



The Second Nuclear Age: Strategy, Danger, and the New Power Politics

Public Affairs

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I'd like to thank you all for joining us for this breakfast meeting.

The topic for our discussion is nuclear weapons and the new environment in which they exist. The subject is particularly timely, given the uncertainty of the multipolar nuclear world we live in.

Our speaker is Paul Bracken, a leading national security strategist, who is the author of an important new book, entitled *The Second Nuclear Age: Strategy, Danger, and the New Power Politics*.

Between July 1945, when the U.S. tested the first atomic device, and August 1949, when the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, the U.S. held a nuclear monopoly. Even with this strategic advantage, few, if any, worried that the U.S. would use its dominance to take over the rest of the world with nuclear weapons.

The Cold War ended more than two decades ago. Since then, most Americans have thought as little as possible about nuclear weapons. But, according to Professor Bracken, this false sense of calm is misguided. Today, with the prospect of deadly weapons coming into the hands of irrational minds with global ambitions, anxiety has increased, and rightly so.

In this post-Cold War world, the once-familiar nuclear geometry has changed. Potential nuclear threats are not just between Russia and the United States, but are now worldwide, as nine countries currently have the bomb. Tensions between Israel and Iran over Iran's nuclear program, the volatile West Asian region, the race towards ballistic missile defense in South Asia, and the North Korean threat, are all ample reasons for the U.S. to reconsider our national strategy and to refocus on new nuclear dynamics.

The threat of a second age of nuclear politics has arrived. How, then, should we be thinking about nuclear weapons in this second nuclear age? How can we make nuclear weapons safer and far more strategically useful?

To answer these questions and creatively address more, please join me in welcoming one of the most widely respected voices in the field of nuclear security, our guest today, Dr. Paul Bracken.

Remarks

PAUL BRACKEN: Thank you very much. I'm delighted to be back at the Carnegie Council once again, where I've had many interesting meetings over the years. Hopefully, I'll be able to shed some light for you and we'll get some good questions. I'm going to probably leave more time than usual for comments and questions and answers, because I find that's often the most interesting part.

There's a lot of expertise here in this audience, including the person who wrote the first book on nuclear weapons I ever read, [Lansing Lamont](#). I thank you for that.

As we speak, North Korea is enriching uranium because they are building uranium-based atom bombs. They used to use plutonium. At the same time, Iran's centrifuges are flipping around there, as we all know—how many thousands I can't keep track of, because every newspaper story I read has a different number. And at the same time, U.S. deputy secretaries of state are flying to Moscow to negotiate new details of the [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty](#) about how to count things like bombs that are not deployed in missile silos.

I want to mention that I am coming here not to talk about any of those things. What I want to do is to take a step back and ask a different question: What do the three examples I just gave—and I could add 25 more easily—mean? What's going on in the world?

The answer that I come up with and I'd like to offer to you this morning is the one offered in my book, *The Second Nuclear Age*. It is, quite simply, that, that the world has entered a second nuclear age.

The first nuclear age was the Cold War. It had very well-defined timelines—some controversy about them—but if you look at it as part of the Cold War, some time in the late 1940s it started, and it ended in 1991, at the outside, with the [demise](#) of the Soviet Union. There was a nuclear arms race. There was a big political contest in it. That's what I call the first nuclear age.

The second nuclear age is just that. I asked myself: What would you call what came after the first nuclear age? I came up with this insight of calling it the second nuclear age. As you can see, this provides probably a great future for me, with sort of [Lassie Come Home](#). [Laughter] I'd like to define the second nuclear age as the spread of atomic weapons for reasons that have nothing to do with the Cold War.

In the book, there's actually a coy element in the definition, because I'm arguing that the second nuclear age began a long time ago; it didn't begin, say, in the 1990s or the 2000s. In fact, if you look back at the history of the Cold War, on one of my early visits to China I actually tracked down one of the generals who put the Chinese nuclear forces on alert to be fired at the Soviet Union in 1969. So the idea that the first nuclear age was this monolithic communist bloc against the United States didn't make any sense, even by 1969.

