

Senator Tom Daschle
“New START and the Outlook for American National Security”
Remarks delivered at The Center for American Progress
July 19, 2010
9:00am

Good morning. Thank you, John, for that generous introduction. I want to congratulate you, and your hardworking staff, for the tremendous contributions you’ve made on this and on so many important issues. You’ve built an unparalleled institution here in Washington. And then you managed to rebuild it, after something close to a third of your staff joined the Administration, to be even sharper and more engaged than ever. I’m gratified to be a part of it. It is also a pleasure this morning to share the dias with Joe Cirincione.

We gather here this morning to talk about the importance of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty to our country’s national security. For the history buffs among us, this past Friday marked the 65th anniversary of the Trinity test, when the Manhattan Project exploded the first nuclear weapon in the New Mexico desert. In the early morning hours on July 16, 1945, the atomic age was born. Nuclear weapons, for the first time ever, gave human beings the ability to quite literally destroy everything.

Just after 5:30 a.m., after the white light faded and the rumbling died down, a few of the men who were there for that first test felt terrifically unsettled, knowing their success meant that they were responsible for the birth of a world in which apocalypse was achievable. Most others, including the young physicist Richard Feynman, broke into spontaneous celebrations from their observation points.

A short time afterward, not long after their invention had decimated Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Feynman sat in a café in New York City and transposed a vision of another New York, one that had been obliterated by an atomic bomb, over the busy street scene outside his window. As he contemplated this vision, he felt a deep sense of despair and near-certainty that the weapon he'd helped conceive would be used again in the very near future to end modern civilization as he knew it.

As brilliant as Feynman was, fortunately he was wrong about that. He lived out the rest of his life without another nuclear bomb ever being used in the course of warfare. But his error is thanks in no small part to the seriousness and sobriety with which our leaders – both Republicans and Democrats; Presidents, Congressmen, diplomats, and national security

experts – have handled nuclear policy in the 65 years since that first explosion in the New Mexico desert.

This year, the Senate has the opportunity to ratify New START, a treaty that builds on and updates the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty that President Reagan began negotiating almost 30 years ago. New START continues mutual, verifiable reductions in strategic nuclear arms in the U.S. and Russia after three decades of effort under both Republican and Democratic administrations to cut the number of strategic nuclear weapons between our two countries.

To say that ratifying New START ought not be controversial is an understatement. Experts of all ideological stripes have argued the merits for its passage – including Henry Kissinger, James Baker, Brent Scowcroft, Stephen Hadley, and James Schlesinger. It has the unanimous support from our country's military. And the first START – which we should all remember was ratified on the heels of the Soviet Union's dissolution, with a country that had been our singular mortal enemy for decades – was ratified in the Senate by a vote of 93 to 6.

There is no doubt that we made the right decision in 1992. START worked. Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush should be commended for possessing the intelligence, integrity, and diplomatic grit to take the difficult first steps towards reducing strategic nuclear weapons. Over the 15 years the treaty was in force, the number of strategic nuclear weapons in the U.S. and Russia was reduced by 80 percent. And President Reagan's patient decade of negotiations produced a verification framework that created trust between the two nuclear superpowers. Trust but verify – that was the rule to live by for the first START, and it remains the rule to live by for New START.

Today, seven original supporters of the Reagan treaty serve as Republican Senators, but have not declared their support for this one – Mitch McConnell, John McCain, Orin Hatch, Chuck Grassley, Kit Bond, Thad Cochran, and Richard Shelby. Independent Joe Lieberman makes eight. If these eight are consistent, New START will reach the 67 votes needed for ratification.

And common sense would argue that they *should* be consistent. New START is an extension and an update of President Reagan's historic

achievement, which expired at the end of last year. Since then, the reasons why New START is critical to our national security have been well articulated by progressives and conservatives alike. I won't read a laundry list of all the reasons here. But there are a few important ones that are worth emphasizing.

By definition, New START will enhance our national security by eliminating redundant weapons within a stable verification framework that both sides trust. From 1996 until last year, America had boots on the ground in Russia to monitor its actions and discern the strength of its nuclear capabilities. The longer we wait to ratify New START, the longer our ongoing verification of Russia's nuclear arsenal will remain suspended. To quote Senator Kyl from last fall, "For the first time in 15 years, the U.S. stands to lose a significant source of information that has allowed us to have confidence in our ability to understand Russia's strategic nuclear forces." Senator Kyl is right if we fail to ratify New START, we blindfold ourselves to what Russia is doing with its nuclear arsenal, thus complicating the task of allocating our defense spending at a time when we are stretched very thinly with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the benefits of New START go beyond bilateral activities. Throughout most of my lifetime, the greatest danger to this country was the nuclear arsenal of the Soviet Union. But today's world is very different. The Soviet Union's collapse created a complex global security landscape comprised of challenges that go beyond the state-based conflicts of the past. One of the most serious challenges is nuclear proliferation, which increases the already-serious risk of nuclear terrorism. Americans know this – four out of five people believe that the biggest danger to U.S. security is the possibility of a terrorist organization obtaining a nuclear weapon.

