

Dismantling the Soviet Threat: Senator Sam Nunn and the Problem of “Loose Nukes”

Frank Leith Jones

For U.S. Senator Sam Nunn, Democrat of Georgia, the collapse of the Soviet Union started with a telephone call on August 29, 1991. Only a few days earlier, Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet president, had been arrested and then released from his Crimean dacha in a failed coup attempt by hardliners from the military, security services, and Communist Party. Now on the line was Nunn’s old friend, Andrei Kokoshin, deputy director of the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies, a Soviet think tank. Kokoshin had been attending the same Aspen Institute conference on U.S.-Soviet relations with Nunn in Budapest, Hungary, but



Senator Sam Nunn

when news of the coup became public, he returned to Moscow. He was pleading with Nunn to come to Russia. He kept repeating that it was very important that Nunn witness the change in the political climate and meet the emerging reform leaders. Nunn’s political antennae were sensitive to Kokoshin’s choice of words; his friend emphasized the word “Russia” repeatedly, not the “Soviet Union.” Gorbachev was back in power after the unsuccessful takeover, Kokoshin informed him, but the hero of the moment was Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin, a political opponent of Gorbachev, had surfaced in the era of *perestroika* and been elected as president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic two months earlier, had rallied the people of Moscow with his defiant stance, and likely saved the embryonic democracy movement from an attempt to establish a military dictatorship. In response

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to Kokoshin's appeal, Nunn offered the excuse that he had no visa to travel to the Soviet Union, but Kokoshin was adamant. He would have the Soviet ambassador to Hungary resolve that issue in a matter of hours, and he was true to his word. The outcome intrigued Nunn, as it spoke volumes about the impending shift in political power, when Kokoshin, who had no official position, could get the Soviet bureaucracy to act with such speed.¹

The Soviet Union Unravels

The Soviet Union was now in the final stages of unraveling, which had begun two years earlier, in November 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification of Germany a year later. Similar scenarios were playing out across Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet republics. The disloyal Soviet officials, who were witnessing the demise of a regime that had been in power for more than eight decades, blamed Gorbachev for the public unrest, the economic turmoil, and the disintegration of the Soviet state. In their view, the Soviet Union was now spiraling out of control, verging on anarchy. Its fragility had been apparent months earlier when the George Bush administration provided \$2.5 billion in short-term agricultural credit guarantees to the Soviet Union, followed by another \$165 million in food aid to feed thousands of suffering Armenians caught up in the interethnic conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, and to stem food shortages in the Ural region.² As Nunn contemplated these facts, a single question was foremost on his mind: Who was in control of the Soviet nuclear weapons during the turmoil of the coup? He was alarmed at the notion that the military perpetrators had complete authority, both their own and Gorbachev's authority.

With his visa problem solved, Nunn traveled from Budapest to Frankfurt by train and then a flight to Moscow where he met with Robert Bell, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee staff, and Kokoshin.³ Kokoshin drove Nunn and Bell directly to the Russian White House, the parliament building, where only

¹ Senator Sam Nunn, Oral History, Sept. 5, 1996, Washington, DC, Sam Nunn private papers, Nuclear Threat Initiative offices, Washington, DC, 149–51; Senator Sam Nunn, telephone interview by author, Mar. 20, 2015.

² Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, "The Nunn-Lugar Initiative: Cooperative Demilitarization of the Former Soviet Union," *The Diplomatic Record, 1992–1993*, ed. Allan E. Goodman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 141. The republics declaring independence before, during, and shortly after the August coup attempt as well as during Nunn's visit were Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

³ Nunn, Oral History, 152–53; Nunn, telephone interview by author; Robert Bell, e-mail message to the author, Apr. 7, 2015.

a few days before, Yeltsin had made his public statement against the coup while standing atop an armored personnel carrier. Nunn was stunned as he surveyed the scene. By his estimate, there were still thousands of people standing outside the building celebrating the result. Nunn, Bell, and Kokoshin forced themselves through the throng and entered the building to meet with Ruslan Khasbulatov, acting chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, and then outside again so Nunn could converse with Gen. Pavel Grachev, who commanded the Soviet airborne troops. Both men had supported Yeltsin; Grachev even defied orders from his superiors to arrest the man and instead, changed sides. On the steps with people and television camera crews gathering around them, Nunn asked Grachev about security of the Soviet nuclear weapons, but the general could not answer with any certainty.⁴ As Nunn stood there with the Soviet physicist and People’s Deputy Roald Sagdeyev, the crowd began hollering at Nunn in Russian, and Nunn noticed that the scientist had removed his parliamentary identification pass. Nunn was perplexed, but Sagdeyev explained. They thought Nunn was a member of the Congress of People’s Deputies and were demanding the end of the Soviet Union. “Resign your position! Abolish the Congress!” they scolded. “I wished I had an American flag,” Nunn later told a U.S. reporter. “You know, Americans are quite popular there now.”⁵

Returning to the building’s interior, Nunn spent most of the day listening to the heated and tumultuous debate regarding the future of the Soviet Union. Before Nunn was a diverse array of representatives from across the Soviet Union—including Kazakhstan, the Ukraine, and Belarus. Sergey Rogov, a coup opponent also associated with the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies, sat beside him interpreting and occasionally editorializing about the speaker’s remarks; calling one speaker a “lying SOB.” Nunn sensed from Rogov’s commentary that Yeltsin’s power was increasing and Gorbachev’s was on the wane.⁶

The next day, Kokoshin took Nunn and Bell to a dacha outside the city where the Russian would speak to a gathering. Nunn was impressed with the surroundings when they reached their destination, a summerhouse situated in a deep forest. The three

⁴ Nunn, Oral History, 153–54; Nunn, telephone interview by author.

⁵ Nunn quoted in Deborah Scroggins, “Nunn Urging Central Control of Soviet Arms,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, Sept. 5, 1991; Nunn, telephone interview by author.

⁶ Nunn, Oral History, 154–55; Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 649; Nunn, telephone interview by author.

entered the building, and before them were “businessmen” from all over the Soviet Union. Men, Nunn surmised, engaged in illegal activity, the underground economy, derisively known as the “Soviet Chamber of Commerce.” Nunn imagined that he had traveled back in time, to the 1920s when Al Capone and his lieutenants met, especially after Kokoshin surprised Nunn and Bell by revealing he was armed. The Russian explained that in the wake of the coup attempt, the situation was dangerous. This disclosure of a sidarm impressed Nunn with how volatile the situation was.⁷

Kokoshin spoke for about 15 minutes and then answered questions for another 2 hours. The men were respectful, but in the smoke-filled room, Nunn felt ill at ease. He had glimpsed another Russia, the men who ruled legal enterprises combined with illicit ventures. As he would later observe, they were powerful, perhaps even violent men who embodied the future of Russia.⁸ The American historian Robert Kagan, another eyewitness to the August events and their immediate aftermath, had a similar impression: the coup had set in motion a “strange blend of democratic revolution, mafia takeover, and cowboy capitalism that would come to characterize the Yeltsin years.”⁹



General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee Mikhail Gorbachev speaking at the 20th Congress of the VLKSM (All-Union Leninist Young Communist League), Kremlin Palace of Congresses, 1987

The following day, Kokoshin and Rogov took Nunn to the Kremlin for a meeting with Gorbachev. Nunn was surprised that the president would see him, given the demands of his schedule and the political pressure he was experiencing. Nunn had met Gorbachev several times before in Washington and Moscow. Gorbachev seemed delighted to see Nunn, and the two men exchanged pleasantries and then engaged in a lengthy discussion of the current situation. Gorbachev enthused about forming a new federation of republics, but underscored the need for some form of central authority to preside over what would be the remnants of the Soviet Union. A

⁷ Nunn, Oral History, 155–57; Nunn, telephone interview by author; Robert Bell, e-mail message to the author.

