**Transcript:**

**House Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Adam Smith**

**Remarks on U.S. Nuclear Posture**

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Thank you, it’s great to be here and I really appreciate the work that CAP has done on this and many, many other issues. I think it’s an incredibly important think-tank. I have enjoyed working with Vikram, and obviously his knowledge base is broad on a wide variety of subjects. A real asset to have him here.

I think one of the most important things he said, which I’ll mention just quickly and get in to the nuclear modernization debate, is the new nuclear arms race. And, in fact, I introduced legislation trying to come up with a strategy to deal with Russia. And part of it, we know, is countering their cyber, their disinformation campaigns, messing with elections and all of that. But one little piece of it was the importance of opening up dialogue like we had certainly near the end of the Cold War, so that you lowered the risk of accidentally stumbling into a nuclear war.

And I actually met with former Secretary Perry yesterday, who talked a lot about this issue and has written a book about it. So it’s strange, we’re all concerned about the way President Trump is talking with Vladimir Putin, and we—well—should be because we’re not sure exactly what’s going on there. But ironically, we do need some channel of communication between us and the Russians to try to make sure there are no miscalculations that stumble us into a nuclear war. And that, also, we can begin to understand the importance of containing the amount of nuclear weapons that we build. These are all things that sort of came about slowly during the Cold War, but then were a critical element of making we sure we didn’t go over the brink and actually live ‘*The Day After*.’ I remember that movie as well. It gave me nightmares for weeks, actually.

So that’s one piece. But when it comes to nuclear modernization, I’m going to start off in kind of an unexpected place. Just to let you know a bit of what goes on on the Armed Services Committee, particularly in the last six months, basically generals and think-tank people come over and talk to us and scare the hell out of us, and tell us how far behind we are on absolutely everything; how much more money we need for deterring North Korea, for dealing with Russia, for dealing with China, for dealing with Iran, for dealing with terrorism. We’re behind on absolutely everything.

Now, how it is that we can outspend these people so dramatically over the course of 20 years and end up behind in absolutely every conceivable area, I don’t know. But the point is, the message that has been driven home is: “Panic! And you have to give us more money.” Now I understand that’s part of what everybody does in Washington, DC, depending on what your interest is. What is really troubling about this is the absence of a strategy that says, OK, here are all of our needs, here’s the resources we think we’re going to have, here are our priorities. That’s what has not been done.

This is troubling on two levels. Number one, it means that the money we’re spending: Is it even really making us more safe? Is it the best use of that money? But, two, and this is most troubling to me, is that it does not put us in the position to live comfortably in the world of finite resources that we have. There seems to be this opinion within the Armed Services Committee that somehow all of this money is going to magically appear. And both of things are problematic, because if you look at what they’re talking about that we quote, “need,” unquote, for national security, forget $700 billion. My goodness, you could probably go up to a trillion dollars without covering all the needs that they tell us about. And they don’t know how to prioritize them. And of course the tiny little fact that we don’t actually have even $700 billion, much less a trillion.

All of this is important when we talk about nuclear modernization, because the question that is so rarely asked and basically never answered is, “What can we do without?” What are we spending money on at the Pentagon that we shouldn’t be spending money on? Because if we can’t answer those questions … we’re basically screwed if you believe what they’re telling us, because we don’t have enough money to protect ourselves. So let’s just cross our fingers and hope for the best.

I don’t happen to believe that. I happen to think that in a defense budget of even $600 billion, our nation ought to be able to meet our national security needs if we are intelligent about how we do it; if we use partners throughout the world to meet our national security needs; and if we get to a better place. But one thing that I do firmly believe is when you’re looking at all of the different areas that we’re told we need to spend money, the one place where we can save money the most clearly is on nuclear modernization, by having a better deterrent strategy.

Now China has a very good example. You’ll have to forgive me, I know there’s a more sophisticated way to put this and there are detailed reports about it. But the way I always put it is that China has enough nuclear weapons to basically say, “Don’t screw with us. Because if you do we can obliterate you.” They don’t get into all these scenarios of, “Oh gosh, what if they took out all of our weapons in a first strike that somehow we didn’t see coming? Then we’d need a whole lot more weapons. But then what if we fired those and they fired these?” So at the end of the day we need like, oh, what, 50,000 nuclear weapons. We really don’t. What we need is a strong, credible deterrent.

That’s basically what nuclear weapons are for, is to ensure your security by saying, if you attack us, we have enough that you’ll wish you hadn’t. And do we need full nuclear modernization to do that? Now they will tell you how far we’ve come down in terms of the number of nuclear weapons that we have, and that’s true. But we had way crazy too many in the first place. So I think a more focused strategy on having a credible deterrent for our adversaries, and then using diplomacy and the other tools of foreign policy to avoid the conflicts in the first place, is a much better way to go regardless, almost, of how much money we have.

But then when you take a step back and see the concerns about: How are we going to deter North Korea? Do we have enough ships to have a credible deterrent in that part of the world? Are we going to have a big enough Army and a big enough Marine Corps? Are we going to be able to develop our cyber capabilities and do we need special operations efforts to deter terrorism? If you look at it in that context, it’s downright stupid to waste all this money on nuclear modernization. There’s much better ways to do it.

Unfortunately, everyone’s protecting every little piece of it. Personally, I think we need to look at whether or not the triad still makes sense. Do you need the ICBMs, for instance? Submarines and nuclear capable bombers are very strong deterrents. You can save an enormous amount of money in this area. What I’m concerned about is that the nuclear modernization plan right now is saying, you’ve gotta rebuild everything, ramp up, and get back into an arms race with Russia.

So I think we need a better approach. Now one of the things we’ve tried to do as Democrats on the Committee is point out how much this is going to cost. That’s an OK strategy. The problem is, it is true that we’re projecting costs over 20 or 30 years and it’s very difficult to calculate. Though based on my experience in 20 years on the Armed Services Committee and things like the F-35 and the Ford carrier, which was finally launched, it’s going to be higher. Always take the over, basically, if you have the opportunity to bet on it.

So, whatever your number is, it’s probably going to be more than that. So we need to focus on having a limited nuclear deterrent that meets our national security objectives and fits our budget. It’s important for two reasons: Number one, I think it will produce a more stable world and a better national security posture. And two, because it will help deal with the rather enormous problem that we have in this country that we are massively in debt and it’s only getting worse.

I reserve the rest of my time to answer your questions, and then I have to rush off to vote.

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