



Center for a
New American
Security

BIG ENERGY MAP

INTERVIEW WITH

DR. ELIZABETH TURPEN

Co-Director, Cooperative Nonproliferation Program
Henry L. Stimson Center

April 9, 2009

CHRISTINE PARTHEMORE: In our report, we recommended a BRAC-type process for the national labs, to reassess who does what where, make sure everything's aligned properly, that everyone's working towards a national strategic goal involving energy security that can also have elements of nuclear goals, climate change goals, etc. We got a lot of push-back for that, for obvious reasons. There aren't a lot of national labs, closing them would obviously would be very politically problematic, but your report also outlined that, on the science and technology side, there are challenges where you sort of need a national-level strategy with many different offices, many different departments, working together and working with the labs to all go towards a single goal. So, it sort of overlapped the purpose. Stepping aside from the BRAC-type process, could you talk about the issues there, and the need for a strategy to guide what all the labs are doing?

DR. ELIZABETH TURPEN: Well, our report, obviously, focused specifically on the nuclear weapons labs and the Nevada test sites. So it's not specific to the energy questions that you're looking at. What we did recommend is that, if you're looking at the capability sets that the nuclear weapons bring to bear, they have lots of users. DoE has been paying sort of full freight for maintaining and investing and paying legacy costs – cleanup and whatnot, for the nuclear weapons complex, while DHS and the intelligence community and DoJ and DoD all leverage the S&T capabilities of those labs. So our proposal was basically, you need a – analogous to a Board of Governors, sort of Board of Directors in the private sector of those users to figure out what is the government-wide, integrated, S&T strategy to make sure that you are most efficiently— first of all you're investing in a multi-agency fashion for the capabilities that all of the users leverage, but that you're also planning and prioritizing what are the capabilities that all of the different users need, and are willing to invest in. And we don't have that, what we have is a nuclear weapons complex.

Everybody anticipates declining nuclear weapons budgets. And what happens over time is, presumably, is if it's NNSA, the National Nuclear Security Administration, that's making those decisions, their lane is that—is the weapons mission and the stockpile. So, all of the sudden, they're going to decide, these capabilities are excess to the stockpile stewardship needs. We can dismiss those and save ourselves some money. And then all of a sudden the intel community is like, whoa wait a minute, we were using those guys for improvised nuclear device assessment in foreign threat assessments. And this is already happening in terms of pressure on the budget and loss of capabilities. The stockpile stewardship stuff is still fine. I'm not dispelling or trying to put out there that there's a crisis in terms of the arsenal itself. There could be, if we're not really careful about how we go about declining weapons budgets over the course of time. But we did have to structure an autonomous agency that had all of the users on board with skin in the game in terms of making their own investments to make sure that those capability sets beyond the traditional nuclear weapons mission remained in place over the long term.

So it's analogous in the sense – in terms of your report ,very analogous in terms of the number of agencies that play a role and trying to figure out what are the structures and mechanisms and oversight and leadership that you have to have in place to get everybody on the same page, and know what lane they're working in. Because in today's environment, with the budgets being what they are, you can't have redundancies writ large and you can't have a lot of inefficiencies in

the system. So we were looking towards maximum efficiency in terms of utilizing the S&T assets that the nuclear weapons complex can bring to bear.

PARTHEMORE: Excellent. And so would you, in an optimal situation (obviously nothing is ever optimal) – if you could create an optimal situation - would this Board of Directors or Board of Governors – would they be in charge of setting a strategy up to govern all of this, all these labs going forward and reassessing the strategy on a periodic basis annually and whatnot?

TURPEN: Absolutely. And part of the idea here is they come up with their laundry list of priorities, and they invest what they think they derive from the system, and they don't get to sit on the board if they're not making strategic investments. And then the agency, you know, the leader of the agency – it's kind of a NASA-like structure in terms of somebody who reports directly to the White House, and then has these FFRDCs underneath it. It's the umbrella organization for the research and development that falls beneath it. That leader, or that bureaucracy, or that headquarters is responsible for figuring out who does what in that mix of priorities and S&T needs.

PARTHEMORE: Do you envision then, that there would have to be an office or an individual person in each of the relevant agencies, from the intelligence community, from Department of Homeland Security and whatnot, to have a reach-back capability for the board? To sort of answer questions and also to feed up what their needs are?

TURPEN: Sure. Yeah in our structure, it's pretty high on the – it's the Deputy Secretary of Defense and the Undersecretary of – Because you have to get that high. If you look at a structure like DHS, they have their S&T component, that's one stovepipe, but then they have other stovepipes underneath that umbrella that also leverage the labs in a one-off sort of manner. Same thing with DoD. So, you'd have to go high enough within the bureaucracies of the different agencies that use the labs to make sure that that person had enough oversight to understand “here's what we derive from them, and this is how much we need to invest to make sure that all these different stovepipes are getting fed and watered on a regular basis.” So it wasn't – we didn't imagine creating a new sort of position within the agencies that's just an S&T person, but rather go up the hierarchy high enough that the person has enough oversight and insight into the different stovepipes of their agency that they can get their arms around what are the capability sets we need, and what investments do we need to be making.

