

Facing a Long-Ignored Problem: *Reviving America's Nuclear Deterrence*

Remarks of the Honorable Jon Kyl
at the George C. Marshall Annual Awards Dinner
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Jeff Kueter: It is our great pleasure tonight to have Senator Jon Kyl with us to deliver the opening remarks of the Institute. Senator Kyl was elected to the United States Senate from Arizona in 1994 and reelected in 2000 and 2006 after having served four terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. As the Republican Whip, he is the second ranking member of the Senate Republican leadership, and is responsible for building support on the broad portfolio of issues that the nation grapples with every day. He serves on the Senate Finance Committee and the Judiciary Committee, but his interests obviously range broadly. He is one, if not the, most articulate and forceful proponents of the need for ballistic missile defense, protecting American interests in space, and developing rational energy and climate policies. Those of you who follow his career and follow his statements know that he is eloquent spokesperson on all of the subjects of interest to the Marshall Institute. We couldn't think of a better person to have with us tonight. Thank you for being here, Senator.

Senator Jon Kyl: Thank you very, very much. I appreciate the fact that this is a very serious group. As a result, I am going to speak seriously this evening. I realize that I am all that stands between you and dinner, but I know that because you take these issues seriously, this will only whet your appetite more, let's put it that way. Ordinarily I would probably talk about space security or missile defense at a group like this, but this evening I am going to change the subject, because frankly of an emergency that faces the United States government. It is an issue which has too long been ignored, primarily by the U. S. Congress – nuclear deterrence. What I hope to convince you of this evening is that it is an emergency on which we need to take immediate action.

First let me congratulate Dr. Bruce Ames of the University of California for receiving the George Marshall Institute Founders' Award, which is well deserved.

Now let me begin by discussing why I believe that the U.S. nuclear deterrent remains important and relevant. There are three primary reasons why. You have all heard or read the comments by four of our elder statesmen first published in *The Wall Street Journal*, Secretaries Perry, Shultz and Kissinger and Senator Nunn, who have been urging certain steps because they would like to move toward a world that is free of nuclear weapons. These gentlemen are primarily motivated by a concern about the potential that terrorists may be able to acquire these weapons and cause havoc in the future. Many, including some of the nuclear freeze movement friends, have taken the call of these leaders to urge that a world without weapons is actually closer than these authors believe and to oppose even modest efforts to keep our nuclear deterrent reliable and capable, let alone modernize it.

Some in the nuclear freeze movement have even invoked the name of Ronald Reagan. I take that personally and so in looking at what Ronald Reagan actually said,

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of course it is true that he *wished* for such a world, just as Secretaries Schultz and Kissinger, for example, do. But not where the U.S. alone is disarmed. He understood that U.S. national security relied on “making sure any adversary who thinks about attacking the United States... concludes the risks to him outweigh any potential gains. Once he understands that, he won’t attack. We maintain the peace through our strength; weakness only invites aggression.”¹ That was what Ronald Reagan really believed.

As I said, there are three key factors which make deterrence as important now as it was during the Cold War, albeit for different reasons. First, other states are modernizing their nuclear weapons and the United States is not. The six states are, of course, our allies Britain and France, and those countries that do not have our best interests at heart, China and Russia, and the other two states are Pakistan and India. As to the most capable of these states, Secretary of Defense Gates noted, “It seems clear that the Russians are focused as they look to the future more on strengthening their nuclear capabilities. So to the extent that they rely more and more on their nuclear capabilities as opposed to what historically has been a huge Russian conventional military capability, it seems to me that it underscores the importance of our sustaining a valid nuclear deterrent, a modern nuclear deterrent.”² Of course, failure to recognize the reality of this for countries like China will only encourage them to attempt to become a peer competitor to the United States, exactly what Ronald Reagan was warning against.

