

## Empire and the Bomb

Transcript of an Interview between Ron Pinchback and author Joseph Gerson  
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**RON PINCHBACK:** Good morning and as Ambrose says 'Top of the morning'. This is Ron Pinchback sitting in for Ambrose I. Lane, Sr. on this Monday morning. Ambrose is just a little under the weather and he'll be back with us hopefully by Friday, so thank you for any calls of concerns and things like that. He's doing fine.

Today on **We Ourselves** were gonna be talking with Joseph Gerson the author of *Empire and the Bomb: How the U.S. Uses Nuclear Weapons to Dominate the World*. Just to let you know a little bit about Mr. Gerson, he is currently Director of Programs and Director of the Peace and Economic Security Program for a AFSC in New England. He joins us live in the studio today to talk about the book. Tonight he's gonna be at the St. Stephens and the Incarnation Church at 16<sup>th</sup> and Newton streets northwest. That starts at 7pm and he'll be talking about his book and meeting and greeting you folks out there who have concerns about this issue. So once again we'd like to welcome to our studios Mr. Joseph Gerson, huh good morning.

**JOSEPH GERSON:** (Off mic) Good morning, thank you for having me.

**RON PINCHBACK:** And let's get right to this book cause it is huh --- it says it pretty plain here; how the U.S. uses nuclear weapons to dominate the world, *Empire and the Bomb*. Daniel Ellsberg writes in review of this book;

"I have not read a more important in many years. Gerson has uncovered the radioactive vein in our secret foreign policy; he helps understand why the threat of nuclear war is greater now than ever before the fall of the Berlin Wall."

>>Break to fix mic issue<<

**RON PINCHBACK:** Alright we're back and once again joining me in the studio is Mr. Joseph Gerson, the author of – Hiroshima—pardon me – *Empire and the Bomb: How the U.S. Uses Nuclear Weapons to Dominate the World*. Tell us about the book and your purpose for writing it.

**JOSEPH GERSON:** Well the book runs through the history of the U.S. use of nuclear weapons beginning with the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombings right on though to the current Bush administration and describes how the United States has used these weapons either to expand or to maintain its global empire. You know, more than a century ago Teddy

Roosevelt said 'Speak softly and carry a big stick' and Nuclear weapons are the ultimate big stick.

I sort of stumble on this back during the 1973 Middle East war when there was a cease fire between Israel and Egypt. And – none the less, I was in Europe at the time and Armed Forces radio announced that there was a worldwide nuclear alert by the United States, our forces were on the highest level of nuclear alert and I wondered why that was. Taking it apart and going back it had to do with taking advantage of that war and making sure that the Soviets didn't basically come in to support Egypt and to maintain U.S. dominance and really expand U.S. dominance of the Middle East. And what you find is that every President since Truman has prepared or threatened to initiate nuclear war during international crisis.

The other reason I wrote it is it's been my privilege now for more than 20 years to be working very closely with the Japanese Peace Movement. So I worked closely with a number of the A-bomb survivors. I've gone really quite deeply into what nuclear weapons means and – uh -- the alarm has to go out.

**RON PINCHBACK:** And by the way Ambrose does an annual program on the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki every August with many of those groups who are participating in that dialogue. You write in your book what you consider the first nuclear terrorism was actually Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

**JOSEPH GERSON:** Right. There was a wonderful named Senji Yamaguchi who is a Nagasaki survivor, an incredibly courageous man. He was exposed to something like 3000 degrees of heat, he literally saw a woman blown apart with her fetus and child, she was pregnant at the time, it was blown out -- totally scarred with more than 20 surgeries. Like many A-bomb survivors he attempted to commit suicide a couple of times in his life. And what he said in a conference in Nagasaki was, you know, the worst act of terrorism in history were the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And you need to think about it, this is one bomb in each city that literally vaporized, in the case of Hiroshima, vaporized about half the city and knocked down and burnt the rest. Poisoned the people, people still die from radiation today. People go through their lives wondering when radiation induced cancers are going to take them down; similarly in Nagasaki.

You know the purpose, what we don't think about very much and not part of our discourse, but Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor to Carter said that the purpose of the military is to mobilize and concentrate the greatest amount of terrorizing power against another nation so that they'll

conform to your will. And this is how the United States is used nuclear weapons now the past 60 years.

