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DoD News Briefing: Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen

Presenter: Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen

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Cohen's keynote address at the Conference on Terrorism, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and U.S. Strategy at the Georgia Center, Mahler Auditorium, University of Georgia, Athens, Ga. The event is part of the Sam Nunn Policy Forum being hosted by the University of Georgia. Secretary Cohen is joined by Sen. Sam Nunn and Sen. Richard G. Lugar.]

Secretary Cohen: Senator Nunn, thank you very much. As Senator Nunn has indicated, he and I have worked for many years together, along with Senator Lugar. The two of these gentlemen I feel are perhaps the most courageous and visionary to have served in the Senate. They were largely responsible, of course, for adopting the so-called Nunn/Lugar legislation.

I'll comment on that later during the course of the morning, but I've had occasion to meet with a number of Russian counterparts, and as we go through various translations of the communications that we're having, the two words they are able to articulate very clearly, they say 'Nunn/Lugar, Nunn/Lugar. So they know exactly what that means, and that means the Cooperative Threat Reduction Act that these two gentlemen were indispensable in shepherding through the United States Congress.

It was Nunn/Lugar I that dealt with the reduction of nuclear weapons between the United States and the Soviet Union in terms of trying to come to grips with how we helped the Russians dismantle hundreds of their nuclear weapons, and also helped them with their destruction of chemical weapons. But they, of course, have looked beyond simply that particular relationship, which is very important, but also looking to the future that we face as far as the rise of terrorism -- both international and domestic; and finding ways in which the Department of Defense can become involved in helping local states and local agencies to deal with the threat of terrorism which is quite likely to increase in the coming years.

It's a pleasure for me to be here. Both Senator Nunn and Senator Lugar are close friends and I look forward to, I think, a very productive seminar. Once again demonstrating that although Senator Nunn has left public service in the Senate, he has not left public service as far as the nation is concerned.

It's a pleasure for me to be here, Sam.

Senator Nunn: Thank you very much, Bill.

...Let me ask if there are any questions for Secretary of Defense Cohen.

Q: The dual containment policy in Iran and Iraq, do you think that's conducive to regional stability in that region? And do you think can cause further terrorism in the United States? That type of containment policy in the Middle East.

A: I think Secretary Albright articulated our policy as far as dealing with Iraq, that it's clear that we have been unable to strike any kind of a productive relationship with Saddam Hussein, and as soon as Saddam Hussein is no longer the head of that government, that there's new regime that follows him, that we will look forward to finding ways in which we could engage them in a much more productive fashion, particularly after they comply with all of the UN sanctions. There's an eagerness on our part to do that. But I think as long as he remains in office as the head of that state, it's unlikely that we could have anything but the current policy in place, with very little prospects for relief.

With respect to Iran, I think Iran continues to present a long term threat to the region. They are acquiring and have acquired weapons of mass destruction, substantial levels of chemicals and we believe biological weapons as well. They have made an effort to acquire nuclear capability. So I think that our policy of dual containment is the right one, and we are going to encourage our allies to support that one.

Q: What does it mean that Clinton (inaudible) proliferation?

A: To the extent that we see the level of communication available today, the Internet and other types of interwoven communicative skills and abilities, we're going to see information continue to spread as to how these weapons can be, in fact, manufactured in a home-grown laboratory, as such. So it's a serious problem as far as living in the information age that people who are acquiring this kind of information will not act responsibly, but rather act in a terrorist type of fashion.

We've seen by way of example of the World Trade Center the international aspects of international terrorism coming to our home territory. We've also seen domestic terrorism with the Oklahoma bombing. So it's a real threat that's here today. It's likely to intensify in the years to come as more and more groups have access to this kind of information and the ability to produce them.

Q: How prepared is the U.S. Government to deal with (inaudible)?

A: I think we have to really intensify our efforts. That's the reason for the Nunn/Lugar II program. That's the reason why it's a local responsibility, as such, but the Department of Defense is going to be taking the lead as far as supervising the interagency working groups, and to make the assessments as to what needs to be done. So we're going to identify those 120 cities and work with them very closely to make sure that they can prepare themselves for what is likely to be a threat well into the future.

