

“Proliferation, Catastrophic Terrorism, and a New Security Paradigm”
Remarks by Dr. William J. Perry, Former Secretary of Defense
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We are here today to pass the baton from the Bush Administration to the Obama Administration. This is an inspired idea that should foster creative continuity in our great democracy. Please join me in a big round of applause for the United States Institute of Peace for organizing this session.

God knows, the Obama Administration will find that baton to be loaded with intractable problems:

- A financial crisis;
- An automobile industry on the rocks;
- A growing unemployment problem;
- And the Mideast in turmoil;

to name only the problems getting the largest headlines today.

But I am going to focus my comments on the growing nuclear danger, which doesn’t receive headlines, but which I believe is the gravest security problem facing the United States.

I will open my discussion with some personal comments about why I decided to join George Schultz, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn in the Nuclear Security Project. This project is dedicated to alerting the world to the increasing danger from nuclear weapons and to laying out a program for reducing that danger.

In particular, I will answer a question I have been asked many times in the last year: “Why is an old cold warrior like you palling around with nuclear abolitionists?”

Well, I am driven first of all by my strong belief that the gravest danger our nation faces today is a terror group detonating a nuclear bomb in one of our cities. But secondly, I must acknowledge that my experiences as a Cold Warrior have, in fact, conditioned me to be especially sensitive to the dangers of nuclear weapons. Let me share two experiences with you.

Very early in my career, when I was a scientist at an electronics lab in California, I received a phone call from a Stanford classmate, Bud Wheelon, who was at the time CIA’s Deputy Director for Science & Technology. He asked me to come back to Washington to consult on a technical problem. I said “Sure, I will rearrange my schedule and come back next week.” He replied, “You don’t understand, I need to talk with you right away.” So I took the redeye to DC and met with him the first thing the following morning.

I was stunned when he showed me U-2 pictures showing a Soviet missile deployment underway in Cuba.

For the next thirteen days I worked with a small team that worked every night studying the latest technical intelligence available so that President Kennedy had the benefit of that analysis the following morning. Every day I went to our analysis center I thought would be my last day on earth. And to this day, I believe we avoided a nuclear catastrophe as much by good luck as by good management.

The second experience occurred sixteen years later when I was the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering.

One night I was awoken by a phone call at 3 AM. As I sleepily picked up the phone I heard a voice identifying himself as the watch officer at the North American Air Defense Command. The general got right to the point, telling me that his computers were indicating that 200 intercontinental ballistic missiles were on the way from the Soviet Union to the United States.

That was, of course, a false alarm.

The general was calling me in the hopes that I could help him determine what had gone wrong so that he had some answers when he briefed the president the next morning.

That call is engraven in my memory, but it is only one of three false alarms that occurred in the United States and I don't know how many more might have occurred in the Soviet Union.

So the risks of a nuclear catastrophe have never been academic to me.

Ironically, during the same period that I was awoken by that false alarm, I was responsible for the development of our country's nuclear weapons. During my tenure I oversaw the development of the:

- B-2 bomber;
- MX missile;
- Trident submarine;
- Trident missile;
- Air-launched cruise missile;
- Ground-launched cruise missile; and
- Submarine-launched cruise missile.

So, I really am a card-carrying Cold Warrior.

But while I saw the risks in building those deadly weapon systems, I believed that they were necessary, given the very real threats we faced during the Cold War. However, after the Cold War ended, I believed that it was no longer necessary to take those terrible risks. And I believed that we should begin to dismantle the deadly nuclear legacy of the Cold War.

My first opportunity to act on this belief came in 1994 when I was asked by President Clinton to be his Secretary of Defense. As Secretary, my first priority was to reduce the dangers of the Cold War nuclear arsenal. Our greatest immediate danger was that of the nuclear weapons in the Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus would fall into the hands of terrorists.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, these new republics had inherited the nuclear weapons on their soil. Ukraine, for example, had more nuclear weapons than the United Kingdom, France, and China combined! And the country was going through great social, economic and political turbulence.

Through adroit diplomacy we were able to get these new republics to agree to give up their nuclear weapons. Then using the Nunn-Lugar program, we assisted them in the dismantlement process. How that happened is an interesting and instructive story, but one I will not tell at this time. I will, however, summarize the dramatic results:

- During my time in office I oversaw the dismantlement of almost 10,000 nuclear weapons in the United States and the Former Soviet Union; and
- Helped three nations, Kazakhstan, Belarus and the Ukraine, go non-nuclear.

This was the first time since the dawn of the nuclear age that nuclear proliferation had been reduced. Also in my last year in office I steered the test ban treaty through the Pentagon so that President Clinton could sign it. At that time, I believed we were well on our way to mitigating the deadly nuclear legacy of the Cold War.

But since then the effort has stalled – reversed:

- The United States has never ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty;
- Russia and China are developing new nuclear weapons;
- And shades of the Cold War, Russia is now threatening to base nuclear missiles in Kaliningrad;
- India and Pakistan have gone nuclear;
- A.Q. Khan sold nuclear technology to an unknown number of parties;
- North Korea built and tested a nuclear weapon; and
- Iran is on the same path.

If Iran and North Korea cannot be contained, we face the real danger of the cascade of proliferation. That is, I believe that today we are at a tipping point of proliferation. And if the world does tip, it will be irreversible and dangerous beyond most people's imagination.

