



**Statement by former Senator Sam Nunn
Co-Chairman of the Nuclear Threat Initiative
On the RAND Report: Beyond the Nuclear Shadow
May 21, 2003**

I'm joined today by Lynn Davis, David Mosher and David Howell of the RAND Corporation.

We are here today to talk about a threat that persists and has even grown over the last several years -- but has received little attention: the risk of nuclear use between the United States and Russia.

Today we are releasing a comprehensive analysis done by the RAND Corporation about the threat of an accidental or unauthorized launch of a nuclear weapon between the United States and Russia. I'd like to give you my sense of what is very important about this study. The RAND team will speak for themselves.

Nearly twelve years after the end of the Soviet Union, we still face the risk of an accidental or unauthorized launch of a nuclear missile, for three principle reasons:

- The first reason is force postures. Both the U.S. and Russia retain large nuclear forces that remain on a "hair-trigger" – that is, they can launch against their targets within minutes.
- The second is economic and social problems in Russia, which have led to an increased reliance on nuclear weapons, a dramatic decline in survivable nuclear forces in Russia, along with an early warning system in serious disrepair.
- Third, the vulnerability of Russian forces is exacerbated by the increasing capability of U.S. forces to deliver accurate and devastating strikes. This increases pressure on Russia's hair-trigger.

As RAND notes, our improved relations with Russia to some extent mitigate the dangers of an accident or miscalculation leading to nuclear use and certainly decrease the danger of a premeditated strike, but these other factors increase the risk of accident or miscalculation.

A pure military calculus leads both sides to keep their forces on a hair trigger, ready to respond to the other on short notice, leaving our leaders with only precious minutes to make fateful decisions during a real, or perceived, crisis.

RAND underscores this crucial point by pointing out seven factors that exist today that could contribute to an accidental or unauthorized nuclear attack between the U.S. and Russia. Each of the seven is worth noting, but in my view, two factors stand out:

- Doctrines or strategies that rely on launch on warning or launch under attack pose the risk of a quick decision with inadequate information.
- Inadequate security and control of nuclear forces and weapons.

Both of these factors apply more to Russia, but both pose grave danger to the United States.

RAND has analyzed a number of possible options for reducing these risks. But I think it is essential to keep in mind RAND's general conclusions as you study the analysis. From my perspective, the most important are:

- The risk of nuclear use is too high, in large part due to the fact that nuclear weapons play a role out of proportion to the improved relationship between the United States and Russia.
- Second, both nations can take steps to minimize the threat of nuclear use that exists today.
- Third, limiting nuclear dangers in our countries requires both operational changes in U.S. and Russian nuclear postures as well as improved cooperation and trust. These two ingredients for improving our security are mutually reinforcing.
- Finally, direct leadership by our Presidents is required. (On this point, in my view, the most important thing that could come out of the next Bush-Putin meeting on this subject is for the two Presidents to order their defense and military leaders, in joint consultation and collaboration, to devise changes in the operational status of their nuclear forces that would reduce toward zero the risk of accidental launch or miscalculation and provide increased launch decision time for each President.)

Even assuming the full implementation of the Moscow Treaty in the year 2012, thousands of U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons will remain on hair-trigger alert and will have the capability to destroy both societies within one hour.

The Treaty of Moscow deals only with numbers of U.S. and Russian operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads; it does not deal with the hair trigger issue. We need to deal with both.

So the bottom line is that I think there is a fundamental question that Presidents Bush and Putin need to discuss when they meet later this month: Given the U.S.-Russian relationship today – 12 years after the end of the Cold War – what requires us to continue to live with the risk of an accidental or unauthorized nuclear launch?

The answer would appear circular: As long as Russia can launch nuclear ballistic missiles on short notice against the U.S., the U.S. must maintain a similar capability against Russia. And vice versa.

During the Cold War, our weapons were in support of our policy – deterring a hostile Soviet Union against both nuclear and conventional threats. Today, Presidents Bush and Putin must each ask the question: Are our weapons driving our policy? Have the machines taken over?

Then-Governor Bush himself made this point three years ago this month:

“Almost a decade after the end of the Cold War, our nuclear policy still resides in that already distant past ... The United States should remove as many weapons as possible from high-alert, hair-trigger status – another unnecessary vestige of Cold War confrontation. Preparation for quick launch – within minutes after warning of an attack – was the rule during the era of superpower rivalry. But today, for two nations at peace, keeping so many weapons on high alert may create unacceptable risks of accidental or unauthorized launch. So, as president, I will ask for an assessment of what we can safely do to lower the alert status of our forces.”

President Bush had it right in his statement three years ago. This assessment is overdue by both the United States and Russia.

The RAND report makes it clear that we must reduce the risk of an accidental or unauthorized launch of a nuclear missile to as close to zero as possible.

The American and Russian people have a right to ask this question: Why must we continue to live with this risk, when we are no longer enemies?

My own question: In the aftermath of an accidental or unauthorized launch of a nuclear ballistic missile: What would we wish we had done to prevent it? And, why aren't we doing it now?