The second reason why the deterrence still matters is that it deters attacks. Our deterrence still provides protection from nuclear, biological and chemical weapons attacks by states, more of which possess these capacities than did at the end of the Cold War. In addition to the nuclear states, rogue states like North Korea, Iran and Syria either have or are working to obtain weapons of mass destruction. Our own

spy satellites just last week identified sites in Iran thought to be used for covert nuclear production, including potentially weaponization.³ On top of this are new reports that, according to the IAEA, Iran has removed 40 to 60 tons of uranium from its main production facilities, which is enough to make five or six bombs.⁴ Add to that, the revelations of the extent of the nuclear smuggling ring run by A.Q. Khan. Nobody knows how far that reached, but we do know that nuclear weapons technology has been available for purchase. The IAEA recently acknowledged “large gaps in investigators’ understanding of the smuggling ring, raising concerns that Khan’s nuclear black market may have had additional customers whose identities remain unknown.”⁵

The third reason for our deterrent is that it would prevent a cascade of proliferation because of the nuclear umbrella that the United States provides for over thirty-one countries, including many with the technology and resources for the development of nuclear deterrence on their own. The unilateral arms controllers have the logic of proliferation exactly backwards when they suggest that it is America’s possession of nuclear weapons technology that drives proliferation. It is exactly the opposite. For example, the first thing that the Japanese government did after the North Korean detonation in 2006 was to call Secretary Rice to get a public declaration that the United States continues to extend its protective nuclear umbrella over Japan. Recently, General Chilton, the commander of U.S. Strategic Command noted that “we have reduced our deployed weapons from...10,000 to [Moscow Treaty levels of between] 1,700 to 2,200. Did that discourage Iran? Did that discourage North Korea? Did that discourage Pakistan?”⁶ Of course, the answer is no. General Chilton’s conclusion is right on: “failing to sustain our deterrent and failing to sustain our umbrella will encourage proliferation around the planet.”⁷ So the U.S. nuclear deterrent remains critical to our national security. As long as

others have or are attempting to acquire these weapons and nuclear weapons states are growing and modernizing their stockpiles, the U.S. must maintain our nuclear deterrent.

The corollary is, as long as we have it, we must maintain it. What is the state of our deterrent today? We used to maintain a very robust nuclear weapons complex. It was able to quickly fabricate large numbers of weapons to respond to the constantly changing global threat. It regularly tested weapons and designed new generations of weapons and we produced them every fifteen to twenty years. The result was a nuclear complex workforce with the best possible training and skill set. None of that exists today. As a result of decades of neglect, the nuclear weapons complex consists of buildings and equipment that have been used since the Manhattan Project in many cases, are over-used, obsolete, and, in many cases, are simply falling down from age.

General Chilton described the situation this way, “the U.S. has effectively eliminated its nuclear weapons production capacity and allowed its infrastructure to atrophy.”⁸ This is not the kind of thing that you hear on the evening news, and I dare say that most Americans are unaware of the degree to which this essential capability has atrophied to the point of essential nothingness. Even though our stockpile has shrunk to a quarter its size from the Cold War, when we could turn out about 3,000 warheads a year, today we can refurbish only about ten weapons a year now.⁹ And that is refurbishing. The head of the National Nuclear Security Administration Thomas D’Agostino described the consequence of this status quo: “currently, if we found a major system-wide problem in the stockpile ...we have insufficient capacity for a timely response.”¹⁰

For example, what would we do if a significant problem were found in the thirty-year-old W-76 warhead? Thirty years old — that is older than most of my staff members! Hundreds if not thousands of these warheads

are deployed on our strategic submarines today. If we can only refurbish ten weapons per year, we could be in the position of losing, without replacement, the most survivable leg of our triad. So what of our deterrent then? The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen noted that there is little time to waste to invigorate our deterrence, when he acknowledged recently that the U.S has accomplished little in this area since the 1980s, mostly because the experts in nuclear deterrence are simply not in the business anymore and no one was mentored to replace those experts.¹¹ Due to the expense of maintaining this decaying infrastructure and because of a decline in the workload it can support, the national labs and weapons manufacturing facilities have shed thousands of their workers. These problems will hamper even maintaining the current weapons program, much less the decision to embark on a modernized weapon. So the nuclear complex is the first problem.