**RON PINCHBACK:** Let's talk about nuclear weapons for a moment here because a lot of people probably don't know just how powerful modern day nuclear weapons are. When they look at the destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima obviously you see a tremendous amount of destruction there, and these were single, you know, single bombs that did that kind of damage. Today's modern weaponry is a whole arsenal of vastly improved, if you want to use the word improved, levels of – levels of lethality. Tells us, tell our listeners – remind our listeners about what these weapons are, how powerful they are today in comparison to what was dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

**JOSEPH GERSON:** Well if you take for example the Hiroshima A-Bomb – uh- it exploded, it was targeted essentially against a hospital, and it exploded over that hospital. The fire bomb, sorry the fire ball was about 750 feet in diameter. It had the heat of the sun; more than a million degrees. In the first second of its detonation people within a 2-mile radius were irradiated, poisoned with radioactivity. That was followed by a blast wave that knocked everything down within a 2-mile radius and then the fires begin and the heat wave. That all happened in 9 seconds. Uh – 100,000 people dead. By 1954 the United States was detonating a hydrogen bomb on Bikini Atolls, where the name of the swim suit comes from, and that fire ball was 2-miles across and had the heat of the sun.

**RON PINCHBACK:** So, 750 feet for the Japan bombs and you're talking about 2000 feet across.

**JOSEPH GERSON:** You're talking about 2000 feet across, right. So the average what they call strategic nuclear weapon today is about 20 times more powerfully than the Hiroshima bomb and they can go up to as much as 100 times more powerful. And – huh – we've got about 9,000 of them either deployed or in reserve. So that's enough to, as they used to say, make the bubble bounce, make the rubble bounce.

**RON PINCHBACK:** Hmmm. And the Soviet Union has this type of, and not only the Soviet Union but some of the Soviet satellite states are also in possession of weapons of this magnitude also.

**JOSEPH GERSON:** Well one of the things I wrote about in the book, just to kind of back up a little bit, was to say that Joseph Rotblat was one of the senior scientists with the Manhattan Project and as early as 1943, which is to say 2 years before the war ended, the Director of the program Gen. Leslie

Groves told him that the bomb wasn't about Germany because Germany wasn't gonna get a bomb. And it wasn't about Japan it was about the Soviet Union. The United States wasn't at war with the Soviet Union and Rotblat had the moral courage and vision to resign and campaign throughout his life against nuclear weapons. At a conference once in Hiroshima I remember him saying in just very, very clear terms that the human species has a very stark choice ahead of us. We can either completely eliminate all nuclear weapons or we'll see their global proliferation. He said and no nation will long tolerate what it perceives to be an unequal or terrorizing imbalance of power. They'll do what they can to equalize it.

So out of that frame the Soviet Union moved quite quickly to develop nuclear weapons, although their delivery systems crude to say the least. So they had their first atomic bomb by 1949, which surprised the United States just four years later. But, the United States had overwhelming terrorizing and intimidating dominance over the Soviet Union really until the early 1970's. And if you look at the history carefully what you see is that the Soviet's backed down during crisis, they were clear not to challenge the United States on what the United States understood was it's own vital interests, and it really until the 1970's that you had something like parity.

And then with that you had a U.S. effort to try to re-achieve global dominance. This is what lead to the ultimately the Reagan arms race, and the nuclear freeze to stop that. And now the so called missile defenses are actually part of the first strike plan the United States has in an effort to maintain this overwhelming dominance.

**RON PINCHBACK:** And you spoke briefly there about intimidating -- nuclear intimidation of the Soviet Union. Is that what occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

**JOSEPH GERSON:** Yeah, that was interesting. Those of us who lived through it sort of -- here in this country, thought we understood what had happened. And Robert Kennedy wrote a short little book called Thirteen Days which kind of gives the received history of it. But if you look more deeply you see that there is a whole lot more going on and something really quite frightening. When Kennedy came to power, Kennedy ran for President with the claim there was missile gap that the Soviet Union has more missiles than the United States and it was dangerous situation and we had to increase our armament. But when, in the transition period when he met with Eisenhower, Eisenhower told him "...you know the only danger of nuclear weapons for the United States was that if we used ours weapons against the Soviets the fallout might come back to hurt us. So we don't really need to worry about the Soviets."

