



Ukraine and the Doomsday Machine - Larry Wilkerson and Paul Jay

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Paul Jay (PJ): Hi, I'm Paul Jay. Welcome to *theAnalysis.news*. Please don't forget there's a donate button, a subscribe button, and all the buttons. Most importantly, come on over to the website and get on our email list. From time to time, Youtube either doesn't let our subscribers know we have a new video, or they take us down. The most reliable way to watch *theAnalysis* is on the website, and from the email list, you will get alerted. Be back in just a few seconds with Larry Wilkerson to discuss the dangers of nuclear war and the crisis/conflict war against Ukraine.

PJ: There's a word that's missing in all this conversation about nuclear war. There's a lot of discussion about tactical nuclear weapons, low-yield nuclear weapons as if it's just another weapon. The word that's missing, and that's the word that comes from the *Doctor Strangelove* movie or the [Daniel] Ellsberg book; and that word is "doomsday machine". There actually are doomsday machines. The US and the Russians both have it. And the talk of tactical nuclear weapons as if it somehow doesn't lead to a greater nuclear war is kind of shocking and amazing. But here we are.

So now joining us to discuss this issue is Larry Wilkerson. Colonel Wilkerson was the Chief of Staff for Colin Powell at the State Department. He worked with Powell at the Joint Chiefs. He's a regular contributor here on *theAnalysis* and on many other media platforms. Thanks for joining us, Larry.

Lawrence Wilkerson (LW): Good to be with you, Paul.

PJ: So if I understand it correctly, in both the American and Russian nuclear war strategy, war plans, if you start to lose a conventional war— in the American case to the Russians or

the Russians to the Americans— it automatically triggers nuclear weapons, especially if a tactical nuclear weapon is used. So, where does that lead? What do you make of this conversation about nuclear war without the word doomsday machine?

LW: I don't know if it's true about the United States in terms of being very public and upfront about this. It certainly is about the Russians. They have published military doctrine that asserts what you just said. I suspect it's true about the United States, too, because of what I'm hearing and also what we're talking about with regard to a possible nuclear posture review. Revision, if you will, for the [Joe] Biden administration. The physical evidence of that is this submarine launch cruise missile nuclear. That is to say a submarine would launch a tactical nuclear missile. This is in response, I assume, to the Russians saying they would use it.

But more disconcerting than that, and to your point and to my grave concern, I'm hearing military officers again talking about the utility of nuclear weapons on the battlefield, and probably worse because we know how these ideas sort of gestate from think tanks. I'm seeing and hearing people writing and talking about it in think tanks. You even have people like Victoria Nuland's husband, who essentially tells the rest of us that we are just shrinking violence because we won't use the bold threat of using nuclear weapons.

For example, in the Ukraine situation, vis à vis [Vladimir] Putin, to make him understand that if he does, we will. This is the kind of collaboration that you know well having talked to Dan Ellsberg. We tried to tamp down and eventually thought we'd eradicated from our lexicon in the Cold War because we knew what would happen- from simulation after simulation, from war game after war game; we knew how those things turned out. We had a saying in the military, if you use one, you're going to use them all or enough to destroy the globe.

At that time- I was looking these figures over again today, I got my papers out from when we were talking with the Soviets- at the time, about helping them destroy their warheads, we had over 35,000 nuclear warheads. Now, according to the Arms Control Association, we're down to somewhere below 15,000, maybe around 13,000. I think that's a little off. At any rate, we've really come down majorly. Now we're talking about modernising and we're talking about doing things with the systems, making them better, making them more usable in some cases. There's only one thing that makes a nuclear weapon more usable, and that's a general officer on the battlefield who recommends to the President that the situation demands the use of a nuclear weapon. It isn't usable in any other sense because we know, I think, from 70 years of doctrinal look, if you will, we know that you probably are going to use them big time if you use them at all. And as you well know, that's the end. That's over. We don't even have to worry about waiting for the climate crisis to do us in. We will do ourselves in with these very deadly weapons.

