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March 13, 2023
Interview with George Perkovich

Citation:

"Interview with George Perkovich", March 13, 2023, Wilson Center Digital Archive, https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/301086

Summary:

The transcript was lightly edited to ease understanding. In some portions, additional explanatory text was added after the interview. This was marked with square brackets throughout the transcript.This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

Michal Onderco: So, thank you very much for being part of this project. I always start the interviews with a question: how did people become interested in nuclear weapons? So how did you become interested in nuclear weapons?

George Perkovich: It was completely by accident, it's a longer story, but when I finished my undergraduate degree, I was [working as a research assistant to Langdon Winner, at University of California at Santa Cruz. Winner was renown at that time as a thinker about the politics of technology. I saw an advertisement on a bulletin board for a week-long conference that would be at Yale in June 1981 on "Science, Technology and Democracy." The conference was being convened by something called Student Pugwash, which I later learned was an offshoot of the Pugwash Conferences started in the 1950s by Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell. I applied to attend and was accepted. It was an amazing event for me – Yale was impressive, the conference faculty was great, there was an evening session with Daniel Ellsberg who was this famous, brave person that I could not have imagined chatting with. Anyway, after that conference I returned to Los Angeles where I was working as a paralegal. A few months later I got a call from the founder of Student Pugwash, Jeffrey Leiffer, saying they were going to establish the organization fulltime with a headquarters in Washington, DC, and would I be interested in applying to run it.

Long story short, I got the job and moved to Washington in January 1982.] I had been studying philosophy of science and political theory, and was interested in technology and society. The first summer I was doing this job the senior Pugwash movement had their conference in Warsaw. This was eight months after martial law had been declared. It was my first travel outside of North America. So I arrive in martial law Poland, and we're there and it was fascinating. [Seeing lines of people waiting outside stores that had few things in them; a large public square fenced off and closed to the public, with a sign on the fence saying, "under repair," and one man with a trowel in the middle of the square replacing a tile – a great introduction to the tragicomical humor of authoritarian governments that want to keep people from freely associating.] And on August 31, it was the first anniversary of the Gdansk agreements,[which had been the big breakthrough for Solidarity]. So the whole Pugwash movement was asked by the Polish government to leave Warsaw and go 100 kilometers away to hold the conference… because there were going to be demonstrations. I decided to stay in Warsaw. And so I went on the demonstrations and was tear-gassed and at one point rounded a corner to see tanks coming down the boulevard. I decided that East-West relations and security issues were fascinating. And so from then on, I started studying things related to nuclear weapons. It was an accident of being in Warsaw then.

Michal Onderco: And if one puts your name in Wikipedia, the first thing that says about you is that you were working at W. Alton Jones Foundation. How did you get to that position? And why did you choose to work for an organization like W. Alton Jones?

George Perkovich: After Student Pugwash, and after this trip in Warsaw, I decided that I would get a graduate degree in Soviet studies. So I went to Harvard and did that from 84 through 86. When I graduated from that, I decided I wanted to write about arms control and security issues. I got a grant from the W. Alton Jones Foundation to do that writing. That was 1986, 87. By 1989, my wife and I had a son, and we needed health insurance – we were paying for it out of pocket and it was too much, so I wanted a real job with benefits. And so I applied and got a job as a writer for Senator Biden, in 1989. We moved to Washington. In Spring of 1990 Jane Wales who had given me the grant from the W. Alton

Jones Foundation, called me and said she was leaving the foundation and wondered if I would be interested in running the program.' I said no, that I really liked working for Senator Biden. And then two weeks later, my mother called me from California and said that my father was in the hospital [and going to have surgery for cancer. We traveled to L.A. for the surgery, and when the surgeon – who was one of my father's best friends – came out of the operating room, he broke down in tears and said there was nothing to be done. The cancer had spread too much and] was not going to be curable. So I called the Jones Foundation back and said: "look, something's changed. If I got the job, but wanted to be in California for as long as my father lived, would that be, okay?'' And they said: "well, yeah, if you get the job, we could be flexible about that.'' And so I said: ''alright, I'm interested.'' And so I interviewed, and eventually got the job. Then I told Senator Biden that I needed to be in California. And so that's basically how that happened. I ended up loving that the job. The foundation, that was, in many ways, the most enjoyable job that I've had.

Michal Onderco: Why?

