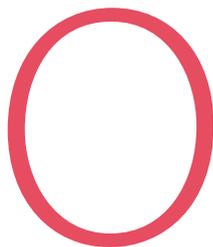


Nunn-Lugar, 25 Years On

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy, President and CEO



ON MAY 9TH, I ATTENDED the 25th anniversary ceremony for the Nunn-Lugar program, hosted at the Pentagon by U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter. Retired senators Sam Nunn of Georgia and Richard Lugar of Indiana were present, as well as other current and former officials.

In 1991, when the Soviet Union broke up, thousands of Soviet nuclear weapons, nuclear materials that could be used to make thousands more nuclear weapons, components and delivery systems were dispersed on the territories of the newly independent Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The latter three countries had no experience handling or securing nuclear weapons, and no agreements with the United States—or with Russia, for that matter—limiting their number of weapons or how the weapons would be handled. The early 1990s post-Soviet problem of “loose nukes” provided a veritable shopping mall for countries or terrorist groups seeking to obtain or build nuclear weapons, threatening to make the world an infinitely more dangerous place.

The Nunn-Lugar approach was conceived of in 1990-91 by a Harvard-Stanford team of policy scholars who were funded by private philanthropy, primarily the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Leading the way in conceptualizing it were then-Harvard professor Ash Carter and Stanford professor William Perry, both of whom would later become secretaries of defense. Other early contributors were Lugar staffer Ken Myers (now deceased), Nunn staffer Richard Combs, and at the Carnegie Corporation President David Hamburg and Cooperative Security Program Chair Jane Wales.

The Nunn-Lugar “Cooperative Threat Reduction” legislation was sponsored in 1991 by the two senators, and in a miracle of bi-partisanship more common then than now, quickly approved by Congress. The approach was quite innovative. It directed the U.S. Defense Department to spend funds to assist the former Soviet countries to dismantle and dispose of their nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and to undertake other measures to prevent the further spread of weapons of mass destruction. Over the years, other U.S. agencies, including the departments of State and Energy, joined DoD in the effort, as well as more than 20 other countries, including NATO, Japan and other foreign allies.

Nunn-Lugar took a preventative rather than reactive approach to the problem, seeking to eliminate the weapons and materials before they could be turned against the U.S. or other countries, rather than having to defend against the weapons later on. It was, as Secretary Carter said on May 9th, an approach that was both creative and paradoxical, assisting our recent adversaries to dismantle their Cold War weapons.

The approach was successful. Within four years, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan agreed to become non-nuclear states, and Russia cooperated on a variety of nuclear safety, security and dismantlement measures on its own territory. The concrete results in the past 25 years have included the elimination of 2,650 Soviet missiles and bombers capable of delivering nuclear warheads to the U.S., eliminating or contributing to the elimination of more than 11,000 Soviet nuclear warheads, securing the warheads that were allowed to remain in Russia under the START agreement, destroying 2 million artillery rounds in Russia with 5,400 metric tons of lethal chemicals, steps leading to the elimination of an anthrax biological weapons facility in Russia, protecting nuclear material from terrorists, transitioning many former Soviet weapons of mass destruction scientists to civilian work, and many other measures.

While the most dramatic successes were realized during the Clinton administration, every administration since George H. W. Bush has supported and implemented the Nunn-Lugar program. The U.S. has spent more than \$15 billion on Nunn-Lugar projects, which, though it might seem pricey, is far less than would have been required to defend against thousands of nuclear weapons. And of course, cost aside, preventing terrorists from obtaining a nuclear weapon or its components is crucial to our security, in an era when Al Qaeda, ISIS/ISIL and other groups are looking for ways to put our society at devastating risk.

There is much work left to be done in reducing the nuclear danger, and efforts like Nunn-Lugar must continue. North Korea continues to rattle its nuclear saber, the deal with Iran to limit its nuclear program must be monitored and upheld, and terrorist groups continue to be on the hunt for destructive weapons.

As Secretary Carter pointed out at the Pentagon ceremony, the Nunn-Lugar history provides an important lesson. In 1991, the threat of thousands of “loose nukes” spread across the former Soviet Union seemed both frightening and overwhelming. Prior to that time, we did not have the policy tools to deal with such a problem. But within a few years, the problem was largely solved. Nunn-Lugar shows that the right proactive approach, entrepreneurial thinking, great leadership, collaboration, resources and diligent execution can produce major strides in solving the most challenging problems. If we could do it with nuclear weapons, we can certainly do it with other challenges our society faces.



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy