

Remarks of Vice President Biden
National Defense University
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February 18, 2010

**The Path to Nuclear Security:
Implementing the President's Prague Agenda**

Ladies and gentlemen; Secretaries Gates and Chu; General Cartwright; Undersecretary Tauscher; Administrator D'Agostino; members of our armed services; students and faculty; thank you all for coming.

At its founding, Elihu Root gave this campus a mission that is the very essence of our national defense: "Not to promote war, but to preserve peace by intelligent and adequate preparation to repel aggression." For more than a century, you and your predecessors have heeded that call. There are few greater contributions citizens can claim.

Many statesmen have walked these grounds, including our Administration's outstanding National Security Advisor, General Jim Jones. You taught him well. George Kennan, the scholar and diplomat, lectured at the National War College in the late 1940s. Just back from Moscow, in a small office not far from here, he developed the doctrine of Containment that guided a generation of Cold War foreign policy.

Some of the issues that arose during that time seem like distant memories. But the topic I came to discuss with you today, the challenge posed by nuclear weapons, continues to demand our urgent attention....

Last April, in Prague, President Obama laid out his vision for protecting our country from nuclear threats. He made clear we will take concrete steps toward a world without nuclear weapons, while retaining a safe, secure, and effective arsenal as long as we still need it. We will work to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. And we will do everything in our power to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to terrorists and also to states that don't already possess them.

It's easy to recognize the threat posed by nuclear terrorism. But we must not underestimate how proliferation to a state could destabilize regions critical to our security and prompt neighbors to seek nuclear weapons of their own.

Our agenda is based on a clear-eyed assessment of our national interest. We have long relied on nuclear weapons to deter potential adversaries. Now, as our technology improves, we are developing non-nuclear ways to accomplish that same objective. The Quadrennial Defense Review and Ballistic Missile Defense Review, which Secretary Gates released two weeks ago, present a plan to further strengthen our preeminent conventional forces to defend our nation and our allies.

Capabilities like an adaptive missile defense shield, conventional warheads with worldwide reach, and others that we are developing enable us to reduce the role of nuclear weapons, as other nuclear powers join us in drawing down. With these modern capabilities, even with deep nuclear reductions, we will remain undeniably strong.

As we've said many times, the spread of nuclear weapons is the greatest threat facing our country. That is why we are working both to stop their proliferation and eventually to eliminate them. Until that day comes, though, we will do everything necessary to maintain our arsenal.

At the vanguard of this effort, alongside our military, are our nuclear weapons laboratories, national treasures that deserve our support. Their invaluable contributions range from building the world's fastest supercomputers, to developing cleaner fuels, to surveying the heavens with robotic telescopes.

But the labs are best known for the work they do to secure our country. Time and again, we have asked our labs to meet our most urgent strategic needs. And time and again, they have delivered.

In 1939, as fascism began its march across Europe, Asia, and Africa, Albert Einstein warned President Roosevelt that the Nazis were racing to build a weapon, the likes of which the world had never seen. In the Southwest Desert, under the leadership of Robert Oppenheimer, the physicists of Los Alamos won that race and changed the course of history.

Sandia was born near Albuquerque soon after the Second World War and became our premier facility for developing the non-nuclear components of our nuclear weapons program.

And a few years later the institution that became Lawrence Livermore took root in California. During the arms race that followed the Korean War, it designed and developed warheads that kept our nuclear capabilities second to none.

These examples illustrate what everyone in this room already knows—that the past century’s defining conflicts were decided not just on the battlefield, but in the classroom and in the laboratory.

Air Force General Hap Arnold, an aviation pioneer whose vision helped shape the National War College, once argued that the First World War was decided by brawn and the Second by logistics. “The Third World War will be different,” he predicted. “It will be won by brains.” General Arnold got it almost right. Great minds like Kennan and Oppenheimer helped win the Cold War and prevent World War Three altogether.

During the Cold War, we tested nuclear weapons in our atmosphere, underwater and underground, to confirm that they worked before deploying them, and to evaluate more advanced concepts. But explosive testing damaged our health, disrupted our environment and set back our non-proliferation goals.

Eighteen years ago, President George H.W. Bush signed the nuclear testing moratorium enacted by Congress, which remains in place to this day.

Under the moratorium, our laboratories have maintained our arsenal through the Stockpile Stewardship Program without underground nuclear testing, using techniques that are as successful as they are cutting edge.

Today, the directors of our nuclear laboratories tell us they have a deeper understanding of our arsenal from Stockpile Stewardship than they ever had when testing was commonplace.

Let me repeat that—our labs know more about our arsenal today than when we used to explode our weapons on a regular basis. With our support, the labs can anticipate potential problems and reduce their impact on our arsenal.

Unfortunately, during the last decade, our nuclear complex and experts were neglected and underfunded.

Tight budgets forced more than 2,000 employees of Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore from their jobs between 2006 and 2008, including highly-skilled scientists and engineers. And some of the facilities we use to handle uranium and plutonium date back to the days when the world’s great powers were led by Truman, Churchill, and Stalin. The signs of age and decay are becoming more apparent every day.

Because we recognized these dangers, in December, Secretary Chu and I met at the White House with the heads of the three nuclear weapons labs. They described the dangerous impact these budgetary pressures were having on their ability to manage our arsenal without testing. They say this situation is a threat to our security. President Obama and I agree.

