



## Episode 1,092: Is Trump Changing U.S. Policy on Nuclear Weapons?

Guest: Mark Perry

**WOODS:** I want to talk about the Nuclear Posture Review of the Trump administration, but first you have to realize that when it comes to stuff like this, I'm a complete newbie and I bet the general public sort of is too. Is this the kind of thing that's regularly issued by different presidents or only when a change in strategy is recommended?

**PERRY:** This is standard for every president. The first Nuclear Posture Review was under President Clinton. Then there was one under Bush and one under Obama. It's now become kind of a regular feature under every new administration to review the standing of the nuclear forces and to recommend changes or budget actions, so the one that was recently issued last week from the Trump administration is the fourth Nuclear Posture Review.

**WOODS:** All right, so first of all, I want to know about what's in this is Nuclear Posture Review, and then maybe we might compare it to a previous one to get a sense of how drastic a departure it represents?

**PERRY:** Certainly. This Nuclear Posture Review was conducted over a period of about a year by the Pentagon, which charged a number of nuclear thinkers and military officers with assessing the state of our nuclear deterrents. What's new in this review is that it recommends the adoption of low-yield tactical nuclear warheads to our arsenal and the adoption of two new systems, increased spending on our nuclear forces, and a modernization of our triad — that is, our bomber missile and submarine force. It's quite an extensive document. It was about a year in the making, very controversial, and issued last week.

**WOODS:** All right, now let's go through it. First of all, how can we get a sense of what a lower-yield nuclear warhead would be like? What could we compare it to?

**PERRY:** Well, the nuclear bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima at the end of World War II and which killed approximately 80,000 people was a low-yield weapon, 14 kilotons. So a low-yield nuclear bomb is anything that is usually considered to be smaller than the Hiroshima blast. In our history, there were two systems which fired low-yield weapons, the Davy Crockett, which is kind of a battlefield artillery piece. But to say these are low-yield weapons is kind of tongue-in-cheek. These can kill a lot of people and they're used on the battlefield to eliminate divisions or corps, 15,000 to 20,000 soldiers. They're not strategic weapons. They don't bust cities. But they can kill a lot of people.

**WOODS:** Does the Nuclear — we can just call it the NPR, the Nuclear Posture Review — does it lay out what the drafters consider to be the strategic value of these sorts of weapons? So in

other words, I hear what you're saying about what it can accomplish, but do they lay out the types of battlefields they might expect to use them on?

**PERRY:** Yes, they do, kind of. And I know that's a punt. But the drafters of this Nuclear Posture Review said that the Russians in particular were operating under the mistaken impression that we would not use strategic nuclear weapons, that they would be able to use their own tactical or low-yield weapons to defeat us on the battlefield or to hurt us on the battlefield and that we wouldn't be able to respond because our only response would be strategic, which would be hundreds of millions or billions of people dead, and we wouldn't do it. So the drafters of this NPR presumed that our strategic arsenal lacked credibility because we wouldn't use it, because we didn't have tactical low-yield weapons. So that's why they proposed the building of tactical nuclear weapons.

Now, this is an extremely controversial position, because the NPR drafters presume that they know what the Russians are thinking. And all of the critics I've talked to on this subject say it's a mistaken impression; we have no idea what the Russians are thinking; this is just sending bad money after bad, that this is absolutely the adoption of a nonessential position and nonessential nuclear weapons and that it's inherently destabilizing. So it's quite controversial.

**WOODS:** Well, even if we could speak non-tongue-in-cheek of low-yield warheads, there is in I think everybody's mind a sense that there's something qualitatively different about the use of nuclear weapons no matter what kind they are, and that if defense experts think they could use them in limited ways to go after 15- or 20,000 troops somewhere, surely that's sadly mistaken, because everybody will think that some kind of a watershed has been reached and it's almost certain to lead to further nuclear escalation. Where am I wrong about that? And I'm just a regular observer here.

