A World Free of Nuclear Weapons: An Interview With Nuclear Threat Initiative Co-Chairman Sam Nunn

Interviewed by Daryl G. Kimball and Miles A. Pomper

Sam Nunn has long been a leader in the U.S. national security community. A Democrat from Georgia, Nunn served four terms in the U.S. Senate from 1972 to 1996, including as chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. He is currently co-chairman and chief executive officer of the Nuclear Threat Initiative, a nongovernmental organization dedicated to reducing the risk of the use and spread of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.

In January 2007 and this past January, Nunn and three other senior U.S. statesmen from both parties—former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Shultz and former Secretary of Defense William Perry—co-authored op-ed articles in The Wall Street Journal calling for the United States to champion the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons and outlining several immediate steps toward achieving this goal. On January 24, Arms Control Today met with the former senator to discuss this initiative and relevant U.S. arms control and nonproliferation policies.[1]

ACT: In essays in The Wall Street Journal in January 2007 and January 2008, you and other prominent Americans called for “a world free of nuclear weapons,” asserting that the current approach to dealing with nuclear dangers is inadequate. How did all of you arrive at this dire conclusion and ambitious solution?

Nunn: I think all of us probably arrived at the conclusion at different times and different ways. We then converged together with that view over a period of several months. In my own case, it was several years of my evolution to [come to] that conclusion.

I believe that the threat has fundamentally changed. We went through the Cold War, where we had a great danger of escalation from conventional [warfare] to tactical nuclear weapons, right up the ladder to strategic nuclear weapons. I was convinced that, at the battlefield front, [NATO’s] military people were going to ask for nuclear release at the very beginning of any conventional war. So I spent a great deal of time in the Senate to try and strengthen conventional forces in Europe so we could raise the nuclear threshold and make it where we would have at least several days, maybe even weeks, to make a decision [to go nuclear].

[More recently,] the work we’ve done with the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI)—particularly on the fuel bank,[2] securing and reducing nuclear material stockpiles, trying to convert reactors around the globe from using highly enriched uranium to low-enriched uranium,[3] and advocating a fissile material cutoff[4]—has convinced me that we simply are not going to get the cooperation we need around the globe to take the steps that are essential for our security without having a restoration of the vision that was laid down in the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Whether we agree on the interpretation or not, the world perceives that the countries with nuclear weapons made a pledge to step-by-step reduce them, make them less relevant, and eventually get rid of them.[5]

The nuclear fuel bank is aimed at trying to prevent proliferation of uranium-enrichment facilities all over the globe.[6] But when you start talking to people about the fuel bank, you find out pretty quickly that there’s no interest even among our best friends, in setting up another have and have-not regime: those who have and can enrich uranium and those who have not and will not be able to enrich. That is why it’s hard to get traction in terms of sanctions against Iran. It’s hard to get unity on
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a lot of things and, I think, it will get increasingly difficult.

Therefore, in my view, we’re moving toward a nuclear nightmare with more enrichment, more nuclear materials, and more know-how around the globe and terrorist groups who have made it very clear they are doing everything they can to get these weapons. Thus, I believe the vision and the steps go together. The way I like to express it is that we ought to make nuclear weapons less relevant and less important, prevent nuclear weapons or materials from getting in the hands of dangerous people, and eventually eliminate nuclear weapons as a threat to the world.

ACT: What do you think are the biggest challenges in convincing nuclear-weapon states to pursue this kind of path?

Nunn: People don’t know that the nuclear-weapon states have a hard time thinking about national security without nuclear weapons. They’ve become so relevant. For a time in the early 1990s after the Soviet Union broke up, I thought it was an opportune time to make nuclear weapons a lot less relevant, particularly with the Nunn-Lugar program.[7] But that time passed for a lot of reasons that you can debate. I think that expanding NATO and putting the military first after the collapse of the Soviet Union rather than making an economic expansion with the European Community was a fundamental mistake. It gave the Russians the feeling that they were, as they pretty much are, excluded from European defense and security. Now, the Russians are in the position that we were in when we ordered up thousands of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. They feel that their conventional forces are not strong enough, requiring them to have not only a nuclear deterrent in a very active way, but a heavy reliance on battlefield nuclear weapons and first use. It’s not unusual that the Russians would come to that conclusion. That’s the conclusion we had during the Cold War. I think the nuclear powers have varying reasons [for possessing nuclear weapons], but it all goes to dependency on nuclear weapons psychologically.