Q: Let me ask you specifically about last week's scare here in Washington, and what we might have learned from how prepared we are to deal with that (inaudible), at B'nai Brith.

A: Well, it points out the nature of the threat. It turned out to be a false threat under the

Q: Let me ask you specifically about last week's scare here in Washington, and what we might have learned from how prepared we are to deal with that (inaudible), at B'nai Brith.

A: Well, it points out the nature of the threat. It turned out to be a false threat under the circumstances. But as we've learned in the intelligence community, we had something called -- and we have James Woolsey here to perhaps even address this question about phantom moles. The mere fear that there is a mole within an agency can set off a chain reaction and a hunt for that particular mole which can paralyze the agency for weeks and months and years even, in a search. The same thing is true about just the false scare of a threat of using some kind of a chemical weapon or a biological one. There are some reports, for example, that some countries have been trying to construct something like an Ebola Virus, and that would be a very dangerous phenomenon, to say the least. Alvin Toffler has written about this in terms of some scientists in their laboratories trying to devise certain types of pathogens that would be ethnic specific so that they could just eliminate certain ethnic groups and races; and others are designing some sort of engineering, some sort of insects that can destroy specific crops. Others are engaging even in an eco- type of terrorism whereby they can alter the climate, set off earthquakes, volcanoes remotely through the use of electromagnetic waves.

So there are plenty of ingenious minds out there that are at work finding ways in which they can wreak terror upon other nations. It's real, and that's the reason why we have to intensify our efforts, and that's why this is so important.

Q: What is response to (inaudible)?

A: We hope we will have access to the defector. In fact I was recently in South Korea and talked with various officials in South Korea. As soon as they complete their own interrogation of this defector, we will have access to that individual. But much of what he has said to date is reflected in the writings that he prepared last year. This is prior to his defection. One would not expect a potential defector to be writing about anything other than what the official doctrine or dogma is of the North Korean government at that time. He is saying essentially what we have known for a long, long time. Namely, that North Korea poses a very serious threat against South Korea, and potentially even Japan, by virtue of having the fourth largest army in the world, by having 600,000 or more troops poised within 100 kilometers of Seoul, of possessing many SCUD missiles, also the potential of chemically armed warheads, the attempt to acquire nuclear weapons. So we know they have this potential, and the question really is going to be what's in their hearts and minds at this point? Do they intend to try to launch such an attack in the immediate, foreseeable future? That we can only speculate about, but that's the reason why we are so well prepared to defend against such an attack to deter it; and to send a message that it would be absolutely an act of suicide for the North Koreans to launch an attack. They could do great damage in the short run, but they would be devastated in response. So we're hoping we can find ways to bring them to the bargaining table -- the Party of Four Talks -- and see if we can't put them on a path toward peace instead of threatening any kind of devastating attack upon the South.

Q: ...a little bit about the situation in (inaudible)?

A: I really don't have much more information than has been in the press at this point. The Department has not been called upon to act in this regard just yet, so I'm not at liberty to give you any more information than you already have.

Q: ...the Administration's plans to expand NATO to more European countries. Is there a terrorism element? Or will expanding NATO help you in any way in terms of (inaudible)? Or is it really unrelated?

A: I think the two are unrelated. There is a legitimate debate that will take place in terms of the pace of enlargement or whether there should be enlargement. Secretary Albright and I testified last week before the Senate Armed Services Committee, and it was a very, I think, productive debate. It's something that Senator Nunn, I think, feels very strongly about as well. The two of us, I think, found ourselves on the Senate Floor last year saying it was time for the American people to start debating this issue. So it's very important and there will be legitimate differences of opinion, but it's important that we bring this to the Senate for full debate and disclosure, and bring it to the American people. But I doubt if it's related to the spread of terrorism whatsoever.

Senator Nunn: Thank you very much.