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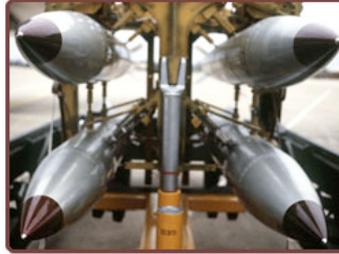
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Prospects for Arms Control in the Obama Administration

[John Isaacs](#), [David C. Speedie](#)

December 1, 2009



Frontal view, four B-61 nuclear free-fall bombs on bomb cart. U. S. DOD (SSGT Phil Schmitt)

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Introduction

DAVID SPEEDIE: I would like to welcome everyone to the second in a series of occasional lunches we have around the Council's U.S. Global Engagement Program, where we try to look in some depth at an important topic. For those of you who were here last time,

we had a [briefing on Afghanistan](#) that was very timely.

This one today is likewise a very timely occasion, with the commitment to the arms-control agenda from President [Obama](#), in place and principle, but yet to be fully seen through in any sort of detail, and with, most immediately, one of the most important cornerstones of that commitment, the

[Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty](#) with Russia, due to expire literally within a few days.

For that reason, we're delighted to have here today John Isaacs, whom I will very briefly introduce in a moment.

Let me just say also, of course, that at the Council we are constantly aware of the relevance and the need to express the relevance of ethics. We are the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.

Clearly it's not difficult to make the argument for the ethical questions surrounding not just the nightmarish prospect of the use of nuclear weapons, but the possession and development are clearly ethical issues, as are some of the strands of the various treaties governing their use, for example:

- The [Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty](#), which will be up—I think John will mention this—for review early next year.
- The question of the nuclear haves and have-nots.
- The commitment of the nuclear powers, not just to prevent proliferation, but themselves to reverse nuclear-arms development and so on.

So I don't think it's by any means a stretch to consider this an ethical set of issues.

I will not spend a great deal of time introducing John. You have a bio in front of you. I will merely say that it's a great opportunity to have someone who is both a specialist, a scholar, on these issues and also very much an activist in the whole global nuclear-arms agenda.

John, welcome and thank you.

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Remarks

JOHN ISAACS: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

If timing were everything, I should talk about Afghanistan because of the president's speech. But I guess you can't predict these things in advance.

While interest in nuclear-weapons issues really has faded, at least in the American public's attention, since the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the problems remain. That's why I continue working on these issues. It's not really one problem; it's 23,000 problems, which is the estimated total of nuclear weapons on this planet today—23,000 weapons, most of which are larger than the two that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II.

But before launching into my remarks, I'll say a few lighter words. Actually, the real purpose of my trip was to scout the city before [Khalid Sheikh Mohammed](#) comes here, to see what kinds of tourist places he might want to visit when he comes here. I understand that the guy is kind of unhappy with [Sarah Palin's](#) new book, *Going Rogue*, because he wants to write a book, *Really Going Rogue*.

One of the more amusing ceremonies in Washington, D.C., this past week, Thanksgiving week, was President Obama pardoning the turkey, something that presidents have done for quite a while, I guess. But when he did so, some of his critics immediately jumped on him for being too soft on poultry and dithering when decisive action was really called for. Some of the recently famous teabaggers, in fact, talked about a preemptive strike on Turkey as a result.

But back to the topic at hand. That's the lighter moment.

There are many problems that engage the attention in this country and the world. Global warming obviously is one, the worldwide pandemics, including swine flu, the threat of terrorists and biological strikes or other kinds of terrorist attacks. But it's important to remember that it's only the nuclear weapons that have the capacity to destroy a city with one bomb; in a massive nuclear exchange, entire countries, and perhaps most life on this planet. Again, that's important. There are a lot of problems that are engaging many people, but it's only nuclear weapons that have that capacity to destroy cities, countries, and most life on this planet.

In Washington, D.C., we have really entered a new era, thanks to the election of Barack Obama as president. He has provided an opportunity for unprecedented progress on nuclear-weapons issues. It's my firm belief that the United States has to provide leadership on the issues of nuclear arms, to move towards what the president calls a world free of nuclear weapons.

