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Interview with Joseph Cirincione

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Summary:

In this interview, Joseph Cirincione discusses his career trajectory and involvement in nuclear disarmament, focusing on his work with the Ploughshares Fund to influence U.S. nuclear policy. He highlights the importance of networking and funding coordination among disarmament groups to achieve policy milestones, such as the New START treaty and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Cirincione explains the current challenges facing the disarmament movement, including the resurgence of nuclear arms races fueled by Russia and China and the limited resources and unity within U.S. civil society on this issue. He also expresses concern about the long-term future of nuclear disarmament, indicating that substantial organizational restructuring is needed to sustain momentum.This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

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Michal Onderco: Thank you very much for being part of this project. And I always start this interview with the question: how did you become interested in nuclear weapons? And why did you become interested in nuclear weapons?

Joseph Cirincione: I became interested in nuclear weapons twice. Once was in 1979, when the Russians invaded Afghanistan, and it really looked like they were making a move for global war with the United States, at least, that was my interpretation at the time. And there was great concern among national security thinkers that we were at a critical moment in our nuclear confrontation with the Soviets. And it went so far that groups on the right to form a group called the Committee on the Present Danger, that argued that we were facing a window of vulnerability. So I thought: ''well, if my time on Earth is limited, I think I should learn a little more about this.'' And the more I learned, the more I thought that that theory was wildly off the mark. And I just fell down the nuclear rabbit hole, learning more and more… when I was not in this space at all. I was a community organizer in low-income housing projects in Boston, And I decided that this was serious enough that I had to change my career. So I came to graduate school at Georgetown University, and studied international security. And that led to my first professional job in the field, which was with the Reagan administration, working on national security policy. A professor I met at Georgetown hired me. I got interested again, intensely when I was hired to be staff on the House Armed Services Committee, beginning in 1984. And I was assigned responsibilities for oversight of the nuclear weapons budget, nuclear weapons policy in NATO. And I spent about nine years in Congress in oversight of those programs. And that's where I really learned about nuclear policy, about nuclear technology, about nuclear contracts, the power of the nuclear lobby, the way the government tried to form its policy in this intense mix of pressures for contracts, political pressures, genuine strategic threats. And that's how I got started in the field.

Michal Onderco: So were you still at the house when there was a moratorium on testing put in place?

Joseph Cirincione: I was, I worked in the Government House Armed Services Committee, and then the Government Operations Committee now the Government Oversight Committee from 1984, through the end of 1993. So I was there during some of the great nuclear developments of the period, including Ronald Reagan's arms control initiative, George H.W. Bush's arms control initiatives, the house in Senate efforts on the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, and then forcing a moratorium on a nuclear testing.

Michal Onderco: Did you at that time have a feeling that things were going in the right way?

Joseph Cirincione: Absolutely. I mean, I've been on the left my whole political life, since protest against the war in Vietnam. And I was definitely on the left side of the political equation, working for the Democrats on the House Armed Services Committee. And there was a tremendous fear in the first four years of the Reagan administration that Ronald Reagan and Leonid Brezhnev were going to blow up the world. And it led to mass movements at the time. And when that switched in the second half, the second administration of Ronald Reagan, it was a miracle. I mean, in hindsight, as we go back, we could see: no, Ronald Reagan really was serious about abolishing nuclear weapons, all those speeches he gave in the first half of his administration. He meant it, we just didn't realize that he meant it. I thought Ronald Reagan was the devil, and he turns out to be an arms control saint. I think it's fair to say Ronald Reagan was the greatest arms control president in American history. And his initiatives to abolish nuclear weapons fell short. But they opened the path to the most dramatic reduction we've ever taken, the first reductions we had ever taken. And then George H.W. Bush followed up on that. In fact,

George W. Bush also followed up, each of those presidents cut the arsenal by 50%. Much better than the Democrats have ever done.

Michal Onderco: So once you left the government, you ended up working at the Stimson Center. Why did you choose the Stimson Center? What was special about Stimson?

Joseph Cirincione: Michael Krepon, a lot of the work and the reputation of research institutes are personal. And the personal credibility and competence of Michael Krepon, and his partner Barry Blechman, were huge factors for me in going to Stimson. And Michael personally reached out to me and asked me one day on the phone if I was always going to be a Congressional staffer. And I looked around at all these old guys waiting to get their pension, and I said: ''yes. This is a good gig. I think I'm going to be here for my…''. ''Well, come over, come over to the Stimson Center, I want to talk to you about something.'' And so he laid out this project for me on working around the campaign to extend the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. And I made the leap, and that was in 1993. And it's a good thing I did, because 10 months later, Newt Gingrich took control of the House of Representatives, and I would have been fired. I would have been in Dupont Circle selling pencils. And it turned out to be a very serendipitous switching career paths.

Michal Onderco: So you were in a think tank, later you switch to be a funder, and to work for one of the major funders in the field: for Ploughshares. Did you perceive this as a career switch? Or did you see it as the same career path just with a different employee.

Joseph Cirincione: Oh, same career path. I was always… by the time Ploughshares called, I was the Vice President for national security at the Center for American Progress. And I enjoyed that role, I enjoyed that position. But the opportunity to sort of take what I was doing in the field and move from being an expert, or an administrator of projects and programs, and become a philanthropist, with all the levers that gives you to affect policy and to affect organizing work, it was too good to pass up.

Michal Onderco: So what was the most appealing part of being the being a President of a foundation?

Joseph Cirincione: Well, there's two things that were very appealing. One is just personal, it was a great team to work with. I mean, I came in there was already a great staff. And over the course of my presidency, we built a tremendous staff that worked very well together. And many of those people are still active in the field, in and out of government. And the second was the ability to give people the resources they needed to get the job done. During the course of my presidency, I raised and helped give away $70 million. That's a lot of money, especially in the field as small as nuclear policy. And I feel that was the best part about it was helping people do the work. Because the field is filled with really smart people who know what they want to do, but they're just resource starved. They just don't have the capability to implement their plans.

Michal Onderco: So when you when you came to Ploughshares, was there something where you felt that the way how Ploughshares has been doing things needs to change?

Joseph Cirincione: Yes.

Michal Onderco: Tell me more about that.

Joseph Cirincione: Ploughshares came to me, I think because I've been writing in 2007 and 2008 about the coming nuclear policy moment. You can do a lot of work in your field, whatever that is, but it's very hard to implement change unless a number of other factors align. And one of those is the political

leadership, and the political will to enact change in your subject area. And you could see in 2007, the winds shifting and the arrow starting to align, that would allow a moment of policy change. And that was happening in 2007, in great part because of what the op-ed in the Wall Street Journal,

Michal Onderco: By the four horsemen.

Joseph Cirincione: By the four nuclear horsemen, the four statesmen as they like to be called. Will Perry, Sam Nunn, Henry Kissinger, and George Shultz. And that was just a seismic shock to the nuclear policy world. That these people, architects of the Cold War nuclear arsenal, were now saying: ''it's time to abolish it.'' It's not the first time people had said that I had been working with Paul Nitze in the 1990s, when he expressed his views dramatically, that we do… but it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough. And this really opened up space, and then when you had a presidential candidate like Barack Obama open to that idea, and amplifying that idea. And you had George Shultz and Henry Kissinger working with John McCain, the presidential candidate for the Republicans. And you had Sam Nunn, and Bill Perry working with Barack Obama. And there was no difference in McCain's nuclear policy platform, and Obama's nuclear policy platform.

Michal Onderco: So you think if McCain got elected, he would also do the Prague speech.

Joseph Cirincione: Yes, or something [like this], in his voice, on his terms, but in that direction, right? The way Ronald Reagan had, I mean, so you could see this moment opening up, and I just thought we have to get ready for this. And you have to unify efforts, you have to get more resources, you got to seize the moment. So I wrote some articles about that, and Ploughshares really liked that. And so, they called me up and said ''let's do this.'' But they wanted me to go change the organization. They wanted me to make the change the chairman of the board, the executive director at the time, Roger Hale and Neil [unintelligible], called me up and we made a plan for how we're going to make Ploughshares more policy relevant, that included opening and Washington office. So we became a little bit of an operating foundation when we started doing our own activities here in Washington, and established Ploughshares as a player in the in the policy world.