⁸ Nunn, Oral History, 155–57; Nunn, telephone interview by author.

⁹ Robert Kagan, “A Front-Row Seat for the Russian Coup of '91,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 18, 2011.

meeting scheduled for 15 minutes stretched into an hour. Nunn marveled how collected and calm Gorbachev appeared. Two or three times Nunn rose to leave, but Gorbachev drew him back into conversation. He clearly wanted to continue the discussion.¹⁰ The coup attempt had not cowed him; the situation demanded bold and resolute action. “The country is waiting for decisive steps, for results,” he insisted. “But we have to overcome the situation that’s resulted from the putsch, not just flap our jaws.”¹¹ Finally, Nunn broached the question about who had been in control of the Soviet nuclear forces when the president had been under house arrest. The president’s answer was evasive, and Nunn had the impression that he was uncomfortable. Gorbachev offered reassurances, perhaps believing, given Nunn’s stature and reputation, that through the senator he could convince the U.S. government that, notwithstanding the coup attempt, he was still in charge. His elusive response was actually informative. It confirmed Nunn’s suspicions that this period had been one of substantial peril. The experience of the past two days led him to conclude that nuclear proliferation, security risks, and the potential for accidents and miscalculation would be significant issues that the United States would have to confront with the impending dissolution of the Soviet Union.¹²

On Sunday, September 1, Nunn was a guest on CBS’s “Face the Nation,” from Moscow. The subject of Soviet control of nuclear weapons surfaced, and Nunn told the viewing audience that the Soviet defense minister had assured him its nuclear weapons remained “under central government control”; there was no immediate danger to the United States. However, Nunn remarked that the United States and the Soviet Union should discuss new nuclear safeguards, including an agreement to eliminate all tactical nuclear weapons, which he believed were more dangerous than stabilizing. Further, the two countries should consider “self-destruct” devices on missiles to abort an accidental missile launch and give more attention to risk-reduction and nonproliferation activities. He summed up, “And we should make it clear [to the Soviets] we expect central control to be maintained over all of their nuclear weapons, whatever happens in terms of the republics achieving independence. That message has got to come through loud and clear.”¹³

¹⁰ Nunn, Oral History, 157–59.

¹¹ Anatoly S. Chernyaev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 381.

¹² Nunn, Oral History, 157–59; Scroggins, “Nunn Urging Central Control of Soviet Arms”; Robert Bell, e-mail message to the author.

¹³ Helen Dewar, “Sen. Nunn Reassured on Soviet Arms,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 2, 1991; Nunn, Oral History, 159; Richard Bradee, “Aspin’s Plan to Deal with Arms Threat,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Aug. 29, 1991.

During the telecast, Nunn was asked about a plan that Representative Les Aspin, Democrat from Wisconsin and chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, had proposed three days earlier. Aspin called for \$1 billion dollars to be taken from the fiscal year 1992 defense budget for humanitarian aid that President George Bush could use to assist the Soviet people as winter approached. Nunn saw the merits of Aspin's initiative, and stated that he was open to using defense funds to convert Soviet military industries to commercial purposes because he believed such a move would lessen the Soviet threat. Left unsaid was Nunn's recognition that a major legislative hurdle existed. The House of Representatives and the Senate had already passed their respective defense authorization bills. Congress was now in its August recess, but soon the two chambers would be in conference to reconcile the differences in the bills. It would be tricky adding new provisions at this late date.¹⁴

A Foolish Proposal

On the flight home, Nunn concluded that the past three days had been the "most unusual 72 hours," he had "ever spent" in his life. He had witnessed the splintering of the Soviet Empire, an empire with a massive arsenal of weapons of mass destruction: biological and chemical weapons in addition to nuclear. He was uneasy about two specific groups: the military charged with securing those weapons and the scientists who were knowledgeable about how to develop those weapons. As he visualized the problem, there were three categories of concern. The first category entailed the strategic nuclear weapons targeting the United States that were located on land but also deployed on Soviet submarines. These were the most highly secured weapons. More worrying was the second category, the tactical nuclear weapons: thousands of these battlefield weapons were spread across several time zones. He believed this component to be the principal danger because of the lack of transparency regarding Soviet stockpiles and the difficulty in accounting for all of them. The third category was the fissile materials, enriched uranium and plutonium, that could be used to build nuclear weapons. By one estimate, there was enough material in the Soviet Union to make 50,000 hydrogen bombs. Joining these three problems with existing chemical weapons stockpiles and ongoing biological research programs, a demoralized military, and increasing numbers of unemployed civilians, resulted in a dangerous mixture that warranted prompt attention, and ultimately, action. Obviously,

¹⁴ Nunn, Oral History, 159–60; Nunn and Lugar, "The Nunn-Lugar Initiative," 142; Scroggins, "Nunn Urging Central Control of Soviet Arms."

neither of the defense authorization bills completed before the coup contained measures to respond to this unfolding situation.¹⁵

Upon his return to Washington, Nunn met with Aspin to discuss how the United States could help the Soviets maintain control of their weapons of mass destruction. Aspin shared this concern and had expressed it publicly. Nunn reciprocated by stating that he was supportive of Aspin’s proposal to provide humanitarian aid. However, Nunn remarked that taking funding for aid from the defense budget was risky. It was likely to be opposed by the Bush administration and by a number of their colleagues. A more fruitful approach would be to use excess military stocks as the source of food and medicine. He also argued there was a much closer relationship between defense and helping the Soviets with controlling their weapons than there was with humanitarian aid. In the end, the two did not come to an agreement but decided to continue their discussion of potential options.¹⁶

Aspin’s scheme had already run into disapproval. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, who remained cautious about defense budget cuts in the aftermath of the failed coup in the Soviet Union and amid fears about a potential civil war, deemed it “a foolish proposal” and “a serious mistake.”¹⁷ At a press conference on September 2, President Bush expressed a similar sentiment. “I’m not going to cut into the muscle of defense in this country in a kind of an instant sense of budgetary gratification so that we can go over and help somebody when the needs aren’t clear and we have requirements that transcend historic concerns about the Soviet Union.”¹⁸ The Cold War mentality was hard to shake. Leading legislators from both parties voiced disapproval as well, arguing against spending money to help the Soviet Union.¹⁹

¹⁵ “Beyond Fear: America’s Role in an Uncertain World,” Radio Documentary, Interview with Senator Sam Nunn, Stanley Foundation with KQED Public Radio, Mar. 2007, <http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/resources.cfm?id=404&article=1> (accessed May 29, 2018); Nunn and Lugar, “The Nunn-Lugar Initiative,” 142.

