

Executive Memorandum

The Heritage Foundation

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RUSH!

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THE NUCLEAR TEST RESOLUTION: UNDERMINING THE PRESIDENT AT THE SUMMIT

The arms control lobby has come up with a way of attempting to undermine Ronald Reagan before his summit meeting with Soviet ruler Mikhail Gorbachev. An effort is expected this week in the House of Representatives to bring House Joint Resolution 3 to the floor for a vote. H.J. Res. 3 was introduced last January by Reps. Berkley Bedell (D-IA), Jim Leach (R-IA) and Edward Markey (D-MA). This resolution calls on the President to submit to the Senate for ratification the 1974 Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT), and the 1976 Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty (PNET). Both limit the size of underground nuclear tests to 150 kilotons of explosive power. Part two of the resolution calls on the President to begin negotiating with the Soviets toward a comprehensive U.S.-Soviet test ban (CTB), which would prohibit all further nuclear testing.

This effort is currently the focus of attention of the arms control lobby, which has been encouraged by Gorbachev's July 29 announcement of a unilateral five-month moratorium on Soviet nuclear testing. Yet that Gorbachev announcement was a patently political effort to take advantage of the fortieth anniversary of Hiroshima to embarrass the United States with a time-limited Soviet suspension of testing only after completion of its own nuclear testing program for 1985.

The TTBT and PNET are not adequately verifiable with current technology and the Soviets have refused to discuss improved verification procedures. A CTB, however, would be contrary to the security interests of the United States and should not be pursued.

In 1954 when nuclear testing limits were first urged, it was hoped that limiting nuclear testing would slow the development of nuclear weapons and eliminate nuclear fallout. But testing is no longer required for nations to develop a nuclear weapons capability. And the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963, limiting signatories to underground nuclear tests, has virtually eliminated nuclear fallout from tests by the signatory countries.

Underground nuclear tests of less than 150 kilotons, which would be prohibited under a CTB, have become increasingly important to U.S. security

and to achieving real reductions in nuclear arms, for the following reasons:

1) Nuclear testing of relatively low-yield explosions is necessary to develop and maintain command, control and communications (C³) systems that are survivable enough so that Moscow would not think it could incapacitate them in a first strike. Underground testing also is critical to the development of C³ systems for the 1990s that are less vulnerable than present systems to electromagnetic disturbances caused by nuclear explosions.

2) The testing of warheads is necessary to assure the reliability of the warheads in the U.S. strategic deterrent.

3) Improvements in the accuracy of missiles and the reliability of warheads have permitted the development of smaller and fewer warheads. As a result, the U.S. has unilaterally reduced its megatonnage by 75 percent and the total number of U.S. warheads by 25 percent since 1960. Continued underground testing is necessary to assure the development of even more discriminating and effective weapons, which are safer, smaller, lower-yield, and more tamper-proof.

4) After three decades of testing and debate, it is clear that limits on underground tests cannot be verified with accuracy. A comprehensive test ban, in particular, would require far greater on-site monitoring than the Soviets have been willing to consider.

The Threshold Test Ban Treaty, which allows continued testing but limits each test to no more than 150 kilotons would not necessarily be harmful to U.S. security. The problem is that it cannot now be verified with accuracy. The Soviets appear to have violated the test limit many times and the Administration says that U.S. monitoring of Soviet tests has a 200 percent margin of error. Either the Soviets are extensively violating the TTBT, or U.S. technical ability to verify Soviet compliance is just not adequate to justify U.S. testing constraints, or both.

In an effort to improve U.S. ability to monitor Soviet testing, the U.S. has unsuccessfully sought to engage the USSR in discussions on verification improvements to the TTBT and PNET. They have refused. If Congress wishes to support the President when he goes to meet Gorbachev in Geneva, it should call on Moscow to discuss verification improvements with the U.S. Otherwise, H.J. Res. 3 will be seen for what it is--an effort by the arms control lobby to embarrass and undermine the President on the eve of a meeting with the leader of the Soviet Union.

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For further information:

Rep. Henry J. Hyde, "Test Ban Fever," The Washington Post, September 25, 1985.

Brian Green, "A Flawed Test Ban Treaty," Heritage Foundation Background No. 340, March 27, 1984.