

Countdown begins on INF ratification

by William Jones

Senate debate on ratification of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty may be delayed until the first or second week in May. Four months have passed since the second "Day of Infamy," Dec. 8, 1987, when President Reagan signed the INF treaty with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov in Washington. Since then, the treaty has been debated—often rather heatedly—in the Select Committee on Intelligence, the Armed Services Committee, and the Foreign Relations Committee.

During the hearings, a total of 46 amendments and reservations were raised, many of these "killer" amendments, that is, amendments which would require renegotiation of the treaty.

Only one amendment, however, was attached to the treaty when it was voted out of the Foreign Relations Committee, its last port of call before proceeding to the floor. This amendment, the Biden Amendment, could, however, become the Achilles heel of treaty ratification. The amendment asserts that the testimony given during the course of the hearings by administration representatives will represent an "authoritative interpretation" of the treaty.

This amendment, initially proposed by Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.), was supported by a large number of liberal Democrats, including Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) and the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), and is intended as a wedge which could be used later by the Democrats to force the administration to adhere to the "narrow interpretation" of the ABM treaty. The "narrow interpretation" would put stricter limits on SDI testing, effectively sabotaging the original SDI program.

Obviously, the administration is not at all happy with this amendment, and would like to see it eliminated. Many Republican senators, who have been supporting the treaty either because they think it is a good treaty or, more frequently, out of loyalty to the President, have become very anxious about the Biden Amendment, and may very well vote against the treaty if the amendment is sustained.

The committee hearings have been a battleground in which not only the INF treaty, but the whole gamut of U.S.-Soviet agreements have been played out in various ways. The ABM

treaty, the SDI program, and human rights issues have all entered into the hearing process, and as one Senate aide expressed it, the floor debate on the INF treaty could very well turn into a debate on the ABM treaty or a debate on the Strategic Defense Initiative. In other words, it could be a very long, drawn-out debate, possibly lasting through the next summit, which is scheduled at the end of May.

Ironically, the Biden Amendment has become something of a two-edged sword. It was supported by Senate Democrats in order to force concessions from President Reagan before ratifying a treaty which he deems the crowning point of his administration. However, if the Biden Amendment were passed, the treaty would no longer be a "clean" treaty. Some Republican senators, otherwise supportive of the treaty, would then feel free to add their own amendments to a document which in their eyes would already be compromised.

On the other hand, if the Biden Amendment is scrapped, then Byrd and other liberal Democrats, not wanting President Reagan to get his treaty without conditions, will make every effort to delay. The fact that the treaty has still not been put on the agenda may be a signal to the White House of what will happen if it doesn't cooperate. Byrd, who wants the treaty as well as the concessions, will undoubtedly attempt to water down the Biden Amendment if necessary, in order to avoid a major fight. Whether he will succeed is still an open question.

Other amendments are also being mooted. One possible amendment, already taken up by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) in the Foreign Relations Committee (where it was voted down, together with the rest of Helms' amendment proposals) would permit the deployment of conventionally armed ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs).

The INF treaty forbids all GLCMs, whether nuclear-armed or conventionally armed, based on the argument that it would be well-nigh impossible to detect whether a cruise missile were carrying a nuclear warhead or not. The cruise missile is, on the other hand, the only effective land-based conventional weapon which could penetrate far behind Soviet lines. Sources on Capitol Hill indicate that Sen. Ernest Hollings (D-S.C.) is also interested in maintaining the conventional cruise-missile capability. Were this the case, there could be an interesting Republican-Democratic consolidation behind a GLCM amendment. Such an amendment would also require a renegotiation of the entire treaty.

Other amendments which it is suspected will be introduced during the debate deal with the question of Soviet compliance with the treaty, the question of verification, the issue of human rights, and even the question of Afghanistan.

Most senators seem to be playing their cards close to the chest, and are saying very little about what they are going to do during the floor debate, perhaps preparing some interesting surprises. The uncertainties are manifold, but as one Senate aide commented, "The floodgates could really start to open up."