¹⁶ Nunn, Oral History, 160–61; Bradee, “Aspin’s Plan”; Nunn, telephone interview by author.

¹⁷ John Lancaster and Barton Gellman, “Citing Soviet Strife, Cheney Resists Cuts,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 30, 1991.

¹⁸ George H. W. Bush, The President’s News Conference in Kennebunkport, Maine, Sept. 2, 1991, Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19931> (accessed May 28, 2018).

¹⁹ Paul I. Bernstein and Jason D. Wood, “The Origins of Nunn-Lugar and Cooperative Threat Reduction,” Case Study 3, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction (National Defense University, 2010), 4.

Misgivings about the potential for political stability in the Soviet Union were not the only barrier to the plan. House Budget Committee chairman Leon Panetta resisted the proposal, because it endangered the budget agreement he, his House colleagues, and Senate counterparts had carefully constructed with Bush in October 1990. The agreement established separate caps on spending for defense, foreign aid, and domestic programs and barred shifting money among those categories. It imposed a pay-as-you-go philosophy to discourage deficit spending.²⁰

Yet, the Bush administration could no longer dismiss the effect that the deteriorating situation in the Soviet Union could have on control of its nuclear weapons. The U.S. intelligence community had forecast nine months earlier in 1990 that worsening conditions in the Soviet Union would likely result in, at least with an even chance, a scenario of “deterioration short of anarchy.” The analysts gauged that the country’s economic, political, ethnic and social problems would increase at a quickening pace while Gorbachev’s power would decline. Although the coup attempt had failed, the estimate’s conclusion that more damaging political clashes were likely seemed to be coming true.²¹

On September 5, Bush, at a National Security Council (NSC) meeting, asked his advisors for their views regarding what policy steps the United States should take given the uncertain state of affairs in the USSR. After considerable debate, it was evident that there was no agreement about how to proceed. Cheney argued for an approach that would “encourage the breakup of the USSR,” while national security advisor Brent Scowcroft and Secretary of State James Baker took a cautious line that would make the probability of peaceful change more likely. When Scowcroft raised the issue of the Soviet Union’s control of its nuclear weapons, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell assured the gathering that there was no doubt in that regard, the “Red Army” was in command. The subject could not, however, be eliminated from the administration’s list of concerns. Ultimately, it added a sixth “principle” to its list of objectives regarding the potential breakup of the USSR: “Central control over nuclear weapons, and safeguards against internal or external proliferation.”²² The administration signaled its concerns about nuclear weapons when Baker remarked

²⁰ Nunn and Lugar, “The Nunn-Lugar Initiative,” 142–43; Eric Pianin, “The Budget Pact: Worst of Both Worlds?” *Washington Post*, Oct. 1, 1991.f

²¹ Director of Central Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) 11-18-90, Nov. 1990, v, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/19901101.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2018).

²² George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 540–42, 544.

during a press conference that day, “We do not want to see the transformation that’s taking place in the Soviet Union either create or add to the problems of nuclear weapons proliferation.” He informed reporters that he would be traveling to Moscow the following week to discuss progress toward peaceful democratic change.²³ Baker’s comments were not just the result of the NSC meeting, but during the coup attempt, U.S. intelligence had uncovered several irregular indicators involving the Soviet military’s nuclear forces. There were no signs of a nuclear accident or other threat, but Bush asked Baker to pay particular attention to command and control issues when he talked to Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and military leaders.²⁴



President George H.W. Bush (right) with Secretary of State James Baker at a Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) Plenary Session, Paris, France, November 1990

Nonetheless, the outcome of the National Security Council meeting was not fruitless. Bush expressed plainly his interest in pursuing deeper cuts in the number of nuclear weapons that both sides had while there were still leaders in the Soviet Union he could work with in the near-term. He left no doubt that he wanted “solid proposals,” and he asked Scowcroft to work out the details with Cheney about additional arms reductions beyond those Bush and Gorbachev had agreed to in the START treaty signed little over

²³ Scroggins, “Nunn Urging Central Control of Soviet Arms.”

²⁴ James A. Baker III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 526.

a month earlier.²⁵ Accordingly, the administration developed a proposal whereby the United States would make unilateral reductions in its nuclear armaments. Bush shared his thoughts in a letter to Gorbachev on September 26, followed by a telephone conversation on the morning of September 27, in which Bush clarified his intentions and Gorbachev was receptive, in principle.²⁶ Bush then called Yeltsin. Yeltsin reacted positively and thought that Bush's proposal demonstrated "a new level of trust" between the United States and the Soviet Union.²⁷

That evening, on prime time television, Bush did what appeared to be a political U-turn. In his speech, he outlined the plan for substantial reductions in the U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals by withdrawing and dismantling tactical nuclear weapons, beginning negotiations to eliminate multiple-warhead intercontinental ballistic missiles, and embarking upon other initiatives to reduce the risk of accidental launches and stem proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and materials. When reporters asked for Nunn's reaction, his response was guardedly positive. He added that he wanted more information about other elements of the plan, but on balance, he believed the president's proposals warranted support.²⁸

Bush's announcement to scrap a considerable share of the U.S. nuclear arsenal set off a chain reaction. Within weeks, the budget agreement between the president and Congress began to fray. The defense budget was under additional scrutiny, with some lawmakers clamoring for transferring funding to domestic programs, if as Bush stated, conflict with the Soviets was "no longer a realistic threat." Even Nunn and other Pentagon supporters were questioning why additional defense cuts could not be made.²⁹ The cry for a "peace dividend" had begun.

²⁵ Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 544–45; Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 241; Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1993), 445–46.

²⁶ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, subject: Telecon with Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the USSR, Sept. 27, 1991, National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington, DC (hereinafter NSA-GWU)

²⁷ Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, subject: Telecon with Boris Yeltsin, President of the Republic of Russia, Sept. 27, 1991, NSA-GWU.

²⁸ Helen Dewar, "Hill Leaders Show Solid Support for Bush's Arms Cuts Proposal," *Washington Post*, Sept. 28, 1991.

²⁹ David E. Rosenbaum, "Cashing In the Bomb," *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 1991; Andy Pasztor and Peter Gumbel, "Soviet Response Surpasses U.S. Arms Cut Plan," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 7, 1991; Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, subject: Telecon with Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, October 5, 1991, NSA-GWU.

