Five years ago, in an op-ed piece published in The Wall Street Journal, two former secretaries of state (Henry Kissinger and George Shultz), a former secretary of defense (William Perry) and a former U.S. senator (Sam Nunn) declared their support for the elimination of nuclear weapons from the globe.

To get to zero, they urged nations to act urgently to control the uranium enrichment process, halt the production of fissile material for weapons, improve the security of existing arsenals, reduce the size of nuclear forces, and adjust the alert status of weapons to prevent accidental or unauthorized launches.

In "The Partnership," Philip Taubman, a former bureau chief of the Washington and Moscow offices of The New York Times, explains the improbable odyssey to the Zero Option of each member of this bipartisan quartet (and Sidney Drell, a Stanford University physicist). The partners, who constructed and carried out the nuclear arms policy of the United States during the Cold War, Mr. Taubman notes, know firsthand that the world is too dangerous "to pass off unaltered to their grandchildren."

"A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," Mr. Taubman indicates, got the attention of just about everyone in the national security fraternity. More questionable, however, is his claim that its "long-shot campaign" has "gained traction" among politicians and policymakers. In any event, it's clear that he hopes "The Partnership" will add momentum to the abolitionist agenda.

Mr. Taubman provides a cogent and chilling summary of the threat of nuclear weapons in the 21st century. The possibility of an attack, he demonstrates, may well be increasing.

The roll call of nuclear states includes the United States, Russia, Britain, France, China, India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea -- the last four of whom have not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran may soon join the club. Highly enriched uranium is poorly protected in many places around the world. Al-Qaida is trying to acquire the know-how to build an improvised nuclear device, smuggle a weapon out of Russia or purchase one in Pyongyang or Karachi.

The partners believe that if the "nuclear deterrence spell can be broken," disarmament will become much more feasible. They envision a robust regime of monitoring, including satellites, aerial surveillance to detect atmospheric gases and particulates, data exchanges, on-site inspections and human intelligence.

It may turn out that the nuclear genie cannot be put back into the bottle and that no nuclear state will agree to disarm completely, given any possibility that a rival or a group of terrorists could develop a capacity. The partners, who are nothing if not foreign policy realists, we can guess may present themselves as unwavering advocates of Global Zero to arouse indifferent and inattentive Americans, who are worrying about lots of others things, and rally support for intermediate efforts to reduce stockpiles and manage materials more carefully.
"It's really amazing what happens when people get older," a friend of Sam Nunn's told Mr. Taubman. "There comes a moment for whatever reason that you have an epiphany."

Mr. Perry, for one, feels a special responsibility for resolving a problem he helped create. So many supporters of the Zero Option (and, for that matter, of a compromise on deficit reduction), it is worth noting, are "former" politicians and policymakers. They retain a desire, of course, to burnish their reputations or linger longer in the limelight.

And yet, with fewer axes -- and axioms -- to grind, and no constituents except posterity to please, they ought to command our attention.

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First published on January 22, 2012 at 12:00 am

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