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**Civics 101**

**Episode X:**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:00] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101, the podcast refresher course on the basics of how our democracy works.

[00:00:29] Today we're talking about nuclear weapons. Tensions are high right now between the U.S. and North Korea which has been assembling a nuclear arsenal despite warnings from Washington. It is not the first time the U.S. has found itself in a nuclear standoff. After we dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II we never really took our finger off the button. We did however experiment with many different strategies and postures when it comes to nuclear strategy and exploring that history with us today is Joe Cirincione author of Bomb Scare The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons. Joe welcome.

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:01:08] Thank you Virginia. Pleasure to be with you.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:09] So what makes nuclear weapons different from other kinds of weapons?

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:01:14] They are unique in their destructive power and their indiscriminate force. So these are the most powerful weapons humanity has ever invented. For example the bomb that destroyed Nagasaki was about 20000 tons of destructive force so that's about 40000 regular bombs. So you can see what the difference is instead of having hundreds of bombers going over a city and destroying it which we did in World War II. One bomber, one bomb, one city destroyed.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:48] Does nuclear weapon include atomic bombs hydrogen bombs chemical weapons?

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:01:53] Yeah the nuclear bomb is not just a powerful explosion. It's a nuclear explosion. We're splitting the atom the basic unit of matter. And when you do that you don't just have a destructive force that can blow things up you also create enormous mega fires in a city for example and then there's the radiation effects that can cause genetic mutations that can last for generations, a completely distinct indiscriminate weapon which is why so many religious leaders talk about these as being immoral that the use of this then the possession of this Pope Francis says for example is immoral. Nobody should have these.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:30] Well we definitely want to talk about today's nuclear strategy but I'd love to put it in context. Could you walk us through some of the main benchmarks or areas of U.S. nuclear policy. The U.S. did drop these two atomic bombs. Japan surrendered. Walk us through what followed up until, let's say the end of the Cold War.

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:02:50] When we use the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been such a massive level of destruction the firebombings of Tokyo and Dresden and Hamburg that the atomic bombs were seen as basically just another weapon just a very large weapon. But after that as we became to understand what we had done as the radiation effects became more apparent. They were clearly put in a different category.

[00:03:11] And the first US impulse was to was to try to ban these weapons so we could stop right there. But when the Soviets got the bomb in 1949 efforts to restrict their spread basically stopped and we entered into an arms race in 1949 when the Soviets blew their first atomic bomb we had about 200 in the decade that followed. We built 20000 nuclear weapons and we used them for everything. Every military service felt they had to have their own atomic arsenal so we had the Air Force with missiles. We had the Navy with nuclear torpedoes in depth charges and rockets and we had the army with nuclear artillery pieces short range rockets landmines. We really did have even a nuclear bazooka called the Davy Crockett they could fire small atomic bomb about half a mile. Why anyone want to do that is beyond me and even the army figure that out we stopped making that in the 1960s.

[00:04:05] But by the 1960s not only did you have an arms race and other countries joined in. Britain had a bomb France had a bomb. China exploded a bomb in 64. But you had the prospect of 20 30 more countries all getting these weapons.

[00:04:19] This led Liberals and conservatives Democrats and Republicans to join together to try to stop the spread of these nuclear weapons. Kennedy started it. He couldn't finish. Johnson negotiated the Non-Proliferation Treaty and Richard Nixon signed it into into law hoping that this would mark a true end to the arms race which in some ways it did. Many of the countries who had these weapons stopped the programs and the two superpowers the United States and Soviet Union pledged to enter into arms control agreements that gradually started to put caps on the number of weapons in the world. And then what Ronald Reagan in the 1980s to actually start reducing it.

[00:04:58] And since then since that peak of the Cold War in the mid 80s where we had about 70000 nuclear weapons in the world most held by the United States and Russia we've come down to the present day where there are about 15000 in the world again. Ninety five percent of them held by the U.S. and Russia and nine nuclear states. That's still a lot of nuclear weapons and a lot of nuclear states but it's not the 20 or 30 that people feared during the beginning of the Cold War.

[00:05:29] We're at a tipping point now. The nuclear reductions have basically stopped the negotiations. The U.S. and Russia are not happening. Every single nuclear armed nation is now building new nuclear weapons. Some of them expanding their arsenals slightly like India and Pakistan and China with about 100 or 200 nuclear weapons and others like Russia the United States for placing the weapons that are wearing out.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:57] Well let's talk about that a little bit. Recently a draft version of the Trump administration's position on nuclear weapons was leaked. It is due out sometime this month. So you mentioned that it proposes some new weapons. What else do you make of it? What do you see here that is different than it's been in the past?

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:06:15] Yeah this is called the Nuclear Posture Review it's sort of the outline of what the administration intends and what we know is that the strategy is to keep all the weapons we have so far to replace all of them with this one point seven trillion dollar spending spree on nuclear weapons but also to add some new nuclear weapons to add a new cruise missile a new submarine launched missile for example and that in some ways this posture review is a great leap backwards. It goes back to the ideas of the 1950s where these nuclear weapons should be more usable. They shouldn't be seen as distinct and unique and separated. The Nuclear Posture Review goes to great lengths to talk about the integration of conventional forces and nuclear forces to exercise these these forces together to start integrating nuclear weapons into the rest of the U.S. military strategy.