False Start

Meanwhile, in conference, Nunn and Aspin had privately decided to combine their respective proposals into a single amendment to the authorization bill. The first part of the amendment would authorize the use of defense funds to transport humanitarian aid to the Soviet Union. The second would authorize funding for defense conversion, assistance in retraining decommissioned military officers, military-to-military exchanges and the destruction and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.³⁰

By late October, when the two committee chairmen were completing the legislation that would oblige Bush to respond to Gorbachev’s insistent appeals for an unambiguous U.S. pledge to assist the Soviet Union with its impending humanitarian and economic turmoil, their quiet efforts became public. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Jim Hoagland viewed their plan as “an effort by Democrats to contest Bush’s mastery of foreign policy,” in the run-up to the presidential election in 1992. As important members of the “centrist group known as Defense Democrats,” the two sought to alter “the dovish image” of the party for the same reason.³¹

The consequences went well beyond fine-tuning a political strategy for an upcoming election. Nunn’s colleagues on the Armed Services Committee, both Democrats and Republicans, expressed “opposition and indeed outrage,” that the Nunn-Aspin amendment was being foisted on them just days before House and Senate conferees were expected to complete work on the authorization bill.³² Nonetheless, the idea was gaining support among Bush administration officials after weeks of intense and secret discussions between the committee chairmen and influential administration officials, including Cheney; Richard Darman, director of the Office of Management and Budget; and Scowcroft.³³

Despite the uproar, on November 1 the conferees announced their agreement on a fiscal year 1992 defense budget of \$291 billion, making few changes to the Defense Department’s proposed budget, as they were reluctant to scuttle the existing budget agreement. Nunn and Aspin were pleased because they had attained their goals after six weeks of negotiation. The authorization bill established a commission, as Nunn had proposed, to help the Soviet Union guide its huge military-industrial

³⁰ Nunn, Oral History, 147.

³¹ Jim Hoagland, “The Democrats’ Audacious Take on Soviet Aid,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 31, 1991.

³² Nunn, Oral History, 161.

³³ Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon May Give Moscow \$1 Billion,” *New York Times*, Nov. 1, 1991; Paul Houston, “\$1-Billion Aid Plan for Soviets Proposed Defense,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 2, 1991.

enterprise toward a civilian, free market economy. It included a provision that met Aspin's concerns, allowing the Defense Department to spend up to \$1 billion to transport and distribute surplus food and medicine, private relief supplies, and other humanitarian aid to the Soviet Union. Spending the funds would be at the discretion of the secretary of defense, but Nunn and Aspin characterized the aid as meeting a valid national security aim: preventing mass starvation and social unrest in a nation with more than 30,000 nuclear weapons. Not all their colleagues shared their perspective. The plan ignited disagreement in the conference's final hours, but Nunn and Aspin succeeded in ramming it through. Republicans on the Senate Armed Services Committee vowed that they would block the measure when it came to a floor vote, but Cheney, speaking for the administration, indicated that it would not oppose the aid provision provided it remained discretionary. In the end, the two Armed Services Committees approved the amendment, adding it to the defense authorization bill, but only after straight party-line votes in both committees.³⁴ Nunn and Aspin's victory was short-lived. A week later, the bill's provision was subjected to withering condemnation in both houses. Republican senators, as promised, assailed the defense bill. Democrats condemned the \$1 billion aid provision.³⁵

Aspin and his party supporters in the House, including Majority Leader Richard Gephardt, were having an equally difficult time. Representative Newt Gingrich, the assistant Republican Leader, judged it an outrage for Aspin and Nunn to add the aid provision at the last minute. Republicans and Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, who saw the provision as foreign aid and therefore an attempt by Aspin to usurp the committee's authority in foreign policy, worked together to kill the entire defense bill. House Speaker Tom Foley, confronting the emerging rebellion, just wanted the controversy to die so the bill could come to the floor for a vote. With the pressure mounting, Aspin signaled that he was willing to drop the contentious plan.³⁶

³⁴ John Lancaster, "Defense Bill Includes Soviet Aid," *Washington Post*, Nov. 2, 1991; Eric Schmitt, "Soviet Upheaval Has Little Impact on Spending Bill for U.S. Military," *New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1991; Andy Pasztor, "House, Senate Hammer Out Defense Bill that Rejects Many of Bush's Priorities," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 3, 1991; Richard Combs, "U.S. Domestic Politics and the Nunn-Lugar Program," in *Dismantling the Cold War: U.S. and NIS Perspectives on the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program*, eds. John M. Shields and William C. Potter (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 43.

³⁵ Helen Dewar, "Plan to Spend Defense on Soviets May Die," *Washington Post*, Nov. 8, 1991.

³⁶ *Ibid.*; Richard Bradee, "Plan to Aid USSR May Stall Bill," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Nov. 8, 1991; Paul Houston, "Democrats Warn They May Drop Soviet Aid Package," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 8, 1991.

Nunn remained resolute. He admitted the opposition had a legitimate grievance in that the added provision was not in either the House or the Senate versions of the defense bill, but he also felt it was an emergency and therefore, justified.³⁷ In defending the provision, Nunn claimed that the aid might be crucial in dealing with pervasive military discontent and civil strife in the Soviet Union. He feared that Soviet nuclear weapons could be sold on the international arms market. Nonetheless, he mollified his critics, suggesting that he would confer with Aspin and Senate colleagues in the next week to preserve, eliminate, or adjust the proposal, based on numerous factors, including “tepid and ineffectual White House support.” In response, Senator John Warner, Republican from Virginia and Armed Services Committee member, believed that the Bush administration would hold to the position Cheney had stated earlier based on a recent meeting he had with the secretary.³⁸

Five days later, on November 13, Nunn and Aspin pulled their proposal, as the opposition from members in both parties was fierce. “We didn’t get away with it,” Nunn confessed a few years later.³⁹ In withdrawing the provision because it could derail the entire defense authorization bill, they admitted defeat and suffered an extraordinary political embarrassment. The lack of endorsement from the Bush administration was a critical contributor to the failure. In the view of many in Congress and the media, two powerful legislators, “among the most astute dealmakers and power brokers in Washington,” had made a serious blunder by not conferring with their Democratic colleagues sooner and failing to foresee the bipartisan disapproval the plan would generate by aiding the Soviets when many Americans were unemployed because of the deepening recession.⁴⁰

The concerns that had catalyzed Nunn and Aspin to action persisted. Nunn remained troubled by the defeat of a plan his critics characterized as a “giveaway,” but he was also angered by his legislative colleagues and the White House’s short-sightedness in not recognizing the “great danger that Soviet nuclear weapons

³⁷ Sam Nunn, “Remarks,” Session 3, “Using Science and Technology to Meet New Defense and Arms Control Needs,” Fifth Panel Discussion, White House Forum on the Role of Science and Technology in Promoting National Security and Global Stability, Mar. 29–30, 1995, <https://clintonwhitehouse3.archives.gov/WH/EOP/OSTP/forum/html/ses3.html> (accessed May 29, 2018).

