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## Abroad at Home

ANTHONY LEWIS

# Test of Leadership

The Soviet-American treaty banning all but underground nuclear tests is nearly 30 years old now, and we tend to take it for granted. We forget that it exists only because a President was courageous enough to lead.

June 1963 was a time of high tension in the cold war. Less than eight months before, we had come to the brink of nuclear war over Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba. The American political mood was overwhelmingly hawkish.

In that climate President Kennedy moved to reduce tensions with the Soviet Union. In a speech at American University on June 10 he called for steps toward peace, if not to end differences with Moscow then at least to "make the world safe for diversity." Most concretely, he called for "a treaty to outlaw nuclear tests," which he said would "increase our security [and] decrease the prospects of war."

The test-ban proposal aroused powerful opposition in Congress and the military. Public opinion was skeptical. When negotiations produced only a limited test-ban treaty, allowing underground tests to continue, even that was fiercely resisted. Theodore C. Sorensen, who was Kennedy's special counsel, described the resistance when he spoke this June 10, also at American University.

"But the President carried the fight to the Senate," Mr. Sorensen said, "to the Joint Chiefs, to the public, with speeches and phone calls and meetings and arm-twisting. . . . And he prevailed. No other signing ceremony in the White House gave him

## J.F.K.'s lesson for Clinton on a nuclear treaty.

greater satisfaction."

Thirty years on, that history is acutely relevant. President Clinton faces an important decision on nuclear testing, one with profound implications for the spread of nuclear weapons. And once again the outcome depends on Presidential courage and commitment.

Last year Congress imposed a moratorium on U.S. nuclear testing until this July 1. After that the legislation allows up to 12 tests for the "safety" of nuclear weapons and 3 for their "reliability."

The military services have told the President they favor further tests, but they are not pushing with great zeal. They are not eager to spend the vast sums needed to deploy new warheads or weapons, now that the cold war is over, and the law allows tests only if the services plan deployment.

The real push for tests comes from the nuclear weapons laboratories, which want to justify their continued existence. And they have friends in Congress.

The arguments for testing are essentially ones of domestic politics, not science. In terms of national security, the arguments are overwhelmingly against new tests.

The United States in fact faces one

extremely serious nuclear threat, and resumption of testing would exacerbate it. That is the proliferation of weapons. Intelligence reports suggest that a substantial number of countries could acquire nuclear weapons if there is any weakening of the barriers to proliferation.

If the United States starts testing, France, Britain and Russia may well conduct tests. President Clinton would undoubtedly say that this will be a last test series, but it would be extremely difficult then to get the other nuclear powers to agree on a final stopping date.

All this would have dangerous consequences for nuclear proliferation. The countries without acknowledged nuclear weapons have always insisted that the principle of nonproliferation is acceptable only if those that have them stop testing. And the nonproliferation treaty is up for renewal in 1996.

In fact, the term "safety tests" is a misnomer. There is no danger in existing weapons of unintended nuclear explosions; the only safety to be checked is of collateral matters. And testing would involve real danger to the world: the opposite of "safety."

President Clinton, speaking at West Point last month, said the U.S. "will soon begin negotiations on a comprehensive test-ban treaty, which will increase our political leverage to combat proliferation." Ending the current moratorium on tests would sabotage that negotiation before it can begin.

The necessary test is the one already taking place: the test of Presidential leadership. □