, and deep humility. If we could follow that path, we have a chance at pulling back from the brink while there's still time.

30:36: Great, thank you. Nick, I think it's back to you now.

30:40: Well it is, and if you could stay with me for a minute, I'm gonna ask the Aspen people to activate my video, please, but you can hear me. I just wanna thank Governor Jerry Brown and Rachel Bronson. This is a somber day, it should be for everybody around the world thinking about what happened at Hiroshima, 75 years ago today, and then Nagasaki. Governor Brown, maybe one last question to you. I was a career diplomat for a long time, and as recently as 10 years ago, people, a lot of national security experts would have laughed at someone if they said we should abolish nuclear weapons. But when Sam Nunn and Bill Perry and George Shultz and Jerry Brown and Rachel Bronson and others get on board, then you have a possibility of making that a mainstream view and reaching out to a broader cycle of people. And even President Obama, I thought, made a departure of all American presidents, talking about that as the ultimate goal. He said maybe not in his lifetime. Is this achievable, do you think, Governor, is it achievable in our lifetime or our kids lifetime?

31:52: Well, I don't know. I have no idea. I do know, by the way, add one more name, Henry Kissinger, signed the letter with the other people you mentioned.

32:03: Right.

32:03: Look, I think, this nuclear threat, like climate, would take decades longer, and maybe pandemics that become more and more virulent, humankind has to assess, and the leaders, some of whom you mentioned, have to assess the danger. I don't believe, and I've talked to the leaders in Washington, I mean all these people, all the presidents I've talked to, not about this always, but my impression is that people don't really sense the danger. And if you sense the danger, I believe we'd do more. I think Ronald Reagan sensed the danger, and Gorbachev, when they said a nuclear war must never be fought, and can never be won. That's not being said by President Trump. It's not the official policy of the United States. I don't know if it's the official policy of Russia or China.

32:54: We have to get down to the basics, and the basics is that humankind could destroy itself, extinction is possible. I know that's so big, it's beyond our nice living, it's just so foreign and wild, but we have to face facts. The power that humankind has is so great, we have to at least think about it. And if we think about it, we'll find ways of reducing. We can live on the planet, we can live together. And we've got some big difference between the Communist party of China and the US. Nothing could be more different. It's even more different than Putin's Russia and Trump's America. But there are bases for a common interest. We have to state them, we have to talk about them. We aren't. There's no conversation like we're having now in Washington, that's being publicly reported by The Washington Post or The New York Times, I don't wanna call them out, or the major networks. We have to devote some time to something that is not news of the day. The end of the world is not news of the day, but it's real, it's possible. And dammit, we oughta start talking about it. If we talk about it we'll find a way forward to abolish nuclear weapons, or at least get damn close.

34:11: Governor, thank you. Rachel, thank you. One of the most important books I've read this past year is Yuval Noah Harari's 21 lessons for the 21st century. He's the Israeli historian, philosopher. And he says, when he reflects on humanity in the next decade or two, he thinks we've got three great existential challenges: One is climate change, one is nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear war; and the other is the integration of AI and biotech and the unknowable when that happens. And that got my attention. We wanted to have this conversation today. People need to hear your views and people need to understand the position of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. Thanks to you, Governor. Thanks to you, Rachel.

34:56: Thank you, Nick.

34:57: Nick, the author you just mentioned has a page on humility, on humility. What do we gotta start?

35:06: It does, and you and I are both Jesuit-trained, and we learned long ago, as young kids, that humility is a virtue.

35:13: We gotta start there, gotta start with humility.

35:17: Thank you, Governor. Thank you, Rachel, thanks for being with us. We really appreciate it,

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thank you.

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