John Mecklin Interview

After Hiroshima Project
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Speaker Key

IV Interviewer
JM John Mecklin

IV Okay, great. Um, I'll just put the volume up. Right, so, um, are your, are you happy if I just fire some questions at you?

JM Yes, fine. Just ask away.

IV Okay. We're doing this mapping thing as part of the show, where we're going to draw out a map of London on the floor and try and look at the effects of different bombs across time on the area of London that we're in and you'd said, [alert tone] you'd said in a previous, in your previous interview, you'd talked about the effect of, um, a, sort of, a Russian, ah, nuclear warhead on, um, New York and I wondered if you could just give me the same sort of idea, um, but talking about London, you know, the, ah, the, just to give an idea of the scale and the size of what might happen?

JM Yeah, I could, ah, do that. Well, let, let, let me see if I can find this story first because I don't want to say something, you know, where, maybe I'm misstating it even a little bit. Ah, gosh, it, it's not coming up quickly, ah…

IV Well, we could go onto something else.

JM The standard…

IV Go on.

JM The, I mean, the standard Soviet warhead on a lot of their missiles is something that's about 750 or 800 kt, meaning, you know, the equivalent of 800,000 tons of TNT. Ah, and if that happened over any city, you would have a, a fireball that, essentially, destroyed and killed everything. That's something like 15 miles in diameter—no, 15… yes, 15 miles in diameter; everything would be destroyed and then y-, then you just start to go out to, well, ah, [ping noise] you know, buildings partially destroyed. You go out farther and it's, you know, all the windows blown out and everything that's flammable burns and, you know, so you, you get out to, you know, areas of 30 and 40 miles away from ground zero, where there's still really, really, really significant damage.

But, basically, what you're talking about is, for, you know, many miles from ground zero, in all directions, nothing will be left alive. There is no such thing as a bomb

shelter from a 750 or 800 kt nuclear weapon. People could be in the third sub-basement of a concrete building and they would, likely, just be cooked. It wouldn't need to blow them up; it would be so hot that it would just cook them in their supposed shelter. [Ping noise] The surface temperature of the fireball, initially, would be something like 16,000 degrees Fahrenheit, which is about 5,000 degrees Fahrenheit higher than the surface of the sun.

IV [Laughs]

JM Ah, and similarly, a fireball would radiate three times more light and heat, relative to the same [ping noise] area of the sun's surface.

IV Wow.

JM You know, it's just, it's just in every way you can imagine, it would be a holocaust. There'd be, you know, draw, you know, say, a 10–15 mile circle and there won't be anything alive and nothing left worth even bothering to go in and try to save. And that's not even talking about radiation. That is just the blast and the fire effect.

IV Mm-hmm. And in terms of then, of, sort of, radiation and ongoing, you know, the, the land being contaminated, for how, how much…? I mean, I suppose, it depends where the wind's blowing and all sorts of things but, but what, what other effects would we expect?

JM Um, again, there's, you know, depending where it went off, I mean, ah, the biggest effect would, obviously, be, it would, essentially, burn down London, okay, which would inject vast amounts of smoke and ash upward with the mushroom cloud. This, in the long term, if enough bombs were exploded, some research says, as few as 20 or 25/50, certainly if 100 went off over cities around the world, it would cause, what's called nuclear winter that would result in famine and the likely deaths of hundreds of millions of people, possibly billions of people; that's the longer-term effect.

The shorter-term effect, closer in, of fallout, entirely depe-, is going to depend on at what height was the weapon detonated, over what part of the city? Ah, what kind of weapon it was. You know, some weapons can be constructed in a way that, you know… well, it's just that, I mean, there are different sizes and types of nuclear weapons so, so it's very hard to say, well, what, what is the radiation effect going to be? At what distance? And from where? But anywhere in the immediate vicinity where, in the direction the wind is blowing, people could not leave their homes for, you know, distances of ma-, at least, maybe tens of miles. And they might not be able to leave their homes, essentially, unless they were rescued.

I mean, it just, it depends. I mean, the spread of radioactivity depends on so many factors, yeah, and, I, I wanted to, sort of, emphasise this, is I'm repeating what experts have told me, what I've learned by being the editor. I am not, per se, an expert in nuclear physics, the physics of the bomb, any of that but, you know, I can give a pretty educated view on this and, you know, if that 800 kt bomb, you know, that's reasonably standard on Soviet missiles, if that went off over London, hundreds of

thousands of people would be instantly killed. The city would be, basically, uninhabitable for longer than it would matter.