PARTHEMORE: Excellent. How do you envision this – obviously, if it's a direct report to the President, or the board has a direct report to the President's office, how do you envision that that might work as part of the – if the executive office of the President puts in a structure that does an annual or a semi-annual assessment of our broad energy and climate change strategy, both because it has nuclear implications, climate policy, and, obviously, the work of the labs, and all those pieces kind of fit together, particularly at DoE. If they establish a strong hub in the White House who's in charge of doing that, do you think that it will work well for them to feed up into a national level strategy, or do you think that it would be the case where, the type of situation where you have this board and they have their own strategy, and that it would be difficult for them to take direction back down to sort of alter-

TURPEN: I'm not sure I'm following you, but one of the things we decided was that the chair of the board is the Vice President, so you have a direct line to the White House. You know, that's a new role for the Vice President in terms of overseeing the national security S&T needs. But let me go back to your first question about consolidating the structure and looking at that. There are... again, we were looking at the nuclear weapons labs specifically, and they all bring something to bear on the energy security question. The DoE secretary is one of the members of the board. So in terms of how that filters through, whatever is on his laundry list of unique capabilities that he needs that reside within those labs, well those investments come from DoE, and they get leveraged through that autonomous agency. Just as, you know, DHS needs nuclear forensics, that's a different investment and they prioritize it accordingly, and they make those investments to make sure that those capabilities are in place. So it works through the board in terms of that agency assessing from the bottom up, "here's what we're willing to invest because we need X, Y, and Z from that S&T set." The consolidation thing that you guys reference—I think there is a dire need – I think there is a dire need as a follow-on to the Stimson study to take a really close look at the DoE labs writ large. Who does what? What capabilities do they bring to bear on climate change? On energy security? On nuclear and whatnot? There was a huge consolidation post Cold War, and nobody has taken a fresh look, say, post 9-11 at what does that structure look like? Where are there redundancies? Are we maximizing, are we utilizing what's available in the most efficient manner, to go back to my point about budgets and where we're at? So I think there's a – let's say a surgical look at that infrastructure that's necessary to get our arms around what's available within the federal R&D infrastructure, DoE specific. Where do we apply it? And how do we best leverage it, for all of these different challenges that we're facing, including energy and climate change – And I want to do that study.

PARTHEMORE: I want you to do that study. And you have experience on the Hill. Do you have much experience in the energy side? I know it's strongly in nonproliferation and defense policy and whatnot, did that overlap at all, particularly on nuclear-related matters in any way?

TURPEN: For a very short time, I carried the portfolio on the NRC, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. That was a time during – I worked for Pete Domenici, the man who's responsible for the nuclear renaissance, if you will. So a lot of my job was trying to try to move the ball forward on certain bureaucratic issues that the private sector was confronting in terms of this next evolution of new nuclear power plants. The regulatory issues, really in the weeds, very boring. And a real uphill struggle, because the jurisdiction is split between the EPW committee, and the energy committee. So anytime you looked trying to – here's one of those other stovepipe jurisdiction issues – What you have in the agencies, you always have again on the Hill in terms of the oversight path, capacity. That's something else that our report did not look at. I mean, you'd have to restructure how Congress oversees the nuclear weapons piece and that S&T autonomous agency. We made an executive decision not to look at that because it does run up against the fiefdoms on the Hill and who's got what budget, and it can undermine what your main message is pretty quickly. So I only had, you know, Domenici was on the Energy Committee, so I always had insights into what was going on over in that domain, but I didn't carry that portfolio specifically. I agree with your report wholeheartedly that it's as messy as many other complex security challenges that we have today. You take any number of – you know, the non-proliferation question, it's the same thing. You got it spread over X number of agencies, and that's why they put Gary Samore in charge of, you know, Congress has been trying

to get the executive branch to create a non-proliferation czar for years, and they always think that that's the solution – create a czar to oversee all the stuff and keep it all in line.

PARTHEMORE: What do you think of the policy of creating czars to oversee stuff in the Executive, especially considering the fact that you do have so many committees on the Hill? Will that help reign in the problem of so many different committees of jurisdiction on these problems?

