

Halting Nuclear Tests

Adjournment of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) in Vienna, without the year-end agreement to which the White House and Kremlin committed themselves last May, demonstrates again the slow pace of progress in curbing the atomic arms race. It brings into question the wisdom of delaying other nuclear negotiations that could contribute to this goal and, particularly, exploration of a comprehensive treaty banning all nuclear tests, including those underground.

The American case against a comprehensive test ban has been based on the difficulty in verifying compliance without on-site inspection, something that is anathema to Moscow. To overcome this obstacle, the United States in the past decade has spent \$274 million in research on means of detecting and identifying nuclear explosions, mostly by seismic methods. It is increasingly evident that a genuine breakthrough has been achieved.

The extent of this breakthrough has just been underlined in a report by a prestigious committee of the Federation of American Scientists, including former Presidential science advisers George Kistiakowsky and Franklin Long, former Pentagon research chief Herbert York and the former science chief of the C.I.A., Herbert Scoville. They state that recent improvements in long-range seismology and other unilateral means of detection—presumably satellite photography and communications monitoring—provide high confidence that violations of a comprehensive test-ban would be detected.

Specifically, the report states, the United States could be sure of detecting violations long before illicit underground tests could develop new weapons threatening the stability of the nuclear balance. Even unrestricted Soviet testing below the level easily spotted by seismic and other national means would achieve nothing more than wasteful further refinements in very small tactical nuclear weapons. In fact, the difficulties in carrying out on-site inspections appear so considerable and the benefits so small that the United States would have no need to go through with them even if Moscow agreed to permit them.

Much of the American opposition to a comprehensive test-ban does not stem from fear of Soviet cheating any more, the report argues, but from a Pentagon desire to continue American testing. New weapons, however, are not needed to maintain the American deterrent, which already is much greater than required. After a SALT agreement, particularly, there will be no need to test new warheads for anti-ballistic missiles (ABMs) and MIRV multiple warhead missiles.

A comprehensive test-ban, on the other hand, would bulwark American and world security by slowing the arms race, reinforcing the nuclear nonproliferation treaty and reducing the likelihood of other countries joining the nuclear club. Soviet officials informally have indicated a willingness to open new test-ban talks. The United Nations General Assembly, by vote of 112 to 0 with only one abstention, has urged the Geneva Conference to pursue a test-ban. An early move by the Nixon Administration to initiate test-ban negotiations is clearly warranted.