IV Mm-hmm. And I was, um, talking to somebody who works at CND about the sort of accidents and things as well and she was tal-, saying that our, ah, nuclear missiles that are from submarines are then, ah, serviced, so they're brought on land through the UK, she reckoned, as often as every six weeks, to be serviced. Um, and, and I just wondered, you know, she was, sort of, saying, well, you know, what if there's a head-on collision, you know, and what if…? I just wondered, what, if, if we put to one side the idea of, you know, a bomb being deliberately, um, you know, dropped, what about those more accidental, um, things that could happen within a nation?

JM Yeah, obviously, the, the details of, in what condition, and how, you know, nuclear delivery devices and the warheads are moved is, is highly classified. You know, it's unlikely that anybody you've talked to knows, actually, in what configurations and how. It, it would be [ping noise] pretty standard that there would be significant measures taken to make sure that, simply, a collision could not cause the warhead to explode and there, there, there are such precautions; there are ways to do that. So, while I understand, I mean, nobody, few people, like the idea of nuclear weapons or nuclear waste being, you know, trucked or railroaded through their communities, I mean, there's a level, on which, I think, people have lost some basic kinds of trust that it's, it's really not legitimate to be that untrusting. I believe, although are accidents, there's a history of accidents, but the, the level of safeguards undertaken to try to prevent [ping noise] that kind of, you know, some truck, trucking a nuclear warhead through England runs head-on into another truck. I'm, I have to believe that's been thought out and that the safeguards to make sure it would not blow up if that happened, you know, are, are, are probably pretty extreme. But again, that's, that's going to be completely classified; there's no way of knowing that for sure.

IV Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, and a number of people that we've talked to have said that they feel that it's, sort of, accidents and, you know, ah, sort of, mistakes of one kind or another that are more likely to, um, bring one sort of nuclear disaster or another. Do you think that's the case, ah, now?

JM Well, that, as, as I said, there's a whole history of near misses, you know, near nuclear accidents, and, ah, misperceptions between the nuclear powers, you know, [ping noise] incidents where, but for somebody being reasonable and deciding not to fire a bunch of nuclear weapons, you know, there would have been a war. There was, you know, ah, people who… a submarine, well, commanders on Russian ships and submarines during the Cuban Missile Crisis, apparently, had delegated to them, the ability to fire nuclear weapons because [ping noise] communications at that time were slow and, you know, couldn't, Moscow couldn't just instantly communicate with these people. You know, but those people did not just start a nuclear war on their own, even though, there were some, some times when it, it could have been possible.

I mean, there have been a whole bunch of those kind of incidents. How, how, what's the probability of that? That is incalculable. You, you can't say the probability that one of these… [ping noise] so far such events haven't led to actual firings and detonations but, you know, there's, was an airplane flying over, I believe, somewhere

in Georgia in the United States that dropped an H-bomb in somebody's back yard, ah, and just a series of luck, kind of, situations meant that it didn't go off. You know, there's, there were many suggestions that, well, it actually could have; it just didn't. [Ping noise] So, I mean, and, and there's a whole long history, as outlined in a book by Eric Schlosser, called Command and Control, of just, you know, mistake after mistake, miscalculation, incident after incident. And so far, they haven't led to anything. I don't think there's anybody that can give you a good, solid number about either that it's zero [alert noise], it won't ever happen, or what the probability might be.

It, it, it does suggest, however, [ping noise] that there really isn't a way to prevent that. I mean, ah, there's a, a theory, it's called normal accident theory, ah, by an academic at Yale, who's named Perrow—P E R R O W—and that theory holds that when a technological system is tightly interconnected enough and complex enough you cannot engineer it so that there won't be an accident. An accident, the probability of an accident is 100%: it will happen. You just don't, won't know when. You won't know if it's in one year or 5,000 years but, you know, the certainty of that system creating an accident cannot be engineered out of it. It's just as a matter of fact. So that, I mean, if you want to consider nuclear weapons and the nuclear weapons systems as being of that tightly wound, tightly interconnected, extremely complex system that mistakes can't be engineered on, if you classify it as that, then if you believe in normal accident theory, you would have to say, the odds of an accidental [dog barks] nuclear detonation are 100%. We just don't know when.