On April 5 of this year, the president delivered perhaps the most significant nuclear-weapons speech since World War II—even, I think, more important than President [John F. Kennedy's](#) nuclear test-ban speech back in the 1960s. The speech was delivered in Prague, and he said at that time, "I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." He pointed out the obvious fact that, "as the only nuclear power that has used a nuclear weapon, the U.S. has a moral responsibility to act."

He also said, "We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it and we can start it."

I think what the president said was extremely important, for a number of reasons—if nothing else, to remind people of the risks of nuclear weapons and that we could take some action to avoid a nuclear holocaust.

Quite frankly, this president followed two American presidents who were quite disappointing on nuclear-weapons issues:

- President [Bill Clinton](#), who failed to reduce significantly nuclear weapons, who really focused on domestic issues, as he promised to do. Despite the historic opportunity at the end of the Cold War, when a lot more could have been done to reduce the nuclear dangers on the globe, that president, I think, failed to take advantage of that opportunity.

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- President [George Bush](#), who really promoted nuclear weapons, who came up with some policies that talked about new uses of nuclear weapons, was very reluctant to have significant reductions of nuclear weapons and, in fact, not only acted to preserve nuclear weapons, but tried to build new generations of nuclear weapons—something, fortunately, that Congress blocked him from doing.

This problem that President Obama has addressed is very critical. As I point out, we don't have as many nuclear weapons as we once did, but 23,000 nuclear weapons is an awful lot of major destructive, killing power. These weapons are now in the hands of nine countries. Ninety or 95 percent of these weapons are in the hands of the United States and Russia. Aside from these 23,000 weapons, there are nuclear-weapons materials across the globe that could be fashioned into hundreds of thousands of additional nuclear weapons.

We have been fortunate since 1945 that these nuclear weapons have not been exploded on cities. But there is always the possibility of errors, unauthorized use, accidents. We have seen some accidents in recent years just with the U.S. nuclear-weapon stockpile, with some nuclear weapons shipped from North Dakota to Louisiana that no one quite realized were there. But we have been very fortunate since 1945 not to have nuclear weapons used, despite all the wars since that time, despite Vietnam and various conflicts on many different continents.

But the luck that we have had since 1945 may not last forever. North Korea in recent years has tested nuclear bombs twice. Iran threatens to develop their own nuclear weapons, in a pretty volatile area of the world. The risk isn't really that North Korea or Iran will launch a nuclear attack—we're not really that concerned about that—but rather that they will launch additional nuclear-arms races, that if Iran develops the bomb, other countries in that region will develop bombs; if North Korea keeps going forward with its nuclear-weapons policies, other countries, such as Japan, might be tempted to go nuclear.

As former Secretary of State [George Shultz](#) once said, "Proliferation begets proliferation."

The problems accentuate the challenges of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime, really enshrined in the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, something that President [Lyndon Johnson](#) signed back in 1968. It's the major international treaty, with 189 countries that have signed up to it. It has largely worked. If you remember back to the Kennedy days—some of you are too young to remember those days—Kennedy predicted that there might be 20 or 25 nuclear powers after he left office. The fact that we have nine is nine too many, but at least it's not as bad as it could have been.

But the non-proliferation regime threatens to unravel. It threatens to unravel for two reasons:

One, the nuclear powers—in particular, the United States and Russia—haven't really acted sufficiently to take the steps needed to reduce the nuclear dangers. There have been some agreements, certainly, over the years, but again 20 years after the Cold War, both countries have major nuclear-weapon stockpiles remaining. When we signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and particularly when it got renewed several times, including permanent entry into force in 1998, the nuclear powers agreed to enact a treaty banning all nuclear-weapons testing, a treaty that still hasn't gone into effect, and agreed to take steps towards nuclear disarmament. Very few people would accuse Russia and the United States of moving in that direction.

But it's not only the problem of the United States and Russia and the other seven nuclear powers. It's also the problems of countries like Iran and North Korea, to which I have already alluded, that are developing nuclear weapons or have developed nuclear weapons, and no one seems to find a way to stop that development, to reverse what's happening in North Korea, to stop Iran before it actually builds nuclear weapons.