Michal Onderco: And one of the things that some of my interviewees say that one of the things that distinguishes Ploughshares from other funders is that Ploughshares has this very explicit policy agenda, and also funds some of the work, which has a goal to persuade Congress to do things or not to do things. And that this is different from let's say, Ford or MacArthur. Do you think that's a fair description?

Joseph Cirincione: Yes, you are not going to implement your policy changes unless you understand the politics around them. So you have to understand that connection between policy and politics and play in that world. And Ploughshares did that better than most.

Michal Onderco: Did you also change who were your grantees around the time? So did you start funding new types of organizations?

Joseph Cirincione: I'd have to think back about this. But yes, we did. Do you want me…

Michal Onderco: You don't have to tell me names, but maybe what kind of new or organizations had you started funding?

Joseph Cirincione: So the core Ploughshares funding has always been the established arms control groups. And so that continued and those grants increased, as we raise more money. We doubled, in

some years tripled, the amount of money we were giving away. I think we went from…more than that, actually, I think we went from about $2 million a year in grants, at our peak we were doing by $8 million in grants. We also started working on with groups that would have a more direct effect on public awareness of the issue by bringing groups that would help bring this issue into established media, some of that being investigative journalism, some of that being Hollywood productions, like movies and TV. And later on, we also started funding ICAN, which was an approach that was not made in Washington, and hadn't been getting any funding from major foundations. I think we were the first foundation to give them some serious funding at a crucial time. But what changed the most was not necessarily… and what really drove This was a different kind of philosophy of grant making, that you didn't just give groups money. You also help them network together to fulfill specific policy goals. So we organized two very successful campaigns for policy change. One was to win the negotiation, and then ratification of the New START treaty, and then to win the negotiation, and then implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. Those were multiyear campaigns, and Ploughshares became the hub for the organizations. Because we were a funder, because we didn't have a stake in the sort of the organizational competitiveness of the field, we were able to be a neutral broker. So we could bring people together around the table and start coordinating strategy, tactics, messaging, and hold people accountable for the policy impact.

Michal Onderco: Correct me if I'm wrong, but my sense is that Congress has its own dynamic, and there is different dynamic. But when it comes to the expert community in the US, New START and JCPOA, were not particularly contested. Or am I getting this wrong?

Joseph Cirincione: Not particularly contested? [surprised]

Michal Onderco: By the experts. By the experts I mean people working in arms control.

Joseph Cirincione: Oh, yeah in the expert community the broad agreement that this is good standard policy. The problem has always been getting that expert consensus implemented into policy change?

Michal Onderco: How did you go about that? And we probably don't have time to go into real details, but sort of, in broad lines, how did you go about translating that scientific consensus, expert consensus into actual policy?

Joseph Cirincione: Sure. Basically, there was sort of three different areas you have to work in. And one of those areas is just the policy itself. You have to build consensus among the experts. It exists, but experts don't really like to work with each other. they're very sort of small shopkeepers, they want their own brand, and I understand that, there's lots of reasons why that's true. But so you have to encourage experts to work together. And you can do that by funding joint projects that people have been cooperating, and then building the expert consensus. So that's number one. Everything depends on that, is this sound? Will this fly? Politicians, you bring it to have confidence in these recommendations. But that's the second part, getting it to the policy people. And that's where the advocacy groups come in. And that's where most expert organizations fall short. They think once they published their report, that's it. No, your work is just beginning. You've got to get that expert report into the right hands, and disseminated broadly in the political world. So that's what the advocacy groups would do. So you help ramp them up, and you help them. Since there's a dozen or so of those in the field, you have to help coordinate them so that you realize the synergies of joint effort, and reduce overlap, reduce friction, etc. So that works. But then you that's still not enough, in order to get

the politicians to take action on the policy recommendations they now agree with, you've got to show them that there's political support for this. And that means you have to do work with the public, where you might just call that messaging work. How do you take these expert opinions as political consensus and message it to the broader public? So that when a politician gives this line in a stump speech, they get applause. So those are the three components: expert analysis, political advocacy, and public messaging.

Michal Onderco: So JCPOA was concluded in July 2015, if I'm correct. For any reader that might read this in 10 years, when did your work on this start?

Joseph Cirincione: Oh, but way before the negotiation, 2012, 2011… perhaps 2010? It was 2010. It was when the Atlantic had a front-page piece written by Jeffrey Goldberg, titled ''when will Israel attack Iran?'' Wasn't if, it was when. And tensions were building up in the in the in the Gulf over Benjamin Netanyahu's desire to solve the Iran nuclear program by military action. And this was widely seen in the expert community as a disaster, this wasn't going to solve the problem, and it was going to ignite a greater war. And so people started from developing and promoting alternative policy plans, or defending the existing policy plans that they had. And if you quickly come to a consensus that US and Iran have to negotiate directly over this matter, we didn't have diplomatic relations, we weren't in regular communication with Iran. This issue requires specific attention. And we had a receptive administration that was already inclined in that direction. So one of the things we did on the outside was help build the expertise, the advocacy and the messaging around a negotiated rollback to the Iranian nuclear program and get the parties to… and that's with the Iranians and the US. So we would support things like track two discussions, that were already taking place. I mean, it isn't like Ploughshares started these things, they were already happening. And we just help them fund them, and maybe connect them to the broader network of people. So you didn't have 20 different efforts operating in ignorance of each other's work, you could net them together and achieve a greater impact from each of the individual efforts.

Michal Onderco: What would you say was a distinct contribution of Ploughshares to the whole effort?

Joseph Cirincione: The networking. I mean we were not particularly strategic geniuses. Especially rich people think that they have a silver bullet idea. And they'll come to you, and they want to give you money. And they'll say: ''but here's what I want to do with it. I mean, I think we have to get X, Y and Z'', you go ''uh huh.'' And there is no silver bullet idea. There is no one thing you could do, it's a lot of hard work. And that's what Ploughshares demonstrated. A lot hard work over multiple years, to coordinate the effort. I always compared it to interferometry in astronomy, where you net together telescopes, so that they can resolve distant objects, that none of them can resolve on their own. And that's what we did with the organizations. So we achieved policy gains that none of those organizations could have possibly achieved on their own, but working together, it worked.

Michal Onderco: So you just described something that was a successful effort. But before we went on the record, you told me that the last 10 years were sort of not successful. And that overall, you think that there has been quite a bit of failure in the field. What are the goals that in 10 years were realistic to gain, and were not gained?

Joseph Cirincione: In the last 10 year?

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Joseph Cirincione: Well, in the last 10 years, let's say… so we're talking from 2012 on. You could have gained a follow on negotiations to the New START Treaty, never happened. There were moments where you could have gotten the Senate to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, never happened.

Michal Onderco: Was that realistic, in your assessment?

Joseph Cirincione: It was possible on Obama's second term. It was a shot, and you should have pushed it. But probably… I mean, the realistic shot was in 2009, and that's a long discussion. But there was a long debate in the administration about whether the Democrats had a 60-vote majority in the Senate. So wouldn't have taken that much to ratify a treaty, and they chose to go with New START, because they thought that would be easier than the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. In hindsight, it probably should have been flipped. But…

Michal Onderco: But do you think they couldn't have both?

Joseph Cirincione: Well, in hindsight, yes, because they could have got the Comprehensive Test Ban right away and then done the New START. And I think you could have gotten both. The administration… I would say, in general, we underestimated how difficult ratification New START was going to be. I mean, I've written numerous articles about this, about what went wrong, and we can go into that if you want. But basically, it was a combination of the Russian refusal to speed up the negotiations after a very ambitious start, Republican refusal to ratify a simple treaty that had broad based support in the National Security Committee, including in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the resistance of the nuclear bureaucracy, who didn't want any change in the nuclear policy and fought it tooth and nail. So those three R's, the Russians, Republicans, and resistance, stopped the new START treaty from being the quick, one- or two-month ratification process, that the Obama administration thought it was going to be when they announced the negotiations in April 2009.