But those details are in the book. This morning I'd like to talk about the second nuclear age.

The point I would make: If we do step back from these details, what do we see? I think we see the emergence of a system of interacting parts with interconnections that are at least as complex as the Cold War, and in many ways more so. So my argument is that a new system of relations among countries has developed for those who have the bomb.

I divide the countries who have nuclear weapons, for simplification, into two classes: (1) major powers and (2) secondary powers. There's an arbitrary definition, but it's basically a \$2 trillion GDP.

So North Korea is a secondary power, in my judgment, giving it a lot—not to call it a tertiary or even less. But there are still major nuclear powers, and this would be the United States, Russia, France, Britain, China, and India, all of which have the bomb.

My contention is that this second nuclear age has arisen out of natural causes. It's the fear, greed, and nationalism that have defined international relations for at least the past 1,000 years. That has now, not surprisingly, continued after the end of the Cold War. In a world where greed and fear and nationalism are predominant forces, it should not be in any way, shape, or form surprising that countries—many of them, not all of them—would want to get the bomb.

To make this a little bit more specific, I would just offer you the case of India, a big, increasingly rich country. It did not sign the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#), but got nuclear weapons in 1998 or 1974, however you define it. The interesting thing about India today is that it is virtually an accepted nuclear power.

When was the last time anybody in this room heard a call for India to sign the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as a non-nuclear weapons state?

So, in my view, what's happening is that we have now moved into a multipolar world. You hear that all the time. I think what people leave out of the equation is that it's also a nuclear multipolar world. Increasingly, to be seen as a major power, it helps if you have nuclear weapons. There are, of course, exceptions to this—Japan, Brazil. But India's joining the club I think is extremely significant.

I'm not here to predict widespread proliferation or minor proliferation. The way I put it is as follows: that when it comes to who gets the bomb in the future, I can imagine a very wide range of possibilities—except one, disarmament. When I look at these major powers, for a country like China or Russia, the United States or India, to give up nuclear weapons would significantly demote them in the status of major powers.

More, I think one particular major power, the United States, has much more to lose from this trend than any other, and we have been deemphasizing nuclear weapons, certainly since the end of the Cold War. I think any reading of Cold War history would say that this started a lot earlier than that, because the United States has the most splendid conventional forces in the world, and we have a national global interest, a self interest, in advancing this cause of nuclear nonproliferation.

But if you take my argument that it's a multipolar nuclear system, my point really can be said quite simply: other countries don't see it that way. China, Russia, Pakistan, North Korea, certainly Iran, do not want to see a world made safe for American strong arm conventional warfare tactics. It is in their interest to do something else, and all of those are getting nuclear weapons.

So we could look at the big major powers and how they are interacting. They are not putting nuclear weapons in the background. In fact, the way I would put it is that there are nine nuclear powers in the world today, nine countries we know of that have nuclear weapons. Unless our intelligence is really bad, I don't think there's a tenth, at least yet, but it is possible.

But there are nine, and eight of them are modernizing their nuclear forces for the 21st century. The one that is not doing that, of course, is the United States. I'm not arguing that we should do that. I'm pointing out the enormous significance of the U.S. pushing these anti-nuclear policies, which I fully support. What I don't support is the conclusion, though, that they're working.

The other major feature of this second nuclear age is the much more dangerous one, in my view, and that is the spread of nuclear weapons to the secondary powers. Here, to be quite specific, I'm talking about Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea, so far, with Iran knocking on the door.

We could look at the major powers through the prism of nuclear nonproliferation. I choose not to do that, because my first argument is that the spread of the bomb is occurring for natural reasons.