President Obama recognizes these challenges and has talked about them. Back to his [Prague speech](#) in April, he said, "Today the Cold War has disappeared, but thousands of these weapons have not. In a strange turn of

history, the threat of global war has gone down, but the risk of nuclear attack has gone up."

He continued, "More nations have acquired these weapons. Nuclear testing has continued. Black-market trade in nuclear secrets and nuclear materials abounds. The technology to build a bomb has spread. Terrorists are determined to buy, build, or steal one. Our efforts to contain these dangers are centered in the global non-proliferation regime. But as more people and more nations break the rules, we could reach the point where the center does not hold."

That was the first step of his campaign. But he has gone further since then. Just a couple months ago here in New York, he secured unanimous Security Council endorsement of a world free of nuclear weapons. The vote was joined by the Russians, by the Japanese, by the British, the French, by all the countries. That was important for reminding the rest of the world that this is an international agenda; it's not just a United States agenda.

Soon afterward, the announcement was made that the president was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in part because of his vision of a world free of nuclear weapons.

I do a lot of work with Congress, and one of the things I've been interested to see is how Congress reacts to what the president says. Ultimately, Congress, of course, is very important to the nuclear-weapons agenda, to say yes or to say no. In fact, as I have looked at both Republican and Democratic websites and looked at press releases, the predominant sound from Washington, D.C., from Congress, to the president's proposals has been silence. That is, very few members have reacted, either to criticize the president's agenda and say he's way off base and this is just too moral, too—you can't even think in these directions. There has been very little criticism, Republican or Democratic, of the president's agenda.

When the president delivered his speech in Prague, the same day the North Koreans conducted a missile test. The next day, Defense Secretary [Gates](#) announced a series of conventional-weapons increases and cuts. There's a lot of criticism of the North Koreans from Congress. There is a lot of criticism and praise from Congress of killing the F-22 or cutting back the missile defense program. Later, when the president changed the missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic, again there was a lot of reaction, particularly from Republicans. But on the call for a world free of nuclear weapons, silence, almost complete silence—again, both parties.

What does this mean, what I call the "sounds of silence," for those who remember the old Simon and Garfunkel song? Why are members of Congress so quiet on these issues? I think it's in part because they are so consumed with other important issues—the health-care debate, climate change, the economic crisis. The president is able to go in many directions at once. Members of Congress have more trouble doing that, and particularly when we are talking about a world free of nuclear weapons that could be decades off. If the issue is not going to be on the House or Senate floor sometime in the coming weeks, there is going to be less engagement in Congress.

But it's also true that Republicans have been very vigorous in terms of defending missile defense. They have been since President Reagan was in office. But they are, at the same time, reluctant to get involved in nuclear-weapons issues. They're just not very popular, even with Republicans. Republicans will say, "We've got to have missile defense in California, in Alaska, and in Europe," but when it comes to nuclear weapons, people, Republicans and Democrats, are more squeamish. After all, it was a Republican-controlled Congress that killed the Bush proposals to build a new generation of nuclear weapons, particularly led by a Republican House member from Ohio. Last year when a Republican tried to add funds for what was called a reliable replacement warhead, a new nuclear warhead, he lost big. He lost 145 to 271, with 44 Republicans voting against that nuclear-weapons money.

Again, I believe that the sounds of silence are because nuclear weapons simply are not that popular. And that gives the president a free hand—not a free hand, but a freer hand than he would have on some other issues.

The vision expressed by the president in Prague was important. But as, I'm sure, most of you are practitioners of politics or government at some point or now, you realize it's the follow-through that is critical. The vision is fine, but what steps are we going to take that might lead in the direction that the president has outlined?

The next six months will be an extremely important period to see if we can move in the direction that the president has outlined. When the president made his speech, he did talk about a series of interim steps that would be important building blocks towards this world free of nuclear weapons.

First and most immediate, as David Speedie talked about, I think the Treaty to Reduce Nuclear Weapons that the United States and Russia are negotiating on—the last treaty expires on Saturday. It was signed back in 1991 by [the first President Bush](#). There is a whole series of rules and regulations and verifications that have been important to the nuclear-weapons process since then.