So let me go back. So it's just other policy opportunities. The biggest policy miss was reducing the nuclear budget. I mean, the Obama administration never wanted to take the heat for implementing their vision. I mean, President Obama didn't think we needed all those nuclear weapons. He didn't think we needed a massive new recapitalization of the nuclear arsenal. He was forced to commit funds to what was euphemistically called ‘’nuclear modernization’’ as the price of getting the New START Treaty. And so the deal was: ‘’we'll give you the treaty, you give us money for modernization.’’ Obama never thought that he was going to have to spend all that money because there was going to be a follow-on treaty. Well, there wasn't a follow-on treaty. So, we got the contracts, but not a policy change.

Michal Onderco: By why was there no follow-on treaty?

Joseph Cirincione: Same factors. Putin was increasingly moving into a hostile position with the United States. Remember, in 2014, he stages his first invasion of Crimea, and US-Russian relations start moving in the opposite direction. The Republicans were increasingly using national security, in particular nuclear policy, as a stick to beat the Obama administration over the head. And the nuclear bureaucracy it saw that they'd won, that they had successfully withstood this wave of abolition that started in 2007, built up speed... I mean, if this was the talk of the nuclear world, for four or five years is: ‘’how can we get to zero? Well, can we really get to zero? Do we only have to get to 500? Or only a 1000? ‘’That was where nuclear policy was going. The combinations of Russians, Republican, the

resistance and the bureaucracy, stymied all that, and it failed. And there was no backup plan, there was no plan B. And many of us urged at the time, that the way to do this is to starve the beast, is stop proposing these massive nuclear budgets, stop putting in money to modernize a new leg, the ICBM leg of the triad and make a real bureaucratic effort to build the consensus for why we don't need the ICBM's. And you can do that consistent with New START. You don't need a new treaty, you can just do it. You can get rid of that leg of the triad and still keep the upper limits of the New START Treaty, just by putting more nukes on your submarines, for example. Obama administration wasn't interested in that. There was a kind of understandable, wishful thinking that conditions would change, and they'd be able to come back to that agenda. And if we couldn't get it in the second term of the Obama administration, surely, we'd get it in the first term of the Clinton administration, which, of course, never happened. And then nuclear policy took a tailspin into bizarro land in the Trump administration. And when Joe Biden came in, again, there was another window where you could have done this, but the community wasn't organized for it, though I tried… it is getting a little personal. But before I left the presidency of Ploughshares, I tried to get the community to come together for one more joint campaign and it didn't work.

Michal Onderco: What was the campaign supposed to be on?

Joseph Cirincione: We had another window opening up. I mean, I think you always have to think in these terms. We had another window opening up, that would be the first year the Biden administration.

Michal Onderco: And the goal would be to do a deal with Russians, to decrease the size, or was it the no first use, or was it the sole purpose?

Joseph Cirincione: Kill the ICBM. I mean, one of the historic mistakes of the arms control movement, especially in Washington, has been to substitute arms control for nuclear reductions. And they think that you need the treaty in order to make the cuts and you don't really. And in some ways, by making the cuts, you make the treaty easier. And the existing logic is the other way around. And so, you could have changed US policy without agreement with the Russian to kill the ICBM, to declare a no first use policy, for example, another step you could have taken. And that might have well-built the conditions for being able to go back to the table with the Russians, and to drawing the Chinese.

Michal Onderco: You mentioned earlier that you were one of the first funders, and probably the first funder, in the US to give money to ICAN. What persuaded you back then that this was a viable initiative?

Joseph Cirincione: Well, in every field, you have the problem of "not invented here". So you go to Stanford University with an idea, and if the Stanford University professors haven't thought of it, they don't think much of it. '' So, that's a very nice idea, son, but none of our professors have written about that. So go away.'' And the same is true for Washington policy.

ICAN was a European campaign, it was not Washington based, it had a disdain for Washington politics. I didn't personally think much about it, but I was reading about it. And in 2014, I went to the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons Conference in Vienna. And I was blown away. I had no idea this effort was this big, both in the number of government officials they were attracting to the conference, and the large and diverse public advocates that were coming together in this campaign. When I walked into the room of the ICAN organizers, there were hundreds of people in that room,

from Africa, from Latin America, from Europe, from Asia. I think my walking into the room raised the average age considerably. And this was a mass movement. But there was nothing like this in the United States. And they convinced me… I wrote a column as I came back, quoting Buffalo Springfield: ''there's something happening here, what it is ain't exactly clear, but something was happening.'' And they certainly deserved our support. And I recommended this to our program team and who recommended it to the board. And the board approved our first grant to ICAN, and we started funding them in the 2015.

Michal Onderco: So at that time, I mean, ICAN was already building these networks all over the world. And there was a lot of young people, and it was very global, as you mentioned. But at the top, so the leadership of ICAN was a lot of, for lack of better words, ''old heads.'' Rebecca Johnson was there, there was Patricia Lewis on the board, there were other people from Physicians for Social Responsibility. For me, the question is: what made you think that this is going to be more successful than other things? Was it the fact that there were not only these ''old heads'', but also this bunch of new people? Or was it something else? Was it the idea?

Joseph Cirincione: It was the impact. I mean, you could see it, they were doing things that no other group or network of groups was able to do.

Michal Onderco: And why do you think they never got traction in the US?

Joseph Cirincione: "Not invented here", and more ambitious than the Washington policy community could accept.

Michal Onderco: But you already said that there were people who, in in the early 2000s, they were floating the idea of abolition.

Joseph Cirincione: In 2000s. But remember, but this is 2014. The world has changed now. And ICAN is trying to continue the abolitionist sentiment, and implemented it in a new treaty process. And nobody else was doing Washington wasn't ready for that. I mean, even the groups that were working on getting to zero in the United States, like the Nuclear Threat Initiative, and Global Zero was skeptical of the ICAN approach, because the ICAN approach it's the sort of guerrilla warfare approach, organize this around the cities, organize the countryside. So you're organizing all the non-nuclear weapon states to lay siege to the nuclear weapons states, which I think is a viable tactic. I was attracted to that, because it was clear to me that the nuclear weapon states weren't going to move and within the nuclear weapons state capitals, there was not the stomach for new nuclear policy initiatives. So that made ICAN extremely attractive, the work was going on out there at a time when it was dying in here.

Michal Onderco: With the hindsight of nine years now, do you still think that this is a good strategy?

Joseph Cirincione: I think it's an effective, I think it worked. I mean, look, in the last 30 years what strategies have worked? What efforts have produced a policy impact? And I got to tell you, most people don't look at the problem that way. They look about it in terms of what the idea is, or maybe who the leadership is, or what Institute they're at, how prestigious is it. But judging impact, you'd have to say there's a handful of successful policy efforts, you could go back to the campaign to save the ABM Treaty. Remember, in the Ronald Reagan administration, they wanted to kill the ABM Treaty. And there was a successful public and political effort to save that treaty, it worked. There was the campaign for the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to an extent, that worked. It was not a given that that treaty was

going to survive or be indefinitely extended. That was a real policy game, again, cooperative effort of governments and the public sector. The campaign to get the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty negotiated, decades, people been trying to do this. In 1996, it all came together. Again, you had government wanting to do it in a public effort supporting that. You then have to go up to the new the New START success of the JCPOA. And ICAN, getting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. That's pretty much it. I'm sorry… You'd have to include in that the Nuclear Freeze Movement, which is the granddaddy of all successful campaigns. That's the one that first opposed what the administration was doing in the first term of the Reagan administration, and in the second term, gave it the political support it needed. So when Ronald Reagan announces that he's going to negotiate a treaty with Gorbachev, and they're cutting the nuclear arsenal by 50%, it was met with widespread public support, right? So it makes it politically popular to do this. So those are the successors and then the arms control cuts that followed after that all had widespread public support. That's it. Those are the successes. I can't think of anything else that has happened. I was personally involved in… let's see, the nonproliferation campaign, the CTBT campaign, New START, and JCPOA. So four of those successful efforts, I was personally involved. They were successful, not because I was involved in them, but because that's the path. And what's common about those, is you see that you're taking something that governments already want to do. And you're pushing them and helping them do it.