The warheads themselves are the second problem. The last new warhead design to enter into service was in 1988 and the U.S. has not funded a modernization of the stockpile since then. Many have grown complacent about nuclear weapons and that includes people in the military and the policymakers in Washington. These are incredibly complicated devices, essentially the most complicated and dangerous ever invented by man. They are constantly in flux. As General Chilton has described it, “they are physics experiments when used, but they are chemistry experiments every day they sit on the shelf.” Many of you know this. They are literally decaying as we speak and the heat they generate affects the components of the weapons every day. And yet, we are just letting them sit there without the capability of doing anything about it. In addition, when they were originally designed, the Defense Department had different needs and different expectations for their uses. As a result, the legacy stockpile does not possess many of the safety features a modern design would include, and these legacy

weapons have capabilities for detonation-yield and accuracy that are not aligned with today's post-Cold War needs.

Now we didn't want to test these weapons, even though we are not precluded by law from doing that because the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was defeated. So we decided to do two things to try to respond to the status quo. First of all we developed something called the Stockpile Stewardship Program, under which computers would simulate testing and hopefully enable annual certification of the stockpile, and eventually, the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) to actually supplant existing warheads, the first comprehensive, soup-to-nuts redesign of a nuclear weapon since before the end of the Cold War. And all of this, of course, without testing. According to recent testimony by the director of one of the national labs, "the basic tenets of the Stockpile Stewardship Program are at risk." This same lab director noted that it is becoming increasingly difficult to make the annual certification about the reliability of the stockpile.

As to the RRW, Congress won't fund it, so we are spending significant resources to attempt to troubleshoot problems on weapons that were only designed to be deployed for fifteen to twenty years. Meanwhile, the mainstay of our deterrent, the submarine-based W-76, built thirty years ago as I mentioned, is twice beyond its design-life. As a consequence, each time we discover a problem in our legacy weapons, which all were intended to be retired by now, we have changed the weapon beyond its original design, in many cases because the components aren't even available any more, they are so old-fashioned. Obviously this introduces additional uncertainty; they haven't been tested and we don't know if substituting for the original may still work.

The third problem, in addition to the infrastructure and the warheads themselves, is the fact that the Defense Department has been plagued with its own systemic problems which culminated in the high profile termination of

the Secretary of the Air Force and the service's Chief of Staff. An example is the Minot incident, where six live nuclear warheads were mistakenly loaded onto a B-52 and flown from North Dakota down to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. After that was news that the Air Force had mistakenly shipped nuclear missile components — the fuses to trigger detonation of nuclear warheads — to Taiwan and did not realize the mistake for eighteen months.¹² These are symptomatic of a serious problem. As a result of these incidents, the Air Force's senior leadership was replaced and a task force led by former Secretary of Defense Dr. James Schlesinger was appointed to review the nuclear mission as handled by the Air Force. In addition, there will be a follow-on report that will examine the nuclear mission across the Department of Defense.

The task force in its first phase report recognized the atrophy of the nuclear mission since the Cold War and stated the "nuclear mission must be reinstated as a continuing responsibility of the Air Force"¹³ Why was this important? The Schlesinger task force was clear that the Air Force in particular needs to realize that it will have this mission for some time to come and it needs to take care of it. Unfortunately, over the past two decades there has been a declining focus on the nuclear mission both from Administrations and senior Pentagon leadership. The services have not been willing to pay the bills related to keeping deployed a nuclear triad, preferring instead to invest in other priorities that are nearer and dearer to their hearts. General Chilton, who is commander of the combatant command with overall responsibility for the nuclear deterrent mission, succinctly summarized the result of this lack of focus when he said, "we have a bunch of delivery platforms and weapons that are not reliable, safe, and secure."¹⁴

