

# EDITORIAL

## Invited Commentary

### The Greatest Danger

Sam Nunn Jr

**T**he threat of terrorism with nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction presents the gravest danger to our nation and the world. These threats are real:

- We know that al Qaeda is seeking nuclear weapons. We do not know how many other terrorist groups have similar ambitions.
- We know that the nuclear material al Qaeda desires is housed in many poorly secured sites around the globe.
- We believe that if they get that material, they can build a nuclear weapon.
- We believe that if they build a nuclear weapon, they will use it.

I am not sure that most Americans fully grasp the devastating, world-changing impact of a nuclear attack. If a 10-kiloton nuclear device went off in midtown Manhattan on a typical workday, it could kill >500,000 people. Ten kilotons, a plausible yield for a crude terrorist bomb, has the power of 10,000 tons of TNT. To haul that volume of TNT, you would need a cargo train 100 cars long, but a nuclear bomb can fit into the back of a truck. Beyond the immediate deaths and the lives that would be shortened by radioactive fallout, the casualty list would also include an erosion of civil liberties, privacy, and the world economy. So Americans have every reason to ask, "Are we doing all we can to prevent a nuclear attack?" The simple answer is, "No, we are not."

- Our slowness in adapting to the threat has not prevented us from taking several important steps. In particular, the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program has been working since 1991 to secure and destroy weapons and materials in the former Soviet Union. In addition to helping Russia remove thousands of warheads, the funding provided by the program has helped Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus implement a critically important decision to give up all of their nuclear weapons. The United States and Russia, working together, have completed approximately 50% of the job of securing nuclear weapons and materials in Russia.
- Increasingly, we are being warned that an act of nuclear terrorism is inevitable. I am not willing to concede that point, but I do believe that unless we greatly elevate our efforts and the speed of our response, we could face disaster. We are in a race between cooperation and catastrophe, and the threat is outrunning our response.

#### NUCLEAR TIPPING POINT

We are clearly at a tipping point with regard to the both the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the production of weapons-usable nuclear material. Terrorists are seeking nuclear materials and weapons as the list of potential suppliers expands.

Mindful of the rising threat of nuclear weapons and troubled by the poor results of policy in reducing the threat, former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, and I published an editorial in January 2007 in the *Wall Street Journal* about how to pull back from this tipping point. Titled "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," this op-ed piece called for the United States to "lead the world to a solid consensus for reversing the reliance on nuclear weapons globally." This leadership and this consensus, we wrote, would be "a vital contribution to preventing the proliferation [of nuclear weapons] into potentially dangerous hands and ultimately ending them as a threat to the world."

The four of us, plus many other former security and foreign policy officials, have proposed a series of steps that we believe constitute urgent new actions that will lay the groundwork for building a world free from nuclear threat. These steps would include the following:

- Changing the Cold War posture of deployed nuclear weapons to increase warning time and thereby reduce the danger of an accidental or unauthorized use of a nuclear weapon
- Continuing to reduce substantially the size of nuclear forces in all states that possess them
- Eliminating short-range nuclear weapons designed to be forward-deployed
- Initiating a bipartisan process with the Senate to achieve ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, taking advantage of recent technical advances and working to secure ratification by other key stakeholders
- Providing the highest possible standards of security for all weapons stocks, weapons-grade plutonium, and highly enriched uranium everywhere in the world
- Gaining control of the uranium enrichment process, combined with the guarantee that uranium for nuclear power reactors could be obtained at a reasonable price, first from the Nuclear Suppliers Group and then from the International Atomic Energy Agency or other controlled

## The Greatest Danger

international reserves; it will also be necessary to deal with the proliferation issues presented by spent fuel from reactors that produce electricity

- Halting the production of fissile material for weapons globally, phasing out the use of highly enriched uranium in civil commerce, and removing weapons-usable uranium from research facilities around the world and rendering the materials safe
- Redoubling our efforts to resolve regional confrontations and conflicts that give rise to new nuclear powers

Certainly each of the steps outlined would enhance the security of the United States, but each of the steps must be taken in cooperation with other nations. None of them can be taken alone.

### COOPERATING AGAINST COMMON THREATS

I believe that preventing the spread and use of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction should be the central

organizing security principle for the 21st century. The United States and its partners must be as focused on fighting the nuclear threat in this century as we were in fighting the Communist threat in the last century. We must do it now.

### About the Author

*Former US Senator Nunn (D-GA, 1972–1996) is Co-Chair of the Nuclear Threat Initiative, a charitable organization working to reduce the global threat from nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons and the risk that they will actually be used.*

*Address correspondence and reprint requests c/o NTI, 1747 Pennsylvania Ave NW, 7th Floor, Washington, DC 20006 (e-mail: [contact@nti.org](mailto:contact@nti.org)).*

*Received for publication September 3, 2007; accepted September 4, 2007.*

ISSN: 1935-7893 © 2007 by the American Medical Association and Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

DOI: 10.1097/DMP.0b013e31815a5674