The two countries pledged to negotiate a follow-on treaty. The two presidents have been involved. The foreign minister has been involved. The negotiators have been involved. We are down to those last days or weeks of frantic negotiations in Geneva, where they hope to complete a treaty perhaps as early as this Saturday, perhaps by the end of the month, but certainly in a matter of weeks.

The treaty, which is going to be called New START, will then go to the Senate. As we all remember our constitutional history—maybe House members don't care about this—we do need 67 Senate votes to win approval of the treaty. We have seen the difficulty of achieving 60 votes for any legislation throughout this year. But on a treaty of this magnitude, we're going to need 67, which, as a matter of math, means we need seven Republican votes, at a minimum, to approve the treaty that the U.S. and the Russians are negotiating.

I'm quite optimistic, actually, that this treaty will be approved. I have talked to about 20 Republican offices. There are concerns raised about the nuclear-reductions treaty, but no Republican has opposed the treaty, or Democrat. In fact, about ten Republicans signed a letter saying to the president, "Don't mess with missile defense, but we also think a START follow-on treaty is a good idea," including Senator [Jon Kyl](#), one of the major leaders of the Republican nuclear-weapons faction, I would say.

We hope that this treaty is not only concluded and then enters into force in the spring of 2010, but then followed by a new round of U.S.-Russia negotiations to achieve much deeper cuts.

So that's step one.

Step two is the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty. President Bill Clinton negotiated an international treaty to end all nuclear explosive testing, underground, on the surface, in the atmosphere, underwater. The treaty was actually submitted to the United States Senate. It languished for several years and then, in 1991, went down to a resounding defeat. President Obama has promised a vigorous new effort to try to win Senate approval for the treaty. If it all goes well—if all goes well—an overwhelming vote for a START follow-on agreement then would be followed by a vote on the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty.

That treaty has been signed by 182 countries, ratified by 150 countries. But under the terms of the agreement laid out when the treaty was signed, nine countries that have to approve it before it enters into force have not ratified the treaty. The United States is just one of those countries, but also China, Pakistan, India, North Korea, Israel, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran. At least Russia has ratified it—further than the United States has gone.

We hope there will be a new vote in the U.S. Senate in mid-2010. But it's not going to be easy. The Obama Administration, as we have seen, has had trouble with many other issues in Congress this year. A lot of the senators who voted against the Test-Ban Treaty in 1999 are still in office and are still opposed. But we are hopeful that, with skillful work by the Obama Administration and a deal worked out with the Republicans, we can win approval of that treaty as well.

The third major element of the president's interim steps: the [Fissile Materials Treaty](#). The president promised to reinvigorate international negotiations to end the production of fissile materials, nuclear materials, that could be used for military purposes, that could be fashioned into nuclear bombs. In May of this year, the Conference on Disarmament, which is the negotiating body for this treaty, broke an 11-year impasse where they hadn't done much of anything and agreed to launch negotiations on a treaty to ban the production of fissile materials for military purposes.

Unfortunately, however, the Pakistanis have blocked what appeared to be a consensus, and things are on hold. But we hope a renewed effort in early 2010 gets these negotiations under way as well.

The fourth major element of the president's interim steps: Securing all vulnerable nuclear-weapons materials around the world within four years. Obama talked about that during the campaign. He talked about it in his Prague speech and several times since. The idea is that, not just in Russia, but in many countries around the world, there are not just nuclear weapons, but there are nuclear materials that are vulnerable to theft or sale by some disgruntled scientist or military official. There have been many steps taken to secure Russian nuclear weapons and nuclear materials, but the problem, as I say, extends around the globe. Wherever there is a nuclear reactor, there is the possibility of nuclear weapons that could be stolen and might be used in some sort of weapon.

The president promised to launch a four-year effort to secure all vulnerable nuclear-weapons materials when he entered office. His first year, to be honest, has been kind of disappointing. I think they have been dealing with a lot of other issues. But we hope that the new federal budget that the president presents in February 2010 includes the resources and the commitment to follow through on this four-year agenda.

