

**Book Review  
By  
Hajira Asaf Khan**

**William J. Perry, *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 234**

“Our response need not be passivity and defeatism and illusion.”  
- William J. Perry

*My Journey at the Nuclear Brink* is the memoirs of William J. Perry, a former serviceman of the United States Air Force, a mathematician, and an entrepreneur of defence and reconnaissance technologies. The author served as Undersecretary of Defence to Harold Brown, in the Carter Administration, as Secretary of Defence in the Clinton Administration and had previously served in the capacity of consultant with the Kennedy Administration, most notably, during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

William J. Perry has been a vocal advocate of arms control and disarmament from the very beginning of his political career. According to him, being stationed in Tokyo after the Second World War had ended, and seeing the destruction that the city had suffered from US fire-bombings left a lasting effect on him. The subsequent realization that similar destruction could now be caused by using just one nuclear bomb, developed in him the conviction that all efforts must be made to avoid the use of these weapons in future.

In his days serving as Undersecretary of Defence, he was responsible for the development of the “system of systems” which included stealth technology, smart sensors and smart weaponry, a signature development in America’s defence technology during the 70s and 80s. The importance of this work was realized later in Operation Desert Storm when it was put to use, especially stealth aircraft. Perry’s account maintains that the offset strategy of the times was the reason that Soviet superiority was met with technological advancement thus, making the possibility of a nuclear strike less likely.

The twenty-five chapters of the book cover important times in and around the life of William J. Perry which he has chronicled with a modesty, not often seen in

memoirs of the kind. It is a retelling of the experiences of his life and the part that Perry played in different capacities, as an air force serviceman, as an entrepreneur, as a civil servant and later, as a diplomat. Despite his illustrious career and many contributions that he made to the defence of his country, his account presents him as someone who was able to grasp the essence of evolving technological and political developments and used his considerable capacity to work hard to make his country and the world a safer place.

The tenth chapter begins to outline the beginning of Perry's track II career as well as his decision to enter academia, having joined Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation, as a part-time senior fellow. During this time the "Star Wars" or Strategic Defence Initiative efforts were put in place by the Raegan Administration, of which, Perry was a vocal critic and published his views in newspapers and journals. It is interesting to note though, that while Perry himself is principally against the use of nuclear weapons and actively worked towards the reduction, if not, the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, his time at the Pentagon also coincided with some qualitative upgrades to delivery systems that in turn exacerbated the nuclear arms race during the Carter Administration.

His push for and the subsequent execution of the Nunn-Lugar bill and the events unfolding around that situation, from transfer of bomb grade uranium from Kazakhstan, formerly part of the USSR, and the process of chemical demilitarization is an interesting and insightful account of the time he served as Secretary of Defence in the Clinton Administration. One also finds a sense of resentment in Perry about the CTBT not having seen its ratification by the US to date. While on the subject, he expresses his doubt about the treaty being reintroduced for ratification in the Obama Administration as was the President's intent to do when he first took office. His doubts have been confirmed by President Obama's inaction in this regard.

In one of the closing chapters, he has commented on dangers emanating from countries like Iran, China, Pakistan, India and North Korea and has offered hope and advice as to how these countries' relations with the US may be improved. In the case of India and Pakistan, Perry advocates an increase in economic interdependence between the two countries. He has also criticized Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons but at the same time has failed to comment on the active

nuclear partnership between the US and India which have exacerbated Pakistan's security concerns.

In the closing chapter titled *A Way Forward: Hope for a World without Nuclear Weapons*, the author has revisited some of the challenges recounted in the earlier chapters and makes some important observations regarding the future of disarmament. He shows appreciation for movements like Global Zero and uses the opportunity to respond to the criticism of his own approach to disarmament as based on detracting steps that undermine the demand for total elimination of nuclear weapons. His opinion, however, is that these steps are "an indispensable prelude" towards the greater goal of reducing nuclear dangers.

William Perry's role as a diplomat is covered with a sense that makes him seem "aware of his roots". His repeated assertion that his time as a part of the private defence technology development industry had given him management skills that often came in handy in his diplomatic missions and assignments. His humility and balanced sense of self is not the only thing reflected in the writing. The book is full of small anecdotes that add a more personal touch to the business of arms control and disarmament that he considered his moral duty to pursue. A personal favorite is the time a young soldier mistook him for Dick Cheney while requesting an autograph.

Overall, the book was an educating read about the life and work of a man dedicated to reducing the dangers of nuclear weapons and having succeeded in no small measure, in enforcing the demilitarization of chemicals under the Nunn-Lugar initiative. The book has a balanced approach towards disarmament effort, based on the experience of the author, both personal and professional.

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