The view that the nuclear proliferation regime could have prevented this—we could go into reasons why it did or didn't—but I think the power of natural causes and the attempt of imagined regimes to reverse really fundamental trends at the nation-state level and at the global level to substitute for security in a world where countries still do not trust each other was doomed to failure. I think we could argue that maybe it bought 10 or 20 years.

But the notion that what's happening now is that there is a weakening of the global nonproliferation regime and that's the cause of the problems is one that I would not support. The global nonproliferation regime is weakening, but much more fundamental forces are driving countries to get these weapons.

Back to my contention that these weapons are spreading to the Israelis, Pakistans, and North Koreas, I think a better way to think about this is that the breakdown in the monopoly over nuclear weapons that major powers held in 1945 until, really, fairly recently, has broken down, and that the big risks in the future are very much in

the regions.

I would point out to you a very interesting insight that I have here, I think. That is that the second nuclear age is in many respects the mirror image of the first nuclear age. Bear with me for a moment.

In the Cold War, the path to nuclear war always led at some point through Moscow and Washington, because that's where the triggers were. At no time in the regional wars—in Vietnam, in the counterinsurgencies in Africa, in the paramilitary fights in Latin America, in the Cuban missile crisis—did any of the regional powers control a trigger. Indeed, recent revelations of the disputes between Fidel Castro in 1962 in the Cuban missile crisis with his Soviet counterpart on the island show that the big argument was that Castro wanted control of these nuclear weapons. If you read the transcripts, it makes crystal clear what I was saying, that there was no way on god's green earth that the Soviet Union was going to allow that to happen, because it was much too dangerous.

Now we have inverted that in the second nuclear age. The triggers to nuclear war are in Tel Aviv, Islamabad, Pyongyang, and in the future possibly Tehran, and possibly in other places too, because you can start a nuclear war even if you don't have nuclear weapons.

One of the other big differences with the second nuclear age compared to the Cold War—there are many differences. I don't think they're so enormous that it's like looking at an Impressionist painting from 10 inches away and you don't see the pattern. But just consider this: the role of terrorism in the world today. Now, many speakers have probably come in here and said that the threat of terrorists getting their hands on nuclear weapons is a really bad thing. Please raise your hand if you think it's okay for terrorists to get nuclear weapons. The one person in the back, I'll see you after class. [Laughter]

We all sort of understand that. But we don't understand the larger significance of terrorism, which is that it can catalyze a crisis situation.

Ask yourself what would have happened at the height of the Cuban missile crisis with 86 B-52s armed with 11 or 12 hydrogen bombs each flying lazy-eights outside of Soviet air space. If at that point terrorists had hijacked, I guess it would be a Boeing 707 commercial airline, and crashed it into the Pentagon and the Empire State Building, I don't know what would have happened, but it would have pushed the United States over the brink.

More, if you look at not all, but major, books about the 9/11 attacks—Larry Freedman, University of London—his argument is that it was a conscious attempt to start a catalytic war. This was not a war between al-Qaeda and the United States; it was al-Qaeda's attempt to get the United States to put large ground forces into Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and in that they succeeded.

So my point is really quite simple: A terrorist with M16 rifles, airplanes, and a few bombs, not nuclear weapons, if they strike at the right time, as Pakistan and India are on Defense Condition 2, can trip this crisis over into a nuclear exchange. That never existed before. Was there terrorism in the Cold War? Yes. Was it designed to provoke a larger war between the superpowers? There's not a single case of that.

Another huge difference between the second nuclear age and the first is the role of emotion and hysteria. There's people in here, when I look around, who I dare say remember the Cuban missile crisis rather well. In those instances, you would not find a million people at Times Square or deployed in the Washington Mall screaming for the blood of the Russians—"We must wipe out these inferior people because they don't have a right to exist." At no time during the Cuban missile crisis, or any other Cold War nuclear crisis, did you find mobs like that in Red Square in the Kremlin. Sometimes there were mobs, but they never appeared when we were in a crisis between the two superpowers. Why? Because the leaders of the two sides knew they could be backed into a corner they might not get out of.