With U.S. conventional capabilities now and with the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact, I really think we are in a totally different threat environment. The current threat environment is one where not only is there no need to have a confrontation with the Russians, but there’s every reason for our own security to have cooperation. While the threat environment has changed, the psychology of nuclear weapons for the nuclear powers in most cases has not changed. That would apply to India and Pakistan for obvious reasons. It would apply to Israel and the Middle East. It would apply to China. Everybody is kind of looking at everybody else.

I describe moving toward zero as climbing a mountain, the top of the mountain being zero nuclear weapons. We might not get there in my lifetime, but we need to be heading up the mountain, not down the mountain. We have to head up the mountain together. It’s not going to be a unilateral move. It’s going to have to be moving up the mountain together and hopefully reaching a plateau so that our children and grandchildren can at least get out their binoculars and see the top of the mountain.

ACT: Which steps up the mountain would you say are the most important?

Nunn: I have my own pet rocks. I think working with the Russians on missile defense is enormously important because if that does not happen, we are going to make all these other steps, which involve the Russians, much less likely and much more difficult. On the other hand, working with the Russians on missile defense and early-warning systems could open up the door for a lot of other things.

If I had to say what would do more good than any one single thing in terms of improving American and Russian security, it would be extending warning times. I haven’t been briefed on the U.S. warning time in a long time because it’s classified. But whatever it is, it is minutes.[8] It’s insane for us, 16 years after the Cold War, to think of the Russian president having four or five minutes to make a decision about whether what may be a false warning requires a response before he loses his retaliatory force. It is insane. That’s fundamentally against American security interests. The Russians can make a mistake. Radars and satellites can go wrong. So we ought to ask ourselves why we don’t work with the Russians to give them more warning time. They need to ask themselves why they don’t work with us to give us more warning time.
ACT: What in particular on missile defense would you do? The most recent essay talked about a cooperative approach. When and how do you think the United States and Russia should reach a cooperative approach on missile defense, particularly missile defense in Europe?

Nunn: I was glad to see Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice go to Moscow with proposals. Evidently it took a long time for the bureaucracy to put those proposals in writing, and when they put them in writing, there were certain things left out from the Russian perspective.[9] Still, I think it was a big step forward for them to go over there. George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, and I all strongly recommended that after we met in Russia last July with a group led by [former Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny] Primakov. We came back saying missile defense was very important, so we hope that we had something to do with Gates and Rice going over there. They went, and I think that was very good.

When I say cooperative, I think the two presidents have to make it clear to the people under them that this is strategic, not tactical, and that the militaries are expected to take whatever the obstacles are and work the problems.

The thing is that [the Bush administration] is basically deploying a system that’s not mature against a threat that’s not mature.[10] The Russians don’t agree on the threat. One of the things I mean by cooperation is a joint threat assessment. I proposed that recently to President [George W.] Bush. I proposed a joint intelligence assessment on the threat. It doesn’t have to be just the Iranian threat, but the generic missile threat. That would tell you how much time you’ve got and where differences exist. If you don’t agree on the threat, it’s going to be ultra hard to agree on the response.

Warning time is similar. I proposed to both [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and Bush in the last six months what I just basically said to you. I suggested respectfully that they tell their military leaders, “We want more warning time. If it’s ‘x’ now, we want it to be ‘2x.’ You give us the steps. We want you to work out the details.”

What is it that makes Russia think it has to launch quickly? What is it that makes Russia think, in the tactical area, that it needs the option of first use? What is it that makes NATO continue to say it has to have first use? Start working those problems because insecurities are on both sides. Beyond the prestige factor—we’ve made nuclear weapons too important—the underlying factor is insecurity. So we have to work the insecurity problems with the United States and Russia and then in every region of the world if we’re ever going to go up the mountain. We have to work regional insecurity problems. “We” are the United States and other nuclear powers, as well as the regional powers.

ACT: The May 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) commits the United States and Russia to each lower their strategic operational forces to less than 2,200 strategic warheads by 2012, which is when the treaty expires. Should there be a follow-on treaty to SORT, and how low should the numbers go?

Nunn: I would like us to focus on the number of quick-launch weapons. I have felt for a long time that while it is perfectly valid and important to talk about and come down in numbers, it is much more important to make nuclear weapons less relevant in the long run. If we can make them less relevant, then the number will come down very appreciably.