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:07:11] So for example it no longer says as we have previously that the fundamental purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter other countries from attacking us with nuclear weapons. Now it says that there are other purposes to nuclear weapons including responding to conventional attacks in the United States. Cyber attacks on the United States and other extreme circumstances. So it opens the door to making these weapons another tool in a combat commander's arsenal. Finally it does one other thing. It proposes shrinking the power of the weapons a small weapon that could still be the equivalent of for example 2000 regular bombs but it's small enough that you could start talking about taking out a section of a city rather than the whole city or aiming it at a discrete target.

[00:08:00] And in this way the authors of the posture review hope that nuclear weapons will be more usable. One way to think about this is that it's operationalizing President Trump's impulses.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:11] Would it be more likely that those weapons because they're small are not as threatening might be more likely to be used?

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:08:21] That is exactly the fear many of us have and that is exactly the intent of the authors of this posture review. This is an ongoing debate among nuclear strategies that goes back generations. Now these are weapon of last resort only to be used to defend the country to prevent somebody else from attacking us. This mutual suicide pact. Or are they usable weapons and there are some. And these appear to have gotten the upper hand in this administration's strategy. They say look this is the most powerful weapon we have. Why should we leave it on the shelf as Donald Trump said during the campaign. Why do we have nuclear weapons if we can't use them with this posture review says is. Here you go Mr. President. Here are some usable nuclear weapons that we could use to go after for example a mobile target that we know kind of where it is but we don't know where exactly it is. We can go take out the whole area or deep underground bunker we can use the nuclear weapon to take it out of.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:27] The nuclear arsenal of the United States has always been measured in comparison to others. You know Russia China North Korea. Where are we now and where are those respective countries in this idea of creating new or changing the technology of nuclear weapons?

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:09:44] The U.S. and Russia are not comparable except in their nuclear arsenals. These are still the two nuclear superpowers. Each has about 7000 nuclear weapons and their total arsenal. No other country has that amount nuclear weaponry. So if you can get the United States and Russia to negotiate again to start this process of reduction to reduce down to say a thousand weapons each then you open up the prospect of getting the other nuclear armed states into those discussions to at least kept their arsenals to stop modernizing to just hold for a bit. And if we can get people to stop the arms race right now before it gets out of control then you can look at the process of getting further reductions and then and move back to Ronald Reagan and John F. Kennedy's vision of abolishing the weapons of war before they abolish us.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:37] It's interesting that we're coming into this sort of Cold War era pattern to North Korea currently backed by China at least economically and in some of their political ways Syria is being propped up by Russia. So again we have this idea of a sort of proxy locations for a much larger kind of conflict. Where does that leave us? Are we back in the cold war?

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:11:01] We are certainly back in the nuclear arms race. There is an arms race underway right now and it's a question of whether this continues and accelerates or whether we can stop it before it gets out of control. One of the other documents that the administration has released is called the National Security Strategy. And there they talk about how the terrorist threat that thing that has preoccupied us for the last 17 years is now a secondary consideration especially with the defeat of ISIS and the expulsion of ISIS from the areas they once occupied.

[00:11:32] Now they talk about great power competition. This phrase it sounds very world war one, great power competition. But this is what they talk about and they see us as having two adversarial nations Russia and China and it gets to your point about proxy wars then you start looking at things like Syria. And this is a proxy conflict you're contending with Russia for control or you see things in career. And this is really a proxy conflict because what it's really all about is China trying to enlarge and we and our efforts are try to contain it. And this brings us right back to Cold War concepts in both strategic vision and in nuclear policy.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:12] So looking at that what kind of options does the U.S. have to deal with North Korea?

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:12:18] Realistically most of us think they're not going to do a bolt out of the blue. They're not going to strike first. This is a homicidal regime but it's not suicidal. They know what would happen next. Deterrence still works. So what you what you want to do is first deescalate the conflict reduce the risk that we might stumble into war by miscalculation or misunderstanding. We are kind of in that period now with the start of the Olympics in Korea. We're in something that people are calling an Olympic truce where things are calm down. North Korea is not testing we're not issuing provocative tweets or statements at the moment. There's exchanges going on between North and South Korea.

[00:12:58] OK. Can you turn that into step two. Can you take that truce and turn it into say a freeze where North Korea agrees to stop testing its weapons. Pauses right here stops producing new weapons in exchange for the U.S. and South Korea reducing the scale and size of the military exercises. That's a deal that's on the table. There's many several countries are urging us to try to explore if you can do that then you open up the prospect of a third step. Detailed negotiations with North Korea and the United States to try to roll back the North Korean program the way we rolled back Iran's program in exchange for economic and security incentives.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:13:39] Even President Reagan great political will great popular leader at the top wanting to get rid of nuclear weapons. The world could not do it. I mean what can we realistically think, will we ever get to a world without nuclear weapons?

**Joe Cirincione:** [00:13:56] Yes I think we can because we've done this with other weapons of mass destruction less destructive but nonetheless terrible weapons. Biological weapons. Richard Nixon negotiated treaty to ban biological weapons chemical weapons. George H.W. Bush negotiated a treaty to ban chemical weapons. They got every place everywhere. Not quite. But none of the major powers have these weapons anymore. Can you do that with nuclear. Well guess what 122 countries just last year at the United Nations signed a treaty banning nuclear weapons. None of the nuclear armed states have joined that treaty at least not yet but that's how you start this process. Can you do this. I think you can. But even from wrong every step we take to reduce the numbers of weapons reduce the number of countries who have these weapons restrict their use makes us more safe.