

Senator Helms' Floccinaucinihilipilification

- [Arms Control Today](#)

[Spurgeon M. Keeny, Jr.](#)

As self-appointed arbiter of U.S. foreign policy, Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms (R-NC) recently disdainfully dismissed an appeal by all 45 Democratic senators that he allow the Senate to consider the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which has languished before his committee for two years without hearings. In his supercilious reply, Helms proclaimed his "floccinaucinihilipilification" of the CTBT, or in plain English, his belief that the treaty is absolutely worthless. With Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott's (R-MS) support, Helms reasserted his intention to hold the treaty hostage to advance his campaign to destroy the unrelated ABM Treaty, thereby blocking Senate action on the CTBT. Failure to ratify the CTBT will endanger U.S. security by undercutting U.S. efforts to build international support for the nuclear non-proliferation regime and by allowing further nuclear weapon developments by countries that could threaten the United States.

The 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which now bars testing by the 181 non-nuclear-weapon states-parties through their agreement not to acquire nuclear weapons, allows the five recognized nuclear-weapon states to continue testing, underscoring the inherently discriminatory nature of the treaty. By applying equally to all nations, the CTBT would end the privileged status of the nuclear-weapon states to continue testing to further develop their nuclear capabilities. The treaty is widely seen as the litmus test of whether the nuclear-weapon states recognize their own NPT treaty obligation to move toward nuclear disarmament.

The CTBT would ban nuclear testing by Russia, the only country that can now possibly threaten the survival of the United States, and by China, the only other country that might in the future achieve that capability. But neither Russia nor China will ratify before the United States does. The treaty also provides a practical means to limit the development of more advanced weapons by India, Israel and Pakistan, three nuclear-capable countries that are unlikely to join the NPT as non-nuclear-weapon states because it would require the elimination of all their nuclear weapons. Finally, by establishing an international norm against testing, the CTBT would put additional pressure not to test on North Korea and Iraq, which are in violation of their NPT obligations, and Iran, which the United States believes is positioning itself to violate the NPT.

Despite these compelling considerations, test ban opponents assert in a campaign of false and misleading statements that without testing the U.S. deterrent will be threatened by the loss of stockpile reliability and that the treaty is "unverifiable." These alarming assertions could not be sustained in a serious Senate debate. The leaders of the three U.S. nuclear weapon laboratories agree that the reliability and safety of the stockpile can be maintained without further nuclear testing. This will be accomplished by the generously funded stockpile stewardship program, which will monitor the reliability of the stockpile with non-destructive and non-nuclear testing, as well as computer simulations. This will give ample warning if weapons or components must be refabricated. The current chairman of the JCS, General Henry Shelton, as well as four former JCS chairmen have endorsed the treaty as serving U.S. security interests. They are confident of the reliability and safety of the U.S. stockpile and see no need to develop new types of weapons to meet U.S. military requirements in an era of declining relevance of nuclear weapons.

The U.S. record of successfully identifying some 1,000 foreign nuclear tests (about 700 underground) refutes the charge that the treaty is unverifiable. With the added capabilities of the treaty's

Senator Helms' Floccinaucinihilipilification

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

international monitoring system, any tests large enough to affect U.S. security will be detected. And the treaty provision to permit on-site inspections will provide a mechanism for taking violations to the United Nations with the support of the international community if clear evidence is discovered or if the inspection is denied.

Helms' obstruction has already lost the United States voting participation in the special Vienna conference October 6-8 to facilitate entry into force of the CTBT. If he is allowed to continue to block ratification, the U.S. leadership role will be seriously undercut at the important five-year NPT review conference scheduled for April-May 2000. Rather than being looked to as the leading force against nuclear proliferation, the United States will be widely held as responsible for the failure of the nuclear-weapon states to honor their pledge on the CTBT in obtaining the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995.

The Republican leadership should not permit Helms to co-opt them as co-conspirators in his effort to block CTBT ratification. If Helms succeeds in denying the Senate the right to exercise its constitutional responsibility to consider this important treaty, the issue must be taken to the American people. Polls indicate that an overwhelming bipartisan majority does not share the senator's cavalier "floccinaucinihilipilification" of the CTBT.

Source URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1999-07/issue-briefs/senator-helms-floccinaucinihilipilification>