

## THE BELFER CENTER AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS POLICY: SECURITY IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

Steven E. Miller  
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The abortive coup attempt against Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow in August 1991 raised in a stark and alarming way the question of who was controlling the Soviet arsenal at a moment of extraordinary political instability. The subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union raised the equally consequential question of who would inherit the Soviet nuclear arsenal. The ensuing and ongoing political instability and economic travails in Russia raised the question of the safety and security of the Russian nuclear arsenal and nuclear empire. In view of the fact that these weapons and associated nuclear materials constitute the largest potential threat to the United States and its allies—and given the potential of Russian nuclear weapons and weapons-usable materials to fuel terrorism and nuclear proliferation—this is one of the most significant security issues of the post-Cold War era. Work on the safety and security of Russian nuclear holdings soon led to concern about the adequacy of custodial arrangements for nuclear weapons and nuclear materials on a global scale. Meanwhile, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, highlighted the danger that a terrorist group may obtain nuclear weapons and inflict an even more horrific attack.

In response to the August 1991 coup attempt, the Center formed a working group to analyze post-Cold War nuclear dangers and to investigate policy options for addressing them. Over the subsequent fifteen years, this strand of the Center's work resulted in numerous books (including a spin-off volume published in Japanese), a series of major conferences, and a host of associated products and activities, including testimony before the U.S. Congress on a number of occasions, briefings of congressional members as well as officials in the Executive Branch, involvement of Center members in drafting relevant legislation shaping U.S. policy, dozens of articles and op-eds, countless lectures and presentations in Europe, North America, Japan, and the former Soviet Union, and fairly extensive media coverage—not to mention the recruitment of several Center members into government service to work on precisely this set of issues.

The efforts that the Center has made in addressing the nuclear challenges of the post-Cold War era are anchored in the books that it has produced on the major dimensions of the problem. The first of these, *Soviet Nuclear Fission: Control of the Nuclear Arsenal in a Disintegrating Soviet Union* (Center for Science and International Affairs, 1991), undertook a comprehensive analysis of the nuclear dangers that may confront U.S. and Western interests should the Soviet Union collapse. This volume contributed directly to the passage of the original Nunn-Lugar legislation, known formally as “The Soviet Nuclear Threat Reduction Act of 1991.” The second volume, *Cooperative Denuclearization: From Pledges to Deeds* (Center for Science and International Affairs, 1993), tackled the challenge of ensuring that the far-flung Soviet nuclear arsenal did not give rise to multiple nuclear successor states among the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. Published in January 1993, it was influential with the then new

Clinton Administration as it fashioned its policy toward Russia and the other states of the former Soviet Union.

A third volume, *Avoiding Nuclear Anarchy: Containing the Threat of Loose Russian Nuclear Weapons and Fissile Material* (1996) was published by the MIT Press in the **BCSIA Studies in International Security** series and focused on the security of nuclear weapons–related assets in Russia. By the mid-1990s, the entire Soviet nuclear arsenal had been consolidated within the borders of a Russia marked by political uncertainty, rampant criminality, economic distress, and social upheaval. The Center undertook to assess the state of security of Russian nuclear materials (distressingly inadequate), to identify U.S. and Western interests in the fate of these materials (the stakes are enormous), to evaluate the effectiveness of existing U.S. policies aimed at reducing the danger of nuclear leakage (current policies were and are insufficient), and to propose initiatives that would be more effective at minimizing the danger of nuclear leakage (which would require a larger investment of political and economic resources).

The response to this book was quite heartening. *New York Times* columnist A. M. Rosenthal wrote, for example, “I cannot think of a more important book” and exhorted his readers that “The time to read it is now.”<sup>1</sup> *Financial Times* correspondent John Lloyd described it as “The most extensive assessment yet of nuclear dangers in the post–Cold War world.”<sup>2</sup> One editorial, commenting in the context of the June 1996 G-7 summit in Lyon, France, urged President Clinton to “take plenty of copies of Harvard’s study, *Avoiding Nuclear Anarchy*, with him on Air Force One and hand them out to his summit counterparts, demanding their undivided attention—and concerted action.”<sup>3</sup> More generally, it received extensive coverage and/or citation in the media.<sup>4</sup>

The Center’s **International Security Program** also supported the scholarship of Jason Ellis through a 1997–1998 postdoctoral fellowship, in which he completed a book-length study of the Nunn-Lugar program. His manuscript was published as *Defense by Other Means: The Politics of the US-NIS Threat Reduction and Nuclear Security Program* (Praeger, 2001) and has been described by reviewers as the most comprehensive account yet of U.S. programs aimed at reducing nuclear dangers in the former Soviet Union.