George Perkovich: Because you can be as creative or more creative than you can be… in the think tank or academic world. You could do all the things that you want to do in the think tank or academic world, but you don't have to raise money. And you can also invent things because you have money that you can put towards them. So you can be very creative, if you wish. It's great. I wrote the book on India's nuclear bomb while I was in the Jones Foundation, doing all the grantmaking. At nights and on weekends I wrote the book. You could do that kind of thing. Everything was possible.

Michal Onderco: I earlier read the annual reports of the Jones Foundation. And I found them very insightful because they were not only reports of all the activities of the foundation, but you wrote them in a way, as a sort of the broad overview of what happened in that field, and what are the major trends, I found that a very different approach to philanthropic grantmaking, Did you, at that time, conceive your work at something broader than just purely administrative job of matching money and…?

George Perkovich: First of all, it's amazing that you read those reports, and I'm gratified. They were actually interesting to write. What you detected in the report was exactly what we were trying to do -- develop a strategy for change. The idea was that we have resources, so if you want to have a kind of change, what would be the things that you would do? The reports kind of reflected how our strategy evolved. It was a board that wanted to get rid of nuclear weapons, which is not the case for many boards. This was a family that wanted to do that. So it was very different. We didn't… I mean, we responded to proposals, but a lot of it was going out and saying to people: "here's what we're interested in.'' We invented a lot of projects. I would find talented people, Dan Plesch, Michael Krepon, number of people -- and go to them and say: "hey, what about doing this kind of project?" So it was a different model than a lot of people…

Michal Onderco: I do want to ask a few questions about your time at W. Alton Jones. But perhaps, before we go there, I asked every interviewer question. How do you view the role of nuclear weapons in the world?

George Perkovich: It's a great question. I don't allow myself or I don't take the time to think about what the world would be like if nuclear weapons hadn't been invented, alright? Because you could have a whole different view based on that. So, based on the assumption that they *were* brought into

existence, I believe and have evidence to think that they have had a deterrent value in some situations in which major warfare would have been an alternative. And so that is a constructive role of that technology. Often, in my view, the way that has happened has been more that they self-inhibited leaderships from doing things that those leaders might have felt political pressure to do otherwise. But because the leader can say: “wait, the other side has nuclear weapons, we can't do that.’’ The leader felt like he could get away with not doing something, because the public would understand. Whereas if the other side, if you Michal, didn't have nuclear weapons, and I still came to conclusion that a war with you was not in my interest, it's hard for me to go to my domestic competitors and others and say: “we could probably win. But it's not in our interests. And I'd rather avoid the war and everything.’’ They'd say: you're weak, you're this, you're that, and I would lose power… But if I can go to my public and say: he's got nuclear weapons, and even if we're stronger, and even if he's a bad person, we are not going to be better off after nuclear war, and it's not worth killing all of our people’’ I can get away with it politically. And I've seen that work in India and Pakistan, I think we saw it work with the US and Russia a few times. So that's the constructive role. That's the only constructive role, I think. Then the question is: why do we have… why do the US and Russia in particular have so many? And I think there are all sorts of really inexcusable drivers of overkill and over-reliance on this stuff, which then makes them more dangerous than they then they ought to be. There's a role for nuclear weapons, and it's overdone.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that in the world as it is today, is it more practical to focus on goals such as prohibition and elimination? Or is it more productive to focus on practical steps and sort of smaller steps?

George Perkovich: I think the most productive thing right now is to focus on, and concentrate people's attention, on the need to avoid war between the US and China, between Russia and NATO states directly, between India and Pakistan, between North Korea and anybody else. Preventing war right now should be the number one focus. And beneath that or in parallel to that, because you can do things in parallel, we should pursue all the different steps that experts in our community talk about in terms of risk reduction and other things in case you can't prevent war, try to prevent escalation or inadvertence, or mistaken launch or etcetera, number one. Number two, lower the size of the arsenal, so if you can avoid war, that the amount of destructiveness that would come from it would be reduced. There's a whole bunch of subsidiary things, but the main focus, I think, needs to be on preventing war. For example, I think this is given much less attention in this town than it should be when it comes to China. Also, when it comes to Russia. Yes, Russia brought the war, Russia started the war, but I think of lots of people around here who are morally righteous, and I get it, who don't think about the possibility of escalation and what that would be like, which I find to be mistaken. And so that needs to be part of the focus, I think.

Michal Onderco: You wrote one of the early books on abolition in 2009, I think?

