

Origins of the Nunn-Lugar Program

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The story of the origins of the Nunn-Lugar program has been told previously by William Perry and me in our book *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America*¹ (from which I borrow below), by one of Senator Nunn’s top staffers at the time, Richard Combs,² by Senator Nunn in a 1995 speech,³ and very recently by Senator Lugar himself.⁴

In 1991 it was becoming clear that Mikhail Gorbachev’s experiment with a gradual modernization of the Soviet Union was instead leading to an unraveling of Stalin’s empire. My colleagues and I at the Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, of which I was then Director, had been working on nuclear arms control matters since the Center had been founded by Paul Doty. By 1991 we were seeing something unaccustomed: the first-ever impending disintegration of a nuclear power. Those worried about the danger of nuclear weapons had heretofore been concerned either with a nuclear exchange – deliberate or resulting from miscalculation during a runaway superpower crisis – or with the spread of nuclear weapons to other governments that could pose regional threats. From these two traditional concerns had sprung, respectively, arms control agreements like the SALT and START talks, and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and a system of export controls on nuclear technology. Some farsighted Americans, beginning in the Eisenhower

¹ Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1999).

² Richard Combs, “U.S. Domestic Politics and the Nunn-Lugar Program,” in John M. Shields and William C. Potters, eds., *Dismantling the Cold War: U.S. and NIS Perspectives on the Nunn Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), pp.41-60.

³ Samuel A. Nunn, “Changing Threats in the Post-Cold War World,” speech delivered in Monterey, CA at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, August 20, 1995.

⁴ Richard G. Lugar, “Perspectives on Congress’s role in foreign policy,” speech delivered in Washington, DC at the Library of Congress as part of the inaugural Bernard and Irene Schwartz Lecture on Congress, September 15, 2005.

administration, had also worried about loss of control of nuclear weapons by a few madmen or a crazy general, as portrayed in the famous movie *Dr. Strangelove*. From this third concern had sprung a system of codes and locks on U.S. (and, we later learned, Soviet) nuclear weapons to prevent unauthorized or accidental use of nuclear weapons.

But no one in the Atomic Age had yet had to face the prospect of an entire continent strewn with nuclear weapons undergoing a convulsive social and political revolution against communism. The Soviet empire was collapsing in the summer of 1991 from the West German border to Vladivostok. At hundreds of locations over this vast area, the wherewithal to cause about 150,000 Hiroshima bombs – highly enriched uranium, plutonium, and fully assembled bombs of all types – had been deployed by the Soviet state.

My Harvard colleagues and I wrote a detailed study of this unprecedented problem and what to do about it called *Soviet Nuclear Fission: Control of the Nuclear Arsenal in a Disintegrating Soviet Union*.⁵ The recommendation we made at the end of that volume was that the United States government should create a program of assistance to the fragments of the Soviet Union to make sure the vast Soviet nuclear legacy was not abused. Our study laid out such a program in detail – it should cover, we said, weapons and materials, factories and technology, military and scientific personnel, in short, the entire Soviet nuclear establishment. The Nunn-Lugar program ended up being similarly comprehensive.

We had the study but not yet the audience of people in power who shared our concern. The Bush administration contained some leaders in the State Department and the National Security Council who could see the importance of such a program, but the Defense Department (then led by Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Scooter Libby, and Steve Hadley), where we thought the program should be lodged, was cool to the idea, although polite. The farsighted part of the U.S. government turned out to be Congress. Senators Nunn and Lugar had long been concerned with defense matters, including nuclear danger. They also knew how to work across the partisan aisle that so often limits the impact of Congress. The matchmakers who brought the ideas of the Harvard study together with the authority and skill of Nunn and Lugar were Bill Perry and David Hamburg, as recounted in *Preventive Defense*:

On November 19, 1991, David Hamburg, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, invited the two of us [Carter and Perry] and our colleague John Steinbruner of the Brookings Institution to a meeting in Nunn's office. Hamburg had a knack for bringing the right people together at the right time to work on the right problems, stimulating common thoughts and common action. Through the Carnegie Corporation of New York, a foundation devoted to peace and education, Hamburg and his associate Jane Wales had for many years supported exchanges and discussions between Soviet and American scholars and officials, even through the darkest days of the cold war. We had

⁵ Kurt Campbell, Ashton Carter, Steven Miller and Charles Zraket, *Soviet Nuclear Fission: Control of the Nuclear Arsenal in a Disintegrating Soviet Union*. (Cambridge, MA: Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, November 1991).

participated in many Carnegie-sponsored meetings and had frequently met with Senator Nunn and Senator Lugar through these meetings.

We were then both outside of government, Perry leading a research team at Stanford, and Carter a research team at Harvard, both studying national security problems. Perry's group at Stanford had been studying the giant military-industrial complex of the Soviet Union and the opportunities it presented to be the engine of recovery for the Soviet Union's backward economy once the cold war ended. Carter's team at Harvard had just completed a study [*Soviet Nuclear Fission*] of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. This study predicted that the breakup of the Soviet Union posed the biggest proliferation threat of the Atomic Age and outlined a new form of "arms control" to stop it: joint action by the two former cold war opponents against the common danger. Carter briefed the senators on the Harvard study. It turned out that Senator Nunn and Senator Lugar and their staff members, Robert Bell, Ken Myers, and Richard Combs, were working on a similar scheme for joint action. After the meeting broke up, Carter, Bell, Myers, and Combs stayed behind to draft what became known as the Nunn-Lugar legislation.