**PERRY:** Well, as a regular observer, you've put your finger on the real problem. For instance, the Nuclear Posture Review calls for the adoption of a low-yield nuclear bomb put on the warhead of a submarine missile. So in a time of growing crisis, we would have the option of sending a signal to the Russians — let's presume they would be the adversary — by firing a low-yield weapon. And the Russians would say, oh, that's a low-yield weapon, so we'll respond with our own low-yield weapon and we will not have an all-out nuclear war.

The problem is when you fire a ballistic missile at your adversary, they have no idea what the warhead is, and they would have to presume that it's strategic, that it would be a hydrogen thermonuclear weapon, and they would respond overwhelmingly, plunging the world into an apocalypse. This is the problem. The problem is that the current NPR presumes we could signal our adversaries selectively, and that they would somehow know the kinds of weapons we were firing, when that's not true. And that's a problem. So why have the weapons at all? Why adopt these low-yield nuclear warheads when we don't need them? After all, we already have them in the arsenal.

And that's why this NPR is so controversial. It calls for the adoption of weapons we already have. And number two, it presumes the Russians don't view our strategic deterrent as credible, and there's no evidence to that whatsoever. So this is, in the words of one of the atomic scientists I talked to who follows this, this is just bad money. This is just making an expenditure we don't need, and it's very destabilizing.

**WOODS:** Well, this review was controversial of course even within, or perhaps even especially within the military community. So I'm curious, in your article that I'm going to link to at — this is Episode 1,092, so TomWoods.com/1092 — you actually go into the weeds a bit as to who exactly is pitted against whom in the struggle over this report. So who's behind it, and who are the people who have been trying to at least limit the damage?

**PERRY:** That's an interesting and pertinent question. The Trump administration and Trump himself wanted this, and they appointed Air Force officers in particular to oversee it. And these Air Force officers appointed a committee to draft this report, and this committee is known as being very conservative — neoconservative, actually. And the appointment of these people to write the report was noticed in the Pentagon, which spurred real opposition to the NPR. Keith Payne, who's a well-known figure in the foreign policy establishment, very conservative, did most of the drafting of this report, along with his colleague Franklin Miller, who's also very conservative. So it was known immediately when these two were appointed to draft the report what the report would say and that it would call for the adoption of these low-yield weapons.

What's interesting about the response to this and the opposition to this is that it came from the military. The military thinks that the adoption of low-yield weapons is absolutely unnecessary. And secondly, they're worried that spending the money on nuclear weapons will take money away from the real problems that the military has with readiness: feeding, clothing, training, equipping, and recruiting new soldiers; upgrading and modernizing our conventional arsenal, which critics of the NPR say is really the one deterrent the U.S. has, which is a good military, ready to go, well-trained and recruited and able to counter moves from our adversaries without the use of nuclear weapons.

**WOODS:** Let me read a passage from your article. This is a quotation from somebody else who is in favor of this Nuclear Posture Review. And the quotation runs as follows:

"This NPR is in line with what three previous presidents have done. Upgrading and modernizing wasn't Trump's idea, it was Obama's. And I understand the problem with funding. And I even agree with it. These budget caps have to go, and if they don't, we're not only not going to be able to implement the NPR, we're not going to be able to address our readiness gap. And that's the truth. The danger here is that in making the choice between one or the other, addressing readiness or building a credible nuclear deterrent, we're in danger of ending up with neither."

Now, that I'm curious to get your thoughts on, and particularly this claim that there's nothing particularly special about this review as opposed to those of previous presidents, including Obama.

**PERRY:** Well, it's interesting. That's the defense. That's the defense of the NPR among the class of nuclear thinkers that I was able to access. And they don't like to talk about this, because they always have to defend the adoption of new nuclear weapons. And that's a red line for many in the military. We have enough, they say. In fact, we have 4,000 strategic weapons. That's more than enough to destroy the world three or four times over. But their argument is that we need nuance in our nuclear posture, and there's nothing wrong with increased numbers of weapons. Increased numbers of weapons, they will argue, makes nuclear war less likely. But that's always been true.