George Perkovich: Yeah. Maybe 2008, I forget… but yeah.

Michal Onderco: And it's a book that even some of the people from ICAN today cite as the idea of abolition is sort of a mainstream idea, because George Perkovich: has written about it. And there is quite are few people who sort of talk about evolution, is your view on abolition, that it's unproductive? Or is it that it's harmful?

George Perkovich: I don't think it's harmful. No, I, in fact, I think it's very important… If we lived in a world where there weren't people advocating abolition, it would be a much sadder, more dangerous world. I used to say this to the board at the foundation, the Jones Foundation. I'd say: “we may not win. But do you want to be in a world with no one's trying to do what we're trying to do?’’ There’s a lot of horrible things in the world, right? That may never change. But you don't want to be in a world where no one's trying to change them. You might look at people who are doing it and say: “it's so nice that you're doing that, you're not going to succeed.” I mean, some of the stuff on climate or poverty, public health, any number of things you can point to, and you can say: we are never going to eliminate these harms. But man, we would not want to live in a world where no one's trying to do that. And so I feel definitely about nuclear weapons: yes, we always should be pushing for disarmament. Where I would differ with TPNW folks, or some of them anyway, is that you really want to create the conditions under which people then would be more secure in eliminating nuclear weapons. That's the tricky part. Some of the difference, I think, amongst communities is that people who say: “no, no, the security challenges are just an excuse. Just eliminate the weapons and then we can deal with the other stuff.” I just don't think it works out. I know enough, especially from the South Asian context, to know that at least a couple of times India would have gone to war against Pakistan if Pakistan didn't have nuclear weapons. And it was that simple, the prime minister just said: “they've got nuclear weapons, I'm not going to do this.’’ And if Pakistan didn't have nuclear weapons, it would have been a lot harder for him to say,: “I'm not going to do it.’’ Because everybody's saying: “F**k, we can do it’’. And so the conditions matter. [Under some conditions, elimination could make major war more likely.]

Michal Onderco: If you look at the development of the nuclear field since the end of the Cold War, what do you see as the biggest failure?

George Perkovich: Since the end of the Cold War?

Michal Onderco: Yeah.

George Perkovich: Well, I don't know. I'd have to think about… I don't know that I've felt that way. In other words, I see a bunch of failures. But I wouldn't say it was a failure of the tiny number of people who really pay attention to these things. It is a tiny number. I mean, my wife works for a major environmental organization. They have probably 10 times more money per year in one organization to work on climate change than the entire global community working on nuclear weapons policy. I mean, it's a tiny, tiny community. So you have to be somewhat realistic in your expectations. Indeed, I only met President Obama once, but in the meeting, there was a small meeting, he kind of expressed exhaustion, and was talking about the nuclear posture review in 2010. He looked at General Cartwright, who was sitting across [and who had been the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff], and he said: “Hoss, you remember how hard we had to work just to get that Nuclear Posture Review?’ Cartwright kind of laughed, because this is the President of the United who has basically kind of given up [trying to push through major change in nuclear posture and policy]. So if the President United States can't do it, and I'm sure Joe Biden is similarly of a view that he didn't even bother getting involved in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, because he's not going to be able to change anything [at a political price that would make sense for him to pay given everything else he wants to get done.] (My theory is that he alone gets to decide if there's going to be use of nuclear weapons, and he decided he's not going to use them. ”So whatever they want to do with the posture, fine. I'm not going to lose

political capital, having these debates, I know I can't win, screw it, I'm just not pressing the button." And that's reasonable.)

So when you look at the communities that don't have much power, [I can't say what else they should do or should have done.] I don't know if they are mistakes. I just want to say we all lack a theory and practice for how you get rid of entities like the KGB, the Revolutionary Guards in Iran, the ISI in Pakistan. The internal security apparatus is in countries, especially countries with nuclear weapons can pretty much persist and control the movement of the country. We don't know how to get rid of them. We had the collapse of the Soviet Union, we had the end of the Cold War, we had Perestroika. Well, who came back? The KGB, in not much time. And with that mindset that Putin has. So I don't know that anybody would have known how to make actually deep change in Russia, but we didn't pay any attention to it. President Bush (the first) said "well, we won.'' I and other… not that it mattered what I did, but there were smart people, George Kennan, others saying: "well, maybe don't push so much.'' But it is a natural thing in politics, well, you know, we won, so we can do what we want with NATO expansion. That gives more grounds to people to feel aggrieved and seek revenge. I think Putin is a sociopath and it gave him more ground.