Michal Onderco: But isn't that different with the TPNW? Because the governments of the nine countries, they don't want to do it.

Joseph Cirincione: Right? So they're brilliance in this campaign was the idea was ‘’hey, we can't wait for them.‘’ We have to go take the other governments, the non-nuclear weapon states want to get rid of nuclear weapons. This is their sort of the forgotten constituency, right? It's like, you can't leave this up to the people. It's like as waiting for the NRA to enact gun control. When is that going to happen? Well, you can't wait for that. You have to go out and organize the people who want the gun control.

Michal Onderco: So some of the people that I interviewed would tell me that we can only say that the TPNW was successful, and, by extension, ICAN was successful, when there are when the nuclear weapons start to be dismantled as a result of the treaty. But if I hear you correctly, you think that that's an incorrect standard. So for me, the question is what is that a standard to judge something as a success or not?

Joseph Cirincione: ICAN was building on the success of previous efforts. So ICAN was building on the success of New START and Comprehensive Test ban, and NPT, and arsenals were coming down. So ICAN was saying: ‘’let's keep going. let's push this to the place we all want to go, elimination of nuclear weapons.” So it wasn't counter to that.

Michal Onderco: But if I understood correctly what you just said, you would say that ICAN itself has been also successful.

Joseph Cirincione: Yes.

Michal Onderco: But what I'm saying is that some of the people that I talked to will say: ‘’well, we can say that ICAN and the TPNW are successful, only when the first nuclear weapon state joins the treaty.”

Joseph Cirincione: Oh, I see. Oh, yes. There’s levels of success, right? So, in any campaign, I mean, if you want to be president, you got to win primaries, right? That doesn't make you president but you

can't become President unless you win the primaries, right? So you've got to get this consensus built up in the world, that this is the path we want to take. And they're doing a very successful job more than anybody else. I mean, let's be fair about this. Let's compare what they did to what Nuclear Threat Initiative did, and Global Zero did. these are all good people, they all want to eliminate nuclear weapons, they all want to get something done yet. NTI is doing remarkable work, Global Zero done remarkable work, they have no policy change to show for it.

Michal Onderco: And so what do you think makes I can successful? Is it the broad support? Or is it a different thing? The approach that they sort of round up the villages?

Joseph Cirincione: Yeah, it's a different approach. I mean, I don't know what they would say. I don't know what they thought about this way, I'm just telling you how it looks to me. When you can't take the cities, you go take the countryside. And then come back to take the cities. That's guerrilla war 101. And that's what they were doing. And I didn't believe it at first. Because I'm telling you, I had the Washington perspective. You're not dealing with the nuclear weapons states, therefore, your policy can't work. And they showed that to be wrong. They negotiated an international treaty. Show me another group that's done that, so I can tell you ‘’okay, we helped with the negotiation of the New Start treaty, we help with the JCPOA, we help with CTBT, right? And they're all similar. You're organizing public support for something that governments are doing is good. And since JCPOA, since New START, what has there been? What major policy change have you seen implemented? We can't even cut this the B83 1.2 megaton bomb from the budget, we can't stop this sea launch cruise missile. These tiny little programs, we can't even get that done in the United States. And ICAN is out there organizing 70,80, 90 countries to negotiate a brand-new treaty, that passes. that is in international law right now. That's a major accomplishment. But they got a long way to go. Well, so now the question is: can you sustain it? Can you build that support, so that you start making this a viable option for the nuclear weapon states or you force the nuclear weapon states to come up with their alternative to your plan? And we don't know the answer to that yet.

Michal Onderco: What's your estimate? Can they sustain that?

Joseph Cirincione: I think they're now caught in a bigger problem.

Michal Onderco: Which is?

Joseph Cirincione: So I think ICAN had the right solution for the moment. But it was not enough to stop the new nuclear arms race, which is proceeding all too rapidly right now. And we are in a new nuclear arms race. I do not see any policy initiative that's going to reverse that in the short term that. You have to understand, I don't think we need to be racing with the Russians and the Chinese on nuclear weapons, I don't think the Chinese need to be building more nuclear weapons. I think that the states should get together and negotiate cuts. I think most nuclear policy experts out there in the NGO world think that you can cut these nuclear weapons, we have more than enough for our security needs.

However, we're in a new nuclear arms race that is now more complicated in some ways than the previous nuclear arms race. And has a huge head of steam. It has political, economic, and bureaucratic factors all driving towards more nuclear weapons. And I'm afraid that that's the world we're going to be living in for the foreseeable future. There is a very dark, pessimistic assessment out there in the policy world that people don't actually like to talk about too much. But it's the feeling that this drive towards more and newer nuclear weapons isn't going to change until there's a nuclear incident. Until

we see one of these things used, or perhaps almost used. And that's what it's going to take to change the minds of policymakers in these two capitals of the nuclear weapons states.

Michal Onderco: So you're saying that, for example, the scare or the concern that people had now, during the war in Ukraine, that Russia may seriously use tactical nuclear weapons is not enough?

Joseph Cirincione: It could have been enough, if there had been an organized anti-nuclear movement ready to seize the moment, but there wasn't…

Michal Onderco: So why do you think ICAN has not seized on it? [quiet] And if you are not comfortable…

Joseph Cirincione: No, it's not a question of comfort, it's a question of knowledge. It's just a tough question. I mean, let me back up. So, right now, because of Vladimir Putin has consistent, credible nuclear threats, more people are worried about nuclear weapons than they've been at any time since the 1980s.

Michal Onderco: Yes, I would agree with that.

Joseph Cirincione: We all talk about the Cuban Missile Crisis, but people forget how worried we were in the 1980s, right? And, again, we came close to Armageddon. And the arms control and disarmament community in America has been unable to seize that moment, to present credible policy alternatives for the American administration, on what you should do about this. And as a result, the fear factor has dominated the discussion. And this is very clear. I mean, it's from the beginning of the nuclear age, right after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there were two reactions to the bomb. One is: we got to get rid of this thing. And the other is: we got to get this thing. And those two fundamental positions have clashed for almost 80 years. And sometimes one dominates, and sometimes one or the other dominates, mostly the fear factor is dominated, or the desire: ''we got to get these.'' And you see that happening now. That's the talk in Congress. And that's the talk in the administration. you were going to build more, better weapons. The arms control community in America is just too weak, too unorganized, too disunited. I was arguing three years ago that we had to prepare for this…we had to prepare for this by organizing our efforts again, and having a common strategy, that failed. I was unable to convince people to do that. And so you see the results here in Washington. I wasn't talking to ICAN at the time. I really don't know what their strategic outlook is. But I would say ICAN has handled the Ukraine crisis better than most. Beatrice Finn has spoken out repeatedly about who's to fault in the Ukraine war, it's not the West. This is a new threat; this is a Russian imperialist threat that we face. And the nuclear threats aren't because the US and Russia are clashing. No, the US is not making nuclear threats. Only one party in this conflict is making nuclear threats, and that's Vladimir Putin, and she's focused on that. But I believe… you'd have to ask them why they haven't seized it, but I believe that because ICAN is so rooted in the left, that there is tremendous resistance among the membership to target Russia as the villain here, and they still blame the West, in part, for this war. And you see that current among many leftists, they think this is part of the continuing US war.

Michal Onderco: I mean, ICAN, of course, has had these statements when they condemned Russian threats. And they have made that similar statements in the TPNW Meeting of State Parties, they have had press releases, etc. But at the end, at the same time, they also went out on a limb to, for example, defend the conclusions of the TPNW Meeting of State Parties that said: all nuclear threats are not acceptable. And I did an interview with one of the people and they said: ''what's the difference

between Putin in what we're saying and 'the fire and fury'?'' And I think there is a difference between what Putin is saying and fire and fury.

