

Test ban meltdown: Backsliding

From the Editors in the [November 3, 1999](#) issue

The U.S. Senate's refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty can be read in a number of ways: as a sign of resurgent isolationism; as the incursion of partisan politics into foreign policy; and as the consequence of Bill Clinton's ineffective lobbying on the treaty's behalf. Each explanation contains some truth. But we are most concerned about the treaty's substance and goal-limiting the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The Senate broke with a nuclear arms reduction policy that spans four decades and seven presidents. On its face, the action by the Senate's Republican majority was an abandonment of the effort to control the expansion of nuclear weapons through international agreements.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall ten years ago this month, concern about nuclear weapons has greatly diminished. The nuclear standoff between NATO and the Eastern bloc no longer looms over every local conflict, and the nightmare scenario of mutually assured destruction has receded in our consciousness. But the threat of nuclear weapons has not gone away. In some respects, the end of the East-West polarity has made the use of nuclear weapons by one or another member of the nuclear club (which now numbers nine) more likely, just as it has made the idea of acquiring or expanding a nuclear capability more attractive to some countries.

The need for international controls on the spread of these weapons is, therefore, more urgent than ever. Urgent, too, is the need for leadership by the U.S. If the U.S. is not willing to limit its own testing, how can it call on other nations to rein in their nuclear programs?

The U.S. can still exercise some responsible leadership by continuing to adhere to the moratorium on testing—a policy Clinton says he intends to keep. Even better would be a careful reconsideration of the treaty and its importance for the world.