Those are some of the most important steps, but there will also be some important milestone events in 2010. Again, it's important. The president not only spoke about nuclear-weapons issues back in April, but has continued to do so since then. These milestones will again focus both American and international attention on nuclear-weapons issues.

First is a nuclear-posture review, a review of United States nuclear-weapons policy, conducted maybe every eight years, something that started earlier this year under the direction of the Pentagon, but with other federal agencies involved. This review is expected to be completely in about February of 2010. It's an opportunity to move U.S. nuclear policy to make it consistent with the president's vision, not move to a world free of nuclear weapons immediately, but to recognize the steps that could be taken to move us in that direction.

At a minimum, we hope that the nuclear-posture review reaffirms the view that we strongly hold that nuclear weapons today have only one purpose—only one purpose—and that's to deter a nuclear-weapons attack or perhaps use nuclear weapons to respond. The idea of using nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict, the idea of using nuclear weapons if the Chinese and the Taiwanese were involved in a war or a Middle East conflict—all these ideas that have been proposed we hope are officially abandoned in the nuclear-posture review and the U.S. affirms nuclear weapons for one purpose only: To deter a nuclear-weapons attack.

We think that's possible, but this study is in the grip of the bureaucrats, who may or may not be quite so enthralled with the president's vision. So we are a little nervous about exactly how this policy review will come out and what kinds of things we will see. We expect some progress compared to the last two administrations, but how much we don't know yet.

Another milestone event in 2010 is a [Global Nuclear Security Summit](#). This is something called for by President Obama, organized by the United States, to be held in April in Washington, D.C. We expect about 25 or 30 countries to participate. The goal there is really to deal with accelerating this program for securing and eliminating unsecured nuclear-weapons materials and weapons across the globe. It's consistent with the Obama pledge of securing all nuclear-weapons materials over the next four years, trying to get the rest of the world buying into that agenda. It also includes tracking and protecting weapons-usable materials and safeguarding against nuclear-weapons

terrorism.

Again, because the planning is under way, we think this summit will have some degree of success—we don't know how much—in focusing international attention on terrorism. Obviously, there is a lot of attention on terrorism already. The Russian train was just bombed. There have been terrorist attacks in Spain and the United Kingdom and a number of places— in India. But so far none of these attacks have included nuclear weapons. That's not for want of trying. There's clear evidence that al-Qaeda and other groups are hoping to either buy or build a nuclear weapon. Fortunately, they have not been able to. Hopefully, with world attention focused on nuclear terrorism as an issue, we can get greater international cooperation on this issue.

The last milestone event we have already talked about briefly, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. Again, as I pointed out, probably more than once, the cornerstone of all nuclear-weapons international cooperative effort is this Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This conference will be held right here in New York City, if you want to participate in any way.

The treaty, as I have said before, is really under threat. It's under threat because the nuclear powers haven't taken sufficient steps that they promised, and the world hasn't been able to stop Iran and North Korea, as I have already pointed out. The major goal of this review conference would be to strengthen the Non-Proliferation Treaty and increase barriers to proliferation—for example, penalize countries that exit from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, as the North Koreans did a few years ago and the Iranians are threatening to do even today.

President Obama in his April speech said about the Non-Proliferation Treaty, "The basic bargain of that treaty is sound."

I have already outlined this. Maybe I'm being repetitive here. If so, I apologize.

"Countries with nuclear weapons will move towards disarmament, countries without nuclear weapons will not acquire them, and all countries can access peaceful nuclear energy."

But we need more resources and authority to strengthen international inspections. We need real and immediate consequences for countries caught breaking the rules. That's the hope out of this Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. No one is quite sure exactly how successful that effort will be.

The [Chemical Weapons Convention](#) signed in the 1990s—signed by the first George Bush, ratified when Clinton was in office—did set up a regime of extensive inspections on chemical-weapons plants, as countries were getting rid of their chemical-weapons stockpiles. I think this treaty, if it would be successful, could at least begin the process of coming up with more vigorous international inspections than now exist for countries that might think of going towards nuclear weapons. Obviously, there have been inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities, but those inspections have been up and done, and sometimes Iran has brought in inspectors and certain areas have not been open to the inspections. So that will be an important area, if the Non-Proliferation Treaty Conference could focus on that.