That’s why earlier this month we announced a new budget that reverses the last decade’s dangerous decline. It devotes \$7 billion to maintaining our nuclear stockpile and modernizing our nuclear infrastructure. To put that in perspective, that’s \$624 million more than Congress approved last year—and an increase of \$5 billion over the next five years. Even in these tight fiscal times, we will commit the resources our security requires.

This investment is not only consistent with our nonproliferation agenda; it is essential to it. Guaranteeing our stockpile, coupled with broader research and development efforts, allows us to pursue deep nuclear reductions without compromising our security. As our conventional capabilities improve, we will continue to reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons.

Responsible disarmament requires versatile specialists to manage it. The skilled technicians who look after our arsenal today are the ones who will safely dismantle it tomorrow.

And chemists who understand how plutonium ages also develop forensics to track missing nuclear material and catch those trafficking in it.

Our goal of a world without nuclear weapons has been endorsed by leading voices in both parties. These include two former Secretaries of State from Republican administrations, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz; President Clinton's Secretary of Defense Bill Perry; and my former colleague Sam Nunn, for years the Democratic Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Together, these four statesmen called eliminating nuclear weapons "a bold initiative consistent with America's moral heritage."

During the 2008 Presidential campaign, both the President and Senator McCain supported the same objective.

We will continue to build support for this emerging bipartisan consensus like the one around containment of Soviet expansionism that George Kennan inspired.

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Toward that end, we have worked tirelessly to implement the President's Prague agenda.

In September, the President chaired an historic meeting of the UN Security Council, which unanimously embraced the key elements of the President's vision.

As I speak, U.S. and Russian negotiators are completing an agreement that will reduce strategic weapons to their lowest levels in decades.

Its verification measures will provide confidence its terms are being met. These reductions will be conducted transparently and predictably. The new START treaty will promote strategic stability and bolster global efforts to prevent proliferation by showing that the world's leading nuclear powers are committed to reducing their arsenals.

And it will build momentum for collaboration with Russia on strengthening the global consensus that nations who violate their NPT obligations should be held to account.

This strategy is yielding results. We have tightened sanctions on North Korea's proliferation activities through the most restrictive UN Security Council resolution to date—and the international community is enforcing these sanctions effectively.

And we are now working with our international partners to ensure that Iran, too, faces real consequences for failing to meet its obligations.

In the meantime, we are completing a government-wide review of our nuclear posture.

Already, our budget proposal reflects some of our key priorities, including increased funding for our nuclear complex, and a commitment to sustain our heavy bombers and land and submarine-based missile capabilities, under the new START agreement.

As Congress requested and with Secretary Gates' full support, this review has been a full interagency partnership.

We believe we have developed a broad and deep consensus on the importance of the President's agenda and the steps we must take to achieve it. The results will be presented to Congress soon.

In April, the President will also host a Nuclear Security Summit to advance his goal of securing all vulnerable nuclear material within four years. We cannot wait for an act of nuclear terrorism before coming together to share best practices and raise security standards, and we will seek firm commitments from our partners to do just that.

In May, we will participate in the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

We are rallying support for stronger measures to strengthen inspections and punish cheaters.

The Treaty's basic bargain—that nuclear powers pursue disarmament and non-nuclear states do not acquire such weapons, while gaining access to civilian nuclear technology—is the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime.

Before the treaty was negotiated, President Kennedy predicted a world with up to 20 nuclear powers by the mid-1970s. Because of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the consensus it embodied, that didn't happen.

Now, 40 years later, that consensus is fraying. We must reinforce this consensus, and strengthen the treaty for the future.

And, while we do that, we will also continue our efforts to negotiate a ban on the production of fissile materials that can be used in nuclear weapons.

We know that completing a treaty that will ban the production of fissile material will not be quick or easy—but the Conference on Disarmament must resume its work on this treaty as soon as possible.

The last piece of the President's agenda from Prague was the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

A decade ago, we led this effort to negotiate this treaty in order to keep emerging nuclear states from perfecting their arsenals and to prevent our rivals from pursuing ever more advanced weapons.

We are confident that all reasonable concerns raised about the treaty back then – concerns about verification and the reliability of our own arsenal - have now been addressed. The test ban treaty is as important as ever.

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As President Obama said in Prague, “we cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it, we can start it.”

Some friends in both parties may question aspects of our approach. Some in my own party may have trouble reconciling investments in our nuclear complex with a commitment to arms reduction. Some in the other party may worry we're relinquishing capabilities that keep our country safe.

With both groups we respectfully disagree. As both the only nation to have used nuclear weapons, and as a strong proponent of non-proliferation, the United States has long embodied a stark but inevitable contradiction. The horror of nuclear conflict may make its occurrence unlikely, but the very existence of nuclear weapons leaves the human race ever at the brink of self-destruction, particularly if the weapons fall into the wrong hands.

Many leading figures of the nuclear age grew ambivalent about aspects of this order. Kennan, whose writings gave birth to the theory of nuclear deterrence, argued passionately but futilely against the development of the hydrogen bomb. And Robert Oppenheimer famously lamented, after watching the first mushroom cloud erupt from a device he helped design, that he had become “the destroyer of worlds.”

President Obama is determined, and I am as well, that the destroyed world Oppenheimer feared must never become our reality. That is why we are pursuing the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. The awesome force at our disposal must always be balanced by the weight of our shared responsibility.

Every day, many in this audience help bear that burden with professionalism, courage, and grace. A grateful nation appreciates your service. Together, we will live up to our responsibilities. Together, we will lead the world. Thank you. May God bless America. May God protect our troops.