And the point that the critics make I think is a salient one. Deterrence has worked, but it can only fail once, and then really it is holocaust that we're facing. So instead of ratcheting down the nuclear temperature, taking our forces off of launch on warning and reducing the number of warheads and increasing command and control, we're going to do just the opposite. It seems to me to be almost commonsensical, and it seems to me that – the critics of the NPR will say this – very commonsensical that more weapons is not a good idea, that more weapons is not better weapons, and that the way to kind of wrestle the atomic genie back into the bottle is to bring down the threat level, to reduce the number of weapons, and to make nuclear war less, not more likely.

**WOODS:** All right, we're going to take a quick break, because I have a message that, although not quite as important as nuclear war, I think my listeners will still find valuable.

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Reading your article I get – I don't just get the impression, but you actually say that the NPR was in a way dampened down by some of the criticism that people who were opposed to this policy were actually able to make a little bit of headway. In other words, it could have been worse than it was. How?

**PERRY:** It could have been a lot worse. It is true that – to kind of go back to your previous question, it is true that previous presidents have always agreed with the need for nuclear weapons, and President Obama actually began the process of modernization of our nuclear arsenal. But that's an extremely expensive proposition, \$1.2 trillion over 30 years. The Trump administration has actually added to that cost of \$1.2 trillion. It could be now \$1.5 trillion. And I think it was the cost of this that really led people in the military, especially in the Navy and the Army, to weigh in. There was a lot of lobbying inside the Pentagon against the NPR. And even the Secretary of Defense at the time when the Nuclear Posture Review was underway and at the outset, he evidenced real doubts that we should be adopting the programs that the Trump administration's NPR eventually recommended. And you'll still find I think a lot of dissent inside the military about this NPR, to the degree that I wonder really how broadly and how deeply it's going to be implemented. I think there's an outside chance that we'll have these recommendations, and perhaps some of them will be adopted, but certainly not all of them.

**WOODS:** Well, that brings me to the question of this claim that Trump was influenced by Sean Hannity, who told him we needed more nuclear weapons, and then Trump went and order this review and we got this kind of review. Is there anything to that? I mean, I can't believe I even have to ask a question like that, but I can't rule out this possibility.

**PERRY:** Well, sadly, it's broadly believed Sean Hannity went on television and said we needed more and better nuclear weapons; Donald Trump, an avid listener, agreed, called over to the Pentagon, talked to James Mattis, and so we have a new Nuclear Posture Review. It's widely believed in the Army that this is what happened. This is the kind of claim that's impossible to prove. But we understand our president and how he's influenced, and this is quite possible.

**WOODS:** Just looking, by the way – before we spoke today, I was looking at some commentary on your book *The Pentagon's Wars*, which I'd love to have you back on to talk about, because what a provocative subtitle: *The Military's Undeclared War Against America's Presidents*. I can kind of see a thesis like that as being plausible. I don't want to be a

Pollyanna and think that the presidents are all wonderful people of good will, and if only their intentions could be implemented the world would be a happier place, because I don't believe that. At the same time, I think it's highly plausible that Obama may have in his heart of hearts wanted to disengage in Afghanistan but could not see a way to make it happen. That's certainly plausible. But in the case of Donald Trump, we have somebody who, he wants military officials surrounding him at all times, and he's been more complimentary of the military than almost anybody I can think of. What's the nature of the relationship between Trump and the military?

**PERRY:** Well, that's an excellent question and it's one that I think a lot of Americans think about every day. I think it's a mistake for the American public to paint the military with a broad and single brush. These are individual leaders with different political views as wide and deep and diverse as any among the American people. And so you have on the Joint Chiefs of Staff and among the combatant commanders different political points of view. James Mattis is a Democrat. David Goldfein whom no one knows, the Air Force Chief of Staff, is probably the most articulate and intellectual of any member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff we've ever had, and he thinks innovatively and creatively about foreign policy.