Michal Onderco: And you think that there were there were concrete moments… So for example, you mentioned that when you work worked at W. Alton Jones there was this desire to get to the world of nuclear weapons. And it's a part of my research, I went to the archives ot the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and there were quite a few people in the 90s who had the idea of getting rid of nuclear weapons. What went wrong?

George Perkovich: Well, there were a lot of countervailing things. Almost all of those people were in the west, and in non-nuclear weapons state, but there weren't…

Michal Onderco: Well, I mean, there were sort of Beltway insiders like Morton Halperin having projects.

George Perkovich: I funded Mort, I knew Mort. Mort was cute about it, he was brilliant. He thought 50 could mean zero, or zero could mean 50. When you actually interrogate it, zero was a label, but he thought [for political and strategic reasons the U.S. would keep 50 as a just-in-case deterrent, not a warfighting force.] If that's how we're counting, then, yes, there were more people favoring "zero."] I've written about this: the move from one to zero is a big move, just like the opposite but probably even more so. We worry about proliferation, like, you know, [there's a big difference between Iran with zero nuclear weapons and Iran with a working device. You don't just say "well, they only have one, don't worry about it", you kind of [say] "well, there's more where that came from."

What I'm saying is, putting it another way, Obama in the Prague speech was very balanced: people tend to focus on one expression or the other, but it was a very balanced speech. Nonetheless, let's say that he really meant it about moving towards a world free of nuclear weapons. What happened after [is] that no one followed him, no other leader joined with him. Putin said, "this is an American plot. Because America wins without nuclear weapons. So we got to resist this." I was in China. The Chinese I spoke with thought something similar, "This is playing to a conventional military advantage. So we really have to keep our nuclear weapons." You didn't have the weaker parties who felt like they needed deterrence against the victor of the Cold War mobilize in favor of disarmament. In the 90s, the Pakistanis and Indians were going in opposite direction for their own reasons. I mean, you know, there

was no involvement there. No involvement of the Israelis, again, for various reasons. We weren't going to have a world war if Israel's the only one with nuclear weapons, [but still they would have had to be involved in going to zero].

You know, we used to laugh about this. Henry Kissinger signed up to Global Zero: he's a pathological liar. So you had to know it was total [expletive] for some of these guys. I talked to Phil Zelikow who went to the first Global Zero conference in Paris in 2007. He had been the counselor to Bush. And I said, "What are you doing here?" He kind of looked at me, he always thought he was smarter than everybody else. And he looked at me said, "George, don't you know, the riddle?" I said, "What's the riddle?" And he says, "In a world without nuclear weapons, we win it all." And I said, "Yeah, I know, I think the others figured that out too Phil." I mean, you know…

But that was the problem that we didn't attend to… we weren't going to get American inside-the-Beltway people thinking very differently. As long as you had the KGB running Russia… China was in a different place than we see what China is now, [but the U.S. and its allies were not going to heed Chinese calls to reduce to their numbers]. Until you didn't have the ISI running Pakistan, you didn't have the Revolutionary Guards in Iran, [you were not going to change establishment thinking in DC]. I mean, those people make people here say, "Okay, we have to keep our strength because those people may threaten allies and members and neighbors".

Michal Onderco: So you already said that in your work at W.Alton Jones, you had you funded some of the work that was sort of working towards the future. And was there something that civil society could have done differently in in the desire to bring about nuclear weapons free world?

George Perkovich: Well, if I had thought of it, I would have tried to do something with it. I mean, you can always say well, we needed more numbers. But then there's a reason you got the number you got first of all. But even with more people mobilized, I think not. Because one of the things that happened. You saw it after the Prague speech and other things at the moment when what "Global Zero" became an expression. I said this to Bruce Blair, who was the founder of Global Zero, was a good friend -- somebody really respected. I said, "you know, what's going to happen now. To the extent that zero gets projected out, the antibodies in the system are going to be mobilized in a way, and they're going to kill this virus". And I think that's what happened.

Michal Onderco: What are the anti-bodies?

George Perkovich: All the defense contractors, all of the ideologues of military superiority, etcetera, etcetera, Strategic Command.