So how do we go about addressing these types of threats? Transnational challenges, like terrorism and nuclear proliferation, cannot be confronted successfully by unilateralism or military means alone. There is no way, for instance, that the U.S. alone can safeguard all the world's nuclear materials to prevent them from falling in the hands of terrorists.

Instead, the United States needs to lead and engage with the international community to address these new dangers. President Obama's commitment to negotiating New START has demonstrated that we are leading by example, and the result has been a reinvigorated nuclear non-

proliferation regime. The ability of the United States and Russia's to work together to reduce their arsenals is, and will continue to be, absolutely critical for generating the credibility and momentum to drive broader international efforts to combat not only the state-based pursuit of nuclear weapons, but also those that keep terrorists from acquiring them.

Despite 9/11 awakening us to the potential for nuclear terrorism, no coordinated global leadership existed to combat it until last April. It was then President Obama hosted a Nuclear Security Summit that obtained firm commitments from 47 countries to lock down and eliminate loose nuclear material within four years. In addition to the progress made at the Summit, this past May the Obama administration led all of the parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to recommit to NPT at the Review Conference, something that the previous Administration failed to achieve. This represents real progress, especially since the previous Review Conference five years ago ended in acrimony and many feared the collapse of the non-proliferation regime altogether.

The revival of the arms control agenda has also consolidated support in the international community for strong action to address Iran's nuclear

program. As a result of the President's willingness to work with our allies, we now have a tough sanctions resolution in place that puts unprecedented pressure on Iran and sends a clear message to other aspiring nuclear powers. This type of careful, considered cooperation is exactly what is necessary to enhance our own national security in a comprehensive way.

The ratification of New START will generate significant national security benefits that go beyond those I mentioned. But the failure to ratify New START would have needlessly destabilizing consequences. Two weeks ago, in a politically charged and factually loose op-ed in the Washington Post, former Governor Mitt Romney stirred the pot when he called on fellow Republicans to reject the treaty. Let's just imagine for a moment what would happen if he got his way.

First, as I mentioned, we would significantly handicap our ability to assess Russia's nuclear activities and, as a consequence, would face added complications planning our own. And given that there are still nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert, the last thing we should want to do is create uncertainty.

But from a broader perspective, what international unity currently exists to stop nuclear proliferation, to counter nuclear terrorism, and to confront Iran would fray and possibly even collapse. Should New START fail, and the U.S. follow through on what many conservatives advocate – that is, building and testing new nuclear weapons – American credibility on nuclear issues would evaporate. Countries belonging to the NPT would then ask a very simple question: If the U.S. is unwilling to live up to its commitments, why should we live up to ours? And if the U.S. is unwilling to ratify even a modest arms-control treaty, what obligation do we have to maintain the status quo and not pursue nuclear weapons ourselves?

That is how we fall past the nuclear tipping point – the point at which the nuclear dam breaks and countries large and small, from Latin America to Southeast Asia, from the Middle East to Africa, decide that their national security interests would be enhanced by possessing the bomb. This hyper-nuclearized world is one that President Kennedy worried would come to pass. In 1960, he predicted that there could be twenty nuclear nations by 1964. Today there are fewer than ten. The creation of an international non-proliferation regime, although imperfect, has largely kept the nuclear dam

from breaking. Rejecting New START has real potential to push the world into a state of nuclear anarchy.

I hope that Senators stop to fully think through and study these implications when choosing whether or not to support New START. They would do well to remember what President Reagan said in 1984. “No matter how great the obstacles may seem, we must never stop our efforts until we see the day when nuclear arms have been banished from the face of the Earth.”

25 years later, those obstacles are political. I must to emphasize that. The obstacles to reducing the number of nuclear weapons in the world, the obstacles to increasing this country’s national security, the obstacles to continuing down the path President Reagan himself first cleared – they are entirely political. The Administration has gone to great lengths to address specific concerns. Those that were raised initially have now been answered definitively, largely during an extensive series of hearings in multiple congressional committees. Yet some conservatives are now relying exclusively on absurd claims to try to delay or derail the treaty’s ratification.

Mr. Romney's op-ed, to take one example, was so brazen in its factual inaccuracy it suggested genuine confusion on the part of its author.

Other far-right conservatives have objected to New START because it doesn't include reductions to China's nuclear arsenal. By that logic, we shouldn't ratify a Free Trade Agreement with South Korea because it wouldn't include a revaluation of the Chinese yuan.