Two days later, Nunn and Lugar convened a bipartisan group of senators at a working breakfast. Carter repeated his briefing, warning of the potential dangers of the Soviet nuclear arsenal as the state that had controlled it fell apart. Nunn and Lugar asked the senators to support legislation that would authorize the Pentagon to initiate U.S.-funded assistance to stem the "loose nukes" problem of the former Soviet arsenal. In the ensuing discussion, the needed support was garnered from the senators in attendance, not all of it motivated strictly by the problem at hand. (Nunn swore Carter to secrecy; not many outsiders get to witness democracy's horse trading at work.)

On November 28, 1991, just nine days after the legislation had been drafted in Lugar's office, the Nunn-Lugar amendment to the annual defense bill passed the Senate by a vote of 86 to 8. Les Aspin gathered the necessary support in the House of Representatives, and the legislation passed the House shortly thereafter on a voice vote.

In March 1992, after the legislation had gone into effect, we joined Senators Nunn, Lugar, Warner, and Jeff Bingaman, as well as David Hamburg and staffers Bell, Myers, and Combs on a trip to look at the problem firsthand. By then, however, we were visiting not the Soviet Union, but the newly independent states of Russia and Ukraine. Leaders in the new states were eager to learn more about the program and to meet the two senators whose names were soon known throughout the weapons of mass destruction archipelagos of the former Soviet Union.⁶

This was the origin of the Nunn-Lugar program as I witnessed it. It is of interest to historians of the Clinton administration to continue the story a bit further, since it was under Clinton that the principal successes of Nunn-Lugar were achieved – the denuclearization of Ukraine, Kazakstan, and Belarus; and the stabilizing and initial dismantlement of the Russian military and military-industrial-nuclear complex during a dangerous period of turmoil. Once again, let me quote from *Preventive Defense*:

A year later we had both gone to work in the Pentagon, Perry as deputy secretary of defense (becoming secretary of defense in February 1994) and

⁶ Carter and Perry, *op.cit.*, pp. 71-72.

Carter as assistant secretary of defense with specific responsibility for the Nunn-Lugar program. Having observed Nunn-Lugar in the making, we were determined to implement the senators' vision.

This was easier said than done. The staff structure Carter inherited, which would be responsible for spearheading implementation, had a branch that targeted the Soviet Union and another that had negotiated arms control agreements with the Soviet Union. But no one had ever *assisted* the Soviet Union; a whole new organization had to be set up for Nunn-Lugar.

The key officials in the new organization were Gloria Duffy, Susan Koch, Laura Holgate, and the policy chief for the region, Elizabeth Sherwood. They set about crafting a set of objectives and identifying facilities and officials in the new countries who could serve as working partners for the new programs. These four officials made scores of visits to the former Soviet Union, frequently to remote sites under very difficult conditions. They all happened to be women, a matter of no particular note in the Pentagon; however, in the former Soviet Union it took a while before the disbelieving generals in Moscow, Kiev, Minsk, and Almaty realized that these women really did carry the authority of the secretary of defense.

Our team at the Pentagon needed not only to identify appropriate objectives for the Nunn-Lugar program, but also to engage the cooperation of the countries whose weapons were to be dismantled or safeguarded. The objectives of the program had to be shared objectives. This necessitated some lengthy negotiations over a number of issues. For example, our partners in the former Soviet Union were understandably intent on receiving social assistance for their people, not just help in dismantling weapons; suspicion lingered that the Americans were pursuing their own security at the expense of their former opponents; and the Russians had a legitimate need to shield their military secrets from our eyes. All these barriers had to be overcome.

In addition, the governments of the Soviet successor states bridled under the legal restraints of the program. Assistance would be largely in kind, rather than cash, which we feared might disappear amidst the shrinking economies and growing crime in what were, after all, countries in profound social revolution. Onerous audits and inspections were required by the Pentagon legal office. Pentagon lawyers were terrified at the prospect that some of the taxpayers' money might be misspent; one of the lawyers explained to Carter and his staff that, if this were to occur, they could all expect to spend the rest of their natural lives testifying about the diversion.

The Pentagon acquisition bureaucracy is justly famed for its ponderous procedures, endless paperwork, and slow workings. Now the acquisition system that seemed able to purchase airplanes in California and computers in Massachusetts only with difficulty was being asked to conduct multimillion-dollar engineering projects in places like Pervomaysk, Ukraine; Engels, Russia; and Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan—on the homeland of the former enemy, in places where U.S. industry had never done business. Contracting and project engineering were the responsibility of the Pentagon acquisition system, led by John Deutch and Harold Smith. They found it necessary to set up a whole new organization to contract for Nunn-Lugar programs and to staff this organization with personnel who could be inspired by the challenge of doing something that history had never before permitted.

