

The Senate Republicans' Finest Hour

Last week's rejection by the Senate of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was the most responsible and courageous action by that body since the 1991 vote authorizing the Gulf War. In the face of a hostile media, a well-organized and well-funded international "arms control" industry, polls showing majority support for the treaty, and explicit threats by Democrats and the White House to use the vote against Republicans in the 2000 elections, Republican senators cast a decisive vote in favor of serious American global leadership. With this one vote, Republicans proved that they are the only party that can be trusted with the stewardship of the nation's security.

The fact that they are being pilloried by the elite media should not give Republicans a moment's pause about whether they did the right thing. On the contrary: They should be proud. The Test Ban Treaty is to the late 1990s what the "nuclear freeze" movement was to the early 1980s and the SALT II agreement was to the late 1970s. All were bad and dangerous proposals that appealed both to the utopian fantasists of the arms control theocracy and to those who have always believed that the most dangerous nuclear weapons in the world are the ones in America's arsenal. Forget all the pious declarations by advocates that the treaty would somehow have magically restrained the likes of North Korea, China, and Pakistan from building up their own nuclear capabilities, or prevented Iraq and Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. That claim, which was manifestly absurd, was only cover for what really animated the push for the treaty. As Thomas Graham, president of the Lawyers Alliance for World Security, told the *Washington Post*, the Test Ban Treaty was part of a larger project: for the United States "to pursue disarmament negotiations aimed at the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons."

That was the real game here. The same people who two decades ago wanted to disarm the United States in our confrontation with the Soviet Union today want the United States to disarm in our confrontation with the disparate forces of evil in the post-Cold War world. Republicans were right to reject such misguided and dangerous fantasizing then. They are right to reject it now.

The accounts of last week's vote in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were comical. According to the jour-

nalists who "covered" the story, Republican "hard-liners" killed the most important treaty of the twentieth century in pursuit of narrow, partisan advantage. The *Times* in its hyperventilating front-page headline actually claimed that the defeat of the Test Ban Treaty "Evokes Versailles Pact Defeat." That paper's R.W. Apple, in what surely must rank as the most embarrassing "news analysis" of the past decade, pulled out all the stops: The Senate's rejection of the treaty "further weakened the already shaky standing of the United States as a global moral leader." Indeed, the rejection "went to the very heart of the efforts by the victorious allies to build a safer world in the wake of World War II." Why, Apple informs us breathlessly, "on Tuesday of this week, a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry urged American ratification, arguing that it would 'serve as an example and promote the ratification of the treaty by other countries.'" Talk about self-parodic.

What accounts for such hysteria? One might compare the left's faith in arms control to old-fashioned religious fervor, except that to do so is unfair to much religious belief, which at least tries to account for inconvenient evidence and arguments. The fact is, even supporters, like the *Washington Post*, admitted that the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was flawed, that its monitoring and verification mechanisms were suspect, and that U.S. ratification would in no way have guaranteed that other nuclear and would-be nuclear powers would have ratified it, much less that they would have abided by it. The fact is, no international agreement can possibly be relied upon, by itself, to limit the spread of nuclear weapons. And the fact is, U.S. ratification would most likely have ended up placing dangerous restrictions on the reliability of the American nuclear arsenal without similarly restricting the capabilities of other nuclear powers, present and future.

This is to say nothing of the core objection to the treaty, brilliantly summarized by Richard Perle:

In domestic affairs, no one would seriously propose that the police and criminals come together and sign agreements according to which they accept the same set of constraints on their freedom of action. Yet that is the underlying logic of the CTBT: a compact among nation states, some of which are current or likely criminals, others—the majority—respectful of international law and their treaty obligations.

Because there can be no realistic hope of verifying compliance with the CTBT, this fundamental flaw, which is characteristic of global agreements, is greatly magnified. The net result of ratification of the CTBT would be a) American compliance, which could leave the U.S. uncertain about the safety and reliability of its nuclear deterrent; and b) almost certain cheating by one or more rogue states determined to acquire nuclear weapons.

