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Sam Nunn on Obama's No-Nukes Speech (06 April 2009)

When Barack Obama spoke in Prague this weekend about a world free of nuclear weapons, he was to some degree tipping his hat to his sometime-advisor, Sam Nunn. Few people have lent as much mainstream credibility to the idea of nuclear abolition as the former Georgia Democratic Senator, who now chairs the private Nuclear Threat Initiative. In 2006 Nunn helped to kick off what you might call the new abolitionism when he co-authored a *Wall Street Journal* [op-ed](#) with Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, and William Perry--hardly a bunch of pot smoking hippies--setting the goal of a nuclear-free world. I checked in with Nunn today for his reaction to Obama's speech and his nonproliferation agenda. What follows is edited for length and clarity:



Q: In Prague Obama said many things that you've been talking about for years; you must have loved his speech.

A: I'm very pleased. I think it was a very important speech. I believe that, just as important--or more important--was the joint statement put out by President Medvedev and President Obama, because Russia clearly has to be involved. The statement and the Czech speech is a powerful sign that not only the U.S. needs to move but all the nuclear powers need to move on a global basis. It cannot be unilateral.

Q: What does having a sitting president call for a nuclear-free world do to put the idea of abolitionism into the mainstream?

A: A lot of people who don't like the direction write it up as if it is unilateral, which is a total distortion. We've made it abundantly clear that this is a move up the mountain, step by step, and others must join us. It's important that he's got the vision of a world without nuclear weapons, but also the recognition that it's going to take time and has to be done with others.

Q: One specific priority Obama mentioned was ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which the Senate rejected in 1999. Why is the CTBT important, and how hard will it be to pass?

A: So many nations have ratified it, and the world has viewed this, correctly, that if we stop testing, the world is going to stop developing as quickly and easily new nuclear weapons. It's important in its own right, but it is also a symbol of a serious effort to [stop] the growth of nuclear weapons and to develop new ones, and to avoid new countries becoming nuclear powers.

I do not think the work has been done in the Senate at this stage for a quick vote. It's going to take a lot of work. They're going to have to update the scientific knowledge, the [progress on verification technology]. I think a lot of the people who voted against it last time are going to have to be clearly shown the changes that have taken place since then, through the testimony of the military and of the laboratories.

Q: How would you rate Obama so far on nonproliferation appointments and policymaking?

A: I would say he's given a very high level of visibility and focus and engagement on the vision side. Now he's got to have a team in place that will work every day to implement this. I see some movement in that direction in the National Security Council, but there hasn't been the kind of clarity with assignment of responsibility that I would like to see yet. The words are very important but the deeds are even more important. There were all sorts of agreements entered into by Bush and Putin. Everyone forgot about them, because they didn't get implemented.

To get people on board around the globe--both countries that will refrain from enrichment programs, and the countries we'll need to put pressure on Iran and North Korea to curb their nuclear appetites--those countries are going to have to be shown deeds. That's why a failure of CTBT ratification would be a serious blow. Countries have heard a lot of those words before, so now it's going to be a matter of deed. And then setting up a global regime, which will demand consequences of countries that breach their commitments. The world doesn't have a system now to make sure there are consequences when there are breaches. And until we really have that we're not going to have the confidence to get rid of the whole inventory. It's going to take a lot of work.

One other thing: I don't view ballistic missile defense as simply a tactical matter to extract cooperation from Russia on Iran. I don't disagree that kind of cooperation is needed. But there's a much bigger picture here which is that we're going to need some type of missile defense systems in the future, and having Russia as part of that effort is enormously important. We can't wish away this whole set of dangers that relate to the delivery of a nuclear weapon either against us or our allies.

WebLink: http://blogs.tnr.com/tnr/blogs/the_plank/archive/2009/04/06/sam-nunn-on-obama-s-no-nukes-speech.aspx