Michal Onderco: But there's been a number of commanders of this STRATCOM, after they retire…

George Perkovich: Yes, after they retire. They don't tend to do that when they're in. I think one of the reasons is when they're in, they realize they have this whole body of people who work for them who resist and don't agree with deep reductions or disarmament, and that you can't impose your will. Just like what Obama said [about trying to push reform in the Nuclear Posture Review]. And I think what Biden would feel and what Reagan felt and others is, "I can't, I can't change this". But you can retire and you can speak your mind. But that's different than when you got the whole thing under your command.

Let's say there was something to what I said about producing the antibodies. Well, does that mean you don't speak for abolition at all? that would be kind of weird. And then what about the people who want to give voice to abolition and so on, so I don't know that there's a way out of this tensiont. Because the antibodies in a sense, mixing metaphors, but the antibodies, they do whatever it takes to kill the virus. It isn't that they necessarily have to be fair, or like, characterize you properly or balanced. They immediately say “you're so and so”. And it works. I wrote about this at the end of the book on India, you know, I kind of noticed that the countries that had given up nuclear weapon programs were non democracies, or they were democracies in transition where the decision to get rid of the nuclear weapons program was done in secret. But no one's ever openly debated, and then decided to get rid of nuclear weapons or a nuclear weapon program.

Michal Onderco: Well, I mean, you had kind of countries in Europe during the Cold War, like Germany and Sweden.

George Perkovich: Yeah, Sweden didn't openly debate. It was a secret program. And they didn't openly debate it, they secretly got rid of it. They had a debate about nuclear policy, but it wasn't about their nuclear program. And they secretly got rid of it. Germany, it was more theoretical. It wasn't like they had like a capability in a program underway.

But you know, I was thinking, South Africa, Taiwan, South Korea, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, decided before they had transition. It's much easier to imagine a non-democratic leader agreeing to let go of capability or restrain a capability than it is to imagine a Democratic leader doing it. Because of the political pressure. One of my favorite examples is the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy makes an accommodation to Khrushchev that is crucial but says you have to keep it secret. “I'll pull the missiles out of Turkey but secret.” The amazing thing is they kept it secret. For years, people didn't know that we had made this concession. Why? Because Kennedy couldn't get away with making a concession politically if people had known… So you imagine now trying to do something in secret like that. You can't imagine doing a secret and then you can't imagine that concession. Now we're stuck. Yeah, like we don't do deals. Maybe it is intuitive, and just not supposed to say it. But I look around this town. When was last time we ratified a treaty? We're not going to ratify a treaty.

Michal Onderco: I want to return back a little bit to the discussion we had about W. Alton Jones, what was different about Jones as compared to other funders in the field?

George Perkovich: Yeah, I love that. It was very different. It started with the President of the Board, who was Patricia Edgerton, who was the daughter of W Alton Jones. W. Alton Jones was the founder, he made the CITGO gas station company successful. She was his daughter. He had died in a plane crash in Long Island. And she… I adored her. She thought we should get rid of nuclear weapons. She just believed passionately. Her eldest son was, is a surgeon. He was part of Physicians for Social Responsibility, a very smart guy. This is in the 80s.

Michal Onderco: I spoke to Ira Helfand on Friday.

George Perkovich: Yeah, so Brad Edgington was part of PSR. He wanted to get rid of nuclear weapons. And then the 2 other siblings – Diane and Bill -- went along with it. Then the other trustees, again, went along, because that's what Pat wanted to do. And that's what Brad wanted to do. So, there was a desire there. they were all outsiders, none of them was a political insider. So it's unlike a corporate board, the Ford Foundation board or Carnegie Corporation board, where you got former governors,

and you've got all these famous muckety muck people. These were people no one in Washington ever heard of.

They had no identity tied to military strength or anything like that, so that made it easy. And then they decided, again, this was largely Pat's doing, that when they hired my boss, who they hired a year before he then hired me, that they wanted a professional staff. Their main emphasis was environment, sustainability. So my boss was an ornithologist and an environmental guy. He was an expert -- they wanted an expert staff. So then he decided: "Alright, the other program deals with nuclear weapons. And I'd like somebody who actually knows the substance, not an administrator.'' And so that's why they hired me. That combination -- they want you to actually invent stuff and be a leader in the field, and the board itself was saying: "we want to get rid of these things''-- that was totally different from others who either had a board and wanted to get rid of nuclear weapons, but didn't have staff that really knew the field, or vice versa.

Michal Onderco: W. Alton Jones at some point left the field as was the first major funder sort of decided to leave. And I wrote my previous book about the NPT Extension. And W. Alton Jones left shortly afterwards.