Nuclear weapons can be made less relevant if they are not going to be used in the early stages of a conflict. Some type of physical barriers could be introduced down the line so nobody can launch within a week and their retaliatory response is not threatened. You have to have both. You can’t have nuclear weapons locked up in a pile sitting there waiting for someone to destroy them.

ACT: START I expires at the end of 2009. How mechanically and diplomatically do you think the two sides can pursue the reductions that you are describing? Is it in the context of the SORT and START processes or through unilateral reciprocal initiatives? How do you see future reductions being pursued?

Nunn: All of the above. I do not think it’s either arms control treaties or things beyond arms control
treaties. I think it is both.

It would be folly to allow the START verification provisions to expire. I think reconstructing them would be a whole lot harder than having this administration and the Russians agree on [extending] them.

I also think SORT needs to be fulfilled. When it first came up, I called it a “faith-based treaty.” It expires the same day that the limits take effect. I think that is absurd. The next administration has to do something about that. Obviously, this one will not. The next administration will have to tie verification provisions to SORT.[11]

I think the arms control treaty process is important. Obviously, you want to reach agreements. But the dialogue, the conversations, the people getting to know each other, and the realization of the fears and seeing where the fears coincide are important. That is where I differ so much from this administration. Sure it is frustrating and takes a long time.

We have a lot of things that we can do without treaties. Warning time, for instance, I don’t think lends itself to a treaty approach.

I also would like to see [command and control] updated in light of the huge technological changes, particularly the cyber world. I don’t think we have explored anywhere near adequately the danger of command and control being penetrated by people in the cyber world, whether it’s a third country or a very clever hacker. There are horrors out there when you see the stakes involved. That’s why I go back to my big pet rock. If everyone had the posture where they could not shoot for a week, it would be a different world. That would make nuclear weapons less relevant, and the discussion about how many you need takes on a different flavor. That is in no way in opposition to reducing numbers, but it is saying that reducing numbers is not the be all and end all.

ACT: There are still several hundred tactical U.S. weapons in Europe. Would you support their unconditional or immediate withdrawal? Why or why not?

Nunn: What I favor is a U.S.-Russian agreement—NATO would have to be involved—that would basically acknowledge the problems of tactical nuclear weapons: the fact that they are susceptible to terrorist attack; the fact that if they are deployed, there is more difficulty with command and control; and the fact that, in some cases, it is reported that there is pre-release authority, where you would not have to get permission from the leaders of the country. I hope nobody has it. I’m not sure about the Russians. I would talk about all of that.

My first goal would be to have transparency between the United States and Russia: where the weapons are and how many there are through mutual exchange of inventories. If you don’t have a baseline, how do you know what they are missing? That’s the way that I would start with tactical nukes. The [final] goal would be to get rid of all of them.

ACT: Given what you mentioned about Russia’s changing perception of threats after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, do you think Russia is ready for that dialogue now, or are there changes in U.S. and NATO policy that are going to be necessary to open the door to that negotiation about transparency and accountability?

Nunn: At this stage, I have seen no indication that Russia is ready for that conversation. I think you have to be willing to sit down and talk to the Russians about where they fit into the overall European security framework. NATO’s Partnership for Peace[12] was a worthy effort for a few years, but it has run its course in my view. The discussions now by serious people about inviting Georgia and Ukraine into NATO and [deploying] missile defense systems in the Czech Republic and Poland mean that the clock is running. We don’t have that much time to have a serious discussion about Europe. NATO has to ask itself if it is in NATO’s interest for Russia to be virtually the only country in that part of the world that’s not eligible to be in that huge defense alliance. If the answer is “that’s the way we want to go,” we’re doing everything just right. If we want Russia to be excluded and if we want Russia to perceive NATO as a permanent enemy, we’re doing it all just right. I don’t think it is our goal. I also don’t think it is NATO’s goal. I don’t even think it is this administration’s goal. So we have to back up
a little bit and say, “Time out. What is the view of the Russian security role?” I think the Russians have to ask themselves that. Most of their responses are simply frustrated responses to what is happening rather than thoughtful and creative ideas about the kind of role that they want to play.

Obviously, Russia is not ready to join NATO. NATO’s not ready. But should there be some kind of overall security framework that the Russians play a big role in and really have a significant voice? If there is not, my view is that we’re going to have a very hard time with this whole nuclear agenda and we’re going to have a very hard time with the security agenda in Europe over the long haul.