TURPEN: It will not fix the mess on the Hill per se. The problem with the czar – We did a study, a two-year study at Stimson on threat reduction. So that's Defense Department, DoE, and Department of State mostly, although other agencies get in the mix, and some of the State Department programs in particular. So we did this two-year study that just sort of did "lessons learned" and how do we make faster progress and what are some of the impediments. And one of the things that we looked at in a lot of detail was this notion of a czar, because it was something put forward in the Nunn-Lugar-Domenici bill in '96, ostensibly to be implemented in '97 and the Clinton Administration ignored it. There were discussions on the Hill that I personally was involved in when the Bush Administration came into office about legislating it again. As Republicans, we decided not to tell the new administration what to do, because they're not going to listen anyway. And that's the point, that Presidents really don't like Congress telling him how to structure his national security staff. That's the bottom line. What we discovered in terms of our research on the czar question as it pertains to non-proliferation, and, I think this is probably true with czars across the board, there might be some capacity - contingent on what sort of staff and capabilities they have internally - to do a little bit better management of redundancies and filling gaps, which is a big piece of the puzzle. The problem is that trying to get DoD, DoE, and the Department of State to function as – in lock-step, in terms of "this is your lane, you stay in your lane, don't step over the line" – that's not the way bureaucracies function. And to have somebody trying to dictate it from here, you can always run up against that program manager who's going to do their own thing, and try to create their own fiefdom within that domain. So the long and short of it is that a czar is not a bad idea, but I think there needs to be a strategic planning process, that that czar brings to bear, in terms of bringing all the agencies involved into the room on a continuous basis, and making sure that they all understand what lane they're in, what their budget allocation is going to look like, and try to enforce, if you will, cooperation. Because that's been a terminal problem in the non-proliferation domain. And I think that's the way bureaucracies function, that's the Washington game – "I want more budget and more jurisdiction and more authority," and so trying to wade through that mess and get bureaucracies to function otherwise is a huge challenge. So Gary Samore is up against a big challenge. And I wish him the best because it's been a necessary coordination process for 15 years.

PARTHEMORE: We wish him the best, too. We also, for the same reasons, didn't go very deeply into Congress, and partially, we knew that the committees were going to be changing on the energy and climate change issues over – pretty much every Congress, Congress to Congress as they have been. So, is there anything – I'm trying to think how to phrase it-

TURPEN: How to get Congress to behave better?

PARTHEMORE: Not behave better but, regardless of the mess of getting legislation through with so many different jurisdictions and whatnot, is there still a budgeting role that they could

use to facilitate the type of, setting up the type of structure that you envision for the nuclear piece, that could be applied more broadly? Could they write it into legislation to budget for any things better? Is that an ongoing sort of challenge to lobby Congress for all those regardless?

TURPEN: Well, you know, actually going back to our structure for the S&T capabilities. Here's the way in my head this might play out. You don't change Congress. The way it works in terms of here's the Board of Governors, they have X, Y, and Z allocations, that then filter down through this new agency. So that's X amount, within that jurisdiction. When they go to the Hill, if they care about it, they make sure that the Hill is cognizant of the fact that whether it's in the DHS portfolio or it's in the DoD portfolio, we have made a strategic decision that we need these S&T capabilities, and this is the amount that we are going to allocate towards that. It shouldn't run up against that big a problem, as long as the agencies step forward and say, "that's what we need, and it falls in X number of jurisdictions." That doesn't really matter, those committees then have oversight of that particular piece – that DoD says it needs and what DHS says it needs. So, I don't know that we needed to restructure Congress for our proposed autonomous entity... that's my notional version of how that might work. In the energy domain, I think you could probably come up with something similar, where EPW has its thing over EPA, and Energy Committee has its oversight over, you know, that piece. But it would take, some of the coordinating functions that you outline, at sort of the executive level to make sure that those agencies are signed on and that they're going to make sure that their congressional masters are aware of what's – you know, how that's filtering down and what objectives they're going to obtain with those monies. What you learn after being on the Hill a couple of years is—the President's budget, yes, is just a blueprint. But if you're going to make any massive changes in that blueprint, and by that I mean on the order of a billion dollars here or there, you have to get 13 cardinals – 13 appropriations committee members to say "yea verily, I give up money to go over here." And they don't do that. That's just not the way it functions. Again, it's all about budgets, because that's authority and responsibility and jurisdiction and control. So, it's really the President's budget blueprint that sets the tone, and sets the priorities. And that's where it starts in terms of the conversation. And again, just because of the way Congress functions, they're not going to be able to make massive changes to what that blueprint looks like, unless you just have some very strange anomaly in terms of an appropriations committee member who says, "oh, sure, I don't need that billion dollars, you can put it over there." Which is just not the way that-

PARTHEMORE: We'll not hold our breath. Excellent. Is there a precedent to the type of Board that you envision?

TURPEN: No.

PARTHEMORE: That you studied?

TURPEN: No.

PARTHEMORE: It didn't sound like it – There's outside oversight and informing boards, but-

TURPEN: There is not. Our model was somewhat based on – it's like a hybrid between NASA and a Defense Science Board Report that came out in 2006 called the Defense Science Board Nuclear capabilities study. I think it was 2006, that's right. It could have been 2005 – But they came up with something they called a government corporation, and it had four agencies on the Board. A little bit different structure, a little bit simpler than ours, but they were not looking at – their focus was the nuclear weapons component specifically, and even with that, they had other users that they put on the Board. Our focus was, how do you best leverage those S&T capabilities for national security writ large? And the stockpile stewardship and the weapons component is a subset of that, because if you look at the budget horizon, that's the likely outcome a decade or so from now. So how do you make sure you maintain what you need to have in place both for the weapons piece, over the course of whatever time it takes to negotiate with the Russians – whatever's going to unfold in the next iterations of treaty negotiations, but make sure you're not losing what the intelligence community needs and what DHS needs along the way.

PARTHEMORE: Wonderful.