Across the board, every major leg of our triad from B-52s to F-15s and F-16s to our SSBNs and ICBMs is in need of replacement or significant modernization. The B-52 first

entered into service in 1954. Given that the Air Force still doesn't have a plan to replace it, it has been said that the mother of the last B-52 pilot has yet to be born. And yet this clearly is part of our strategic weapons. Or look at the Minuteman III missile, which first entered into service in 1970. We view that as a modern missile, don't we? The Air Force is trying to figure out how and whether this missile can be kept in service until 2030. This epitomizes the systemic decline that has developed. It should now be clear that a failure to modernize our nuclear weapons complex and the weapons themselves, including the delivery systems, not only threatens the continuing reliability and credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent, it threatens the basic tenets of our national security strategy since the end of the Cold War.

How can this decline be halted and reversed? Congress created the Commission on the Strategic Posture, led by Secretaries Perry and Schlesinger, in the Defense Authorization Act last year. The idea was to examine and make recommendations relating to the long-term strategic requirements for U.S. national security, and that included nuclear deterrent, missile defense, space security, etc. But by the time this Commission releases its report (hopefully by next April) and by the time the next Administration has been able to appoint its key personnel, consider the report, and draft a budget that reflects the recommendations of that report, and Congress then responds to that, those of you who understand the timing here on Capitol Hill realize all of a sudden we are talking about two years before the recommendations of that Commission could actually be implemented in terms of funding requests. Based upon what I have said, I hope it is clear that it would be irresponsible to wait the two years to try to deal with this emergency.

So I believe that Congress should take some action right now to turn the situation around. The first thing, obviously, is to fund the modernization of our nuclear weapons infrastructure. Just to give you one example of

where that could be done, with as little as \$300 million we could begin the construction of facilities like the Chemistry and Metallurgy Facility Replacement Project (CMRR), which will replace aged infrastructure and enable us to have a modern ability to check for problems associated with the aging stockpile and potentially develop the next generation of weapons for the U.S. nuclear deterrent. While the whole complex is in need of comprehensive reconstruction, I think it is safe to say that accelerating the construction of the CMRR is the highest stopgap priority at this time.

We talked about the nuclear weapons themselves. Obviously we have priorities there as well for research and engineering and development. Then I would note, since I started by referring to what had been written by Secretaries Schultz and Kissinger and Perry and Senator Nunn, I have been in contact with them about what they believe we ought to be doing. I can report to you that at least in recent conversations with Schultz and Kissinger, they appreciate the problem that we are talking about here this evening and support the immediate-term refurbishing and rehabilitation of our system on the same principle that I mentioned earlier, that is, as long as you have them, you have to take care of them. Secretary George Shultz recently wrote a letter to me on behalf of himself, Secretaries Kissinger and Perry and Senator Nunn, citing one example: "recent layoffs [he is talking about weapons labs] raise a concern about the continuing strength of the [nuclear weapons] program" and "the need for funding adequately the flow of scientists to the labs."¹⁵ What we are proposing here would help to meet that requirement.

By modernizing the nuclear weapons complex and replacing these Cold War legacy weapons through programs like Reliable Replacement Warhead, our nuclear weapons workforce can be put back to work and we can get new scientists who are skilled in the actual working with the weapons and the skills of almost seven decades could be preserved for

this most critical mission. The technical achievements of the Stockpile Stewardship Program, while significant, are nonetheless at the end of the day a simulation. They are not working with the actual weapons themselves. I am sure there is nobody in this room would want to go under the knife of a surgeon who had never actually performed surgery outside of a computer simulation. When you stop to think about the complexity of the use of the weapons, ask yourself whether we should put the security of the United States in any less serious way. Simulation has been great, but it is no substitute for hands on work, whether addressing urgent needs with the W-76 or B-61 weapons or proceeding with the RRW, none of which is possible without additional budgetary resources and scientists who can finally get their hands on these kinds of programs.