George Perkovich: Well, we left in 2001. [The decision to close was made in September 2001, and then the foundation made phase out grants for a couple years thereafter].

Michal Onderco: Well, okay, so not shortly, but afterwards. And people sort of were very… many people sort of talk about this as a turning point when things started to go south.

George Perkovich: It's so funny. Go ahead and ask your question Michal.

Michal Onderco: So my question is: did you at that time feel that the job was done?

George Perkovich: Oh, no. what happened was… [OFF RECORD]

Michal Onderco: So there was no feeling that the job was done.

George Perkovich: No, no, no.. Especially then. And then a week later. 9/11 happened. So then it was like… I mean, it wasn't the nuclear problem. But it was like people got even more worried about terrorism and other things like that.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that… you mentioned terrorism, sometimes when I speak to people from civil society, they think that after 9/11, there has been a growing attention to nuclear security, nuclear terrorism, that sort of culminated in the Nuclear Security Summit process, that this was sort of a big distraction from the actual goal of nuclear disarmament. And some people say that it was purposefully developed as a distraction. So I see that you disagree with the second part there. But do you agree with the first part that it was a distraction from nuclear disarmament?

George Perkovich: I think its effect was a distraction from disarmament. I don't think that was the intention, for the most part. I think the intention was a) that people were worried about nuclear terrorism. This was a genuine thing to be worried about, and it was a doable thing to work on, whereas the getting rid of nuclear weapons is much, much harder. The thing about security summits and nuclear terrorism -- It's like, well, who disagrees with it? Is somebody saying we shouldn't do this stuff? The only question is how do you do it? And how do you get states to prioritize, spend money and all that. Those are questions are important and reasonable. I find them boring and never wanted to work

on them because it was like, there shouldn't be any controversy. It's not about how do we get you and me to figure out how to get along and not kill each other. You would see this as a more bureaucratic issue -- agencies doing export controls, and data monitoring, and helping set up borders and better fences, and so on. That's good work and important work, it's just…

Michal Onderco: it's boring.

George Perkovich: Yeah, but it also did have the effect of allowing leaders to say: "well, we're doing something.'' And you go out and you give a speech, and you announce it. But what's not being done is addressing the underlying political relationships and what kind of global security do you want to try to create on that? You're not doing that. You're saying, "Look, we're building fences, we're hiring guards."' It had the *effect* of being a distraction, but it wasn't meant as a distraction.

Michal Onderco: After you left the W. Alton Jones you came to work and as sort of hardcore think tank. Why did you choose Carnegie?

George Perkovich: When the W. Alton Jones Foundation, announced they were splitting up, that night, or the next night, Jessica Matthews called me because she had heard this was happening, and asked if I wanted to come work for Carnegie. I always admired Jessica -- she was president of Carnegie. And I admired Carnegie, we funded Carnegie's work. I thought of the think tanks, they were doing the kind of most focused and most interesting work on nuclear weapons policy. So I said yes.

And then at the same time, Ted Turner had called to ask if I would help with NTI, set up Nuclear Threat Initiative, because I had briefed him when he was thinking about that. He liked me and I liked him. He's crazy. I love Ted Turner. And so for the first like six months, I worked halftime for Ted Turner, and NTI and halftime for Carnegie. And then I realized it was too much time going between the two and was inefficient. I had to pick one or the other. And I realized I like to write and stuff. And so I then went full time at Carnegie.

Michal Onderco: What do you think makes Carnegie different from many houses on the street?

George Perkovich: Yes, yes, Massachusetts Avenue. Well, for a long time, a global perspective. We tend not to see a challenge or a problem, as "okay, how does the US win this?'' We ask, how do all of the antagonists perceive the problem? And what would it take from each of them to solve the problem? And then work from that. So it's a different perspective … And I think that's the biggest difference. I mean, some think tanks aren't independent, politically or whatever. But some are, and so that doesn't distinguish us that much that we're independent. It's that perspective, and then always the attention to quality. It's fine to go out and do social media, and before that op-eds and all that. But that wasn't the premium, the premium was on doing quality in-depth work that would last. So I appreciated that.

Michal Onderco: If you look at the relative position of Carnegie vis-a-vis others in the field, so not only others on Massachusetts Avenue in but also more activists like PSR, or ACA, or academics. What do you think are the sort of productive ways for cooperation? And where do you see the biggest differences between you?