PJ: Ellsberg says when he was there, meaning working for the RAND Corporation as an Advisor to the Pentagon –this is in the late 50s, early 60s on nuclear war strategy– it certainly was American nuclear war policy/planning, he says– I think if I get it right– if one American brigade was in direct military conflict with a Russian brigade in Eastern Europe and was

losing, that's enough to have triggered an all out nuclear attack on the Soviet Union. And not only on the Soviet Union and every major city in it, but every major city in China as well. Even if China wasn't involved.

And there's an interesting quote recently from a retired general. There's a nuclear posture review going on, and you talked about it. And the woman that was supposed to lead it apparently wanted to at least discuss taking first-strike off the table, at least discuss it. The Pentagon was so opposed to even discussing it, they lobbied to get rid of this woman and they lobbied successfully. And she's no longer leading this review.

LW: I think that's accurate.

PJ: At the time, there was a quote, I believe, from a retired Air Force General who used to be in charge or part of the nuclear weapons planning. His quote was, "the strategies have worked fine for the last 60 years. We don't need to change it now." Well, if he's referring to the doomsday machine, and hair-trigger alerts and all that goes with it, then maybe things really haven't changed at all. The doomsday machine is as much in place as it always was.

LW: No, I think we're back to a time where we've forgotten it. It is like it never happened. It's like the Cold War experience, the Cold War doctrine, the Cold War escalation theory, the Cold War experience with nuclear weapons, Berlin, for example, and that hot summer of 60/61, and then Cuba in 62, when we came within hairs breath of potentially using strategic nuclear weapons. They've forgotten.

My students look at me with some querulous look on their face. I handed out a pamphlet that LBJ [Lyndon B. Johnson] signed. It's a pamphlet that the President of United States signed, telling you how to build a bomb shelter in your backyard and what to stock in it. This is lost. It's gone. No one has any memory of this in Europe, in America, indeed, probably any place in the world. The leaders from that time are gone.

We now have a whole new experience with modern militaries and militaries that can get caught in situations where they are in severe duress, contemplated and war planning. Your idea that Ellsberg presented that our brigade might be in trouble, it was facilitated by the fact that we had things like Davy Crockett, ADMs and other nuclear weapons that were right there on the front lines, so to speak, with the units. Yes, the doctrine was probably, as we said at the time, chop them down to the military commander in peril and then use could be made of them.

Most people don't know, if you read *One Minute to Midnight*, you find out quickly a very well researched book. All the archives were opened up in Russia. Some were opened up in Cuba once the Cold War was over. We now know that there were free overground rockets right outside Guantanamo with nuclear warheads on them. The OPCOM [Operational Command] of those weapons was chopped down to the Russian regimental commander. Had we launched what Curtis LeMay, for example, wanted to launch an invasion of the island of Cuba— it wasn't just Curtis. It was quite a few military leaders. That was the target, the invasion fleet. They were going to put ten tactical nuclear weapons on top of the invasion

fleet. There were harrowing moments that weren't even known about until the archives were open and we saw these things.

This is where we are again. There is a reason some very qualified, competent people have been writing about how we may be closer to midnight, as it were— *Two Minutes to Midnight*, that was the name of the book. We may be closer than we were in either Berlin or Cuba today because of this facility with which people like [Robert] Kagan at Brookings are writing and talking about using nuclear weapons.

PJ: The world came very close to nuclear war because President [Yuri] Andropov thought in 1983 that [Ronald] Reagan was planning a first-strike. It just happened that there was a day, one day of the year where the radar would hit the moon, bounce back, and look to the Russian computers as if they were American missiles. If it wasn't for this one guy in the radar station who knew Andropov was on high alert and expecting an attack from the Americans. And he didn't tell Andropov, he just decided not to and waited to see how real it was. If he hadn't done that, we wouldn't be here talking about this.

LW: There are so many moments like that. You know the one about Will Perry. Will Perry writes about it in his book, *The Button*. It's 3:00 A.M. in the morning, and he gets a call from the watch officer in the National Military Command Center, and he tells him the launch has been made. Perry says, Can you confirm that? He says, Yes, I will do that. Perry says, I have three minutes to call the White House. Three minutes. He's getting ready to call the White House on a secure phone in his bedroom. The watch officer calls back and says, Sir, I'm so sorry. An exercise tape was left in the machine. And when I turned the machine on, it played, and I thought it was a legitimate strike.

