Mutually Assured Destruction

Eight months after Bill Clinton’s impeachment, the defeat of the nuclear test ban treaty proves that the air in Washington is still radioactive. And it’s likely to get worse

By RICHARD LACAYO

In the days before the Senate voted, there was never much of a public debate over the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Then suddenly it was defeated in a vote that stunned not only Washington but just about every other capital. And now, just as suddenly, the Beltway is consumed by concepts like nuclear blasts, mutual assured destruction and radioactive fallout. Of course, not much of that talk revolves around the treaty. Those just happen to be the terms you need to describe the mood between Congress and the President, a climate so poisoned by the impeachment fight that as Bill Clinton moves toward his final year in office, he doesn’t only have scorched earth behind him. He has it in front of him.

Ten years from now, this will be seen as the epitome of partisanship, says a White House aide. “The rest of the country has already moved on. Washington, as usual, is the last to figure it out.” The struggle over impeachment left Republicans furious that Clinton had escaped them. To make matters worse, he keeps escaping them. Two weeks after he vetoed the G.O.P. tax-cut bill last month, Republicans failed to stop the Democratic version of the HMO-reform bill in the House. And coming soon is a proposed minimum-wage hike that most Republicans oppose but probably can’t stop.

However, it has been different on foreign-policy issues, on which Clinton can seem as inattentive as most Americans. Even for initiatives as important as the test-ban treaty, which would ban nuclear tests and was supposed to consolidate four decades of bipartisan arms-control efforts, Clinton failed to prepare the ground of public opinion. While the Bush Administration prefaced the Gulf War with months of explanations, NATO’s bombing campaign against Serbia this year seemed to come out of nowhere. So on foreign policy, Republicans have sensed an opening to humiliate a President they could not topple, even if that means discarding the tattered remains of the bipartisan consensus on foreign affairs. Last year, when Clinton ordered the bombing of Iraq on the eve of his impeachment, Senate majority leader Trent Lott was unafraid to issue a statement questioning the timing of the attack. In April, House Republicans defeated by a tie vote a measure in support of the NATO campaign against Serbia.

So it was no wonder that the Senate’s perfunctory debate on the test-ban treaty included a moment in which Jesse Helms, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, offered an imitation of British Prime Minister Tony Blair in conversation with Clinton and signing off with “give Monica my regards.” Washington may be the one place in America where people still talk about Lewinsky. It was also no wonder that Clinton was in a genuinely vengeful mood after the vote when he accused Republicans of “reckless partisanship.”
Whatever it means for America’s status abroad, the bitter collision over the test ban is a bad omen for the future of peaceful co-existence between the President and Congress. Republicans may try to force votes on specific Clinton spending proposals, leaving Democrats vulnerable to ads stating that they supported, say, money to protest the striped bass over money for retirees. “Whatever tear-jerking program they can come up with, they’ll have to justify raiding Social Security,” says a G.O.P. Senate leadership aide. “That just won’t work.”

Something else that may not work is compromise. One of the things that make the system operate is personal contact between the President and congressional leaders, especially those that come from different parties. But Clinton and Lott have had the kind of working relationship that Mike Tyson had with Evander Holyfield. Before Clinton phoned Lott last week to urge him to allow the test-ban treaty to be withdrawn without a vote—a call that Republicans complain came just 90 minutes before the vote was scheduled—the two men had not spoken since July. Lott says that if Clinton had called a week earlier, it could have been withdrawn. But Lott is in no mood to play nice. He knows that Democrats in Congress set the debacle in motion by pushing all summer for a vote on the treaty, fully expecting that the Republicans would never oblige. When Lott decided to call their bluff, Democrats had no time to turn the sizable but less than urgent public sentiment in favor of the treaty—it ran as high as 80% in some polls—into an irresistible public demand that would force more Republican Senators to vote with the Democrats. In the end just four Republicans defected. Lott also knew that he had to placate his conservative wing, still angry over his willingness two years ago to bring to the Senate floor the treaty banning chemical weapons.

In a final effort, Senator Tom Daschle and Lott agreed that the test-ban treaty could be withdrawn if Democrats promised not to introduce it again during Clinton’s presidency except under “extraordinary circumstances.” Republicans, who feel they always lose when they cut a deal with Clinton, wouldn’t go for it. As White House press secretary Joe Lockhart said, “They act as if they’re afraid to get in the same room with us because they’ll get taken.” In the year to come they won’t be taking much. Or giving it.

Questions

1. What is the purpose of the test ban treaty?
2. What does the vote on the treaty reveal about the relationship between Congress and the President?