

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks Following a Meeting on the United States Nonproliferation Policy
May 19, 2009

The President. Hello, everybody. I just had a wonderful discussion with four of the most preeminent national security thinkers that we have, a bipartisan group of George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, Bill Perry, and Sam Nunn, all who've come together and helped inspire policies of this administration in a speech that I gave to Prague, which set forward a long-term vision of a world without nuclear weapons.

I don't think anybody would accuse these four gentlemen of being dreamers. They're hard-headed, tough defenders of American interests and American security. But what they have come together to help galvanize is a recognition that we do not want a world of continued nuclear proliferation, and that in order for us to meet the security challenges of the future, America has to take leadership in this area.

This is particularly true at a time when countries like North Korea and Iran are in the process of developing nuclear weapons capacity, at a time when we see a country like Pakistan with a large nuclear arsenal on the other side of a long-running conflict in the subcontinent with India, at a time when terrorist organizations like Al Qaida are trying to seek fissile material. It is absolutely imperative that America takes leadership, working with not just our Russian counterparts, but countries all around the world, to reduce and ultimately eliminate the dangers that are posed by nuclear weapons.

And we can take some very specific steps in order to do this. We can revitalize our Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. We can work with the Russians, as the two countries with by far the largest nuclear stockpiles, to continue to reduce our dependence on nuclear weapons. We can move forward on a comprehensive test ban treaty. It's going to require more work, but I think that we can get something accomplished there and we can lock down loose nuclear weapons that could fall into the hands of terrorists.

We are going to be pushing this as one of our highest priorities, to take specific steps, measurable steps, verifiable steps, to make progress on this issue, even as we keep a long-term perspective and a long-term vision about what can be achieved. And we can think of no better advisers, counselors, and partners in this process than the four gentlemen who joined us here today.

We also think this is a reminder of the long tradition of bipartisan foreign policy that has been the hallmark of America at moments of greatest need, and that's the kind of spirit that we hope will be reflected in our administration.

So, with that, let me just allow George to make a brief statement on behalf of the group.

Former Secretary of State George Schultz. All four of us support enthusiastically what the President is doing, as expressed eloquently in his speech in Prague. First of all, we all noted on your White House web site that the first sentence was: "We will work for a world free of nuclear weapons." That's the vision we all support.

The second sentence is: "As long as nuclear weapons are around, we will be sure we have a strong deterrent ourselves." So we support that notion that we must be conscious of our national security all the way along to zero.

Then we were really impressed to see that you had such a constructive meeting with the President of Russia. And there the two of you, the countries with most of the—over 90 percent of the nuclear weapons, pledged together to seek a world free of nuclear weapons.

And in your Prague speech, you linked the vision to steps, and you identified a few of the steps. And we think that's just the way to proceed, that there is an interaction between the vision, which you need, which requires you to think of the steps and know where you're going and the steps which need to be taken to show that the vision has a reality to it, and we're getting there.

So all four of us, Mr. President, support what you're doing. I would only have one word of slight disagreement. You said that you welcome the fact that this is bipartisan. And, well, it is. At the same time, I think all of us have said, when people have told that to us, that it's really nonpartisan. This is a subject that ought to somehow get up above trying to get a partisan advantage. And it's of such importance that we need to take it on its own merits. And that's the way we've proceeded. And that's the way, at least it seems to us, you've proceeded.

The President. Thank you so much, George. And thank you all, gentlemen, for joining us. This is going to be an ongoing collaboration. We're very grateful to them. And we're grateful to you guys for taking time to listen.

Thanks a lot.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:38 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. Participating in the meeting were former Secretary of State George P. Schultz; former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger; former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry; and former Senator Samuel A. Nunn, Jr. Former Secretary of State Schultz referred to President Dmitry A. Medvedev of Russia. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

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