PJ: So at a time of such tension over the invasion of Ukraine, and as far as I can make out, unless there's some back channel of some sort, the Russians and Americans are barely talking to each other. I saw one report that some of the senior American military leaders were trying to get their vis à vis in Moscow to talk to them just to make sure there wasn't a mistake made. And the Russian military leadership didn't want to talk to them. Now, I don't know the truth of that, but it wouldn't take much for Putin and it wouldn't take much for NATO, Biden and a NATO radar station to interpret something coming, in the worst way.

LW: It wouldn't. All these systems are fallible. When you think they're infallible or you think more and more that they're infallible, then that's when they're really fallible. More frightening to me right now, and I come back to this a lot because of what's happening in Ukraine. Because I think Putin has principally accomplished most of his objectives, however clumsily in some cases. But he's now consolidating gains, and he's focused on destroying the remaining hard elements of the Ukrainian military forces, which he has basically surrounded. But as I listened to a gentleman whom I was referring to earlier with you, this former Finnish Foreign Minister, former Finnish Prime Minister, now a professor at a European University, talks about how he thinks Putin has morphed. He's watched him. He helped his Foreign

Minister for Finland settle the Georgia conflict. He helped forge that peace agreement, which is still in place. And he thought that Putin was just doing another move like he had done in Georgia, Crimea. But now he's convinced that Putin has, I won't say, lost it but is more focused on –what you and I talked about earlier– his legacy as the Tsar, the leader of Russia. He's desperate now to make sure that everything he's planning to do and had planned to do is successful and, more importantly, is seen as successful. Of course, we are making every effort, propaganda wise, disinformation wise, and on the ground as much as we can with our money to make it look like he's unsuccessful. And that, the Finnish gentleman said, he said, Oh, I hope this isn't the case; that might lead to the ultimate act by Putin, and that act being using a nuclear weapon. Because he is not going to accept anything that even looks like defeat for him. That's a very worrisome situation, especially when you understand he has 5,000 nuclear weapons at his fingertips.

PJ: So I think when you're doing any kind of geopolitical analysis, of course, including the conflict in Ukraine, you have to start from how to prevent nuclear war. Then we have to talk about how we deal with the climate crisis. Starting from the point of view of how to prevent nuclear war, there's this balance between what I think is the right of the Ukrainian people not to be invaded and attacked but the necessity in terms of avoiding nuclear war to give Putin a way out. There doesn't seem to be a lot of interest on the American side to give Putin a way out. Weakening Russia seems more of an objective than ending the war and reducing the chances of nuclear war and a lot more civilian casualties.

LW: This visit by [Antony] Blinken and the Secretary of Defence to Ukraine, and I listened to their remarks, such as they were recorded on several different networks, just an hour ago. It didn't help any. It's almost like [imitating a gorilla]: We are going to take you. We're going to get you. We won't fight, but we're going to get you. More money. Seven hundred million is coming today. More will come.

PJ: Yes, of course, and who gets most of that 700 million? It mostly goes to American arms manufacturers who get paid to send stuff and to blow it up.

LW: Another question there.

PJ: Yeah, but it occurred to me that maybe Putin's not as megalomaniacal and out of touch with reality as some people think. Perhaps he's looking ahead. If you're going to do this and invade Ukraine, and get this land bridge to Crimea, and get control of the Donbas, and so on, maybe you do want to do this under the watch of the Democratic Party. Because if you think the Republicans are going to take Congress, and you think you've got a good chance of getting a Trump type, if not Trump himself, back in office in 2024. If you do this while the Democrats are in power and the Republicans don't get blamed for letting it happen, then when a Trump type, or Trump, gets elected, if so, in 2024, then they're likely to actually normalise relations with Russia in some way and probably reduce sanctions. When you look

at the strength of the Christian nationalists in the United States who really want war with China, not with Putin, who to some extent actually see Putin as a hero because he's seen as a defender of the Christian faith. He supports Marine Le Pen and other far-right political figures in Europe who are also Christian nationalists in their own way. Maybe this is more of a calculated move. Putin thinks I'll get away with this because by 2024, I'll have a President that will normalise things. We'll put up with the economic pain in the meantime. We'll have closer relations with China, and eventually, we'll have Christian nationalists in power in the United States as well.