A third example is funding the Reliable Replacement Warhead itself. By moving forward with that, we cannot only stop this hemorrhaging of skilled technicians and scientists, but can address the ongoing accumulation of technical anomalies within our stockpile, the inevitable result of keeping these weapons in service long beyond their service life. The highest priority is to provide stopgap spending for at least the Phase 2a studies this year relating to the RRW. That is about a \$66 million cost. Clearly it is within our ability to fund it, if we want to do that.

Finally, to recover the importance of the nuclear mission within the Department of Defense and to maintain the critical delivery systems that constitute the three legs of the triad itself, we must do planning, programming, and budgeting for follow-on nuclear weapons delivery systems, which would include cruise missiles, warplanes, ballistic missiles, and strategic submarines. We can begin this process now with a relatively modest stopgap investment of approximately \$200 million. These are just the top-priority items and I am giving you one example in each of the areas to illustrate that if we act now, we can

make a significant difference to stop this downward spiral. It doesn't begin to pay for everything, but who on watch today can deny that we need to step up and try to deal with this problem? I have been working with several of my colleagues in the House and Senate and with the Administration including the Vice President, the Secretaries of Defense and Energy and others to determine how we should proceed, what programs are the highest priorities and how to get the funding. I believe that we have the support of immediate funding of these very same leaders who have talked about an ultimate nuclear-free world, but who appreciate the need to take care of what we have. So there should be broad-based support for this kind of activity, if we can get it done by the U.S. Congress. That won't be easy. The ability to do that will depend upon good will and the legislative vehicles to accomplish that result yet this year. I hope, however, that we can find a way to accomplish that result because it is so important.

The bottom line is that the nuclear genie is out of the bottle and nobody is ever going to stuff it back in, in spite of their good intentions or the audacity of hope or any other kind of slogan. Remember, President Reagan correctly warned, "We can't afford to believe that we will never be threatened. There have been two world wars in my lifetime. We did not start them and, indeed, did everything we could to avoid being drawn into them. But we were ill prepared for both. Had we been better prepared, peace might have been preserved."

That was the charge that you have undertaken as supporters of a very serious Institute which thinks seriously about important problems that confront us. Neither you nor I have the luxury of backing away from this problem, because we know better and we have the ability to try to do something about it. So my charge to you tonight is to do the same thing I did when I examined these facts, talked to the experts and came to the conclusion that on my watch, I had to do something to turn this

dangerous state of affairs around. I hope you will join me in any way that you can do so in achieving this objective for our future, because it literally depends upon it. I thank you for the opportunity to speak here.

Notes

1. President Ronald Reagan, Speech to the Nation, March 23, 1983.
2. "Pentagon sees Russia strengthening nuclear arsenal," Reuters, June 9, 2008.
3. Con Coughlin and Tim Butcher, "Iran Renews Nuclear Weapons Development," *London Daily Telegraph*, September 12, 2008.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Joby Warrick, "Nuclear Ring Was More Advanced Than Thought, U.N. Says," *Washington Post*, September 13, 2008.
6. Remarks by General Kevin P. Chilton, NDIA Congressional Breakfast Speech, July 21, 2008.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Statement of the Honorable Thomas D'Agostino, Administrator, National Nuclear Security Administration. Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee Strategic Forces Subcommittee. February 27, 2008.
11. Admiral Michael G. Mullen, "It's Time for A New Deterrence Model," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 4th Quarter, 2008.
12. *Agence France Presse*, "U.S. sent Taiwan nuclear missile components by mistake," Mar 25, 2008. Website accessed on June 19, 2008.
13. Letter of the Honorable James Schlesinger to Secretary of Defense, September 12, 2008. Accompanies the Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear Weapons Management — Phase I: The Air Force's Nuclear Mission, September 2008.
14. Remarks by General Kevin P. Chilton, NDIA Congressional Breakfast Speech, July 21, 2008.
15. Letter from George P. Shultz to Senator Kyl. August 25, 2008.