Another volume resulted from a conference that the Belfer Center co-sponsored with the Center for Nonproliferation Studies of the Monterey Institute for International Studies. The conference assessed the Nunn-Lugar Program, particularly from the perspective of the recipient countries, and the papers presented there were published as *Dismantling the Cold War: US and NIS Perspectives on the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program* (MIT Press, 1997).

A fifth volume sought to address in a detailed and comprehensive way the possibility of terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This book, *America’s Achilles*

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<sup>1</sup> A.M.Rosenthal, “Only a Matter of Time,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1996, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> John Lloyd, “Sceptical Bear Ill-Disposed to Having Claws Clipped,” *Financial Times*, January 15, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> “Confront Nuke Threat at G-7 Summit,” *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, June 24, 1996, p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> A prominent mention, for example, is “Costing a Bomb,” *The Economist*, January 4, 1997, pp. 30–31.

*Heel: Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Terrorism and Covert Attack* (MIT Press, 1998), analyzes the feasibility and likelihood of WMD terrorism. It concludes that WMD terrorist attacks are not easy, but are feasible under a number of conceivable circumstances—and that while the likelihood of such attacks is now low, it is rising and sufficient to warrant that this threat be a source of serious concern in U.S. security policy.

Starting in 2002, the **Project on Managing the Atom** (a joint undertaking of the Center’s **International Security Program** and **Science, Technology, and Public Policy Program**) began to issue an annual monograph which examines in detail the progress made in addressing nuclear leakage issues and highlighting the problems that remain to be addressed. Five such volumes have been published, the most recent of which is *Securing the Bomb 2006*. These monographs are regarded as indispensable guides to the issue.

In 2004, Belfer Center Director Graham Allison published *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (Henry Holt & Company, 2004), which analyzed the threat of nuclear terrorism in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, offered a series of recommendations for addressing this threat, and raised awareness among policymakers and the public. *Foreign Affairs* editor James Hoge wrote, “Allison’s comprehensive but accessible treatment of this vital subject is a major contribution to public understanding. In turn, an informed public could spur the government to complete the counterterrorism agenda” in his review for the *New York Times*.<sup>5</sup> During the 2004 U.S. Presidential election, both President George W. Bush and Democratic challenger Senator John Kerry ranked securing fissile materials as the number one national security challenge facing the United States. Representative Jane Harman (D-CA), member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, praised Graham Allison for effectively communicating this threat in his book at a John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum, “**Can Nuclear Terrorism be Prevented?**” on October 24, 2005. Professor Allison has continued to write and speak widely on this issue.

### **Center Books and Monographs on the Soviet Nuclear Legacy, Loose Nukes, Nuclear Terrorism, and Associated Issues**

*Soviet Nuclear Fission: Control of the Nuclear Arsenal in a Disintegrating Soviet Union* (1991)

*Cooperative Denuclearization: From Pledges to Deeds* (1993)

*Avoiding Nuclear Anarchy: Containing the Threat of Loose Russian Nuclear Weapons and Fissile Material* (1996)

*Dismantling the Cold War: US and NIS Perspectives on the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program* (1997).

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<sup>5</sup> James Hoge, “Nuclear Terrorism: Counting Down to the New Armageddon,” *New York Times*, September 5, 2004.

*America's Achilles Heel: Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Terrorism and Covert Attack* (1998)

*Politics of the US-NIS Threat Reduction and Nuclear Security Program* (Praeger, 2001)

*Securing Nuclear Weapons and Materials: Seven Steps for Immediate Action* (2002)

*Controlling Nuclear Warheads and Materials: A Report Card and Action Plan* (2003)

*Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (2004)

*Securing the Bomb: An Agenda for Action* (2004)

*Securing the Bomb 2005: The New Global Imperatives* (2005)

*Securing the Bomb 2006* (2006)