1. It is my considered opinion that a new Cold War is already underway, and I believe that it is already as dangerous as the first Cold War. So it is important to consider what lessons we can learn from the first Cold War. I lived through all of the Cold War and was a significant participant in its key events. The first and perhaps the most critically important lesson I learned is that we survived the Cold War more by good luck than by good management.

2. A key example was the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which I was an active participant. Neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev wanted a nuclear war to result from the Cuban Missile Crisis, but events almost got out of their control. At the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy said that he thought there was one chance in three of the Cold War resulting in a nuclear catastrophe. But when Kennedy said that, he didn’t know that the Soviet forces in Cuba already had operational tactical nuclear missiles, and the authority to use them. So if Kennedy had accepted the unanimous recommendation from his Joint Chiefs of Staff to proceed with an invasion of Cuba, U.S. troops would have been decimated on the beachhead by tactical nuclear weapons, and a general nuclear war would surely have followed.

3. Another example is the false alarms that occurred during the Cold War. On one such alarm, the North American Air Defense Commander called the President to alert him that there was an attack underway, and then happily five minutes later called him back to say it was a false alarm. Had he discovered that error ten minutes later, it could have been too late. The false alarm was caused by a simple human error: the computer operator, as his shift began, mistakenly put a training tape into his computer, which simulated a missile attack. So, one person, one thoughtless error, almost brought us to a nuclear catastrophe.

4. These examples illustrate a second lesson from the Cold War. The danger was not that a nuclear war would start as a result of careful deliberation. The danger was that we would blunder into a nuclear war.

5. The third lesson that I’ve learned from the Cold War is that the strategies, policies, and programs of the U.S. and the Soviet Union were built on a false assumption—that the other side was planning a disarming first strike. As a result, each of us built ever-larger nuclear arsenals to defend against that presumed threat. By the time the Cold War was over, the arsenals of our countries had exceeded a staggering 70,000 nuclear weapons.

6. The fourth lesson I learned from the Cold War was that arms control can decrease the likelihood of a nuclear war. We practiced arms control to limit and then reduce the number of weapons. That was the argument, but if you look at the results—more than 70,000 nuclear weapons—it is clear that arms control did not succeed from that point of view. The
primary benefit of arms control was the dialogue that resulted between the two countries, and that dialogue decreased the probability of blundering into a nuclear war, which was the real danger.

7. When I became U.S. Secretary of Defense in 1994, I had already learned those lessons from the Cold War and gave my highest priority to decreasing the role and the number of nuclear weapons. In fact, within the three-year period when I was Secretary of Defense, we dismantled 8,000 nuclear weapons, half of them in the former Soviet Union, half of them in the United States. I put a high emphasis on dialogue and cooperation between the United States and Russia, and it led to cooperation under the Nunn-Lugar Program on dismantling nuclear weapons and securing fissile material; it also led to other types of cooperation such as the Partnership for Peace, and the participation of Russian soldiers with the NATO Peacekeeping Force in Bosnia.

8. When I left office in 1997, I believed we were well on our way to lowering the nuclear dangers that we faced during the Cold War. That was 22 years ago. What about now? Sadly, I think the governments of both the United States and Russia have learned the wrong lessons from the Cold War. Instead, they have restarted the nuclear arms race, rekindling the nuclear dangers of the Cold War, The United States is walking away from arms control treaties and there is no constructive dialogue between the U.S. and Russia on critical nuclear issues. Now, as then, the danger of nuclear war is not that the United States or Russia would deliberately conduct a disarming attack against the other country. The danger is that we will blunder into a nuclear war. Without arms control treaties and ongoing constructive dialogue, we are creating the conditions that increase the probability of blundering into a war.

9. Each year, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists convene a group of eminent scientists to estimate how close we are to “doomsday,” symbolized by the Doomsday Clock in which the minute hand is approaching midnight. At the time I was the Secretary of Defense, that minute hand was at fifteen minutes to midnight. In 2018, they set it to two minutes to midnight—the closest it has ever been.

10. The last time it was two minutes to midnight was 65 years ago: the Soviet Union had just tested a hydrogen bomb; Eastern Europe was in the iron grip of the Soviet Union; there was danger of a military conflict erupting in Berlin; and U.S. troops in West Germany were fully expecting an invasion.

11. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists experts equated the nuclear danger in 2018 to what it was in 1953. So there’s not only a new Cold War underway—it is equivalent to the most dangerous year of the first Cold War. Once more, we’re putting at risk the survival of civilization. But, unlike the last Cold War, the public and our political leaders seem to be unaware of this danger, and so our policies do nothing to address it.

12. When one plays “Russian roulette,” he puts a bullet in a revolver, spins the chamber, puts the gun to his head, and pulls the trigger. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were, in effect, playing Russian roulette. We won that gamble during the Cold War—should we take that gamble again?
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