IV Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And I saw, with the Doomsday Clock, this week, that you'd set it again at three minutes to midnight. Um, and one of the considerations was, ah, nuclear weapons. [Dog barks] And I wondered, particularly, what was in mind in the discussions you were having around—sorry, my dog's barking—around the nuclear issue. Sorry. Posie! [Dog barks]

JM [Laughs] Um, well, there, I mean, I'm sure you've seen it; there is a, a statement that they put out [alert noise] of several thousand words, that I was involved in writing, that, basically, their reasoning was that, ah, [ping noise] you know, the Iran nuclear agreement was a real diplomatic achievement and really a step in the right direction, in terms of nuclear prolife- proliferation and control of nuclear capabilities, but that it was relatively small, in comparison to the heightened tension between Russia and the United States, the, ah, continued war games, the training exercises that both sides are [ping noise] engaged in.

Ah, and not just Russia and the United States, but China and all the other nuclear powers are engaged in what they call nuclear modernisation programmes. The, the United States, that programme is expected to cost $350 billion over ten years, roughly £1 trillion over 30 years and it contemplates, essentially, new, an entirely new nuclear triad for the United States: new missiles, a new long-range bomber, ah, 12 new nuclear missile submarines. And the Russians and the Chinese are engaged in similar sorts of, what they are classified as, modernisation but are really, you know, technological upgrades to nuclear weapon systems and, really and truly, I mean, I think, that lies at the centre of a lot of concern. The, the non-proliferation system, [ping noise] ah, Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is based on the idea of constraining

the spread of nuclear weapons and that those who have them, over time, take steps to disarm.

And, you know, when government [?] [unclear] have 30-years plans to spend $1 trillion on nukes [?], to a lot of countries in the rest of the world, that doesn't look or sound very much like disarmament and so those countries say, well, the, [ping noise] the nuclear weapons countries, they aren't disarming and they aren't going to, so maybe we need to get them to. And, and so the, rather than going in the right direction, I think, it's seen as that we're not; we're going in the wrong direction, in terms of reducing arsenals, you know, getting a handle on modernisation, ah, even just plain talking. You know, there's tension with, between Russia and the United States [ping noise] over the Ukraine and now Syria but I know that my board, a lot of my board don't see the reason why we still can't talk about, with the Russians, about continuing progress with the control of nuclear weapons but… so the, those are the main reasons if, ah, I know, you're just taking my words for this but, ah, you know, if, if you need just plain old information, there is a, ah, [ping noise] the statement, the formal statement of what the board says, this is why we did it. I mean, you can go and pull it off our website and that'll tell you all the little reasons why they decided it's still three minutes to midnight.

IV Mm-hmm. Yeah, I, I had a bit of a look at that. It's just good to hear it in, in your words. Um, so what, if, if we imagine a, an audience watching this play and feeling, you know, perhaps, a bit overwhelmed, we're in the process, obviously, over the next few months in the UK, of making the decision about Trident, about, um, the renewal of, of the submarines and things. Um, what, what should people be doing, do you think? What, what action can, can, can and should people take?

JM Well, it would nice, first of all, if the British Navy stopped using Windows XP on their computers for their nuclear submarines. They're, they're running a, an operating system on their submarines' computers that is obsolete.

IV Really?

JM It's no, it's no longer even updated. So then, you know, security-wise, it's horrible. Microsoft has advised everybody to stop using Windows XP because security patches are no longer being created.

IV [Laughs]

JM Now, I trust that the British Navy is in, you know, communication with Microsoft on some level but it's still, I mean, it, there, this is not a simple thing. I mean, there are things that need to be upgraded. You cannot get things as dangerous [ping noise] as nuclear weapons, let the technology deteriorate, let the weapons deteriorate so as they become unsafe and could be accidentally used. So there's some level of spending that has to be done. What, what can people do? Well, this is one of those things where it's what democracy is made for. I mean, if, if citizens don't require that their politicians talk about this, [ping noise] they won't talk about it. If they don't, in the town halls and the meetings, if your media doesn't bring up, in a sophisticated way, things about nuclear deterrents and the nuclear deterrent and is there really a reasonable role for nuclear weapons in the UK military, you know, if

it's not brought up and discussed, you know, by the media, by the citizenry at large, politicians are going to do… I mean, I, I know in America—I'm not as familiar with Britain—in America, it's, sort of, a, a competition to make sure that you can't be called weak. And the proper control of nuclear weapons is not weakness; it's just good stewardship and not being suicidal. But in America these issues are never realistically discussed, that it's barely even been mentioned in most mainstream major outlets, that we're going, it's planned to spend $350 billion over ten years. Now, [inaudible] that's real money and it [inaudible] I'm not making an argument that it should be 10% lower than that, half of that, a third of that [ping noise]. It should just be discussed and that's what people can do: they can force the discussion.

IV Yeah. And thinking about, you were, you were, sort of, talking about the role of nuclear weapons and mentioned the idea of, of deterrents; um, can you, can you imagine, is, do you think…?