A word about the problems in North Korea and Iran. Clearly, as I have mentioned, what North Korea and Iran are doing are threats to the nuclear non-proliferation regime and also cause a lot of controversy in this country, which is more focused on their potential nuclear weapons as opposed to the United States' thousands of nuclear weapons.

I don't know if there is any good solution in those two cases. I think we have to be patient and hope the negotiations work with Iran, with North Korea. In both cases, it's multilateral negotiations. With North Korea, six countries are involved, including Russia, China, Japan, the two Koreas, the United States. With Iran, it's again a group of countries involved that are negotiating with Iran. I don't know if these negotiations will be successful. You have seen in recent days where the [International Atomic Energy Inspection Agency](#) has criticized Iran. Iran's reaction was not to be at all apologetic, but to say, "The heck with you. We're going to build ten new nuclear plants. By the way, we may bar inspectors." Not the reaction we might have hoped for.

To paraphrase what [Winston Churchill](#) said about democracy, negotiating is not a good option, trying to deal with Iran, trying to deal with North Korea; it's just better than any of the other options.

How do you evaluate what the president has done on nuclear-weapons issues? You can say, legitimately, the rhetoric has been great, but what about the reality? Where's the follow-through? Or, as [Walter Mondale](#) once asked [Gary Hart](#), where's the beef?

In fact, [Henry Kissinger](#) was recently quoted about the president, not talking specifically about nuclear issues. Said Kissinger, "He reminds me of a chess grandmaster who has played the opening in six simultaneous games, but he hasn't completed a single game. I'd like to see him finish one."

In defense of the president, these things take time. Henry Kissinger, of all people, should know this. The opening to China, which was the one particular thing he and President Nixon were noted for, took a lot of time to engineer. Exiting from the Vietnam War took many, many years, unfortunately, to accomplish. Going to war is easy and can be done quickly; extricating ourselves takes a longer time.

Even this relatively modest U.S.-Russia negotiation under way that we hope will conclude in the next weeks has taken close to a year.

Safeguarding nuclear-weapons materials: If we're lucky, a four-year project.

Any of these major international problems take time—solving the India-Pakistan conflict, bringing peace in the Middle East, getting the Palestinians and the Israelis to live together in peace. These issues take, not years, but decades. In fact, Henry Kissinger tried to deal with some of these issues and was no more successful than his predecessors or his successors. Producing health-care reform takes time.

These things that the president has outlined on nuclear weapons take time. If you ask me to issue a report card for President Obama on nuclear-weapons issues right now, I'd have to give him an incomplete. You have to invite me back in two, three, four years to give a better evaluation.

There have been some very good decisions that we very much like to see, which we admired and liked, out of the Obama Administration. Killing the F-22, despite major congressional support—an important decision, and that decision is surviving in Congress. The decision to end the missile defense program and substitute a different version for Poland and the Czech Republic clearly was a good decision and one that the Russians largely were happy with, which is important because the Bush plan was a major irritant in U.S.-Russia relations.

But while giving the president an incomplete, I have to give the president a high mark for reviving interest, not just at home, but internationally, in nuclear-weapons issues. As I said at the beginning, for 20 years, people really haven't worried about nuclear weapons, since the end of the Cold War. Kids used to hide under their desks. Nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviets was always hanging over the planet.

But the president has raised the issue. He has done it once in Prague, but he has done it over and over and over again, in Japan, at the United Nations. He has set up a series of interim steps for next year. There are other milestones to push the plan forward. So even as the president is working on health care, climate change, he continues to work on these nuclear-weapons issues and continues to move us, at least slowly, in the direction of a world free of nuclear weapons. For that, I believe he deserves enormous credit.

Thank you very much for this invitation to speak. We'll know a lot more, as I say, in three or four years. But the next six months will be very telling, with all these milestone events. We'll see where we are probably about June 2010.

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