The Cold War was run not on nationalism and hysteria. It was very distant from the street. Nobody was screaming for the other side's blood. We had clinical images, some of you may recall, of Secretary of Defense McNamara with big charts showing concave marginal-return functions as a function of the megatonnage we

would land on the Soviet Union, and he was making almost like systems analysis arguments about how many megatons we needed. We treated the Cold War with a kind of clinical rationality which was detached from emotion, hysteria, and hatred.

In a nuclear crisis between India and Pakistan, Israel and Iran, North Korea and South Korea, or, dare I say, even China and Japan or the United States, my only point is simple: hysteria, nationalism is going to be much larger. In fact, the Cold War did have an ideology, freedom and liberty versus atheistic godless communism, to simplify a little bit. I went to Catholic school, and those were the aspects that were emphasized to me, that they were atheists who didn't believe in God.

The ideology—and we sort of think there isn't any ideology for a second nuclear age. But there is, and it is called nationalism—a force in the world the U.S., and particularly the U.S. academic community, so consistently underestimates its power. If you were to go to college campuses today and look at courses on nationalism, they would have titles like “Nationalism and the Politics of Genocide.” It's looked at entirely in a negative way. It may be negative, but it doesn't look negative if you're in Russia, Pakistan, India, or Israel. It's a driving force that we ignore and dislike at our peril.

Let me conclude just by giving you a little example of how the United States has thought about these things in recent years, has thought about the second nuclear age.

In 2007, the Air Force **moved** six hydrogen bombs from Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota. They flew them down to Barksdale in Louisiana in a “routine move.” They forgot to take the warheads off the bombs. They were flying live hydrogen bombs. If you look at it, the secretary of the air force and chief of staff of the air force were fired by Secretary of Defense **Gates** over this, and he appointed a commission which said, “How can this happen?”

The commission was headed by former Secretary of Defense **Jim Schlesinger**, a man who knows his way around the defense establishment. He came in and he said, “Yup, we did an investigation, and they violated procedures.” But he found a lot more. He said, “Attention to nuclear weapons in the Pentagon has disappeared since the end of the Cold War.” Middle management wasn't paying any attention to it. Senior management at the secretariat level was not paying any attention to it. Therefore, it wasn't surprising to him that people in the field got the message that the people in the middle and at the top didn't think these things were important.

The view that the United States nuclear establishment is these old Cold Warriors fighting arms control treaties is preposterous. The people who used to do that have long since died off or gone into retirement. Nobody is thinking about nuclear weapons. That's why that accident occurred.

We have let the discussion of these issues fall to a dangerously low level, in my judgment, captured almost entirely by questions of nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament. But mention the word “nuclear” today in Washington or on a college campus, and if the next word isn't “nonproliferation” or “disarmament,” the conversation ends.

The notion that North Korea and Israel and Russia and China have these weapons, and they're damn glad they do, just like the United States was in the Cold War, gets scant consideration, and I consider that dangerous.

I thank you for your attention. Let me see if there are any comments, questions, or other things.

Questions

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson.

You have been absolutely clear in your declarations. But there are many problems remaining.

Let's begin with regional politics, because if Iran has a bomb to use and it's nationalistic and everything else, its neighbors are the ones who are most concerned, and not only Israel, but Saudi Arabia. So do you foresee

greater proliferation where the Saudis have money, they don't have to have the educational facilities to produce the nuclear scientists who can make bombs, but they can purchase them from Pakistan or wherever? This is happening in many different regions and there are possibilities—not only that, but nonstate actors—to acquire nuclear weapons.

Now, an important issue in the first nuclear age was deterrence. What do you do regionally, and what about deterrence at all these levels?

PAUL BRACKEN: The question is, if my premises occur, or if one buys them, will there be accelerated proliferation?