My colleague, Sam Nunn, has said “The world is in a race between cooperation and catastrophe.” True enough, but, in fact, we are not racing!!! Indeed, the world has been moving backwards in nuclear proliferation in this past decade. Some of us have been sounding the alarm, but no one is heeding it and each year we have moved ever closer to a nuclear catastrophe.

I have gone through this background to explain my state of mind just over two years ago when George Schultz decided to hold a workshop at Stanford on the twentieth anniversary of the Reykjavik Summit. At the end of the workshop we concluded that we ought to revive the idea that Reagan and Gorbachev discussed at that meeting – starting to move towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. We believed that some really dramatic position was needed to stop this terrible drift to a nuclear catastrophe. And there followed two op-eds by the four of us, in January of 2007 and January of 2008.

Since then we have visited leaders and former leaders all around the world to rally support. In London in February of 2008 we met with European leaders; we also met with leaders in Delhi and Shanghai in October of 2008; and in Moscow of December of 2008. This year we are scheduling additional meetings.

To be sure, these unofficial or Track 2 efforts have stirred a global discussion of the issue but in fact no real actions will happen unless these governments begin to take it seriously. And that will not happen, I believe, until the American government takes a leadership position. President-elect Obama took a strong position on this issue during his campaign when he said: “It’s time to send a clear message: America seeks a world with no nuclear weapons. But as long as nuclear weapons exist, we must maintain a strong deterrent.”

I am wholly in accord with both of these positions.

And I believe that there are specific actions that President Obama can take to move us in the direction of a world with no nuclear weapons.

- He could use the bully pulpit of the presidency to awaken the world to the incredible danger of nuclear weapons; and I believe that President Obama would be especially effective in that role;
- He could invite Russia to negotiate a new treaty entailing significant nuclear arms reductions;
- He could seek a return to deep cooperation between Russia and the United States in mitigating the dangers of nuclear terrorism;
- He could work with the Senate for the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (twelve years after we signed it);
- He could propose a new Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty, to include verification procedures; and
- He could support the International Atomic Energy Agency in its efforts to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

All of these steps could be started in the first year of his administration. And any of them would make us safer.

What is harder to do but even more important: He must deal effectively with North Korea’s and Iran’s nuclear weapons programs.

I believe that North Korea's production of plutonium and subsequent nuclear test to be the most dangerous development since the end of the Cold War. But I also believe it still can be resolved with diplomacy.

However, I am not so confident about our ability to deal with the nuclear weapons program in Iran. The European Union is negotiating with Iran to try and get them to foreswear enriching their uranium but those talks seem to be going nowhere. The United States is a very interested party in these negotiations but has declined to join them.

So my forecast is that with the present weak negotiating strategies, Iran is moving inexorably towards becoming a nuclear power. And it seems clear that Israel will not sit by idly while Iran takes the final steps towards becoming a nuclear power. As a result, President Obama will almost certainly face a serious crisis with Iran; indeed, I believe that the crisis point will be reached in his first year of office.

So on the nuclear front, President Obama will face a daunting set of problems, none of which can be solved unilaterally. And I don't need to tell you how difficult it will be to get the needed international cooperation. Our relations with Russia, for example, are at an all-time low. My recent visit to Russia verified just how low but it also offered some hope that the United States-Russia relations can take a positive turn with a new administration. Although I must say, this is a hope, not a certainty.

I would sum up my feelings about our Nuclear Security Project after two years of effort as follows: Based on the global responses we have gotten to date, I am encouraged to believe that we are on a positive track.

More than a century ago Victor Hugo wrote: "More powerful than the tread of mighty armies is an idea whose time has come."

I believe that containing the deadly nuclear legacy of the Cold War is an idea whose time has finally come. But I also believe that it will take decades to achieve the final goals of our project. And that long time scale has two ramifications.

First, until we approach that goal, nuclear powers still will feel obliged to maintain an appropriate level of deterrence forces and those forces must be constituted to have acceptable levels of reliability, safety and security. I am chairing a congressional commission that is examining what actions the United States should take to maintain our deterrence forces without signaling to other nations that we are trying to rebuild these forces. Our interim report was sent to Congress last month and our final recommendations will go to the new Congress and the new administration in a few months.

The good news in our interim report is that the Stockpile Stewardship Program and the Life Extension Program have been outstanding successes and our weapons capability remains robust. The bad news is that support seems to be wavering for these programs and for the scientists who make them possible.

A second ramification of this long time scale is that we must be training a new generation of security specialists to carry on the task as the generation of Cold Warriors retires from the scene. All of the members of our Nuclear Security Project are in their 70s and 80s, and our friends ask us why we are still working on security projects. But in fact, I work every day at Stanford with young security specialists and when I retire from the scene, I will happily pass the baton to them as well as the young security scholars at other universities and institutions such as the United States Institute of Peace. But I am not ready to retire from the scene just yet....

I hope my brief comments have answered the question with which I started my talk. But that leaves the question of why I am still taking redeyes to DC and making extended trips to Delhi, Moscow and Beijing instead of enjoying my golden years. I will answer that second question by noting that, having helped build our nuclear arsenal, I believe that I have a special responsibility to help dismantle it.

Indeed, I want to express this thought by using the words of Robert Frost:

“The woods are lovely, dark, and deep;
But I have promises to keep;
And miles to go before I sleep;
And miles to go before I sleep.”

Thank you.