Actually, what led Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, to attempt to put medium range missiles -- base them in Cuba were two things. First and foremost they were totally intimidated, they were totally overwhelmed. They had at the time 4 intercontinental ballistic missiles with the theoretical capability of reaching the United States, although as I'll explain they really couldn't. So the effort was to base them there (in Cuba) to equalize the balance of terror. The second is that the Chinese communists were being very critical of Khrushchev and his associates, saying that they lost the revolutionary spirit of communism, the United States had already tried to invade Cuba once, and Khrushchev thought that this was one way to kill two birds with one stone; he could equalize the imbalance of power and he could defined the Cuban revolution.

In the event the United States threw up a blockade – uh, uh – went on the level of highest nuclear alert at the height of the crisis, Kennedy's most senior advisors thought that the odds that the United States would initiate a nuclear war, guesses that the United States would initiate a nuclear war were between a third and a-half.

And what you had – and ultimately the Soviets backed down – but there were a couple of important lessons through that. We operate with the illusion that the President controls the nuclear weapons – uh – that there's a total control here and accidents won't happen.

But what two events took place during the Cuban missile crisis. At one point when Kennedy had essentially ordered that the Soviet ships not be confronted in the Caribbean as part of the blockade, so Khrushchev could have some peaceful time to think through a proposal, McNamara, who was Secretary of Defense at the time, wanders down into a sector of the Pentagon who is essentially off limits to civilians like himself, it was Navy place, and he looked at a map and he saw that there was a Navy ship not where it wasn't supposed to be. And he asked about it about it and there was literally a yelling and screaming match that went on.

What was happening was that for the Navy they saw this crisis as a great opportunity for practice. And so what you had was surface ships dropping depth charges against Soviet submarines; some of which had nuclear armed torpedoes. They wouldn't blow up the United States but they would certainly initiate a nuclear war. And in this one case the damage was getting so heavy for a Soviet sub that members of the crew beginning to pass out, lacking oxygen. And uh – the Soviet doctrine at the time was that if the three commanding officers agreed to launch one of the nuclear tipped torpedoes that they could to it. Two of the three wanted to launch. And it was the third

who said 'Let's just give it a little longer', who prevented a nuclear war.

One other thing that happened during that crisis, which is reminiscent of something that happened just a few months ago, is that at the height of crisis, on his own authority a senior general increased the level of the nuclear alert in a way that no one else would see except for the Soviets, who were monitoring U.S. communications. This was something that Kennedy hadn't authorized. So you see that the military can actually act independently.

So we had, people have seen and you may have reported it on this program before, in August a B-52 in North Dakota with absolutely no authorization took off and flew across the United States with 6 nuclear weapons. This was an accident that was not supposed to be able to happen. So the question here is, were the controls that lax so that about 5 different mistakes got made that made that possible or was something else going on?

**RON PINCHBACK:** Was something else going on? Ladies and gentlemen we're talking with Joseph Gerson. He's the author of *Empire and the Bomb: How the U.S. Uses Nuclear Weapons to Dominate the World*. We're gonna invite you to be a part of this conversation as Ambrose does, traditional, by dialing 202-588-0893. You can ask your questions or make comments about the things that Mr. Gerson is talking about this morning. That chapter 'The Cuban Missile Crisis: Prestige, Credibility, and Power' uh – and then you have your fifth chapter 'Vietnam; Failure of Nuclear Diplomacy'. Give us a brief summary of that chapter because people don't associate nuclear strategy with Vietnam.

**JOSEPH GERSON:** Right, right. Well nuclear weapons were inherit to U.S. – Vietnam policy beginning as early as 1954 the French were facing defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the end of French colonialism there. And at that point Secretary of State Dulles and the Vice President Nixon with Eisenhower's approval offered the French two nuclear weapons to break the siege. The French had the good sense to say that the wind might be blowing in the wrong way and we don't want to lose our troops. So they denied the offer and accepted the defeat and life went on.