I would say the impetus toward greater spread of the bomb is likely to grow. I do not hold the view, nor do I think it is reasonable, to argue that everybody should get the bomb and then the world would be stable. There are academics who *argue* that. I would say this is why policy circles ignore academic writings. [Laughter]

I don't want to focus on that. But in your question the particular case of Saudi Arabia is one that is often advanced. I think it's going to be a lot harder for Saudi Arabia simply to purchase the bomb.

There's a joke about Saudi Arabia getting the bomb. It's referred to as "the virgin birth," because you don't have to go through all the trouble of building plutonium factories and uranium enrichment and things. It's clever. But I think the U.S. could probably stop that, or make it extremely difficult. Nonetheless, I do agree with the thrust of your question.

As to what to do about it, the last part of the book is on: Okay, so what; where do we go from here? I have a lot of ideas on arms control, such as the U.S. immediately embracing a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons. I would amend that and say that the policy should be no first use of nuclear weapons, comma, guaranteed second use. If anybody does use nuclear weapons, we will use nuclear weapons against them as punishment, and I don't care who it is. I know somebody will raise Israel at this point.

But there's a lot of things we can do, which we haven't had time to discuss this morning.

I do not think reinforcing the *START treaty* deals with any of the problems I'm talking about. I'm in a business school, my tenure is, and there are studies why do companies go bankrupt, and about 80 percent of the reason is the business environment changes, the company doesn't, the company goes bust.

Think about it. We're still negotiating as though for a mutual assured destruction world with the U.S. and Russia, while Israel is moving its nuclear forces to sea, Pakistan is doubling its arsenal. It's, we do what we know how to do. So we've got to redirect arms control.

QUESTION: Richard Valcourt, *International Journal of Intelligence*.

You have mentioned various reasons for having a nuclear weapon—nationalism; and then you've talked about hysteria. But you have talked around an issue, and that is Israel, North Korea, they're not likely to use the bomb, except for a reason; but an Islamic jihad will use the bomb if in fact they feel that that advances the cause. There's nothing wrong with dying in the cause of Islam according to what's happening now. There is the problem. Pakistan or some other countries—even Iran. Why don't you talk about that one?

PAUL BRACKEN: First of all, I would respectfully disagree that these countries are not using nuclear weapons. North Korea uses nuclear weapons every single day. My tax dollars and yours are going to support the inept economy and the lack of energy and the lack of political legitimacy there. It's a disastrous situation which the Western world is supporting.

I think we have to expand our notion of what it means to use a nuclear weapon, and that is a lesson we learned in the first nuclear age too. The most important single lesson of the Cold War was you don't have to fire a nuclear weapon to use it. North Korea is using nuclear weapons every day.

This doesn't obviate your concerns about the Islamic jihad terrorists who think that good things will happen if they use nuclear weapons.

Let me just lay it out on the table. There's no good answers here. It's better to prevent a second nuclear age than to go through and live it. Nobody's going to disagree with that. But we haven't prevented it. But we haven't faced up to the questions of what it means if we go into this nuclear age.

Number 1: What do you do if Iran actually uses nuclear weapons?

Number 2: How would they use nuclear weapons? For example, they could use nuclear weapons, as I [published](#) in *The Wall Street Journal* piece two weeks ago, to terrorize Israel, to go on alert, to force Israel to go into a civil defense posture. This could all happen and nobody fires a single shot.

You look at war games of this, you conclude: deterrence worked; people said it would work and it worked. But it didn't work because Israel will find this, and it will be, an intolerable situation.

So what do we do? How do we configure our forces if we are forced to go to war? When I say "our forces" I mean conventional and nuclear forces.

I don't think people are aware how atrophied our nuclear forces are. People look at the numbers, that we have 10 times or 100 times as many as anybody else. Ask yourself, when was the last time we test launched a missile out from a real silo? Anybody know what the answer is? We tested two of them in 1967, and they both failed.

QUESTION: Edward Russell.

