

Sam Nunn

*Taking steps toward a world  
free of nuclear weapons*

Secretary of State Dean Acheson was once asked to define foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> He thought a moment and replied, “Foreign policy is one damn thing after another.” I realized at a relatively young age that nuclear weapons were not just another thing, but that indeed they held hostage the future of mankind. I was a 24-year-old lawyer for the House Armed Services Committee on a three-week air force trip to Europe when the Cuban Missile Crisis broke out. During that period, while the world held its breath, our delegation met at Ramstein Air Base in Germany with the head of the U.S. Air Forces in Europe. The general explained that in the event of war, he had only a couple of minutes to launch all of what were known as quick-reaction aircraft, or they would be destroyed. These planes and forward bases were the first targets for the Soviets because they would deliver the first nuclear weapons to strike the Soviet Union, or at least that is what the Soviet Union anticipated. The fact that the fate of mankind rested on the shoulders of only a few people on each side who had only a few moments to decide whether to launch nuclear weapons made a lasting impression on me.

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I pledged to myself then that if I ever had a chance to work on the problem, I was going to tackle it.

Today the Cold War is over, but we face new nuclear dangers. I believe that the greatest danger we face is the possibility of a catastrophic nuclear attack by a terrorist group that does not have a return address and therefore is unlikely to be deterred. The accelerating spread of nuclear weapons, nuclear materials, and nuclear know-how has brought us to a nuclear tipping point. Indeed, we are in a race between cooperation and catastrophe. If we are to continue to avoid a catastrophe, all nuclear powers will have to be highly capable, careful, competent, rational – and if things go wrong, lucky – every single time. India and Pakistan have already had more than one close call, and their nuclear age has just begun.

I frequently ask myself two questions: the day after a nuclear attack on one of the cities of the world, what would we wish we had done to prevent it? And why aren't we doing it now?

We do have important efforts under way as well as some important successes, including the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program, the Global Threat Reduction Initiative, the Proliferation Security Initiative, and the Global

Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. These programs mark progress and potential, but the risk of a nuclear weapon being used today is growing, not receding. The storm clouds are gathering:

- Terrorists are seeking nuclear weapons, and there can be little doubt that if they acquire a weapon they will use it.
- There are nuclear weapons materials, some secured by nothing more than a chain-link fence, in more than 40 countries; at the current pace, it will be decades before this material is adequately secured or eliminated globally.
- The expertise to build nuclear weapons is far more available today because of an explosion of information and commerce throughout the world.
- The number of nuclear-weapons states is increasing. A world with 12 or 20 nuclear-weapons states will be immeasurably more dangerous than today's world and will make it more likely that weapons or materials to make them will fall into the hands of terrorists with no return address. Developments in cyberterrorism pose new threats that could have disastrous consequences if the command-and-control systems of any nuclear-weapons state are compromised.
- With the growing interest in nuclear energy, a number of countries are considering developing the capacity to enrich uranium to use as fuel for nuclear energy; but this would also give them the capacity to move quickly to a nuclear weapons program if they chose to do so.
- Meanwhile, the United States and Russia continue to deploy thousands of nuclear weapons on ballistic missiles that can hit their targets in less than 30 min-

utes, encouraging both sides to continue a prompt-launch capability that carries with it an increasingly unacceptable risk of an accidental, mistaken, or unauthorized launch.

The bottom line: the world is heading in a very dangerous direction.

With these growing dangers in mind, former U.S. Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry, and I published an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* in January 2007<sup>2</sup> and a follow-up piece in January 2008<sup>3</sup> that called for a different direction in our global nuclear policy. We proposed steps that would lay the groundwork for a world free of nuclear threat. We called for building a solid consensus for reversing reliance on nuclear weapons globally.

We are all keenly aware that the quest for a world free of nuclear weapons is fraught with many practical challenges. We have taken aim at those challenges by laying out a number of steps, which I believe are doable even though they are very difficult. We cannot reduce nuclear dangers without taking these steps. We cannot take these steps without the cooperation of other nations. We cannot get the cooperation of other nations without the shared vision of eradicating these weapons and their threat to the world. Indeed, even a quick glance at the steps we proposed in our two *Wall Street Journal* essays reveals that none of the steps can be accomplished by the United States and our close allies alone:

- Changing nuclear force postures in the United States and Russia to greatly increase warning time and ease our fingers away from the nuclear trigger;
- Reducing substantially the nuclear forces in all states that possess them;

- Moving toward developing cooperative multilateral ballistic-missile defense and early warning systems, which will reduce tensions over defensive systems and enhance the possibility of progress in other areas;
- Eliminating short-range “tactical” nuclear weapons, beginning with accountability and transparency among the United States, NATO, and Russia;
- Working to bring the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into force, in the United States and in other key states;
- Securing nuclear weapons and materials around the world to the highest standards;
- Developing a multinational approach to civil nuclear fuel production, phasing out the use of highly enriched uranium in civil commerce, and halting the production of fissile material for weapons;
- Enhancing verification and enforcement capabilities – and our political will to do both;
- Building an international consensus behind ways to deter and, when necessary, strongly and effectively respond to countries that breach their commitments.

Many people’s reaction to the vision of a world without nuclear weapons comes in two parts. On the one hand, most people say, “Boy, that would be great”; on the other, “We simply can’t get there from here.” But there is hope. In the 1990s, under Bill Perry’s capable leadership as the Secretary of Defense, we made a deal to buy highly enriched uranium from Russian warheads that were aimed at the United States, blend it down, make it into nuclear fuel, and use it in our power plants. Today, after

a number of years working on that program, we have made tremendous progress. If you think about it, approximately 20 percent of the electricity in the United States is supplied by nuclear power; 50 percent of the nuclear fuel that goes into that nuclear power is supplied by highly enriched uranium that has been blended into low-enriched uranium and made into nuclear fuel that 20 or 25 years ago was in warheads aimed at the United States. So when you look at the lights in any room in America, theoretically 10 percent of those light bulbs are fueled by material that was in the form of weapons aimed at America in the 1970s and the 1980s. Swords to plowshares: we have hope.

When I think about the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons, to me it is like a very tall mountain. It is tempting and easy to say we can’t get there from here. It is true that today our troubled world cannot even see the top of the mountain. But we can see that we are heading down, not up; we can see that we must turn around, that we must take paths leading to higher ground, and that we must get others to move with us. It is urgent for the survival of humanity that we stop our descent and find paths up the mountain toward a world free of nuclear weapons.

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ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This essay is based on remarks made by Senator Nunn at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on October 12, 2008, and at the American Academy in Berlin, Germany, on June 12, 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "Toward a Nuclear-Free World," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2008.