LW: You may even be onto something with regard to the midterms. Because I heard yesterday, this is from someone in the Democratic Party, not my party, the Republican Party. They told me they're going to lose 50 seats in the House and four to six in the Senate. So it'll be prepped by that. We'll have a President who can't move hardly, with regard to the Congress and the legislature. So you've got a point.

All appearances right now, it looks like Putin is going to make a run on Moldova. They are getting very concerned in Moldova because his forces are moving along the rim of the sea there and moving towards Moldova. Apparently, there's some intelligence that indicates that they aren't going to stop until they get there. If you look at a map, we're talking about the whole Southern border of Ukraine, and then Moldova in the southwestern tip will belong to Putin for all practical purposes. So I'm not sure the megalomaniacal title should be taken away yet. Your point is well made.

PJ: You can be megalomaniacal and out of touch with reality or megalomaniacal and in touch with reality. It was starting to look like he really was losing connection with reality. But maybe this theory of projecting where the United States is going to be in a few years, not only does it look like it might create some normalisation with the United States after the war is over. But also, Europe might not be so keen to be cozying up to the United States with such crazy politics that a Trump or Trumpist could introduce. The most urgent thing right now, I think, is to stop the war. Stop the slaughter of Ukrainian civilians. Stop the killing of Ukrainian soldiers. I must add, stop the killing of Russian soldiers. The way this gets talked about, it's like it's okay to kill soldiers who are mostly ordinary working people. To a large extent, they didn't have any economic alternative but to join the army. The killing of the soldiers is a crime as well. Two, it has to stop in a way that it doesn't get us closer to nuclear war. Because there won't be any great victory for the Ukrainians either if there's no world anymore. No human world anyway.

LW: Yeah, I don't think there's an incentive on either side. The Finnish former Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, what's his name? Alexander Stubb, he has four presentations. The first one I watched today it's really good. It's, *Where did this Come From? The Origins of this Conflict*. If he's right, then neither side wants this war to stop. We don't want it to stop because we want to carry it to the ultimate destabilisation of Putin, his fall from power, and

even possibly the destabilisation of Russia. Now that gives all kinds of repercussions for fossil fuel companies, for example. And he doesn't want to stop because his legacy is not assured yet. He's not gained everything that he wants, and he's not going to be stopped short of that. He refuses this time to be stopped short of it. So if that's the case, we have two very intractable entities here. Both nuclear arms clashing over another country that doesn't matter a damn to either one of them. Nor do the deaths of their own soldiers or the country they're in soldiers. All they care about, us, is destabilising Putin and Russia, and all he cares about is accomplishing his legacy. So we're in real trouble here since both are nuclear-armed.

PJ: Let's go back to this discussion of tactical weapons. Can you imagine, either through treaty or just through understanding that a tactical nuclear exchange, tactical nuclear weapons don't lead to all-out nuclear war? Is there a world where that happens? I just don't see how any side could accept losing.

LW: I'm not sure that I would say absolutely without exception that a nuclear weapon couldn't be used and then there be no further. After all, we did use them in Japan. No one else had them at the time. It sort of sobered everyone, I think. If you go back and you look at the literature, it sort of sobered everyone. Certainly sobered the people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Not to put too fine a point on it. That you could use a tactical nuclear weapon and accomplish a specific objective, as the Soviets maintained underneath their doctrine, and as of now, Russia has put on top of their public doctrine, would depend entirely on the circumstances, I think. I hate to even say that because I don't think those circumstances could be made to exist, but maybe I could imagine them. I've war-gamed this too much and too often to think that the other side wouldn't react, and react in a way that you can predict. That way is to use them back on you. Would it be a tit for tat, or would it be a massive counter-strike? Or even a little bit more than you did in your initial strike? That's for humans to sit down and count the number of angels on the head of a pin, I think.