George Perkovich: We have this discussion within Carnegie about cooperation with the China program, or the Russia program, and I'm sure the bosses are always, you know, "you guys all got to cooperate." And my view is that there are two fundamental, real-world elements of that challenge. One is time.

Like, okay, what am I supposed to give up if we're going to add this to my time? And the second one is money. If the time that one has now is fully occupied, and almost by definition that is meeting requirements of grants and everything else, that if I'm not going to do that, then where am I getting the time and money to get to do other things, right? That's just a real-world thing. When I was at Jones, we knew that. So there were a couple of times, we created a coalition, including one about extending the NPT, with Joe Cirincione and Michael Krepon. That was an idea Michael and I came up with. But I understood that we'd have to give each of the main groups more money to then participate in the coalition. Because if we just went to them and said: “hey, guess what, there's going to be a coalition, we want you guys, Darrell and others, to put time into this, you do this and everything else you were doing before.’’ They may not say it to a funder, but I know they're going to be going well: and then drop what? So, instead, we say, we're creating this coalition, and there's an extra $100,000 for you, and for you, for you to do that. So I think that's a non-substantive requirement. The substantive things would be, do you see the problems in a similar way? And there's often a lot of difference. Academics, especially in political science, are more and more theoretical… The discipline requires large N studies, yada, yada, yada. But when you deal in the world of policymakers, such studies are0 totally irrelevant. So what are we really going to cooperate on? We do work with some of the more activist groups, but as you know, I mean, there's a spectrum. There's the Arms Control Association, which has expertise and historical knowledge, and so on. And then there are other groups that are much more kind of grassroots oriented, and often with younger staff who may know little of the history or… I mean, they're organizers, and that's great. But there's not much of a connection with the kind of analysis we do, or even a discourse in a way, so it just doesn't make as much sense to cooperate… and then their audiences is different.

Our theory of change, or my theory of change, is that for the most part, what's most important is trying to engage directly with policymakers, or people they listen to, to put new ideas in or correct bad ideas and so forth. The idea that, well, you’ve got to mobilize the grassroots and you got to mobilize the citizenry -- my thought to that has always been: in this field, probably too hard. Because it starts really abstract and distant, and so on. And then as soon as you really got people mobilized, the other side, would counter-mobilize with like, 100 times more money and with rhetoric that would win because “Perkovich wants you to trust the Ayatollah.’’ They got a picture of the Ayatollah, or they got “Perkovich is going soft on Xi,’’ and they got a picture of President Xi and whatever, you know, coronavirus. “Perkovich loves Putin’’, and it's like game over. I mean, you're not going to win that. You can win on our side, as long as there's not much opposition, or as long as you're reacting to what they perceive to be Reagan in the beginning. But then even Reagan -- and this is great that he did this and that Richard Pearle backfired – in doing the INF Treaty, you know. Perle tried to propose a formula for INF that the Russians wouldn't accept – eliminating all this category of weapons -- as a way to then keep going the arms race, but the Russians accepted it. And then Reagan said, “great.’ That was an historical accident. That's wonderful. And great. But otherwise, most of the time, if you kind of mobilize, [the other side comes back stronger] This was an argument I often had with Joe, wanting to mobilize and do media stuff. I'd say: as soon as you do that, if it starts taking, they're going to come back much harder. And it's going to be “you’re dupes, you're taking money from this bad guy, that bad guy, you're a communist, you're this, you’re that”, and that will stick in the society. [Peace through strength usually wins.]

Michal Onderco: I'm not sure to what degree this is shared in North America, but in Western Europe, one of the groups that is seen as the most successful in recent years on these issues is ICAN and so, from the point of view where you sit, how do view ICAN?

George Perkovich: Rebecca Johnson, who cofounded ICAN, is a longtime friend and I used to fund her. I am very sympathetic to the thinking and feeling that produced ICAN: total frustration with nuclear weapons states, total frustration at hypocrisy and inactivity. That's right. I think the instrument – the TPNW -- is inadequate in many ways. I wrote something, I don't remember where but I could find it for you, that predicted what very well could happen is you get this treaty to enter into force, and nothing happens. And the weapon states, especially the French, resist and have no public movement in their own country. And they come to the conclusion: "we don't have to deal with disarmament anymore'. They [the disarmament activists] had their treaty. They got it. It has no impact on us. We're done." And so, it would backfire. I felt that as long as you stayed within the NPT framework, you have some leverage. But that the TPNW would give up leverage that you had, and prove, because you would get no movement in the weapon states, that abolition was ignorable. I think that's what's happened.

