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WILL AMERICA REMAIN A NUCLEAR POWER? IMPLICATIONS OF CLINTON'S NUCLEAR TEST BAN

“ . . . I can foresee a time early in the next century when America will no longer be a nuclear power.”

—Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, June 21, 1994

On August 11, President Bill Clinton announced a ban on all U.S. nuclear tests. This decision is a major step toward making Senator Thurmond's prediction come true. It effectively reverses the policy the Clinton Administration adopted less than a year ago. The September 1994 Nuclear Posture Review found that the U.S. must maintain a stockpile of reliable, safe, and effective nuclear weapons to deter any potential adversaries and fulfill its security commitments. Because such a stockpile cannot be maintained without testing, President Clinton effectively has committed the nation to unilateral nuclear disarmament.

President Clinton's case for a comprehensive nuclear test ban is based on a number of misperceptions about nuclear testing.

X The Administration asserts that nuclear tests are not needed to maintain a stockpile of reliable, safe, and effective nuclear weapons. Tests are needed. This was the conclusion of a non-partisan panel of scientists, chaired by Stanford University scientist Sidney Drell, in a report submitted to the House Armed Services Committee in 1990. Dr. Drell stood behind this assessment as recently as 1992, in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Drell now chairs another study group which has reached the opposite conclusion. The JASON group, in a report released on August 4, concludes that tests no longer are required to maintain a stockpile of safe, reliable, and effective nuclear weapons. What accounts for Drell's change of opinion is unclear. However, even the JASON study hedges on the question of adopting an outright ban on testing. Its authors conclude that continuing tests of nuclear weapons below the kiloton level can add to long-term stockpile confidence and that unforeseen problems might require the U.S. to withdraw from a comprehensive test ban treaty.

X A comprehensive test ban rests on the assumption that America need not develop any new nuclear weapons. This assumption is false. The *Minuteman III* intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which is the only ICBM the U.S. will retain after implementation of the Strategic Arms Reduction (START) II Treaty, was first deployed in 1970. If there is no further testing, the *Minuteman III* will never be replaced with a new missile. The more modern MX missile will be dismantled under START II.

A new missile will be required simply to replace the aging *Minuteman III*. But it also will be needed for another reason. New missile designs will be more accurate, and this will make them more lethal against hardened military targets.

X The President asserts that the nuclear test ban will expedite the adoption of a comprehensive test ban (CTB) treaty. Even if a CTB treaty is negotiated, the evidence indicates the Senate will not consent to its ratification. In fact, on August 4, the Senate voted by a margin of 56 to 44 to fund the sort of tests the Clinton policy and a CTB treaty would ban. Senate consent to ratification of a CTB treaty will require 67 votes, assuming all 100 Senators are voting. This means that President Clinton will have to find 23 more votes in the Senate to support his desire for a CTB treaty.

Even if a CTB treaty were ratified, it would not impose a global ban on testing. No country would be compelled to sign the treaty, and even those that do could circumvent it by conducting very-low-yield tests that could not be verified. Thus, the Clinton policy will not achieve a comprehensive global ban on testing. However, it will impose a unilateral ban on the U.S.

X The Administration assumes that a CTB can be verified. The truth is that it will be impossible to verify whether very small nuclear explosions have taken place. Most nuclear tests can be detected through seismic sensors. But these sensors are not likely to be sensitive enough to detect a secret test of a very-low-yield device. Even the JASON group study concludes that monitoring compliance with a treaty barring such tests would require cooperative, on-site monitoring.

X The Administration asserts that barring nuclear tests in the United States will prevent the proliferation of nuclear arms around the globe. In fact, a test ban will spur proliferation. The U.S. nuclear arsenal serves as a barrier to proliferation, not as an incentive. U.S. allies like Germany and Japan are less likely to desire nuclear weapons as long as they view the U.S. nuclear guarantee as viable. One of the measures of this viability is the safety and reliability of the U.S. nuclear force, and this requires testing.

America's nuclear deterrent is a force for good in the world. Nothing will invite the acquisition and possible use of nuclear weapons by rogue states more than U.S. nuclear disarmament.

CONCLUSION

President Clinton's decision to bar future tests of U.S. nuclear weapons is short-sighted. It will not help eliminate the world's arsenal of nuclear weapons. However, it could result in unilateral disarmament for the U.S.

The U.S. already has been down a similar road. In the late 1960s, the U.S. unilaterally banned the development and stockpiling of biological weapons. But other countries, including Iraq and the Soviet Union, continued to develop and stockpile such weapons, regardless of the 1972 treaty banning them. The result was that the U.S. ceased to possess a weapon that other countries continued to build. President Clinton has adopted a policy that will lead inevitably to the same sort of inequitable outcome with respect to nuclear weapons. This is a course fraught with risk for U.S. national security.

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