Can you comment a little bit about how the thinking of counterparts of the U.S. policy circles—in Europe or Russia, Japan—is on the questions you've described?

PAUL BRACKEN: Yes. It's a good question. It's what's the thinking in other counterparts?

What you're seeing now is innovation, innovation for a nuclear environment. To me it's like going back to the late 1940s and early 1950s, where there was tremendous attempt to find innovative uses for the bomb, which means more than hurling hydrogen bombs back and forth, which has its disadvantages. Doctrines of deterrence and containment were invented only after we had the bomb—the view that these things came from on high and then we followed them. Let me just give a couple of examples.

Israel is shifting a good part of its nuclear deterrence to sea in German diesel submarines bought from the government of Germany, full consent of the German government, undoubtedly the full consent of the United States government, and Israel in the future will have a secure deterrent that can't be taken out by a nuclear Iran. So you can see, even though Iran doesn't have the bomb today, she's already started dynamics in the region.

Let's turn to Iran. She has mobile missiles which can reach well into Europe, and she also has fixed, silo-housed missiles. Why? You look at the details—we don't have a generation of people that looks at the structures anymore, because they've retired or died. The reason for the fixed, silo-housed missiles is so that, in my judgment, Iran could immediately go into a launch-on-warning posture. This in itself would have immense political consequences, negative for Israel.

More, she has to disperse her mobile missiles, and they are very awkward when they drive around, and you can find them. They go at like eight miles an hour. And they're vulnerable. So you want to cover this missile dispersal.

So launch-on-warning, innovation number 1, using silo-house missiles to cover the mobile alert missiles. China is doing the same thing, building a much more agile force.

My book is the only one that pulled these templates together to look at the high levels of innovation.

I'm not arguing that this innovation all makes sense, that some of it isn't crazy. I'm simply saying it's going on, just as it did in the early Cold War.

QUESTION: Don Simmons.

For many years, most people regarded antiballistic missiles [ABMs] as fanciful. I think that was still true at the time of the first [Gulf War](#), where the Patriots' performance was not very good. More recently, there have been apparently some improvements, particularly with Israel's [Iron Dome](#), and everybody is taking very seriously our antiballistic missile system for installation in Eastern Europe. Do ABMs now represent some offset to the danger of nuclear war?

PAUL BRACKEN: I would say ballistic missile defense has a place in what I'm talking about here—only a place. The idea that you can build an impermeable dome against a country was never plausible.

I'll say something else. If you read the newspaper accounts of the Iron Dome's performance, the numbers I saw were something like 80–85 percent. I studied engineering here at 120th Street at Columbia University. Anytime I see a system that has 85 percent performance, I know they're lying. [Laughter] So it's not as good as they say. But it has a role.

We have to really think through its political role too, because if we deploy these systems, Russia and China can use them as an excuse to expand their arsenals. That's the reason, if you look at the cover of the book, with the balls hitting each other—one country makes a move and it reverberates through the system. It's really quite interesting how China is moving to their own road-mobile system, using our threats to legitimize that.

QUESTION: John Richardson.

Some months ago, there was a distinguished financial journalist who spoke here. Afterwards I asked him, "Given the disarray in Europe and unemployment and everything, are we going to see [Marxism 3.0](#) or [Marxism 5.1](#) arrive?" He said, "You bet."

So my question is: Given the evident disarray of the Western democracies in terms of their public finances, in terms of their nuclear arsenals, and probably in terms of their social infrastructure, given the frightening Salafistic Wahabi, Shia versus Sunni, the whole thing in the Middle East, where the infidels can get killed by the millions, wouldn't we be better off ultimately with this atheistic, godless communism that you mentioned, because in fact they may be a little bit more conservative?

PAUL BRACKEN: Oh, absolutely. I would bring [Brezhnev](#) back in a minute! [Laughter]

In fact, that's really a central argument of my book. If you look at the Cold War, we had two very conservative bureaucracies—not liberal conservative, but risk-avoiding, respect-for-tradition, status quo policies.