Michal Onderco: So you wouldn't consider ICAN to be successful?

George Perkovich: They were successful in producing the things they wanted to produce, they have not been successful in producing the outcome in the world of eliminating nuclear weapons, or even reducing by one.

Michal Onderco: How would you define success in this field, or impact?

George Perkovich: Well, so like, there is the impact of ICAN, I mean, they got a treaty passed, and that's what they were trying to do. That's a success, I just don't think that treaty has a real-world impact, like I would want to have. So the impact that I would want, I would want to have or that I think would register…a clear articulation by China and the US about avoiding war, and the beginning of a restatement of what the policy is towards Taiwan, no use of force as long as Taiwan doesn't declare independence, and starting to adopt measures so that you don't have aircraft getting so close to each other, and fisheries being violated. Like start doing stuff that says: "hey, we're going to have rules and try to work against conflict'' . That, to me, that will help me sleep a lot better.

A statement and actual action by the US, Russia and China that not only could nuclear war not be won and must never be fought, a nuclear arms race can't be won. "This is stupid, let's figure out how to at least stop racing, because we know you're not going to give up. And if we got an advantage, it's for a year, and then we're going to be back at it again, this is stupid, let's not do that.'' That to me would be a big success. That's not getting rid of them. But it's saying: "let's just realize this isn't the way out and let's find another way.'' That would be useful.

I have written about it, but it's not going to happen and nobody's paid any attention to it: try to have an agreement on a physical limit of nuclear weapons below what experts would say would likely cause nuclear winter. In other words, we're going to have nuclear deterrents. But beyond a certain number, we won't go because if that's used, it's all over anyway. So we're not going to have overkill. If governments did that kind of stuff, to me thatwould be a world where I go: "okay, people got it. They understand.'' [But I'm certainly no more successful than ICAN has been!]

Michal Onderco: And since we have limited amount of time, I want to move on to last two questions. My second last question is, do you think there will be still nuclear weapons around in 50 years?

George Perkovich: Yes, or there's going to be a much smaller population, because there's going to have been a big, big war. And then after that war, somebody did something radically different. But, in my imagination, the paradox is that if we avoid a big, global war, nuclear weapons will be part of that avoidance.

Michal Onderco: My very last question, and you said at the beginning that you don't spend time imagining the world where nuclear weapons were not invented. But imagine there is a weapon, there is a world without nuclear weapons. How would security in such a world be provided, if it wasn't disarmed world?

George Perkovich: Well, that's it. There's the disarmed world under Article Six, which is general and complete disarmament, which I don't picture. And so that's why I can't get to nuclear disarmament because if you're in a world with conventional armaments, and cyber, all of those capabilities, or many of those capabilities, then I don't get how actors who feel a potential aggressor has more military power, won't resort to acquiring nuclear weapons. I just don't get how you get evenness of balance to the point that people say: “I don't need nuclear weapons, because it's even-balanced.’’ Because the ones that are inherently more powerful, why are they going to agree to be less powerful than they could otherwise? And as soon as they act on being more powerful, than the less powerful go “I can't let that happen.’’ I don't see how to solve that problem. Now, my dear friend, Zia Mian, who's one of my closest friends on the planet. He says: “well, you know, that's what the UN system is supposed to deal with the rule of law, the UN system…’’ And God bless him and I would love that, but I just see it doesn't.. you know, again, the big powers don't respect that. I find that even some of those who say they most care about it, like don't actually in terms of what their governments do, or their populations do, to enforce these things.

So that makes me kind of a realist small r. I don't see what changes, and that goes back to the thing I talked about the beginning: we don't know how to get rid of a KGB, we don't know how to get rid of an ISI. I don't think there's really a deep state here in Washington. But we don't know how to get rid of finance capital. Chinese -- are they going to get rid of the Communist Party apparatus? India is becoming a fascist state, so the RSS in India, how are you going to get rid of the RSS? I don't know. I mean, you know, if you can start getting rid of those entities, I can go “well, maybe’’, because I think people can get along. But these institutions that are built on dominating parts of their own population, and then projecting threats… that's hard.

I liked your questions. I like you, I don't know what the hell you're going to do with it all, but I liked the questions.

Michal Onderco: Thank you very much.