

“Crazies” in Charge of America’s “Nuclear Button”: Trump’s New (Acting) National Security Adviser Said Nuclear War with USSR Was Winnable

Questioning “mutual assured destruction,” Charles Kupperman called nuclear conflict “in large part a physics problem.”

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“Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”,

“The more things change, the more they stay the same”, **Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr**,
(*Les Guêpes*, July 1848)

President [Donald Trump](#)’s acting national security adviser, former Reagan administration official **Charles Kupperman**, made an extraordinary and controversial claim in the early 1980s: nuclear conflict with the USSR was winnable and that “nuclear war is a destructive thing but still in large part a physics problem.”

Kupperman’s suggestion that the U.S. could triumph in a nuclear war went against dominant theories of mutually assured destruction and ignored the long-term destabilizing effects that such hostilities would have on the planet’s health and global politics.

Kupperman, [appointed to his new post on Tuesday](#) after Trump fired his **John Bolton** from the job, argued it was possible to win a nuclear war “in the classical sense,” and that the notion of total destruction stemming from such a superpower conflict was inaccurate. He said that in a scenario in which 20 million people died in the U.S. as opposed to 150 million, the nation could then emerge as the stronger side and prevail in its objectives.

His argument was that with enough planning and civil defense measures, such as “a certain layer of dirt and some reinforced construction materials,” the effects of a nuclear war could be limited and that U.S. would be able to fairly quickly rebuild itself after an all-out conflict with the then-Soviet Union.

“It may take 15 years, but geez, look how long it took Europe to recover after the Second World War,” Kupperman said.

Referring to the Japanese city on which the U.S. dropped the first atomic bomb in 1945, he also claimed that

“Hiroshima, after it was bombed, was back and operating three days later.”

At the time, Kupperman was executive director of President Ronald Reagan’s General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament. He made the comments during an interview with Robert Scheer for the journalist’s 1982 book, “With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War.”

The National Security Council did not immediately respond to questions on whether Kupperman, 68, still holds the same views of nuclear conflict as he did in the early 1980s. Kupperman’s seemingly cavalier attitude toward the potential death of millions of people was criticized at the time both by Democratic politicians and arms control experts.

“It seems reasonable to suggest the crazies are in charge of the nukes,” **Jeremy Stone**, president of the Federation of American Scientists, [wrote](#) about Kupperman and his colleagues in 1984.

Contemporary nuclear experts similarly criticize Kupperman’s beliefs as wrongheaded and dangerous.

“Kupperman’s comments might as well have come straight from the script of (the film) ‘Dr. Strangelove.’ He was part of a group of defense analysts at the time who weren’t shy about sharing such views,” said Kingston Reif, director for disarmament and threat reduction policy at the Washington-based Arms Control Association, who first noted Kupperman’s views in a Twitter post in January when Kupperman was hired as the deputy national security adviser.

“The simple fact is that a nuclear war can’t be won and must never be fought,” Reif said.

“Kupperman’s comments might as well have come straight from the script of ‘Dr. Strangelove.’”

But rather than being sidelined as a relic of Cold War hubris, Kupperman now holds one of the most powerful positions in the White House. Although his role is temporary, civil rights groups have also already called on him to resign over [his extensive ties](#) to the Center for Security Policy, an anti-Muslim think tank founded by conspiracy theorist Frank Gaffney.

Gaffney is a prominent anti-Muslim activist who repeatedly promoted the conspiracy theories that members of President [Barack Obama](#)’s administration were working to enforce Islamic law in the U.S., that the Muslim Brotherhood had infiltrated top levels of government and that Obama was secretly Muslim himself. Kupperman served on the board of directors for Gaffney’s Center for Security Policy between 2001-2010.

“CSP has continuously promoted Islamophobic conspiracy theories, and anyone, like Mr. Kupperman, who has so closely associated with them for so long is — at the very least — complicit in their brand of anti-Muslim bigotry and should not be entrusted with one of the highest-ranking security roles in the United States,” Council on American-Islamic Relations Executive Director **Nihad Awad** said Tuesday.