Some have said New START should be defeated because it doesn't include tactical nuclear weapons – despite the title of the agreement: the New *Strategic* Arms Reduction Treaty. But if it is tactical weapons they believe should also be addressed, who among them actually believes we can do so if *this* treaty dies in the Senate.

Some conservatives in the Senate continue to claim that New START will limit missile defense. Yet this treaty clearly places no constraints on our missile defense plans. And as they continue to ignore the facts, they also ignore the testimony of General Patrick O'Reilly, the head of the Missile Defense Agency, who has forcefully argued that START puts no limits on missile defense.

At least one Senator has raised further complaints that the treaty would prevent us from creating a potential missile defense system that could repel a barrage of missiles from Russia. As Secretary Gates noted, no previous President has considered such a thing, since it would lead to a new nuclear arms race and cost a fortune. But even if we *did* want to build one, it would be permitted under New START.

This is the quality of the arguments that are now being made among influential conservatives some of whom appear to be intimidated by the far right wing or their party. Their arguments are reduced to claims that are either extremely confused or outright dishonest. The sad realization is that these claims are being made at the expense of a sober evaluation of the real risks to our national security and how our government should respond to them.

Let me make one final, broader observation. I admit that Washington is not always a civil town. But the rhetoric surrounding New START has capped off a period of incivility that is reaching a fever pitch. It has reached a state that may be virtually unprecedented. Since the President's

inauguration, a combination of negative political forces and poor judgment has driven too many conservative leaders in the Congress to step beyond the bounds of what is fair to call “normal” partisan rancor. All too often they have succumbed to rehashing right conspiracy theorist junk. The examples are endless:

A leading, widely-respected Senator repeating the absurdity that the new health care law would create “death panels.” A representative yelling “You lie” during a presidential address to a joint session of Congress. Other elected officials openly entertaining the idea that President Obama isn’t actually a citizen of the United States, and as such has usurped the presidency. A member of the House suggesting openly that Americans should be “armed and dangerous” and fight a “revolution” against their government. Another sitting Senator, in reference to START negotiations, implied that the Obama Administration has knowingly and willingly cut a “secret” deal that undermines the United States.

If Glenn Beck or Sarah Palin or Rush Limbaugh choose to make a living peddling partisan hate and anger and mangled conspiracy theories, there will always be people for them to sell a bill of goods. It is not healthy

for our democracy, but it is a part of it, and it has been in some form or another throughout our history. If what motivates them is a concerted effort to cause the President of the United States to fail that is their prerogative. They are not public servants and hopefully things will stay that way.

Nor is there anyone in this country that doesn't know politics is a rough business. But there is a basic line that elected officials have a responsibility to respect every day when they take the oath of office. It is a line that they should remember deep inside and have the integrity not to cross. It is a line that divides criticism from demonization, and playing hardball from inciting hatred and opening the door to the consequences that can flow from it. And it is a line that some conservatives in elected office are close to crossing in an *institutionalized* fashion in their desire to retake power and stall every piece of the President's agenda.

As President Obama has said, it's one thing to have an honest difference of opinion on something. There's nothing wrong with that. But you can't walk away from your responsibilities to confront the challenges facing the country, because you don't think it's good short-term politics. There is no clearer example of plain and simple short-term politics at play

than on New START, and we can't afford to let that rule the day, especially when it comes to nuclear weapons.

But many of today's conservatives, especially those in elected office, are facing enormous pressure to choose politics over governing on issue after issue. Too many have already decided to surrender to the most extreme voices on the right at the expense of basic integrity. But New START is so widely acknowledged to be the right move that it presents conservatives in Congress with a clear choice: They can choose politics, or they can choose governing. They can choose Mitt Romney, or they can choose the entire U.S. military establishment. They can choose a world with a greater risk of nuclear disorder, or one with less. On this issue, there is simply no in between.

Some have apparently already decided that denying the President a victory is more important than America's national security interests. But I know there are many who don't share that view, and to them, I say that the consequences of choosing politics over governing are real.

If conservatives make the wrong decision, more than 90 percent of the world's most dangerous weapons will cease to be governed with transparency and stability. Non-nuclear states, which stake their nuclear security on the global non-proliferation regime, will lose an important incentive to shun nuclear development. The hard-fought legacy of four U.S. presidents would be foolishly discarded, leaving the world's nuclear landscape more unpredictable than at any time in the last twenty years.

Not quite six years ago, I asked my colleagues in the Senate a question. Will we recognize that power is not just our arms, but our wisdom, our compassion, our tolerance, our willingness to cooperate, not just with ourselves, but with the whole world? If the Senate can cooperate to ratify New START, then the answer, at least in this instance, is yes. And if the answer is yes, then we will honor the uniquely American ideal. That we are responsible for crafting a world that is safer, more prosperous, and more fair for future generations. I urge the Senate to do the right thing for the security of this country, and to stand up for a New START.

Thank you.