JM I, I'm sorry, you, you c-…

IV Sorry.

JM You, you cut out for a minute there and I missed what you said, so re-ask what you're asking.

IV Um, you, you mentioned deterrents and you, ah, talked about, sort of, a, a role for nuclear weapons. We, obviously, you know, people think there is a role. Um, why do, why would you say, briefly, that there isn't a role? And thinking of things like deterrents and other issues, why is there not a role for them to play?

JM Well, I think, there's, you have assumed something without facts and evidence. I, I don't… I am not Mr Zero Nuclear Weapons, you know, and, and neither is the Bulletin. There's a whole range of our supporters and board members and whatever, as to, [ping noise] you know, military policy and whatever, you know, and there, there's a significant philosophical discussion about, given how human beings are, could you go to zero? Would that be more dangerous than having a level of deterrents? What's the proper level of deterrents? How many or how few of these can serve deterrents, so that we can get rid of the rest?

These are really complex questions and I'm not here to tell anybody that I am certain that in the near term, going to zero nuclear weapons is a workable solution, because if the United States went to zero and the UK went to zero and Russia went to zero [ringtone], China would still have hundreds of nuclear weapons. India and Pakistan would each have more than 100, if I remember right, on numbers. All of a sudden, they would be the most powerful countries in the world. Ah, is the United States or Russia, or China, are they actually going to allow that? No, so the idea of, well, getting to zero is like getting everybody to agree to zero, including what have been called, you know… okay, so if everybody else got rid of it, of course, North Korea would get rid of their weapons, correct?

IV [Laughs] Well, yeah, I see what you mean.

JM You know, it's just not… I mean, there are some things to do with human nature here that are very real. You know, given that, with thousands of nuclear weapons, there's [ping noise] the capability of literally destroying civilisation and, possibly, all human life [alert noise] many times over, given that, it's really not appropriate to engage in, you know, what I like to call, from the American point of view, hippy-dippy, dreamy-weavey, you know, wouldn't it be wonderful? We could all sing Kum Ba Yah and all give up our nuclear weapons. Well, it's a little harder problem than that. If it were that easy, it would be done. This is a really sticky, difficult situation and the people making the decisions on this are not nec-, they're not evil. Y- you know, they're just [unclear] and it's just a tough thing [unclear] like Gorbachev and Reagan, essentially, trying to agree to do this and getting stuck and not being able to do it. But, you know, all that said, there is certainly a path forward: having fewer of them, having them on lower alerts, reducing the danger. That can be done, and it's not being done, and it should be.

IV And it's not being done, principally, why, do you think?

JM Oh, well, right now, it is a, ah… [ping noise] it's just a situation of Russia has annexed part of another country and fomented some kind of revolution/disturbance/whatever in the eastern part of the Ukraine. As long as that situation is not resolved [ping noise], I mean, people can talk about there could still be talks, but there really aren't going to be any, and from the people I've talked to recently, the other real reason, okay, and that is from the west side: how can we engage in Syria's, you know, disarmament negotiations with somebody who's engaged in, you know, just outright invasion of another country?

You know, from the Russian point of view, it's pretty clear that Russia is not particularly interested in further [ping noise] nuclear reductions un- until, until and unless, essentially, the United States and Europe foregoes all missile defence, which, you know, that, that has a starting point; it's like, to start the negotiations, you have to agree to give up all missile defence, then we'll talk to you. Well, that's a confirm-, United States' point of view, that's a complete non-start [?]. So, they're locked in these positions [ping noise] where unless something changes without these, there will be no progress and what's going to change those situations? It's hard to say. Could it, different leaders, perhaps? You know, just passage of time? Economics? Russia is hurting pretty badly, economically. So, I mean, things could change but right now, that is why nothing's happening. [Ping noise]

IV Yeah. Thank you. That, that's all my questions really. That's all that I need. Um, I will look, I'll look further on, on the website and I'll look at the, ah, the Perrow stuff that you mentioned. Um, is there anything else that, that is in your head, that you think should be, that it's important to communicate at the moment, that you think is really key?

JM Ah, not really because I, obviously, I haven't even seen your script so it would be hard for me to know what you need to know but, ah, if, if, when you get this transcribed and you look at it, there's still some piece you need somebody to say X, Y, or Z, just give me a call back; I'm glad to.

IV Okay, brilliant. Thank you very, very much for your time. I appreciate it.

JM No problem.

IV Take care.

JM Now, good night to you over there.

IV Thanks [laughs]. Have a good day.

JM You too. Bye, bye.

IV See you. Bye.