

# Clarifying Statements on Securing Nuclear Materials in the Presidential Debate

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In the first Presidential debate on September 30, both candidates emphasized that keeping nuclear weapons out of terrorist hands was America's top national security priority. Since the debate, a number of assertions have been made in the press about the accuracy of some of the claims the two candidates made, some of which drew on our past reports. This paper provides a fact-check, with sources, on those key points in the debate.

Fundamentally, however, the most important, undisputed point is that large quantities of nuclear material around the world remain inadequately secured. Whoever is elected in November, it will be crucial to match actions to words, with sustained Presidential leadership to overcome the obstacles to locking down these stockpiles before terrorists and thieves can get to them.

**KERRY:** "And this president, I regret to say, has secured less nuclear material in the last two years since 9/11 than we did in the two years preceding 9/11."

**FACT:** Kerry's statement is confirmed by official data in the Department of Energy's budget justifications for the relevant years, which indicate that roughly 7% of the estimated 600 tons of potentially vulnerable nuclear material in the former Soviet Union received comprehensive security and accounting upgrades in the two fiscal years following the 9/11 attacks, while approximately 9% of this material had received such upgrades in the two years before. While some press reports have suggested that the Department may now be changing its numbers, this data continues to be the most recent authoritative data publicly released. *SOURCE:* Matthew Bunn and Anthony Wier, *Securing the Bomb: An Agenda for Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Project on Managing the Atom, Harvard University, and Washington, D.C.: Nuclear Threat Initiative, May 2004; available online at <http://www.nti.org/cnwm>), pp. 45–47, and references cited therein.

**KERRY:** "[A]t the current pace, the president will not secure the loose material in the Soviet Union—former Soviet Union for 13 years."

**FACTS:** During Fiscal Year (FY) 2003, Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham has officially stated that comprehensive upgrades were completed on an additional 35 tons of the roughly 600 tons of potentially vulnerable nuclear material in the former Soviet Union. Since, at the end of FY 2003, comprehensive upgrades had not yet been completed on 78% of the nuclear material in Russia, amounting to over 460 tons of nuclear material, at a rate of 35 tons a year it would take over 13 years to complete the job. *SOURCE:* Bunn and Wier, *Securing the Bomb*, pp. 45–47, and references cited therein.

**KERRY:** "And we're going to get the job of containing all of that nuclear material in Russia done in four years."

**FACT:** In the parts of the U.S.-Russian cooperative nuclear security program that have succeeded in overcoming obstacles related to access to sensitive sites and other political and bureaucratic obstacles, comprehensive security upgrades have often been completed within eighteen months to two years of starting work at a site. Technically, if the political and bureaucratic obstacles could be swept aside, the job could be done in four years. Indeed, the Department of Energy's official plan

is to complete this work in four years—though accomplishing that will require a dramatic acceleration from current rates, which will likely require sustained leadership from the White House. *SOURCE*: Matthew Bunn, Anthony Wier, and John P. Holdren, *Controlling Nuclear Warheads and Materials: A Report Card and Action Plan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Project on Managing the Atom, Harvard University, and Washington, D.C.: Nuclear Threat Initiative; March 2003, available online at <http://www.nti.org/cnwm>), p. 42 and 119.

**KERRY**: “And to do the job, you can't cut the money for it. The president actually cut the money for it.”

**FACT**: President Bush proposed substantial cuts in international threat reduction programs when he first came to office. For programs focused on controlling nuclear weapons, materials, and expertise, the Bush administration proposed a budget of roughly \$465 million, or some 20 percent below the FY 2001 level. Since then, President Bush has reversed course to support continuing to fund threat reduction programs, though he included no new funding for international efforts to keep nuclear materials around the world out of terrorist hands in the tens of billions of dollars in supplemental funding he requested for the war on terror after the 9/11 attacks. President Bush has also proposed a cut of more than \$41 million, some 10% in the Department of Defense's Cooperative Threat Reduction account for FY 2005, compared to the FY 2004 appropriation. *SOURCES*: Anthony Wier, “Funding Summary,” *Nuclear Threat Initiative Research Library: Controlling Nuclear Warheads and Materials*, October 2004 (available at [http://www.nti.org/e\\_research/cnwm/overview/funding.asp](http://www.nti.org/e_research/cnwm/overview/funding.asp)); see also Bunn and Wier, *Securing the Bomb*, op. cit., p. 96, and references cited therein.

**KERRY**: “There's some 600-plus tons of unsecured material still in the former Soviet Union and Russia.”

**FACT**: This is incorrect. The Department of Energy estimates that there are 600 tons of *total* weapons-usable nuclear material outside of nuclear warheads themselves in the former Soviet Union. As of the end of fiscal year (FY) 2003, after more than a decade of effort, comprehensive security and accounting upgrades had been completed for 22% of this weapons-usable nuclear material (leaving over 460 tons “unsecured” by this measure), and a first round of “rapid upgrades” had been completed for an additional 21% of the material. *SOURCE*: DOE, *FY 2005 Detailed Budget Justifications—Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation* (Washington, D.C.: DOE, February 2, 2004; available at <http://www.mbe.doe.gov/budget/05budget/content/defnn/nn.pdf> as of April 29, 2004).

**BUSH**: “Actually, we've increased funding for dealing with nuclear proliferation about 35 percent since I've been the president.”

**FACT**: Funding for strengthening efforts to keep weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of terrorists and hostile states in other countries around the world has increased modestly during President Bush's term, with most of those increases initiated by Congress. Total funding for international threat reduction increased from a nominal total of \$890 million in FY 2001 (the last Clinton budget) to President Bush's FY 2005 request of \$1.059 billion, an increase of 19 percent. President Clinton's FY 2001 request, however, was higher than what Congress provided: in real terms, President Bush's FY 2005 request for international threat reduction is no more than President Clinton's last budget, requested long before the 9/11 attacks ever occurred. Bush's claim of a 35% increase comes from including a variety of programs focused on long-term research and development and on reducing the United States' own stockpiles of nuclear material. Over three-quarters of the increase is for disposition of the United States' own excess plutonium and highly enriched uranium—an increase that, while important, does not directly improve security for vulnerable nuclear stocks abroad. *SOURCES*: For more detail on this point, see Anthony Wier, William E. Hoehn III, and Matthew Bunn, “Threat Reduction Funding in the Bush Administration: Claims and Counterclaims in the First Presidential Debate,” October 6, 2004 (available at <http://www.ransac.org>); see also Bunn and Wier, *Securing the Bomb*, pp. 94–99, and references cited therein.