Joseph Cirincione: Yeah

Michal Onderco: But they would say: ''well, there is none.''

Joseph Cirincione: That's what I mean, there's a left tendency to assign equal blame to the nuclear weapons states. So if there's a crisis between the US and Russia, they would blame both sides for the crisis, or the actual tendency is to blame the US first. And you see that in many of the analysis. I mean, there are sectors of the anti-war left, I just wrote an article about this, that blame the US for the war in Ukraine. They buy the John Mearsheimer line, that this was all because of NATO expanse. And this is nonsense. But it is a very strong current among the left. And I believe that it's got to be a factor in the ICAN base, that mit would be impossible for the leadership, even if you believe what Beatrice Finn I know believes, that this is a Russian and peerless war, that Russia is threatening nuclear war, and you got to target Russia, you can't get the base to go along with that.

Michal Onderco: If you look at the world today, in 2023, how do you view the role of nuclear weapons in the world today?

Joseph Cirincione: They're our greatest threat. And that's the conflict, this is part of what you have to do, many people see nuclear weapons as our ultimate security. They are, in fact, our ultimate threat, there was nothing else that can destroy human civilization in an afternoon. Nuclear weapons are it, not pandemics, not climate change. There's three or four great global threats that you face, right? And you might say it's global poverty. That can change human civilizations over decades, climate change can destroy human civilization over decades, pandemic might be able to destroy human civilization in years, nuclear weapons can destroy human civilization in an afternoon. There was nothing like that on the planet. And we simply do not take it seriously enough, we keep thinking our luck will hold. But you got to be a real optimist to think that you can leave 13,000 nuclear weapons in fallible human hands, and something terrible is not going to happen. Something terrible is going to happen.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that, as someone who has experienced both as being a member of civil society and funding civil society, do you think in 2023, the most productive use of civil society's time is to focus on these big goals like elimination and probation? Or to focus on smaller piecemeal efforts, stepping stones, and these sort of things?

Joseph Cirincione: That's a very good question. It's a fundamental strategic question. You make incremental change, or do you swing for the fences? And I think different situations, demand different tactics. I would have said in the mid-1990s, going for the NPT, and the CTBT was the right way to go. Even though there were people arguing that we have to go for near elimination. I would argue that the consensus wasn't there for elimination yet you had to build confidence in this by those incremental steps.

Michal Onderco: Do you think differently about it today?

Joseph Cirincione: I honestly don't know what the answer is right now. This is part of the dilemma that we're in right now. this there is no clear path forward. Let me just to back up on this, because how do you approach a question like this? What's the right strategy? Incrementalism… or what would you call the alternative?

Michal Onderco: I call it abolition.

Joseph Ciricione: So abolition or incrementalism. What's the best strategy? Well, how do you answer that? Well, part of it is based on: what are your instincts? What do you feel? What do you really want? But you're looking at the political reality, the moment, and there is no way you're going to get even incrementalism, right? So the conditions are not there for change in global nuclear policy. And you can know that, because you're going to look in the past over the past, say 40 or 50 years, and you can see what the conditions were when we did get dramatic change. That is not the situation we're in right now.

Michal Onderco: I want to I want to move on to a slightly different question. What do you think was the biggest failure of civil society in this field in the last 30 years? So since the end of the Cold War, of civil society.

Joseph Cirincione: Of civil society?

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Joseph Cirincione: What do you mean by that? You mean, the NGOs?

Michal Onderco: So NGOs, or activists.

Joseph Cirincione: Oh, the failure to unite into a larger organization that could have political clout. I mean, the movement as a whole remains fragmented, isolated, and as a result, disappearing. I am going to just back up and tell you something. All movements have waves, civil rights, women's liberation, nuclear. They come and they go, because of the conditions, they don't exist in a vacuum, things are happening in the real world that affect people's willingness to become part of a movement. And it affects people's desire to lead that movement. Whatever, all of those factors. I don't want to go into that. We are at the end of a major anti-nuclear wave that began in the 1980s, which was a massive wave, right? Achieved tremendous success, changes the position of the President of the United States, and the President of the Soviet Union, right? For all different reasons, a bunch of factors happen in, but this anti-nuclear movement got a lot of what it wanted, right? Including no nuclear war, negotiations, vast reductions, a path to zero. I mean, what else do you want, right? So here we go. And that continues, and in the 1990s it continues in a smaller way. But people assumed that the direction of the moment was the permanent direction, and it never is. So Clinton doesn't move fast enough. He thinks he's got time to implement these changes incrementally, piece by piece, you should have gotten faster. Obama comes in and the wave picks up again, we have a new abolitionists wave. Well that quested around you might say, quested around 2010, with the negotiate with the ratification of New START in December 2010. That was pretty much the last successful effort there. The JCPOA was a successful nuclear effort, but it wasn't on the core issue of the arsenal's, so if you just looking at the arsenal's that had failed. And with it, as this decline goes on in the 2010s, you see the groups getting smaller and smaller, not bigger and bigger. And instead of uniting and realizing that what's happening, they don't. Or you could take it at the peak of the movement in 2008, 2009, when there was two big abolitionist organizations in the United States: Global Zero and NTI, and they couldn't agree. And they couldn't cooperate for various reasons. And so you never built a big anti-nuclear organization, the way you built a large national organization to combat climate change, for example, or in civil rights. So you never got the clout, and you never had groups who were putting together the different tools that you need to enact change. For example, expert analysis, political fundraising to make donations to candidates,

right? A couple of the groups do this, like Council for Livable World, which gives them tremendous access to politicians. But they're so small that that access is never fully realized. And so, the failure to unite and form a larger organization is the critical organizational mistake. It wasn't policy on what you should do about nuclear policy. It was organization, how would you organize to implement that policy? And I believe that the movement will not do that. And so what you're seeing is the gradual dissolution of that wave, the last wave… the nuclear policy community in a death spiral.

Michal Onderco: That's a very negative…

Joseph Cirincione: But it's not because I want it to be the death spiral.

Michal Onderco: I am not accusing you of that.

Joseph Cirincione: I am looking and what's happening, that's what's happening. They're getting smaller and smaller, everybody's scrambling for funds… everybody's losing staff.

Michal Onderco: So I've been in the US for now, for a week. And I've done six of these interviews, you are number seven. And I think out of the six interviews, in five of them, I've heard people saying: this is partly of the reason why this field has not been able to achieve major policy change in recent years, is because there is very little funding. And if you compare it, for example, with climate change, the funding is…

Joseph Cirincione: Billions of dollars.

Michal Onderco: Exactly. And someone told me that the annual philanthropic funding in the nuclear field in the US is $40 million.

Joseph Cirincione: It was, not anymore. I would say it's more 20, 25 now.

Michal Onderco: So, infinitesimally small.

Joseph Cirincione: Yes

Michal Onderco: Do you think the lack of funding is the primary reason why there was no more impact?

Joseph Cirincione: This is chicken and egg. If you're a donor, why would you fund one of these groups? What are they going to do? What is their return? What's your return on investment? What's the policy impact your funding is going to achieve?

Michal Onderco: Let's say, you win Mega Millions tomorrow, and you have a billion dollars, and you decide ''I've been in this field for so long, I'm going to fund someone'', or you consider that. Would you actually go and give money to, I don't know, ACA or…?

Joseph Cirincione: I wouldn't give money to any one group. And this is my regret as President of Ploughshares, that I didn't work with the foundation community to force the change that was needed.

Michal Onderco: So what kind of change was needed?