³⁸ Dewar, “Plan to Spend Defense on Soviets May Die”; Bradee, “Plan to Aid USSR May Stall Bill”; Houston, “Democrats Warn They May Drop Soviet Aid Package.”

³⁹ Sam Nunn, “Changing Threats in the Post-Cold War World,” speech, Monterey Institute for International Studies, Monterey, CA, Aug. 25, 1995.

⁴⁰ Eric Schmitt, “Moscow Aid Plan Dying in Congress,” *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 1991.

would fall into the control of breakaway republics, nationalist groups, even that they would be sold to or stolen by terrorists.” As he said in a floor speech the day he pulled the provision from the bill, he would rely on his colleagues to explain to their constituents why they had not voted for the provision when that moment came, especially when the Soviets were asking for U.S. assistance to destroy 15,000 nuclear weapons. For him, it was a commonsense proposition. The United States had spent \$4 trillion to contain the Soviet threat for more than four decades; he believed Americans would understand a relatively small investment to substantially reduce the threat.⁴¹ Nunn was not the only person disquieted by Congress’s opposition to aiding the Soviets. Within a week, Robert Strauss, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, a longtime friend of Bush and a Democrat, added his voice to Nunn’s complaint about the U.S. government’s imprudence. Strauss was alarmed about the possibility of famine, which caught the attention of two senators: David Boren, an Oklahoma Democrat and a senior member of the Agriculture Committee; and Senator Richard Lugar, an Indiana Republican and the committee’s ranking member. They wanted to offer agricultural credit guarantees to the USSR so it could purchase grain from the United States. While the proposition intrigued the White House, the budding proposal appeared doomed. Senate Democrat Patrick Leahy, the Agriculture Committee chairman, viewed it as “playing a deceptive game with American taxpayers,” who bear the ultimate risk of default.⁴²



Senator Richard Lugar

Boren had concerns far beyond food, as he chaired the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. U.S. intelligence officials apprised him that the situation in the Soviet Union was “very unstable and potentially dangerous.” Additionally, former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union and career diplomat Jack Matlock, who kept current on Russian affairs, expressed his concerns directly to Boren,

⁴¹ “Pentagon Money Will Not Go To USSR,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, Wash., DC, Nov. 13, 1991; Helen Dewar, “Lawmakers Drop Aid for Soviets,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 14, 1991.

⁴² Robert D. Hershey, Jr., “2 Senators Seek to Revive Plan to Divert Pentagon Funds to Soviets,” *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 1991.

and ex-Oklahoma Senator Henry Bellmon, who had recently returned from a visit to the Soviet Union, informed him of dramatically worsening conditions throughout the country.⁴³

Nunn was equally committed to his belief that the Soviet Union was “coming apart at the seams,” and decided to proceed with a stand-alone bill that would focus principally on dismantling Soviet weapons of mass destruction. He decided to discuss the issue with Lugar, a senior member on the Foreign Relations Committee.⁴⁴ Lugar had a longstanding interest in international security and arms control issues, and the two, along with three aides, Robert Bell, Ken Myers, and Richard Combs, started to work on a plan.⁴⁵

Building Consensus

Politicians were not the only ones who were concerned about the impending peril of a disintegrating state with nuclear weapons. Dr. Ashton Carter, director of the Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, and three colleagues had recently completed a study that examined the unprecedented proliferation problem that could result.⁴⁶ In Carter’s view, there was now the “prospect of an entire continent strewn with nuclear weapons undergoing a convulsive social and political revolution against communism.” Their study forecast the end of the Soviet Union and specified the principal threats to reliable custody of more than 27,000 nuclear weapons during that turbulent time. It recommended that the United States government establish a comprehensive program to assist the Soviets and the governments of the emergent republics with securing and dismantling their enormous nuclear enterprise, including weapons and material, plants and research programs, and the military and civilian personnel associated with this venture.⁴⁷

⁴³ Don Oberdorfer, “First Aid for Moscow: The Senate’s Foreign Policy Rescue,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 1, 1991.

⁴⁴ Nunn, Oral History, 161–62.

⁴⁵ Ashton Carter and William J. Perry, *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* (Wash., DC: Brookings, 1999), 71–72.

⁴⁶ Kurt Campbell, Ashton Carter, Steven Miller, and Charles Zraket, *Soviet Nuclear Fission: Control of the Nuclear Arsenal in a Disintegrating Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 1991).

⁴⁷ Ashton Carter, “Origins of the Nunn-Lugar Program,” Presentation to the Presidential Conference on William Jefferson Clinton: The “New Democrat from Hope,” Hofstra University, Nov. 2005; Campbell, et al., *Soviet Nuclear Fission*, i–iv.

To Carter's dismay, when the team presented their findings to Bush administration officials, they received a polite but indifferent reception. However, two important men intervened. One was David Hamburg, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which had funded the study, and the second was William Perry, who had served as a high-ranking defense official in President Jimmy Carter's administration, and was now leading a research organization at Stanford University that was examining how the Soviet military-industrial complex could be transformed into a civilian economic engine when the Cold War ceased. Hamburg used his relationship with Nunn and Lugar, who had served as members of the steering committee for the Carnegie Corporation's Prevention of Proliferation Task Force, to set up a meeting between Ashton Carter and the senators.⁴⁸

On November 19, Hamburg, accompanied by Carter and Perry along with John Steinbruner, director of the Foreign Policy Studies Program at the Brookings Institution, met in Lugar's office, where Carter briefed Nunn and Lugar on the study team's findings and recommendations.⁴⁹ The impact of the briefing was immediate. It bolstered and corroborated Nunn's belief that it was in U.S. national interest to aid the Soviet Union to secure and control its vast stocks of weapons of mass destruction, given the likelihood of its collapse. Lugar was also impressed with the analysis and agreed that they should proceed with restoring the relevant parts of the failed Nunn-Aspin legislation, and fashion a new bill. Nunn and Lugar directed Myers from Lugar's staff, and Bell and Combs from Nunn's staff, to draft the legislation. Combs fashioned the language based on the views of the senators. He coordinated with Representative Aspin's staff on specific provisions and received advice from a member of the House Armed Services Committee. Combs welcomed these recommendations, as one of Nunn and Lugar's goals was to build consensus for the legislation in both houses.⁵⁰

For their part, Nunn and Lugar composed a list of senators from both parties who might support the new bill, especially since the issue was receiving prominent attention in other Washington quarters. Carter's briefing occurred during a visit by

⁴⁸ Richard Combs, telephone interview by author, Feb. 5, 2015; David A. Hamburg, *A Perspective on Carnegie Corporation's Program, 1983–1997* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1997), 19; Carter, "Origins of the Nunn-Lugar Program"; Carter and Perry, *Preventive Defense*, 71–72; Bernstein and Wood, "The Origins of Nunn-Lugar and Cooperative Threat Reduction," 6.