But leave all this aside: If ratification of this treaty was of such transcendent interest to the United States and the world—if it was, as the *Times* insists, the most important treaty of the twentieth century—how is it that President Clinton barely lifted a finger to press for its passage? How is it that Clinton did not expend a micron of his political capital, did not risk a single digit in his approval rating, to try to push this treaty through the Senate? After all, the president signed the Test Ban Treaty over three years ago, in September 1996. We don't recall his making it a major campaign issue that year. Nor did he make ratification of the treaty an issue in the 1998 congressional elections.

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan gave speech after televised speech on foreign policy issues of importance. Clinton, by contrast, has never once appeared before the American people to try to explain or sell what we're now being told is the cornerstone of peace and the international order. And as long as we're making comparisons to 1919, how about this: Although in desperately poor health, Woodrow Wilson toured the nation stumping for his treaty, and the exertion killed him. Clinton last week met with a few senators and made a few phone calls. According to the *Times*, the administration's approach to the treaty was one of "benign neglect."

In short, the treaty was so vitally important that the president could hardly bring himself to talk about it. The strongest statement Clinton made in its defense came a day after its rejection, in which he preposterously accused the Republican opponents of the treaty—who include the likes of Richard Lugar and John McCain, Henry Kissinger and Jeane Kirkpatrick—of "a new isolationism."

Which leads us to the question of partisanship. Who was really playing politics with the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty? Not the Republicans. Anyone who thinks Republicans were playing to their constituents on this vote is living on another planet. The polls were against them last week and probably will still be against them come next November. Instead, it's the Democrats who all along were sharpening their knives for the coming election season. The day after the vote, Al Gore already had his ads ready to go. The Democrats can't wait to blame the Republicans the next time India or Pakistan or some other nation carries out a nuclear test.

The bad faith of the Clinton administration and Senate Democrats in the ratification debate was breathtaking. The Republicans did not go looking for this fight. It was Senate Democrats who taunted Senate majority leader Trent Lott and threatened to bring Senate business to a halt unless

they got a vote on the treaty. The Democrats did this knowing that they didn't have the votes to ratify. They wanted the Republicans either to refuse to let the treaty come up for a vote or to vote the treaty down. Either way, the Democrats figured, they would have the issue for the next elections. This may well have been smart politics. But let's not pretend it was about anything other than politics. Neither the Senate Democrats nor the White House were thinking seriously about the treaty. They were not thinking about the damage that might allegedly be done to U.S. credibility were the treaty to fail in the Senate. If they had been thinking seriously about these matters, they wouldn't have tried this gambit.

Republicans called the Democrats' bluff, and in doing so, went to the trouble of taking the treaty seriously. Led by senator Jon Kyl, they brought experts and prominent former officials like James Schlesinger and Brent Scowcroft to the Hill to discuss the merits of the treaty. Convinced that the treaty was deeply harmful to U.S. interests, Kyl organized briefings for senators and methodically set about the business of collecting votes against it. One of the *New York Times*'s reporters last week characterized Kyl's efforts as "political intrigue"—as if a senator's reviewing a treaty's merits and marshalling opposition to it were somehow shady and illegitimate activities. Kyl's efforts apparently took the Democrats and the White House by surprise. Why? Because, unlike Kyl, they couldn't be bothered to build their case.

Fortunately, at the end of the day, seriousness prevailed. Republicans have struck a blow at arms control fantasies, thereby showing an admirable willingness—unlike their critics across the aisle, at the White House, and in the newsrooms—to confront the real world, with all its multiplying dangers, without illusion. The Clinton administration would have us believe that the problems of nuclear proliferation can be addressed by gaining ever more signatories to an ever growing plethora of weak international conventions. This while the administration manifestly fails to do anything about the proliferation of weapons in Iraq and Iran, tries to bribe North Korea into halting its programs, and consistently coddles the ever-proliferating Chinese. And this while the administration drags its heels on building a missile defense system that can protect the United States and its allies from real threats today and in coming years.

Senate Republicans have blown the whistle on this charade, and they are to be congratulated and encouraged. This year it's the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Maybe next year they can press the administration to submit its amended ABM Treaty to the Senate, so they can vote that down too. After that, a Republican president can take over, rebuild our defenses, make the case to the American people for serious global leadership, and work realistically for a more secure world.

—William Kristol and Robert Kagan, for the Editors