In my view, the behavior of an awful lot of people involved in NATO security during and since the 1990s, including the Bill Clinton and Bush administrations, has basically been one of almost deliberate disdain for Russia being important enough to worry about. I have felt all along that that was extremely shortsighted. It was perhaps true in a pure economic sense for quite a while. It is no longer true in energy, no longer true in environment, no longer true in economics, and, in my view, never has been true in terms of national security. Russia’s going to be a player, and to me, the question is whether it’s inside or outside the tent. Right now, it is outside the tent. Maybe that is what the Russians want. Maybe that’s what NATO wants. But I believe it is happening inadvertently without much thought.

**ACT:** You are well known for your work with Senator Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) to create the Cooperative Threat Reduction program. What are your recommendations for accelerating and maximizing the unfinished work of that program and similar efforts?

**Nunn:** I see a maturing of the Nunn-Lugar program in the former Soviet Union. There’s a lot left to do, but given Russia’s very impressive economic progress, I think that Russia should step up to the plate much more as a partner. I believe that Russia and the United States should really join together to approach this whole subject on a global basis. I see the Nunn-Lugar concept continuing, but I don’t see the funding continuing to be primarily American. The Group of Eight has already made pledges, and they need to be fulfilled. The Russians also need to step up much more to their own security and beyond their own security. I see Russia necessarily moving from being, in effect, a partner that is supplicant for funds to a truly global partner that deals with these subjects on a global basis with its own experts and its own money.

The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1540, which places the burden on every country to take security steps to prevent catastrophic terrorism by protecting their nuclear arsenals or materials, including radiological [materials]. Most countries have not been able to do much under that mandate. I have proposed that the United States and Russia offer U.S. and Russian experts who have worked together on the Nunn-Lugar program to basically be available under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to help any country in the world that needs help implementing that resolution. Those experts could provide technical assistance, best practices, and other know-how on the ground. The United States and Russia have learned so much working together over the last 15 years that I think it would be a shame not to have that lab-to-lab, military-to-military, scientist-to-scientist expertise available to others. It could grow into a bigger project, but I would start off with a small group of people, and it would need to be under the IAEA. It would have to be voluntary. Nobody could impose that on the world, but it certainly ought to be offered. That is the way I see the Nunn-Lugar program evolving.

**ACT:** I want to get back to your discussion earlier about the fuel bank, particularly the NTI role. What’s your sense on the notion that there has been movement in Russia in establishing a fuel center? What are the prospects that this will really happen, and what are the obstacles that might prevent its creation? Where do things stand?

**Nunn:** We are involved in it all the time, but the answer is, I don’t know. I think there’s a good chance that we could get something done. I think the IAEA, at least its leadership, would like to get something done. The problem gets back to the haves and have-nots. There are a lot of countries out there that are determined, no matter what happens, not to get into a regime where some people have and some people have not. I think that whatever’s framed in terms of fuel assurances has to be framed so that countries do not forsake their sovereign right to engage in enrichment at some point down the line. From my point of view, the whole concept of fuel assurances is to help those countries
that have decided on their own not to go into enrichment. So there’s a thin line there. Not going into enrichment is an actuality; forsaking your right is a pledge. I do not think we are going to get anything that looks like a pledge.

I think what we can get is a regime that has tiers of assurances for fuel, starting predominantly with the marketplace but with marketplace backups, including the Russian concept of enrichment on its soil under IAEA supervision; the U.S. concept of cross guarantees of supplies; perhaps some of the Japanese, German, and British ideas for a series of tiers; and certainly the final reserve, which we propose is the NTI fuel bank controlled by the IAEA.

All of those things are entirely possible, but right now it is going to take a lot of diplomatic leadership to make it happen. It is going to require some of those countries that don’t have enrichment and don’t want enrichment, but also don’t want to give up that right to enrichment, to step up strongly and endorse this concept. Right now, that is the missing element.

**ACT:** Given those realities, which countries do you believe will be convinced to take advantage of a fuel bank and decide not to go down the enrichment path? Is a fuel bank really going to convince the hard cases, such as Iran or an Iran of tomorrow?

**Nunn:** The Russian proposal with Angarsk[14] or some concept like that is the best case in terms of Iran. Of course, Iran has said “no” so far. But my understanding is that they have said “no” and not “hell no.” They may not use profanity.