⁴⁹ Combs, "U.S. Domestic Politics and the Nunn-Lugar Program," 43–44.

⁵⁰ Combs, telephone interview by author; Richard Combs, email message to author, Feb. 2, 2015, with attachment (Richard Combs, "Origins of the Nunn-Lugar Legislation"), June 24, 2013; Combs, "U.S. Domestic Politics and the Nunn-Lugar Program," 44; Bernstein and Wood, "The Origins of Nunn-Lugar and Cooperative Threat Reduction," 7.

Viktor Mikhailov, Soviet deputy minister of atomic energy and industry, to the Senate Arms Control Observer Group. Mikhailov described for the legislators his country’s problems with storing, destroying, and controlling nuclear weapons. The problem was simple. His country did not have the needed money, about \$800 million, to store or dismantle the nuclear weapons Gorbachev had committed to destroy. He pleaded for American help. Sergey Rogov and Andrei Kokoshin, who accompanied him, added to the alarm with a sobering report on nuclear control deficiencies. The three men left their listeners with an unmistakable message: the Soviet Union was coming apart, and the situation required rapid U.S. action.⁵¹ Such messages were received clearly in Western capitals too. Officials from the leading industrial nations, the G-7, were meeting in Moscow with Gorbachev and representatives from the 12 remaining Soviet republics, a sign that the central government’s power was waning, to determine how they could provide aid but with assurances that the republics would repay existing debts. In the meantime, Bush announced that the United States would provide almost \$1.5 billion in grain and agricultural credits to help the Soviet Union make it through the winter.⁵²

Two days later, on November 21, Nunn and Lugar invited a bipartisan group of 16 senators, chairmen of key committees and other senior members, to a breakfast meeting in a conference room of the Senate Armed Services Committee, to hear Carter’s briefing. According to Nunn and Lugar, “Once acquainted with Carter’s analysis, these colleagues agreed that U.S. domestic political hostility to Soviet aid paled in comparison to the dangers in question.” Ultimately, Nunn and Lugar secured the other members’ agreement to support a \$500 million program to destroy nuclear weapons and a separate \$200 million for humanitarian aid. Some of the senators pledged to speak with party colleagues in the Senate, a few others promised to discuss the issue with potentially cooperative members of the House, and still others agreed to engage the administration. The group decided that Senators Boren and Carl Levin, a Michigan Democrat, would take charge of the humanitarian aid effort, while Nunn and Lugar would lead the weapons destruction issue.⁵³ With this profitable result, Nunn and Lugar were prepared to advance to the next step in their agenda.

⁵¹ Nunn and Lugar, “The Nunn-Lugar Initiative,” 144; Bernstein and Wood, “The Origins of Nunn-Lugar and Cooperative Threat Reduction,” 46, n30; Oberdorfer, “First Aid for Moscow.”

⁵² “Soviet Talks on G-7 Help Hit New Snags,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 21, 1991; “U.S. Government Offers More Aid to Soviet Republics,” *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, Wash., DC, Nov. 21, 1991.

⁵³ Nunn and Lugar, “The Nunn-Lugar Initiative,” 144; Carter and Perry, *Preventive Defense*, 71–72; Don Oberdorfer and R. Jeffrey Smith, “Senators Back Aid to Soviet for Arms Cuts,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 22, 1991; Oberdorfer, “First Aid for Moscow.”

The next day, the *Washington Post* published Nunn and Lugar's op-ed in which they characterized the Soviet Union as a nuclear superpower descending into chaos, the signs of which were readily apparent: a plummeting economy, a scarcity of food and other essential goods, a currency growing increasingly worthless, and long-simmering ethnic quarrels exploding into violent clashes. In this moment of turmoil, the United States had an opportunity to foster the largest reduction in weapons of mass destruction in history. They made their appeal sensible and easily understandable to not only their colleagues on Capitol Hill but also to the American public. While U.S. assistance could not eradicate the threat that Soviet nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and technical expertise posed to the United States and its allies, it could catalyze the destruction of a large portion of the arsenal. It would be a significant step in advancing nonproliferation efforts. They emphasized the "importance of preventing the weapons and weapons know-how from being transferred to the Saddam Husseins and the Moammar Gadhafis of the Third World." U.S. assistance would come with a price. Specifically, it would depend on Soviet and republic leaders abiding by all relevant arms control agreements, respecting the human rights of minority groups in the newly sovereign republics, and making clear commitments to demilitarization. They asserted that destroying Soviet weapons of mass destruction made sound economic sense, as the process would lower U.S. defense spending in the future and, consequently, free more funding for domestic priorities. They ended by underscoring that the Soviet and republic leaders requested U.S. help in this project and that Congress needed to act now. "It would be shortsighted and irresponsible to let this opportunity pass." To buttress their claim, that same day, they released the Harvard study, whereby a reporter dubbed the weapon proliferation problem as "the frightening possibility of 'loose nukes.'"⁵⁴

The White House agreed with Nunn and Lugar's assessment, but the initiative lay with Capitol Hill. Nunn talked to Scowcroft and discussed the plan with Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defense Donald Atwood, who had just returned from a trip to Moscow and had heard Soviet appeals for aid directly from Gorbachev and other officials. Along with Boren and Lugar, Nunn attempted to set up a meeting between Bush and Senate leaders to discuss the issue, but Bush refused. Nunn could only assume that while there were admin-

⁵⁴ San Nunn and Richard Lugar, "Dismantling the Soviet Arsenal; We've Got to Get Involved," *Washington Post*, Nov. 22, 1991; Robert C. Toth, "Funds Sought to Control Soviet 'Loose Nukes,'" *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 22, 1991.

istration officials who were “interested individually,” no White House endorsement would be forthcoming.⁵⁵

Legislative Success

Such a position became more obvious when Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, speaking at an American Bar Association meeting, stated that he did not believe there was “cause for alarm about who had control over nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union today,” but he also hedged, “the future is clearly very uncertain and unpredictable.” Nonetheless, he advocated for Washington working with the Soviet Union on measured steps to trim the number of nuclear weapons. A high-level meeting of U.S. and Soviet officials was scheduled the next week to discuss destruction of short-range nuclear missiles.⁵⁶

Nunn and Lugar were not deterred. They built their coalition of co-sponsors, now numbering 24, by writing a bill that would win broad backing for the plan and conceivably have the best chance of passage in the closing days of the legislative session. To reassure Senate conservatives, such as Republican Minority Leader Robert Dole and Jesse Helms, Republican from North Carolina, the bill forbade funds being used to underwrite the Soviet military in any way. The occupational retraining and housing of decommissioned officers from Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces, which had been proposed in the Nunn-Aspin legislation and had been particularly offensive to Republicans on the Senate Armed Services Committee, was eliminated.⁵⁷ They addressed other concerns that Senate and House Republicans demanded. In some cases, they made their arguments for a provision based on feasibility rather than political acceptability, such as establishing the Defense Department as the lead agency for the program rather than the Department of State. In other cases, they had to make certain that domestic political concerns were dealt with, such as ensuring that U.S. technology and expertise were used where practicable, including a “Buy American” provision, and requiring prior notification to Congress of the Defense Department’s intent to reprogram funds to the program. Recipient countries had obligations as well. The most stringent provision established performance criteria that recipient countries were required to fulfill before obtaining Nunn-Lugar funding. These criteria required observing international

⁵⁵ Oberdorfer, “First Aid for Moscow”; George Bush, “Address to the Nation on Reducing United States and Soviet Nuclear Weapons,” Sept. 27, 1991, Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=20035&st=&st1=> (accessed May 28, 2018).