Joseph Cirincione: These groups have to unite, they cannot continue to exist as separate eggs in the carton. It's not working, it doesn't work, you are dying. If I have that kind of money, I would be given grants to every group that wanted to transition into a larger group. And I would buy a building in Washington, D.C., and say: ''this is where we're going to be. And you come and we will save you money

on administrative costs on development costs, and fundraising costs, and management costs, all that's going to be centralized here. We're going to take everybody in your organization, nobody loses a job, everybody comes. And we have a collective leadership.'' so we have the person who's doing congressional liaison, and the person who's running the expert community, and we post who's doing the advocacy work, the person who's doing comms, we have the different teams, we take everybody's best skill, we pull them together, and we build an organization that can be like the Natural Resources Defense Committee. And we're going to have clout and we're going to have a pack, and we're going to raise four or $5 million a year to start and give it to people who support our policy positions. That's what we're going to do. And then you're in the game, and it doesn't mean you're going to win. At least you're in the game and you've got something sustainable.

Michal Onderco: So imagine our interview is read by a graduate student, let's say 10 years. How would you sketch for them the funding sphere in the nuclear field in the US in this decade that we are at the moment? So if they want to understand who are the sort of the main players and what are the priorities. So you said that one thing that was distinct about Ploughshares was that it had this distinct policy goal. How did you see in your work others and the role of others in the field?

Joseph Cirincione: Traditional foundations that were funding traditional projects. So supporting good work, supporting good ideas, but hesitant to become organizationally involved in the field, a traditional foundation position. And one that a lot of grantees want, they don't want the foundation telling them what to do. Nobody was looking for Ploughshares to tell them what to do. That wasn't it. And then new entries like Skoll Global Threats Fund when an imaginative Silicon Valley entrepreneur who starts it, Jeffrey Skoll, wants to do big things, believes that big investments in these fields can make a difference, is looking… that was that was innovative and clever. And as it turns out, unsustainable. After about 10 years, that effort, folded, and was folded back into the overall foundation. And I understand why MacArthur left the field. And when you look at where your money's gone, you're not getting any change. Now, it's true, you're investing billions in climate change, but you are getting change. world climate policy is changing in the direction that you want. And the question is: is it changing fast enough? But this is where you're going. So now you're looking at where you put that money, and it takes billions of dollars to change global climate policy, right? Nuclear policy is much easier to change. We're not talking about stuff that's essential to human life, like the production of energy, we're talking about eliminating weapons that are the antithesis of human life, nuclear weapons. It's a very small economic interest, you can surround and defeat this economic issue. You have to understand, one of the reasons we have nuclear weapons is because people make money making nuclear weapons. And they're very, very good at making nuclear weapons and marketing nuclear weapons. But you can defeat that, you don't need billions to do it, you do need probably hundreds of millions.

Michal Onderco: So I recently spoke with someone who said that even if you look at the American military-industrial complex, that the nuclear part of it is getting smaller and smaller, and less and less important. And so that…

Joseph Cirincione: That's generally true, that's why you can defeat it. Go ahead.

Michal Onderco: So my question was, is that good news for the nuclear disarmament movement? That the financial…

Joseph Cirincione: It's good news only if you're ready to do something about it. And here's the problem, you have few. And then if you're trying to cut nuclear weapons, there's no way you're going to cut nuclear weapons as long as the military budget keeps climbing. The Joint Chiefs don't particularly care about nuclear weapons. But when the whole pie is growing, they will give the nuclear weapons sector of their community its share, right? But when the pie starts to shrink, the Joint Chiefs will always choose planes, and ships, and tanks, and troops over nuclear weapons. We know this, this has historically happened. One of the things about policy is that it leaves a track record, and wondering what to do… you want to know what to do? Go look at what happened. And this is the importance of your work. Let's document what happened here. So you don't just ask, What should we do? We have to analyze: what did we do? What worked and what didn't yet? And let's as we say in strategy, double down on success, take what worked and double down. And one of the reasons you're able to make these nuclear weapons gains is because the military budget is shrinking. So one of the things that… it kind of that kind of happened at the same time, the ability to reach Reagan and Gorbachev to reach an agreement helped reduce the size of the nuclear budget, the collapse of the Soviet Union, cut the military budget. And then in that, then the nuclear component start to shrink and shrink and shrink, and you see it immediately. I don't know if I want to go back to this, it's kind of on the side, but we were supposed to have many more nuclear weapons than we currently have. The Reagan administration had a very ambitious plan that it passed in its first four years to build many more ICBMs, many more bombers, and many more stuff than we actually built So these expensive programs were cut, just as they were getting started. So instead of having all… I think the big original figure was 2436, Triton submarines, we ended up with 14. Instead of a 1000 ICBMs, we ended up with, with 400… I think only 10 of them were MX missiles, I forget, the MX missile was supposed to be mass produced like sausage, and it never made it. Anyway, you can see that as you start to shrink the military budget, the nuclear component becomes smaller and smaller, because the Chiefs want the weapons that they're really going to use, and not these weapons. We're in a period where the military budget is out of control. And as long as it remains out of control, the nuclear part of it will continue to grow. I would say the nuclear weapons community has no more money now than they know what to do with now. I would say they have more money than they know what to do with.

Michal Onderco: I wanted to ask a slightly different question. If you look at the American civil society that is active on nuclear weapons, how would you divide them into different groupings or camps and how they relate to one another?

Joseph Cirincione: The what community?

Michal Onderco: The American civil society, so the activists.

Joseph Cirincione: Camps?

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Joseph Cirincione: Well, there's sort of philosophical approaches. Are you looking for stability? Or are you looking for reductions and elimination? That's two things. So in the expert community, that's one division. When you talk about civil society, you mean across the political space, right?

Michal Onderco: Yeah.

Joseph Cirincione: Well, there obviously is a very strong contingency in the expert community that thinks we need more nuclear weapons. So, are you including them and US civil society? Because they are a part of civil society. We just don't agree on the US policy.

Michal Onderco: Is there anyone in this moment in the US who argues that we need more?

Joseph Cirincione: Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Foundation, CSIS. Sure, of course, of course. Absolutely. Go to CSIS and talk to people there, and there are advocates for more nuclear weapons that we have to build up in order to deter China, absolutely. Look, the hearing of the House Armed Services Committee last week. All the top... Have you seen that hearing?

Michal Onderco: No, I haven't.

Joseph Cirincione: You should go and read the transcript of that hearing. Give me your email, and I will send you the transcript. Dr. Strangelove is alive and well, in the nuclear weapons community. Inside the government, in the Congress, outside.

Michal Onderco: I have heard I have heard those arguments quite often, in Europe as well. And people tell me if we ever want to do arms control with Russians or the Chinese, it needs to happen from the position of strength. So we need to build before we cut.

Joseph Cirincione: There you go. So in other words, we're back to 1979, 1980. This is the Committee on the Present Danger all over again.

Michal Onderco: I mean, I didn't know that this is sort of becoming mainstream in D.C. as well.

Joseph Cirincione: Absolutely. So, right away, there's a divide. And you might say there's three camps. And the dominant camp, the well-funded camp, is the more nuclear weapons camp.

Michal Onderco: And so when you say it's well funded, is it funded mainly from the industry? The industrial complex?

Joseph Cirincione: One of the things that's happened to civil society…When you're doing an analysis like this, you can't just talk about policy, you have to talk about money. And this is a little uncomfortable for people, because they don't want to feel like they're…

Michal Onderco: We have talked a little bit about money.

Joseph Cirincione: But we have to talk much more about money. because it's one of the major drivers in nuclear policy. Nuclear policy in the United States is mainly driven now, not by strategic considerations, but contract considerations. We have created a sector of the US economy that builds excellent nuclear weapons. And we've funded them to do this for generations now. And they want to continue doing it. So they keep coming up with new proposals for new and better nuclear weapons. And they pitch these proposals and they convince governments to accept these proposals. And that's what drives nuclear strategy right now, it's not primarily the threat from China or Russia. Those are validations for the new contracts. Contractors make nuclear weapons, the way Kellogg's makes shredded wheat, you don't just get one shredded Wheat, you get mini shredded wheat, you get frosted shredded wheat, you get strawberries frosted shredded wheat, it comes in all kinds of variations. And there is a near infinite number of changes and differentiation. You can make two nuclear weapons to make them smaller, make them bigger, make them airborne, make them seaborne. There's all kinds of niches you can create that you then say you want to fill. So you have to

talk about money… wait, but one of the things about that money is not just how it works between the contractors and the administration of the contractors in Congress. It's how it works in the contracts in civil society. And what the arms control industry understood in the 1990s was that they needed to heavily influence the think tanks and academic institutes in America. And so they started funding in a big way these think tanks. Governments came in, American think tanks started accepting large government contracts, foreign government contracts, contracter contracts. Yes. So if you look at the think tanks in Washington, they have very large buildings now. They didn't used to have very large buildings. I worked in think tanks, and they were small academic centers, they are not that anymore, right? And so what that means is that you get very little creative defense policy coming out of those institutes that runs counter to what the government or the corporations want to do.

