

Nuclear Threat Reduction CAMPAIGN

A program of Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation
and The Justice Project

INTRODUCTION

What is NTRC?

The Nuclear Threat Reduction Campaign (NTRC), a joint project of Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation and The Justice Project, educates and mobilizes key constituencies on a centrist, bipartisan basis to advance public policy that reduces the threat posed by nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

Our unique approach focuses on galvanizing bipartisan Congressional as well as grassroots support to implement pragmatic and effective steps that will steadily reduce the threats posed by weapons of mass destruction.

What is the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD)?

As the events of September 11, 2001, and subsequent anthrax attacks exhibited, the end of the Cold War did not eliminate the threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. The existence and proliferation of these weapons of mass destruction increase the likelihood that they will fall into the hands of terrorists or terrorist states that could stage a catastrophic attack on Americans, our deployed troops, or our Allies.

Today, Russia maintains an estimated 20,000 nuclear warheads in addition to possessing 130 tons of plutonium and 970 tons of highly enriched uranium—enough to build at least 60,000 additional warheads. A recent CIA report faulted the security of Russian nuclear arsenal facilities stating that, "undetected smuggling has occurred." In addition, Russia has thousands of tactical nuclear weapons that, since they are not covered by any treaty, exist in numbers and locations of which the United States is unaware. These weapons, because of their size and greater portability, are highly desirable to terrorist groups or nations. In October 2001, the U.S. government became very concerned that al Qaeda may have smuggled a 10-kiloton nuclear warhead into New York City. If placed in lower Manhattan, such a device would probably kill 250,000 people, seriously injure tens of thousands more, and render the entire area uninhabitable for decades to come. The U.S. government took this intelligence seriously because a Russian general had recently stated that he could not account for a nuclear weapon of comparable size.

In addition to the huge nuclear arsenal in Russia, there are also insecure stocks of nuclear materials at hundred of sites across the globe. These materials were originally intended for research or power generation purposes, but today many of these activities have ceased and the stocks are vulnerable to theft. Consequently, the United States and its allies must expand efforts to return these materials to the country of origin, in many cases Russia.

Russia and the United States also continue to maintain thousands of nuclear warheads ready to launch in mere minutes. Moreover, Russia's early-warning and nuclear command systems are deteriorating badly. The CIA has reported that equipment controlling Russian nuclear weapons frequently malfunctions, and critical electronic devices and computers sometimes switch to combat mode for no apparent reason. Many of the radars and satellites intended to detect a ballistic missile attack no longer operate. The danger of a Russian launch through miscalculation could suddenly become much more acute if control of Russian nuclear weapons were strained by an internal or international political crisis.

Biological weapons potentially pose greater dangers than either chemical or nuclear weapons because pathogens are so lethal on a pound-for-pound basis, their production requires a much smaller and cheaper industrial infrastructure, and the necessary technology and know-how are almost entirely dual use and, thus, widely available. The devastation that could be brought about by the use of biological weapons is suggested by the fact that throughout history, the inadvertent spread of infectious disease during wartime has caused far more casualties than actual combat.

At its peak, the Soviet biological weapons program produced massive quantities of biological agents annually employing more than 60,000 scientists and technicians. Today, due to the diminished state of the Russian economy, Moscow cannot afford to safely maintain stockpiles or employ scientists for peaceful purposes. More must be done to ensure that weapons, materials and expertise do not fall into the hands of those that wish the United States harm.

Also, the Soviet Union had the world's largest chemical weapons program, consisting of over 60 institutions spread across the USSR. That program continues to present special international security problems today. Russia still possesses the world's largest chemical weapons arsenal, with at least 40,000 metric tons stored at seven sites. These sites are poorly secured, and there is not an accurate accounting of what many of the sites contain—making the stockpile particularly vulnerable to theft. The Russian CW stockpile must be secured to ensure that these weapons do not fall into the hands of terrorists groups or states that wish the U.S. harm.

The United States plays a pivotal role, and has special responsibilities, in controlling the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and in leading the way toward the liquidation of the WMD legacy from the Cold War. Reducing nuclear, biological and chemical weapon threats must be made a higher priority if U.S. national security is to be ensured.