I don't think you can control it once the genie is out of the bag. Once you have that incredible number of casualties in that split second, and again, it would depend on what the target was. If you use one say on a strictly military formation, and the only thing that died underneath that cloud of, say, half a KT were armoured forces and artillery and soldiers, maybe you could get away with it. Maybe the other side would then make such a threat that it would retaliate with so much power that it would cow the side that initially used it. That's sort of what the Russians are talking about in their public doctrine. They call it escalate to de-escalate. They think that the explosion is going to be so traumatic that it automatically de-escalates the situation, and people start talking.

Now what they start talking about is the question. They're not going to start talking about you winning and them taking all their troops home and waiting for a better day. I just don't see that happening. That's not the way humans react to things like that. My daughter once put it this way. Second Lieutenant in the Army, Secret Service Agent, farm lady now. She said, Don't ever count America out, dad. Because if, in the end, we are losing, we will nuke the

other side. I think she's right. I think that's the psychology of this, and that's very dangerous psychology.

PJ: Ellsberg has a study that was done about this issue during the Taiwan crisis in 1958. [Dwight D.] Eisenhower actually authorised the use of nuclear weapons against China if it looked like Taiwan was going to fall to Mao Zedong's Army. In this document are the minutes of a Joint Chiefs meeting being discussed. They fully expected that if they used low yield— in those days, they talked about this too— nuclear weapons against the city that was closest to Taiwan in mainland China, Russia would likely respond with nuclear weapons in support of China. And this would probably lead to an all-out nuclear war. In the minutes of this meeting, they talked, and they were willing to risk it. And for what? They said if they don't do all this, if they don't use the nuclear weapon in this situation, America will lose prestige. Geopolitically, it will lose positioning. Now, in the end, in this crisis, it was Mao Zedong who decided not to push it over the edge. The American logic would have been to use nuclear weapons.

LW: There are Generals at that time, Paul, as you well know, who would make such wonderful comments such as, Well, there'll be a few people left, and we'll pick up the pieces and move on.

PJ: Yes. I think the quote was, "as long as there's more of us left standing than them, we win."

LW: Yeah, that kind of comment. Exactly. Mao is the one that made the really, I think, commonsensical comment. No matter how horrible it was, to say, I'll take out Los Angeles and New York. You'll take out a few Chinese. You tell me who wins.

PJ: Of course, these days, nobody wins. Not just because of radiation, but nuclear winter as well.

LW: That's one thing the Cold War taught us. There's no such thing as victory in a nuclear war. We all lose.

PJ: Yet the United States is spending a trillion dollars modernising its nuclear force, and apparently, Russia's going to as well. I'm not sure where they're going to find the money now, but I expect they will. They're doing the same thing. And a big piece of it for both countries are these developments of various kinds of tactical, what they call low-yield nuclear weapons. I mean, obviously, the arms companies are making a fortune building all this stuff.

LW: Well, here you got it. Here you got some of it. They were angry. The niche industry, the niche of the military-industrial complex, that is nuclear weapons, is a luxurious niche. You make tons of money in that niche. They were really irritating with the INF treaty. As Powell

and Reagan, as President at the time, said, for the first time, they had a treaty that eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons. It was the first. It was euphoria time. They were angry about that. They being the merchants of death who make these weapons. Now they've got them back. They've been working on it all along, trying to get them back. Now they've got the class back. Now they can make money in that class. That happens to be one of the most productive of profit classes.

PJ: So eventually, I guess, one assumes, this war in Ukraine ends. It doesn't look like it's going to end with the complete destruction of Ukraine. It doesn't look like it's going to end with some complete withdrawal of Russia. The US can keep arming Ukraine, but it doesn't look like they're going to, quote-unquote, "win." However, the American media is filled with that kind of language.