Michal Onderco: I've heard that argument in slightly different iteration before, and one of the questions for me is always whether there is a sort of a mating process where people who genuinely believe in these ideas are then met by willing sponsors who think that this is a thing to fund? Or whether there is a more sinister process where people can develop certain ideas because they know that they're fundable?

Joseph Cirincione: I think that the two interact with each other. I don't think people say what they say, because they're getting a grant from Boeing. I think Boeing funds people, because they say what they say. So, I don't think you can find an advocate for more nuclear weapons that is not getting funding from a defense contractor, either directly or through the center that they work for.

And defense contractors are on the board of CSIS. CSIS is a fine institution, doing a lot of good work. But they're not going to produce a study that runs counter to the interests of some of their major donors. It's as simple as that, they're not going to do it. What you will get is studies that talk about how to maintain us to technological advantage in the nuclear competition with China. There's dozens of studies that are produced by think tanks in Washington along those lines. And they will get funded and studies that say: ‘’how to bring China and the United States into a treaty to abolish nuclear weapons’’ is not going to get funded in a significant way. It just isn't. The think tank isn't going to produce that, even if Ploughshares came in and said: ‘’we'll give you $200,000 to do that study’’, they wouldn't do it.

Michal Onderco: But are there in D.C. at this moment, people who would in their hearts of heart believe that there is a way how the US and China can build treaty regime?

Joseph Cirincione: Oh, I mean, so I was posing an extreme. But the way you get it, is not the way I formulated it. But it would be a path forward for US and China into strategic stability. It'd be like that. And one of the options would be in a study, would be arms control working towards a reduction of US and Russian arsenals. Because you got to remember, the official policy of the United States is to work towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. That has been the official policy United States since Harry Truman. We just don't do it, usually.

Michal Onderco: I want to move on to the last two questions. From the vantage point of 2023, where do you expect the nuclear field to go in the next 50 years?

Joseph Cirincione: Jeez.

Michal Onderco: Some people find it easier to answer if that I posed that question, as do you think there will be nuclear weapons around in 50 years?

Joseph Cirincione: Well, I would say this isn't the first time that the arms control movement has sort of disappeared. So the fact that I'm saying it's going to, I think it's realistic, not pessimistic, but it's not the end of the story. I mean, this has happened before, there was massive anti-nuclear movements in the 1950s, for example, that lost the battle. Ban the Bomb, didn't work. Or after the Cuban Missile Crisis 1960s, and then groups sort of have disappeared. And if I'm right, in at this current moment is where it is the end of the anti-nuclear wave that began in the 1980s, and then was revived in 2007, 2008, if I'm right, these groups are going to more or less disappear, a few will remain as the tide goes back. A few rocks will stand. I would say that you're not likely to have an anti-nuclear movement in the way that we've known it over the last eight decades, that it's more likely that nuclear policy will become part of us, sustainability or survivability agenda of large civil society organizations. So that groups that are working on climate change, will, will take on the nuclear weapons issue as part of their agenda, because they need the funds for climate change.

Michal Onderco: But since we discussed already, that the money in the field of nuclear is so small compared to climate change, will that'd be a serious motivation?

Joseph Cirincione: I mean, no, they need the money from governments. Climate change initiatives, pandemic initiatives, poverty initiatives are underfunded. So if you have a big constituency that's demanding funding for that, you have to identify where you're going to get the funding, and the military budget is where you get the funding, right? And we've seen sort of the first ripples of this in the reaction to the pandemic. You saw a number of people writing almost simultaneously, and the need to reimagine or redefine national security. Max Boot, writes about: we should have been making ventilators, not nuclear weapons. When somebody likes Max Boot says that, this is a shift. You saw when President Biden came in, and he introduced his national security team in November of 2020. Jake Sullivan, the National Security Adviser took his three minutes to say in part that the President has tasked us with reimagining national security to include climate change, and pandemics, and social inequity, and racial injustice. And we were on the way to sort of doing that you Biden phrase of foreign policy for the middle class, kind of encapsulates that view. How is this improving the lives of Americans? The war in Ukraine, put a stick in the spokes, right? And so even before that, military budgets were going up, but now it's really going up. We're going to need to resolve the crisis in Ukraine, we're going have to defeat Vladimir Putin, we're going to have to turn towards the reconstruction of Ukraine. But in that moment, this in the new term, you can see that you have a much more positive agenda. Now you're not talking about funding weapons, you're talking about funding rebuilding, you're talking about Marshall plans, right? Not arsenal democracy. And with that, we come some increased military spending, but nothing like what we have now. A defeated Russia may be more willing to talk about arms control, because now it's definitely more than national interest. You get that, then you sort of potentially have an opening with China as well, which has no need to build a 1000 ICBMs, right? 300 deters us perfectly well, they could benefit from a sort of arms control. So the natural security interests, the countries are aligned there, what you need is people on the outside of articulating all this, who were packaging it all together. And so if I was in the foundation world right now, that's what I'd be doing. I would take funds away from the existing organizations, give them one last chance to merge. And then go and move it into organizations that are already well established, already have a policy impact, and give them funds to take on the nuclear missions.

Michal Onderco: That still doesn't answer the question will we have nuclear weapons in 50 years.

Joseph Cirincione: Will there be nuclear weapons in 50 years?

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Joseph Cirincione: Well, I hope not. It's so hard to answer a question like this, because most of the scientists involved in the Manhattan Project would have been stunned if they had been told that 80 years, or 78 years later, another nuclear weapon hadn't been used on a city, they would have been stunned. Nobody thought that was possible. You couldn't live in a world where nuclear weapons and don't have them used. That is generally my view, that is generally the view of most nuclear weapons experts. I expect that if you asked it a poll ''will a nuclear weapon be used in the next 50 years?'' The answer would be overwhelmingly yes, that is my view. If that's my view, then I believe that the reaction to that is going to be similar to the reaction that we saw at Hiroshima. There'll be two views: ''We got to ban these things once and for all, or we got to get more of these things.'' So countries that don't have them are will want to get them. And those two views will content. And that's an opening for the nuclear movement. And so I would say, the chances are, there will be a nuclear use, that there will be a huge movement to ban it, there's much more experience on banning it now, you'll have a real good shot at reversing the course. But it turns out that the barriers to nuclear use are much more formidable than we thought. I mean, there's a reason Vladimir Putin hasn't used nuclear weapons in Ukraine. He has threatened it enough, I wrote an article about this. One of the reasons is there is no real military rationale for doing it. There is no scenario where using a nuclear weapon wins him the war. So that's one of the biggest barriers is that they're not very useful for military campaigns. And the other is the global reaction to any such use will be overwhelming united and devastating to the country that use them. Those are formidable barriers, it will take a madman to use it in the face of those likely reactions to use. So, we'll be rolling the dice over 50 years. I mean, given all that, that's the rational policy analysis. You try to look at the policy factors, you can understand and put them all into an equation, and then run the equation and see what you get. That would be my prediction. But as Robert McNamara said: ''We escaped nuclear use by luck. We got out of the missile Cuban missile crisis by luck.'' And the question is ''do you feel lucky, punk?''

Michal Onderco: So my very last question that I always ask respondents is, imagine there is a world without nuclear weapons, so a disarmed world, what does security in such a world look like?