Before joining the NSA, Kupperman served as an informal adviser to Bolton and worked as a

defense industry executive at Boeing and Lockheed Martin. He was a critic of the Iranian nuclear deal and in 2017 co-signed a letter to Trump backing Bolton's plan to withdraw from the agreement.

Here are excerpts of Kupperman's comments from his interview with Scheer:

On what kind of life we could visualize after a nuclear attack:

It means that, you know, it would be tough. It would be a struggle to reconstitute the society that we have. It certainly wouldn't be the same society [as] prior to an exchange, there is no question about that. But in terms of having an organized nation, and having enough means left after the war to reconstitute itself, I think that is entirely possible. It may take 15 years, but geez, look how long it took Europe to recover after the Second World War.

On disagreeing with the Physicians for Social Responsibility organization's view of nuclear war:

Scheer: But in terms of nuclear war, do you factor in what those doctors were saying?

Kupperman: Yes, that is why I want to have a civil defense system, because it can be very effective in reducing casualties. That is my point. If doctors are so concerned about it, the answer isn't necessarily disarming the United States or cutting our weapons programs. ... it might be having a civil defense program. You can make a very good case that is exactly what those doctors ought to be shouting for.

Scheer: But they say that it is impossible to protect the population from nuclear attack.

Kupperman: Yes, but the thing is, nuclear weapons have certain effects and if you take steps to deny those effects, you save a lot of people. And unless you are right in the middle of ground zero, you are not going to have a lot of burn victims if you take those steps. And if you evacuate these people out of the targeted areas, or what you think are targeted areas, they are not going to get burned or destroyed.

On society surviving nuclear war:

Scheer: Is it possible to survive it with your civilization intact?

Kupperman: Well, it is possible to survive it with a certain amount of society intact, it depends on what steps we take to ensure that survivability. It certainly won't be the same as before the war. But generally societies have been intact — like Germany and Japan and Western Europe in the Second World War weren't the same after the war as they were before. But generally societies have been intact. The question really gets down to political credibility in the conduct of your foreign policy. If you look like you are serious about defending yourself and your allies with real civil defense programs and other measures, I think that has political credibility with the adversary. An adversary isn't going to take

somebody seriously if they don't take steps to protect themselves. Nuclear war is a destructive thing, but it is still in large part a physics problem.

Scheer: What do you mean?

Kupperman: Well, sheltering yourself against nuclear effects can be done, it just depends on how much effort and money one wants to spend on it, but a certain layer of dirt and some reinforced construction materials can assure the survivability of somebody, assuming they aren't at ground zero of a detonation. Hiroshima, after it was bombed, was back and operating three days later. So it is certainly a destructive weapon, and nobody wants a nuclear war, but I don't think the United States in the past has been serious enough about planning for its survival in the event of a nuclear war...

On winning nuclear war "in a classical sense":

Kupperman: It depends on what one considers all-out. If the objective in a war is to try to destroy as many Soviet civilians and as many American civilians as is feasible, and the casualty levels approached 150 million on each side, then it's going to be tough to say you have a surviving nation after that. But depending on how the nuclear war is fought, it could mean the difference between 150 casualties and 20 million casualties. I think that is a significant difference, and if the country loses 20 million people, you may have a chance of surviving after that.

Scheer: Would that mean the other nation would survive as well? You're not talking about winning a nuclear war, you're talking about a stalemate of some kind.

Kupperman: It may or may not be a stalemate, depending on who had more surviving national power and military power.

Scheer: So you think it is possible to win?

Kupperman: I think it is possible to win, in the classical sense.

Scheer: What does that mean, "in the classical sense"?

Kupperman: It means that it is clear after the war that one side is stronger than the other side, the weaker side is going to accede to the demands of the stronger side.

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