⁵⁶ Oberdorfer and Smith, “Senators Back Aid to Soviet for Arms Cuts.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; Nunn and Lugar, “The Nunn-Lugar Initiative,” 144; Combs, “U.S. Domestic Politics and the Nunn-Lugar Program,” 42–44; Nunn, telephone interview by author.

norms of human rights, abiding by arms control commitments, and enabling U.S. verification that program funds were being used for the purposes on which the United States and the recipient country had agreed.⁵⁸

When their coalition building was complete, Nunn and Lugar used the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty Implementation Act as a vehicle, offering an amendment titled the Soviet Nuclear Threat Reduction Act of 1991. The Nunn-Lugar amendment, as it became commonly known, authorized \$500 million from the defense budget to help the Soviet Union and its republics solely for destroying nuclear, chemical, and other weapons; transporting, storing, disabling, and safeguarding weapons to be destroyed; and establishing verifiable safeguards against the proliferation of these weapons.⁵⁹

Their attention to their colleagues' concerns and the compromises they made paid off. On November 25, 1991, the Nunn-Lugar bill passed in the Senate. The vote was 86-8, supported by 52 Democrats and 34 Republicans, with 8 Republicans voting against the measure. Senator Joe Biden, Delaware Democrat, called the program "the most cost-effective national security expenditure in American history." Others credited Ambassador Strauss's alarms about imminent disorder in the Soviet Union for their support.⁶⁰

While Nunn realized that his partnership with Lugar would strengthen the bill, bringing additional votes to the cause, he marveled at the outcome, "It was the most dramatic reversal of congressional opinion in a two-week period that I've seen, short of something happening like a war. I mean, it was an unbelievable amount of support given how much skepticism there had been." It was a stunning achievement: the ability to connect events occurring in the Soviet Union and security of the United States.⁶¹ During the debate on the amendment, senators expressed their approval largely because they viewed destroying these weapons as

⁵⁸ Combs, "U.S. Domestic Politics and the Nunn-Lugar Program," 45; Bernstein and Wood, "The Origins of Nunn-Lugar and Cooperative Threat Reduction," 8.

⁵⁹ Theodor Galdi, "The Nunn-Lugar Program for Soviet Weapons Dismantlement: Background and Implementation," (Wash., DC: Congressional Research Service, 1995), 3-4.

⁶⁰ Don Oberdorfer and Helen Dewar, "Senate Votes to Assist Soviet Nuclear Cutbacks," *Washington Post*, Nov. 26, 1991; Eric Schmitt, "Senate Votes Aid to Soviets to Scrap Atomic Arms," *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 1991; Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty Implementation Act of 1991, H.R. 3807, 102nd Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* (Nov. 25, 1991), Senate Vote No. 274.

⁶¹ Nunn, Oral History, 162-64.

a means of enhancing U.S. security, while others viewed it as a major step toward preventing proliferation.⁶²

The Senate Appropriations Committee did not support the proposed funding level the bill’s sponsors endorsed, and reduced it to \$400 million, without explanation. However, the figure did not add new funding to the Defense Department’s budget; instead, it authorized the department to transfer (or “reprogram”) up to \$400 million from other categories in its operations and maintenance and working capital accounts to this new program. This discretionary element appeased the White House, which was said to favor the new aid package, and made it more acceptable to members of Congress in both houses, but the Defense Department remained displeased about having to take funding “out of its hide” for a program it considered of dubious worth. Still, the proof that Nunn and Lugar had fashioned a politically acceptable bill came a few days later when Les Aspin and House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt assembled the needed support in the House of Representatives, and the legislation passed that body by acclamation.⁶³

Two weeks later, on December 12, Bush signed the defense bill, and Nunn-Lugar became law. The White House press statement only mentioned the Bush administration’s commitment to helping the Soviet Union and the republics join “the community of democratic nations,” strengthening “a more peaceful and stable international order,” and designating several administration officials as responsible for coordinating the U.S. assistance. There was no mention of assisting these countries with dismantling nuclear weapons.⁶⁴ Moreover, the press paid little attention to another event 185 miles to the north in Princeton, New Jersey. Speaking at Princeton University, Secretary of State James Baker voiced no doubt about the matters that concerned him with the end of the Soviet Union. He noted the political and economic issues at stake regarding U.S. relations with the former Soviet Union and the successor states, but a security issue was most troubling: the need to safeguard and destroy the former Soviet Union’s vast arsenal of weapons of mass

⁶² Galdi, “The Nunn-Lugar Program,” 4; *Cong. Rec.*, 102nd Cong., 1st sess., vol. 137, daily ed., no. 176 (Nov. 25, 1991): S18001, S18018, S18038.

⁶³ Combs, “U.S. Domestic Politics and the Nunn-Lugar Program,” 44; Bernstein and Wood, “The Origins of Nunn-Lugar and Cooperative Threat Reduction,” 8, 14 n35; Nunn and Lugar, “The Nunn-Lugar Initiative,” 145; Michael Ross, “Senate Votes \$700 Million for Soviet Aid,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 26, 1991.

⁶⁴ George H. W. Bush, “Statement by Press Secretary Fitzwater on Assistance to the Soviet Union and the Republics,” Dec. 12, 1991, Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=20334> (accessed May 28, 2018).

destruction, now under the control of a single authority. The Bush administration was determined to prevent the emergence of new nuclear weapons states from the ongoing transformation of the Soviet Union. In this context, Baker alluded to the Nunn-Lugar amendment. “That’s neither charity nor aid,” he declared, “that’s an investment in a secure future for every American.” If not destroyed, he asserted, these weapons might find themselves in the hands of figures like Saddam Hussein or Muammar Gaddafi.⁶⁵

Don Oberdorfer, a *Washington Post* reporter, would not let the event pass unnoticed or unappreciated. He praised the Nunn-Lugar amendment as a beginning step in a drastically altered international environment, judging it the “Senate’s foreign policy rescue.”⁶⁶ It was an 11th-hour salvage as well. Four days earlier, the presidents of Rus-



Senator Richard Lugar with Typhoon Submarine (TK-202) during a 2002 delegation visit to the SevMash and Svezdoichka shipyards, Severodvinsk, Russia. The submarine was being de-fueled as part of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program.