So what would a deal look like? It seems to me, number one, if they actually want to avoid nuclear war, then beginning with the US government and the Ukrainian government, for that matter, because they could actually do much of what I'm about to say, even without the US. If they dare do it in spite of the US— because I agree with you, the Americans want this war to go on for quite some time— but Number one, take NATO off the table. Make a declaration, no NATO for Ukraine in exchange for a ceasefire. The Americans could offer no more arms to Ukraine if Russia withdraws. Those two things could be linked. Three, an internationally supervised referendum of Donbas. Let the people decide where they want to be. I believe people in Donetsk and Luhansk have a right to decide whether they want to be a part of Ukraine or not.

I'm Canadian. I believe in Quebec's right to succession. It's a Democratic principle. If a community of people, ethnic or otherwise, don't want to be in a country, they should have a right to self-determination. If they want to leave the country, they should. In many cases, if that principle is really respected, more often than not, people may not want to leave.

LW: We would probably need some kind of UN [United Nations] peacekeeping force in there to make sure that referendum was at least partially adhered to.

PJ: One more thing about Putin, which is part of the story. When he was asked, I think, by NBC about if there was a limited first strike against Russia with a nuclear weapon and you knew that your retaliation second strike would cause the end of the world, would you do it? He says, Well, what's the point of a world without a Russia? Well, I think the American elites have the same feeling. What's the point of a world without an American-dominated world?

LW: You would have no trouble whatsoever in convincing me that there could be a confluence of leadership that would start a world Holocaust. No difficulty convincing me at all. I've been there. I've seen how these people make decisions. I've seen how irrational they can be in their decision-making. I've seen how self-interested they can be in their decision-making. Frankly, Paul, I've seen how stupid they are. I do mean that, how stupid

they are. We do not elect great leaders. Russia does not have the privilege of saying it elects great leaders either.

As a matter of fact, I firmly believe that the leadership in the West right now, with some exceptions, is one of the worst sets of leadership that we've ever had. That said, I think the situation is made doubly dangerous by the fact that we have so many interests playing around in Ukraine right now in things that have nothing to do with Ukraine. So many people— mainly because of the media in every major capital in the world, teaching the people this and know nothing of this— they think it's all about white Christians being abused by Slavic raiders, whatever their image is. They think that's what it's all about. That is not what it's about. It's not about NATO. It's not about NATO membership. It's not like Finland and Sweden, and Norway becoming members of NATO. It's about none of that. It's about interests that are profiting from what's going on, either politically, financially, economically, or geopolitically. That latter being the most dangerous one of them all. This all involves bringing Putin down, destabilising Russia, and clearing that flank for a war with China. That's the grand strategic thing that's driving this. They do not give a dang about a single baby, a single woman, or a single person in Ukraine. They will use every one of them if they can or have to get to Putin and to get to their ultimate objective. That's why this is so dangerous.

PJ: I'd only add to that a lot of the same motivations on the Russian side.

LW: Oh, yes, absolutely. Like I was telling you, the former Foreign Minister/Prime Minister has changed his whole analysis of Putin. Practical, strategic, brutal, but practical strategic thinking man. Now he's only interested in winning. That's dangerous. That's extremely dangerous.

PJ: Yes, it's a poisonous cocktail, but for us sitting in the US or any of the other NATO countries, I think it's up to us to be demanding this insanity ends. To risk nuclear war and have thousands of people slaughtered for a total bullshit principle about Ukraine's right to join NATO, which is not even what the fight is about.

LW: It's bullshit on both sides.

PJ: But if you gave up on it, it would begin to give Putin a way out of this.

LW: I hope you're right. That was my view until I listened to this Finn. I have a lot of respect for the Finns. Living with a 1,400-kilometre border with Russia, the Soviet Union before it, and surviving. Fighting that winter war and surviving. I mean, they're incredible. And to listen to him talk about this giant that he has living on his elbow, his shoulder, and talk about it in such dire terms was sobering for me. What he's telling me is, Putin is the equivalent of us. Neither will give up. Us for mostly insane reasons. And Putin for mostly legacy reasons. It doesn't matter what the reasons are, really. They're clashing, and they're clashing over something neither cares about at all. They just want to make their points.

PJ: And the money.

LW: And their money.

PJ: I think that's the operative word. Thanks very much for joining us, Larry.

LW: Thanks for having me.

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