

Dereliction of Duty

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Ignoring its constitutional treaty-making responsibilities, the Republican Senate leadership has allowed Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, to single-handedly block Senate action on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which President Clinton signed two-and-a-half years ago. If the Senate's advice and consent on this critical treaty is delayed another six months, the future of the treaty will be in doubt and the United States will have seriously endangered its leadership role in the efforts to contain further nuclear proliferation.

First advocated by President Eisenhower in 1958, the CTBT has been a long-sought objective to constrain the nuclear arms race. With the almost universal acceptance of the critical nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the CTBT has become the litmus test of the willingness of the nuclear-weapon states to move away from the inherently discriminatory nature of the NPT. The CTBT would prohibit the nuclear-weapon states from testing—a much criticized right they alone retain under the NPT.

At the 25th-anniversary NPT review conference in 1995, which extended the treaty indefinitely, the five nuclear-weapon states agreed to complete negotiation of the CTBT no later than 1996. With strong U.S. leadership, an agreed text of this complex agreement, which had so long eluded the nuclear-weapon states, was completed on schedule. To date, the five nuclear-weapon states and 147 non-nuclear-weapon states, including Israel, have signed the treaty, and 29 states, including Britain, France, Germany and Japan, have ratified the accord. However, as a consequence of the U.S. failure to ratify, many countries, including China and Russia, are holding back on their ratification. Unless the United States and 43 other designated states ratify the treaty, it cannot formally enter into force.

Senator Helms has advised the president that he does not think the CTBT is important and that he will not consider it until his committee first deals with unrelated amendments to the ABM Treaty and the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, both of which he strongly opposes. Helms' conditions will not be met soon because the Clinton administration does not plan to submit the Kyoto Protocol in the foreseeable future and will not submit the amendments to the ABM Treaty until the Russian Duma ratifies START II.

Unless the Republican leadership resolves this impasse promptly, Helms will have succeeded in placing in jeopardy not only the CTBT but U.S. nuclear non-proliferation policy. If the United States fails to ratify the CTBT, it will not have a vote at the special conference called for in the treaty in the fall of 1999 to "facilitate the early entry into force of the treaty," nor will other key countries, including Russia and China, whose ratification is contingent on U.S. action. This will set the stage for an at-best unproductive, and possibly disastrous, NPT review conference in 2000. Instead of providing a platform for the United States to marshal support against threats to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, the United States will bear the brunt of attacks on the nuclear-weapon states for blocking progress on the CTBT and for failing to meet the other commitments made in connection with the indefinite extension of the NPT.

After 40 years of debate, it is indeed tragic that the United States is prevented from conducting foreign policy at a time when there should be strong bipartisan support for the CTBT. The treaty is endorsed by the overwhelming majority of the American people, with only a small group of extremists in opposition. The military, which in earlier years opposed such a treaty, now supports it

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as serving U.S. security interests. This endorsement includes the current and four former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The weapons laboratories, which historically called for continued testing, now agree that by relying on a generously funded stewardship program they can certify the reliability and safety of the nuclear stockpile without nuclear testing.

Even the long-standing dispute over the verifiability of the CTBT has largely dissipated with the general recognition that such an agreement can be adequately verified to preclude emergence of any significant new military threat to U.S. security. In fact, the international monitoring system established by the treaty will improve current verification capabilities and provide for on-site inspection of suspicious events.

The administration must translate its supportive rhetoric on the CTBT into a focused public campaign, challenging the Republican leadership to allow the Senate to exercise its constitutional responsibilities in the treaty-making process. If Republican leaders continue to hide behind Helms' dictatorial whims in denying the Senate the right to vote on this important international treaty, they will not only be derelict in their constitutional duties, but will earn an unenviable place in the nation's profiles in cowardice.

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