Joseph Cirincione: Oh, well. You don't need nuclear weapons to give nations security.

Michal Onderco: Let me ask this question differently. Do you think that the world without nuclear weapons looks exactly like the world today, just that there are no nuclear weapons?

Joseph Cirincione: I do. And I understand the argument here.

Michal Onderco: You basically think that the world without nuclear weapons is exactly like the world we have today, just that there are no nuclear weapons?

Joseph Cirincione: Okay, the arguments been made by people I tremendously respect, like Sam Nunn, that that's not the case. That the world we're not nuclear weapons is not the same world as it is today because in order to get to zero nuclear weapons, you're going to need an inspection regime that is so intrusive, that you're going to have to develop areas of government cooperation and trust, that don't exist right now. And stability mechanisms that don't exist right now. And I understand that argument, a

lot of that is true. But that has been taken to the point where opponents of getting rid of nuclear weapons have flipped it and have said: ‘’until the world is like that, we can't eliminate nuclear weapons.’’ And so we're looking at the federation of planets before we're able to get rid of nuclear weapons. And I just think that's factually not true. That the world without nuclear weapons will look substantial like this with just enhanced verification mechanisms, some of which, for example, have been prototyped on a smaller scale in the JCPOA. And we know the JCPOA gives us incredible confidence that Iran is complying with its rollback and containment of its nuclear program. And that did not require a fundamental change in Iranian society. It didn't require a confederation of Arab Gulf States in order to do that, you could just do it. And since there are only nine countries with nuclear weapons, I think these kinds of mechanisms are possible. But I tell you what, suppose I'm wrong, and we only get down to nine countries, each having 100 nuclear weapons, while we work on the verification mechanisms needed for their total elimination, we are still exponentially safer now in that world than we are in this world. And as Sam Nunn says: ‘’let's work towards that goal.’’ We can't see what the final answer is now. But we have to we have to get closer to the goal before it becomes clearer. What are you getting out of this question?

Michal Onderco: So sometimes when I speak to people about how the world without nuclear weapons look like, some of them tell me: it's a world where we don't even need to think about the concept of deterrence because the relations between states transform to the degree that there is no point to think about that concept. There are others who say: the world without nuclear weapons is a world where deterrence is provided by sanctions, and cyber weapons, and global prompt strike, and whatever else. And there are others who say: well, the world's nuclear weapons is just like the world today, because nuclear weapons are fundamentally irrelevant. And there are some who basically say: it's really difficult to think about the world without nuclear weapons. So, let's think about the world with 50 nuclear weapons. That well, a world where each country has 50 nuclear weapons, rather than bothering ourselves with thinking about the world with zero nuclear weapons. And my question to you is: which of these camps do you find yourself in?

Joseph Cirincione: I'm in the camp that the world without nuclear weapons is very similar to the world we have now. That they're largely irrelevant to national security, they are not our ultimate security, they don't provide the foundation of American defense policy, which you often hear, they would allow us to confront aggression and conflict around the world. That is fundamentally untrue. That is a nice story that the nuclear weapons advocates tell everyone, but it's simply not true. And all you got to do is look at Ukraine, right? Nuclear weapons did not stop Vladimir Putin. They did not stop Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, they do stop American direct involvement in Ukraine.

Michal Onderco: But they may have stopped Vladimir Putin from taking Poland as well.

Joseph Cirincione: No, not at all. His military capabilities stopped him from being able to take Poland. If he thought he could take Poland, he would try to take… it isn't the threat of nuclear weapons that deters him from taking Poland. Attacking a NATO state, he would be crushed. NATO conventional forces can crush Vladimir Putin. NATO does not need nuclear weapons to defeat Vladimir Putin's army, right? That is crystal clear now. And I come from a spot where when I joined when I started working on this issue, we thought we needed nuclear weapons to prevent 55 armored tank divisions from the Warsaw Pact streaming through the Fulda Gap. That's what we thought, we absolutely needed nuclear weapons. Where in the world is there a scenario where you need nuclear weapons to determine other

countries conventional aggression? It doesn't exist, there is none. If anything is done on the other side, Russia believes it needs them to defeat an invasion of Russia. So that's where you are.

But in the course of reducing the nuclear weapons, you are changing the world. In some ways you were creating the conditions that you say you need to get to the eventual elimination. If you can get to a world where there's 100 nuclear weapons in each country's arsenal, we're all down to sort of North Korea levels, or India, Pakistan levels. That is a fundamentally different world that you've created, just by the reductions. Everybody get keeps their safety net, they think they still need their nuclear weapons for ultimate security. But you're starting to reduce the possibility of a civilization-ending event. At the very least, you've reduced it from an absolutely historic catastrophe, you have reduced it from a civilization ending event, to a historic catastrophe level of destruction. So and then you can get to the point where people feel more and more comfortable, etc, etc, and they get rid of them all. So that's why I think it's only that. But I have common cause with my brothers and sisters who are in there… ''let's get down to 100 weapons'', fine, we're on the same path. Let's go to the same path. And we'll see what happens. And we'll see who's right at that path.

Michal Onderco: You mentioned already, and I promised that that would have been my last question. But if I may, I'll ask one more. So you mentioned already, that one of the things that you wouldn't be surprised if that were to happen is that the nuclear field might sort of find its way with climate change field and social justice groups, and that they will incorporate nuclear weapons in their advocacy as another risk factor. I've spoken to another person who was making major grants in a foundation. And that person told me that there is currently in the US a growing tendency to see nuclear weapons primarily through a social justice lens. And that this is a risk, because people will forget that these are really dangerous things on their own. So there might be some social justice element to them, but it's not a social justice issue, primarily. Now, that I see your face, I think you disagree with that reading.

Joseph Cirincione: Yeah, I don't understand the argument.

Michal Onderco: So, the argument is that we shouldn't be looking at nuclear weapons as a social justice issue, that there is a lot of groups these days trying to fund projects that look at racial justice, environmental justice, and climate angles on nuclear weapons. And that people are risking to miss the big picture about nuclear weapons by focusing on social justice. You disagree with that?

Joseph Cirincione: It's a false choice. You want to focus on the big picture of nuclear weapons? Go ahead. Go look at the New York Times editorial page today, and you'll see a big picture about nuclear weapons, that's there, that's around. That is a necessary view, it isn't sufficient to win the policy argument. And a person who thinks like that is not understanding that they got to get people involved in a process to change policy. It's not enough just to have the right position, or to be the clarion on the hill that is shouting, ringing the bell, given the warning. That's nice, that's good, that's right, we need that. We need a new Jonathan Shell. Where's the Jonathan Shell of this era? Someone who's writing like that, with that kind of poetic historical voice We need another four statesmen where are they now? We need another Barack Obama speech. We need all that, we need those clarion calls. But you need people to back it up, and where you're going to get those people? And you're not going to get it from a dedicated anti-nuclear movement is not going to happen, forget it. Absent a nuclear incident, it is not going to happen. And if you wanted to test that theory, we have just tested it over the last year. We have been in a crisis with Ukraine, where nuclear risks have been greater than they've been in decades. And there has not been a revival of the anti-nuclear movement, and the current anti-nuclear

movement, in all its manifestations, has failed to rise to the challenge. Not there. Okay, case closed, not going to happen, not in the dedicated resurgence of the anti-nuclear movement. So then you look at the what is surging? Well, you see, that globalization has left a path of destruction in its way. There are a whole lot of people who've been left behind, and they are pissed, right? And they want what's theirs. And so they want social justice, economic justice, environmental justice, racial justice, they want that justice. Well, part of that justice is to reorient government expenditures. And the approximately $75 billion we spend on nuclear weapons and related programs in the United States, is money down the rat hole. That is 75 billion that you could use for a whole lot of things that would improve all those justice issues. And what your job, if you were a philanthropist, what you'd be doing is funding those groups to understand that. That they have a stake in the nuclear weapons budget, the money, not just the threat. That's what will change nuclear policy.

Michal Onderco: I think this is a good moment to stop our interview. Thank you very much.