

By Elayne Jude, Great North News Services

Turning up to hear former US Secretary of State for Defense William Perry address a meeting of the Henry Jackson Society at the House of Commons the other day, I had it in mind to investigate the following:

Sir: when you took office in 1994 as Clinton's first Defense Secretary, you stated these three reasons for so doing: To work to end the nuclear threat to the United States, while avoiding a return to the Cold War; to advise the President how and when to use military force, or to reject its use; and to manage the reduction of forces in the post-Cold War era.

Should I ask Professor Perry (now back at Stanford, his alma mater) how he thinks he did in achieving those ends? Tempting; but time was short and history, like educational, is endless. So:

Sir: If you were to be asked to serve today, as Obama's Defense Secretary, what would you give as your three reasons (one can almost say three wishes)?

A few minutes into Perry's talk on global security and I was fairly sure that he would reiterate at least two of those objectives pretty much unchanged.

Perry stopped over in London very briefly, en route to Moscow for meetings with senior Russian politicians. Still committed to avoidance of Cold War.

He outlined the four major security threats facing the new President. There were four security catastrophes to be averted, rather like the four horsemen of the apocalypse: Financial; ecological; geopolitical; and nuclear.

We don't talk anymore about the continuing threat of nuclear holocaust, he says; perhaps because, after so long tiptoeing past the tripwires, many of us would like to stand down from that exhausting alertness. Perry hasn't blinked.

The danger is most acute at a sub-national level - the possibility of terrorist organisations obtaining, in a fledgling or failed-state marketplace still rocking from the uncouplings of the old power bloc, the means to inflict it

We don't talk about it; but Perry's continuing preoccupation is the containment of nuclear proliferation. He is still a player, of stature and gravitas, and a consummate communicator; doubly potent, as he is able to command the attention due an elder statesman with commensurate high access, but is relieved of speaking officially on behalf of an administration.

Because his tone is so measured, so modest, so anti-sensational, one quickly sensitises to the nuances of his understatement. Here is a topic which, until the last month or two, I had not picked up on at a public diplomatic level; Israel is very seriously considering the possibility of launching pre-emptive strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities.

It is strong language for someone of this pedigree to say, in an open meeting, that Bush's decision not to participate in EU anti-proliferation talks has increased the probability of their failure. It is a clear message to a global audience to state that at this point, Israeli planners are busy preparing for worse-case scenarios; that, hideous as a ground incursion into Iran by US troops would be, with all its unforeseeable and uncontrollable consequences, it would be Perry's recommendation to Obama that the consequences of allowing Iran to obtain nuclear capability, without any transparency or accountability, would be worse; and that, whatever we in the West are going to do about it, we had better do it soon.

I write on summer solstice, one of the hinges around which the seasons swing. Neat. Have you started your Christmas list, or given a thought yet to next year's summer holiday? We are looking at six to twelve months before Iran's nuclear programme goes live. How long will the Israelis hold off? And will the US be willing or able to resist their pressing requests for assistance?

Perry clearly does not want to send troops into Iran. A viable alternative, if applied globally and in time, is robust diplomacy, and intense financial pressure. But the US and the EU cannot make this work in isolation. Russia is the key to Iran, says the man who listed as the high point of his Secretaryship the deployment of a Russian brigade in a US division in a peacekeeping operation in Bosnia. He is encouraged by Biden's wish to 'reset' relations with Moscow, and says his optimism is borne out by his meetings in Russian and by witnessing the interchange between Obama and Medvedev.

China, Af-Pak, demographics were briefly mentioned; Perry gave his blessing to the appointment of McChrystal in Afghanistan, expressed willing to answer questions on all subjects. But the intensity of his short term focus is all on Iran, and what must and can be done.

He is not particularly hopeful that a regime change in Iran, whose possibility is raised by events in Tehran post-election, will make any difference to the national determination to acquire nuclear capability. As someone who has had long close closetings with Ahmadinejad's old friend and national security adviser, he is in a position to describe the events of the last week as 'a setback'. He says: We will not persuade ANY Iranian government to give up its nuclear programme.

A compromise of transparency and full compliance with IAEA norms might be the most the nervous West can hope for. Israel, however, sees Iran, not unreasonably, as an existential threat.

In the end, the question I would most liked to have had aired was: Going back to Obama's four horsemen, is it possible to balance averting ecological catastrophe with the need to avoid geopolitical and - possibly consequent - nuclear havoc, by using development to redress the

economic imbalances between the stable and the unstable worlds? Where does staving off global financial collapse fit into that picture?

A long meditative exploratory answer might be attempted. The solution would be global, consensual, extraordinarily difficult and a very hard sell. We would all have to commit to a new way of living.

If we had time.