In my judgment, I've asked myself, "Why didn't we have a nuclear war in the Cold War?" The single most important reason was—there's many reasons—technology—but the conservative behavior of the two sides. They weren't prone to nuclear risk-taking. I can see that happening with a nuclear Iran or Pakistan or North Korea easily. It's a huge difference.

QUESTION: My name is Kevin McMullen.

I have a question about strategy and current thinking. It seems to me that it's not in our interest as we see it to really resolve our problems with North Korea and Iran, because doing so would deprive us of our pretext for defenses that we're building against other countries. A sea-land battle is really directed against Red China, but we make-believe it's directed against North Korea, because that doesn't force either Red China itself or the other countries in the Far East to react as if it were directed against China.

PAUL BRACKEN: I see the logic. Let me put it this way. I serve on several boards where we really are into sea-land battle. You're imputing too much sophistication and subtlety to Washington, D.C., and rationality. It's like people in Kansas who think the Council on Foreign Relations runs the country. Just go to a Council meeting.

Having said that, let me change your question a little bit. I think the reason we're in the mode we are is out of intellectual laziness and habit. I'll put it this way. The words we use were created in the Cold War for the Cold War—deterrence, containment, counterforce, countervalue, first strike, second strike, minimum deterrence. Nuclear war fighting is the opposite of minimum deterrence.

We use these terms today as if their meaning was self-evident or in no need of explanation for a totally different situation. We need a better vocabulary to have a more productive discussion about this, just as we did in 1955, when the [Henry Kissingers](#), [Tom Schellings](#), and [Herman Kahns](#) were writing.

It's habit and laziness that we continue to use these terms as if it's self-evident. "Iran will only have a minimum deterrent"—I never hear that at Israeli conferences. I hear it in United States conferences all the time, because it maps into our academic literature, and our students have been raised on that kind of thing.

QUESTION: You made the point that a lot of other people consider the U.S. a stretching behemoth. Putting it in regional terms, can you make a case that Tehran wants the nuclear weapon in order to establish some sort of parity in that region against Israel, which not only has major conventional forces but also the nuke?

PAUL BRACKEN: I think if you gamed out virtually any randomly selected American team and put them in Iran's spot, they would make the decision to get the bomb. I've done that on several occasions. It's perfectly rational. It isn't a breakdown of the nonproliferation regime unless you hold the [invasion](#) and [occupation](#) of Iraq in 2003 as part of that regime. But, obviously, we can't handle the problems in those ways.

I would say something else. A lot of people say, "But, Professor Bracken, you really can't be sure that Iran has intentions of getting the bomb." I would say that's certainly true. I don't have any inside pipeline into what's going on there. But, boy, have countries gone to war with a lot more flimsy information than what we have there.

We don't have to go very far back, and you know what I'm talking about, [March 2003](#). But it isn't the only example. Our whole war in Vietnam was based on theories and speculation that didn't have hard evidence that Vietnam was going to be the cat's paw of communism. That didn't stop us from putting 550,000 troops there.

So the standards I would like to be higher, but history suggests that they're not.

Thank you. You've been a great audience this morning.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you very much.

I just want to wish you all a very happy holiday. I'll see you same time, same place, next year.

Audio

In the Cold War, the path to nuclear war always led through Moscow and Washington. In the second nuclear age the triggers to nuclear war are in Tel Aviv, Islamabad, Pyongyang, and in the future possibly Tehran, and possibly in other places too, because you can start a nuclear war even if you don't have nuclear weapons.

Video Clip

In the Cold War, the path to nuclear war always led through Moscow and Washington. In the second nuclear age the triggers to nuclear war are in Tel Aviv, Islamabad, Pyongyang, and in the future possibly Tehran, and possibly in other places too, because you can start a nuclear war even if you don't have nuclear weapons.

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