⁶⁵ James Baker, “America and the Collapse of the Soviet Empire: What Has to Be Done,” Address at Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, Dec. 12, 1991, *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, Dec. 16, 1991, Vol. 2, no. 50, 887, 888–90.

⁶⁶ Oberdorfer, “First Aid for Moscow.”



Senator Richard Lugar in front of an SS-19 missile silo in Pervomaysk, Ukraine, during a delegation visit that Senators Nunn and Lugar led in October 1996. The silo would be one of 60 SS-19 silos eliminated in Ukraine in 1996 alone.

sia, Ukraine, and Belarus signed the Belavezha Accords, declaring the Soviet Union dissolved and establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States. By the end of the month, Soviet state institutions stopped operating.⁶⁷ As the Central Intelligence Agency predicted a few months earlier, and Yeltsin underscored in a letter to President Bush in late November, a historic transformation was underway. The old order was dead; an undefined, new political order was being born.⁶⁸

Conclusion

One of the ways to understand Nunn’s leadership role with respect to the problem of “loose nukes” is to think of him as a policy entrepreneur, working within the foreign policy domain situated in the U.S. Congress through a process sometimes

⁶⁷ Bernstein and Wood, “The Origins of Nunn-Lugar and Cooperative Threat Reduction,” 8, 14 n33.

⁶⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence Paper, “Gorbachev’s Future,” May 23, 1991, NSA-GWU; Letter from Boris Yeltsin to George Bush, undated, NSA-GWU. Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev handed this letter to President Bush on November 26, 1991.

called “cloakroom politics.” Committee chairs, such as Nunn, can have an outsize influence in moving issues from proposal to serious attention on the legislative agenda, but with a crowded agenda, the timing of the initiative must be suitable, and it must solve an issue needing immediate attention. In this example of issue-specific legislation, Nunn was able to take the lead and build consensus by clearly defining the policy problem and its importance to U.S. security, identifying a feasible solution, and then using procedures and relationships to formulate a new policy and see it enacted into law.

Nunn’s political success was achieved without the endorsement of the Bush administration, an administration that in 1991 began to reconsider its policy options because of the growing disorder in, and possible collapse of, the Soviet Union, as well as the end of communism in Eastern Europe. It remained on the sideline as events unfolded, sometimes sending mixed signals about how the United States would react to changes in leadership or national aspirations. The coup became the inflection point for an overly cautious administration that favored measured change and careful engagement to maintain regional stability. While Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney worried about the impact that disintegration of the Soviet Union might have on the U.S. defense budget, Secretary of State James Baker believed that the administration should not reject opportunities to advance political and economic reforms in the former Soviet Union and its republics. Nunn’s past experiences, however, shaped his perspective and prompted his determination for immediate action. These experiences included the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, which occurred when he was working on the staff of the House Armed Services Committee, and his longstanding bipartisan efforts in arms control, especially reducing the risk of nuclear war and the potential for nuclear proliferation.

Nunn’s successful entrepreneurial activities can be divided into the following steps: problem definition, agenda addition, policy solution, and “working the system” and legislative activities. In terms of problem definition, Nunn had to interpret the events he experienced in the Soviet Union: the bipolar world of the Cold War security environment was crumbling and the Soviet government’s control of its nuclear weapons and fissile material suspect. He reframed his Cold War schema by integrating these data with his personal theory of how the world works. This exercise assisted him with devising a method of presenting his views to colleagues about a situation that demanded their immediate attention and, thereby, placing it at the top of the policy agenda. Nunn connected the issue to more than political

change and nuclear proliferation. At stake was something more far-reaching: the possibility that U.S. security, an enduring and core national interest, was imperiled. The release of the Harvard researchers' study proved critical, for while Nunn worked the system by contacting and consulting the Bush administration, this document served as a new focusing event. Nunn then built support in the Senate by reaching across the aisle to Lugar, an internationalist with a reputation for bipartisanship and a well-regarded member of the Foreign Relations Committee. This move broadened the base of support to another foreign policy–related committee and added to his side other Republicans who shared Lugar's orientation. From this point on, Nunn and Lugar built a sturdy coalition within the Senate, one that would coalesce around a new amendment that Nunn and Lugar forged but were willing to compromise on to achieve their goal. Thus, armed with the study and attracting 24 co-sponsors to their legislation, they found a legislative vehicle to which they could attach their amendment. Nunn's previous discussions with Aspin and the support of House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt helped ensure success in that chamber.

Once the Soviet Union disappeared, the Bush administration slowly initiated activities to implement the legislation, with Nunn and Lugar keeping up the pressure by leading a congressional delegation (CODEL) to the Newly Independent States in March 1992 and personally providing recommendations to Bush. Baker continued as the legislation's champion. In addition, Baker devised a plan that provided technical assistance to clean up the former Soviet nuclear weapons sites, as well as programs designed to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Both elements were incorporated into the Freedom Support Act of 1992 (P.L. 102-511). Nonetheless, it was William Clinton's presidency that ensured an executive branch commitment by institutionalizing Nunn-Lugar in the Defense Department under the leadership of Les Aspin as secretary of defense; William Perry, his deputy; and Ashton Carter, as the assistant secretary of defense responsible for the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program.⁶⁹

The Department of Defense's Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program became an immense and remarkably successful nonproliferation venture. Although the program has ended in Russia, it now operates in 40 countries worldwide. Since its establishment, the program has deactivated more than 7,600 nuclear warheads and destroyed more than 3,600 missiles and

⁶⁹ Nunn and Richard Lugar, “The Nunn-Lugar Initiative,” 146–51.

delivery systems, 33 submarines, 155 bombers, over 1.6 million chemical munitions, and in excess of 4,000 metric tons of chemical agents. Within three years after the demise of the Soviet Union, the program helped former Soviet republics Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus remove nuclear warheads from their territories and become nonnuclear states.⁷⁰ Nunn and Lugar's foresight and statesmanship did not go unrecognized; they were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 and 2001.⁷¹

Picture credits: Senator Sam Nunn, Nuclear Threat Initiative; Senator Richard Lugar, SS-19 silo, Lugar at submarine, The Lugar Center; General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, RIA Novosti archive/Vladimir Vyatki; President Bush and Baker, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum.

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⁷⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Threat Reduction Agency, "Celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program," News release, No. DTRA 2016-013, December 12, 2016, <http://www.dtra.mil/Portals/61/2016-013%20Soviet%20Threat%20Reduction%20Act%2025th%20v5.pdf> (accessed May 26, 2018); Nuclear Threat Initiative, "The Nunn-Lugar Vision: 20 Years of Reducing Global Dangers," brochure, https://www.nti.org/media/pdfs/NunnLugarBrochure_2012.pdf?_=1354304005 (accessed May 28, 2018).

⁷¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. Sam Nunn, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sam-Nunn> (accessed May 28, 2018).