Some people believe we could simply divide [the world] into good guys and bad guys, and if they are good guys, they [can enrich]. So India and Brazil could go ahead and enrich. I don’t think that works, and I don’t think it has any sustainability. I don’t think we can sit here and divide the world into good and bad. Now, we can take adamant positions against people that we think are extremely dangerous, like the Iranians. But a lot of the countries are going to be in between. They are not going to fit into anything like that. So I think there has to be an international regime. IAEA Director-General Mohamed ElBaradei is very dedicated to that. I have a lot of confidence in him, but whether he can pull it off is uncertain given the attitude of so many of these countries which have the determination not to be have-nots with enrichment, as well as with weapons. But I will add that I think it is important to have all enrichment, including U.S. enrichment, under international safeguards. That might not be acceptable here, in Russia, and in a lot of other places, but I think it is going to have to be that way. I don’t think we can simply divide the world up.

**ACT:** The next president is going to have to deal with a lot of issues, including the war in Iraq. How realistic is it that the next administration and Congress will take up and implement the ambitious agenda that you and your colleagues have outlined? And how do you get the U.S. government to prioritize these issues?

**Nunn:** It depends on who is elected. Some of the candidates have talked about some of these things in some depth and others, primarily on the Republican side, have not addressed these issues.

In the last presidential election, both Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) and President Bush said on national television that nuclear terrorism was the most important challenge we faced. President Bush has said over and over again that keeping the most dangerous weapons out of the most dangerous hands is our top priority. President Putin has said the same thing. It’s the gap between words and deeds that is the frustration because all the words are there.

What is missing is execution. What is missing is presidential focus, both Bush and Putin, on a continuing basis. What is missing is a sense of priorities in our allies, although British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is now speaking out on these subjects. What is missing is an organization in the United States, Russia, and other countries that is held accountable for real execution and performance. Most of the efforts disappear at third and fourth levels of the bureaucracies without people at the top paying a lot of attention. That has to change with the next U.S. administration, whether it’s Republican or Democrat, and hopefully in Russia too.
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ENDNOTES


2. The general concept of a nuclear fuel bank is to establish a reserve of nuclear fuel for peaceful purposes that can be made available to those states forgoing the development of full national nuclear fuel cycles. For more information on the NTI initiative and other fuel bank proposals, see Oliver Meier, “News Analysis: The Growing Nuclear Fuel Cycle Debate,” Arms Control Today, November 2006, pp. 40-44.

3. Highly enriched uranium can be used to build nuclear weapons. Low-enriched uranium cannot be used for that purpose.

4. A fissile material cutoff entails ceasing the production of highly enriched uranium and plutonium for weapons purposes. Both these fissile materials have been used in nuclear arms.

5. Article VI of the 1968 nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty obligates its states-parties to “pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”

6. Uranium-enrichment facilities can be used to produce low-enriched uranium to fuel power reactors and highly enriched uranium to build nuclear weapons.

7. Established by legislation passed in 1991, the U.S. Nunn-Lugar program has funded activities in Russia, other states of the former Soviet Union, and additional countries, such as Albania, to secure and dispose of excess or outlawed biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons and materials, as well as delivery vehicles.

8. An ongoing debate about the actual alert status of U.S. nuclear weapons flared up last fall when New Zealand sponsored a UN resolution calling on nuclear-armed states to remove their nuclear weapons from high alert. Wade Boese, “Nuclear Weapons Alert Status Debated,” Arms Control Today, December 2007, p. 44.


10. The Bush administration claims that its proposed European-based anti-missile system is to defend against a growing Iranian ballistic missile threat.

11. SORT did not include any verification measures. In his June 2002 letter transmitting the treaty to the Senate for its advice and consent to ratification, President George W. Bush stated, “It is important for there to be sufficient openness so that the United States and Russia can each be confident that the other is fulfilling its reductions commitment. The Parties will use the comprehensive verification regime of [START] to provide the foundation for confidence,
transparency, and predictability in further strategic offensive reductions."

12. NATO launched the Partnership for Peace program in 1994 to enable nonmember countries to pursue bilateral cooperation on a variety of military and political issues with the alliance.

13. In a June 2002 summit at Kananaskis, Canada, the Group of Eight members (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) pledged to raise up to $20 billion over 10 years to help secure and eliminate biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons in Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union. Paul F. Walker, “Kananaskis at Five: Assessing the Global Partnership,” *Arms Control Today*, September 2007, p. 47.

14. Russia plans to establish a multinational uranium-enrichment facility in the Siberian city of Angarsk.

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