Again you have in the escalation, it's interesting – one of the things as I was doing the research on it, you know you go back and see how the Gulf of Tonkin, the Tonkin Gulf incident was totally manufactured. McNamara knew it at the time he was first briefing President Johnson about that. But the decision had been made, not so much by Johnson but by his senior advisors during the election in 1964 that they were gonna basically crowd him into a war. And in doing so they were clear that they could only do it on the basis

on knowing they could use nuclear weapons against China, just to ensure that China wouldn't come in down the road.

1967 during the siege of Khe Sanh, which the U.S. leaders feared might be another Dien Bien Phu, Johnson made a nuclear threat as this seemed to be related to the ultimate disappearance of the North Vietnamese troops around Khe Sanh. And then you get to the really biggest threat...

**RON PINCHBACK:** Wait a minute, let me – let us go back...

**JOSEPH GERSON:** (laugh)

**RON PINCHBACK:** Now, are you saying that the North Vietnamese evacuated the - uh - Khe Sanh because of...

**JOSEPH GERSON:** in part. I say it's in part. It's a bit interesting and confusing. What you see is that General Giap, the North Vietnamese leader was hoping or appeared to hope that he could lure U.S. forces into something like another Dien Bien Phu; a remote place where the U.S. could concentrate its troops and be taken apart by the Vietnamese. And Westmoreland, the U.S. commander was thinking something in the reverse. He was saying well I have a whole lot more fire power than the French had let's suck as many Vietnamese in here, we'll put some people out as bait and draw them in and just savage them in what he called savage Indian country with B-52 bombings. And, and it was a terrible, terrible battle. The U.S. lost quite a number of troops and the Vietnamese – the description in one diary in there which I quote from of a North Vietnamese soldier being under the – the description of what it's like being under the B-52 bombing – it's totally, totally terrorizing.

So in the midst of this is the fear that the fortress would be lost. Both U.S. military leaders and Johnson communicated a threat of possibly use of nuclear weapons. And in the days after that the siege lifted. But interestingly as it lifted the U.S. forces were caught in the Tet Offensive. And this was, as the people know, the turning point for the war. The question here is whether in fact Giap was looking to concentrate U.S. forces and attention on Khe Sanh while they went to hit the coast and hit the decisive blow.

**RON PINCHBACK:** Operation Left-Hook as they called at the first Gulf War. Um—also let's talk briefly just about – and I like to remind listeners that nuclear weapons of today – when you think of nuclear missiles and things like that – they're not carrying one nuclear warhead – uh most of these missiles are carrying multiple warheads. Is that accurate?

**JOSEPH GERSON:** Many of them. I don't know if you can say most, but certainly many of them, certainly the Tridents do. And this is the ultimate U.S. terror machine. These are on Trident Submarines. You have up to 24 missiles which in turn have a couple of dozens of warheads...

**RON PINCHBACK:** Each...

**JOSEPH GERSON:** Each. So you're...

**RON PINCHBACK:** Each being on average – what – ten times stronger...

**JOSEPH GERSON:** Ten to twenty times – twenty times stronger. One way to think about it is one hydrogen bomb can kill more people than Auschwitz, then was killed at Auschwitz. So you're dealing with genocidal weapons here. And – huh -...

**RON PINCHBACK:** Well you know, the reason I bring that up is because there are those out there who suggest that somehow people could survive a nuclear attack. And a city like Washington, the nation's capital and such; we wouldn't be hit with one nuclear weapon we'd probably be hit with several nuclear weapons. Survivability?

**JOSEPH GERSON:** Well, it's a situation in which the living would envy the dead. But I think, I think we need to reframe for the moment and think more about Tehran, which is under, as we speak is under a nuclear threat. George bush but also Hillary Clinton has said that all options have to be on the table. When a nuclear power says all options that includes possible nuclear attack. We've have nuclear capable aircraft carriers fleets in the Persian Gulf. So you know, the – one of the things I think we haven't understood and its part of this whole propaganda system here is we thought of ourselves as the primary targets or victims of nuclear weapons when in fact for six decades we've been targeting other peoples and making the threats.

**RON PINCHBACK:** Nuclear Intimidation. Empire and the Bomb: How the U.S. uses Nuclear Weapons to Dominate the World by Joseph Gerson. He's our guest in the studio. We're gonna take some questions from you our listening audience. Give us a call at 202-588-0893.