Congress sometimes also made implementation difficult. It was not hard to understand why many senators and representatives found breathtaking the very notion of providing assistance to the former Soviet enemy, and in particular to

units with custody of nuclear forces. Once the program was explained, however, most saw that it advanced U.S. security as well as the interests of the cooperating countries and gave their support. But even though many voted enthusiastically for weapons dismantlement projects, some still balked at the social programs that were essential to getting the job done. Examples of such programs were housing for officers whose bases were being closed and defense conversion assistance for weapons factories that had no orders, both of which were crucial for success at Pervomaysk and elsewhere. And, finally, some members of Congress clung to the idea that the Pentagon's job was simply to fight and that its money should be spent only on tanks, planes and ships.

We argued that Nunn-Lugar was "defense by other means." Its contribution to U.S. security was at least as great as any other program in the defense budget. The Department of Defense was the correct agency to manage the program because the parties with which the United States needed to work to get the job done were, for the most part, the militaries of the former Soviet countries. Moreover, the expertise to dismantle weapons resided in the DOD and the defense industry.

Most frustrating to us, however, was the fact that far too many people, both inside and outside of Congress, seemed to assume that nuclear dangers belonged to the cold war and now that the cold war was over, the dangers would disappear by themselves. The lack of public and press attention to the nuclear danger in the former Soviet Union, as opposed to, say, events in Bosnia or Haiti, made it much harder to overcome congressional and bureaucratic barriers.

The initial ambivalence in Congress had a result that we faced immediately in 1993. The original Nunn-Lugar legislation did not actually appropriate money from the Treasury to spend on forestalling loose nukes. It only authorized the secretary of defense to take money from other Pentagon programs and "reprogram" it to Nunn-Lugar. One can easily imagine the lack of enthusiasm for the Nunn-Lugar program within the Pentagon bureaucracy when it came time to pass the cup for Nunn-Lugar. One of our top priorities, therefore, was to secure for the Nunn-Lugar program its own congressional appropriation, so we would not have to raid other parts of the Pentagon. The first budget DOD submitted after we took office contained a dedicated appropriation for Nunn-Lugar.

Elsewhere in the U.S. government, it was difficult to shake the grip of the old-style arms control bureaucracy. Officials used to the glacial pace of arms control during the cold war sought endlessly to form "interagency negotiating teams" and send them to foreign capitals, rather than sending the engineers and technical specialists who were essential to action on the ground. These and other well-intentioned "helpers" around Washington's other agencies and the White House needed to be discouraged from impeding the program, a process which sometimes caused hard feelings.⁷

None of the successes of the Nunn-Lugar program would have been possible without the inspired support of Bill Perry, the popular and powerful Secretary of Defense who was much respected in the Pentagon and in the Russian military, and of President Clinton, who never failed to push the issue of nuclear safety with Boris Yeltsin. At two Clinton-Yeltsin summits during which I represented the Department of Defense – in the Kremlin and in Hyde Park, New York – Clinton bypassed his advisors, who were focused on the political management of NATO enlargement, to raise issues of Nunn-Lugar

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-76.

implementation with an ailing and unpredictable Boris Yeltsin. Vice President Al Gore, working with his counterpart Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin, showed the same steady attention to the big-ticket item of nuclear safety.

Historians should look back at what might have happened – but didn't – thanks to Nunn-Lugar. The disintegration and discrediting of the power and ideology that commanded half the world for half a century passed peacefully, like evening into night, despite the fact that the Soviet empire's writ ran over enough destructive power to end civilization as we know it. This is a major historic achievement for humankind, and historians not only decades but centuries from now will note the disaster that might have been – but which was averted through Nunn-Lugar. It is terrifying to contemplate how differently it might have turned out. The nuclear legacy of the Soviet Union might now, fifteen years later, be in the hands of – let us reflect who! – bin Laden or his ilk, other terrorists with other crazy causes, Belarus under Lukashenko, some renegade Russian general or worse private, fragile democratizing states from Central Asia to the German border, a host of copycat governments and non-governmental groups stimulated by the collapse of nuclear control in the center of Eurasia.... Contemplate all that, and you see the enduring value of Nunn-Lugar.

Since then, I have been involved – inside and outside of government – in dealing with many nuclear dangers, including North Korea and possible nuclear terrorists. I chaired NATO's High Level Group, conducted President Clinton's Nuclear Posture Review, launched the Department of Defense's Counterproliferation Initiative, and served as deputy to Bill Perry when he conducted his historic North Korea Policy Review. I now co-chair Senator Dick Lugar's Policy Advisory Group, which he has charged with dealing with the nuclear security challenges of the 21st century. All of these are important initiatives, but the clarity of vision and thoroughness of follow-through of the Nunn-Lugar program during the Clinton years shines brightly as an example of the United States government, executive and legislative branches alike, serving this nation's and the world's deepest security interests. It is an achievement of President Clinton that does not receive the credit he deserves.