I don't think it's a given that our view of the military as very conservative means that they're very pro-Trump. It is true that Mr. Trump gained about 80% of the vote in the military in the recent election, but at the senior officer level where policies really need to be fought through and implemented, I think it's quite different. There's a real diversity of opinion. And it's not beyond question – I mean, there's no doubt that a military officer will obey the commands of a commander-in-chief, but I think it's quite likely in the current environment that we'll see what we really haven't seen before, which is not just a "Yes, sir," and a thrown-off salute from military leaders, but a, "Yes, sir, but..." "Yes, sir, but..." is an important part of the American military tradition, and the, "Yes, sir, but..." response to a president has been issued not rarely, but certainly it's not common, but I think we can see more of it in the current environment.

**WOODS:** One other thing. What was your impression of Trump's request for a military parade?

**PERRY:** I thought it was kind of funny, actually, humorous. I have been reviewing some of my own history readings, and I noticed that General George Gordon Meade, commander in our American Civil War of the Army of the Potomac, wanted a huge military parade when he was named commander in June of 1863. And his top aide, a general, reminded him that a military review wasn't going to be possible because General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, the Confederate Army, was then in Pennsylvania and headed towards Gettysburg. And military reviews were always in American history a kind of a favorite of the military. They loved military reviews, especially during our Civil War. But that tradition has faded.

And when I heard President Trump call for a military parade, I immediately wondered what the military would do – well, knowing what they would do. They would say, "Yes, sir, we should do that, but sir..." Here's a classic example of the "Yes, sir, but..." tradition. "Yes, sir, we should do that, but sir, it will cost \$20 million. We have to bring tanks from all over the world. This isn't the kind of thing we do. We're not sure we can do it very soon." It's the kind of thing that the military would drag its feet on and, frankly, I'd be surprised if we ever saw a military parade.

**WOODS:** All right, so there is some sense of cost. With Trump and the military, it seems like this is the one area where he is going to go to bat and get those budget increases, come what may. Infrastructure, maybe, but we'll see what comes of that. But when it comes to the military, he doesn't seem to hesitate, and this NPR would in fact – unless he's going to severely cut elsewhere in the military, it would require – in other words, as you said, you're competing for funds with either basic outfitting of soldiers or these kind of low-yield nuclear weapons. So is he going to be able to get both?

**PERRY:** No. We just had passed from the U.S. Congress a huge increase in the military over the next two years, and the military applauds that increase. And frankly, we need it. I mean, our Air Force has been in the air since 1991, running constant missions, and they're in need of an upgrade. But what's even more important is that our military is in desperate need of a rest. The reason that we're expending so much money on our military right now is not because the cost of weapons has increased, although that's certainly part of it, but because we're overextended. And you'll find this particularly in the Air Force, there's talk of this. They'll say we need more money for operations, but what would really help us is kind of the ratcheting back of the responsibilities that we've taken on across the rest of the world. We simply cannot continue at this pace.

And I think if you sit down with the military and get them to talk to you about what they really, really want, it would be this turning down the temperature on our overseas deployments. We have American soldiers now in Africa and everywhere around the world, and we need to refocus our efforts, bring a lot of these assets home, upgrade them, modernize them, repair them, reequip them, put on the back burner the NPR and the new low-yield weapons, and build a military that we had in the 1980s – that is, a strong military that was rarely, rarely used. And I think there's a certain tendency in the military to want to return to those days when we were feared, but we were feared because we didn't use our military.

**WOODS:** Well, Mark Perry, I appreciate your time today. I'm going to, as I say, link people to your article at [TomWoods.com/1092](http://TomWoods.com/1092), and then tell people to follow you over on Twitter, where you are @markperrydc. And thanks so much again. I'd love to talk to you about your book at some point if you can spare me the time.

**PERRY:** Absolutely, let's do it. I'm happy to do it all the time, and I appreciate being on.