

Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Lesson Plan

Topic: Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and nuclear testing

Grade Level: Grades 9-12

Subject Areas: US and World History after World War II

Time Required: 2 class periods

Goals/ Rationale

The Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed in Moscow on August 5, 1963 after eight years of negotiations between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. A turning point in those negotiations came after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when both President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev, having faced the possibility of nuclear war, opened a more substantive dialogue. Although this treaty was limited in scope, it paved the way for later arms agreements.

In this lesson plan, high school students consider the threat of nuclear weapons in the early 1960s and the opportunities and challenges in negotiating an arms control agreement.

Essential Question: Why might it be difficult for countries to agree to and sign international treaties?

Objectives

Students will

- analyze a political cartoon.
- interpret the language of an international treaty.
- assess the opportunities and difficulties for the United States in negotiating and signing a nuclear test ban treaty in the early 1960s.
- consider the challenges all nations face in developing international arms treaties.

Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

National History Standards

US History - Era 9: 2A; Era 10: 1C

World History - Era 9: 1B

MA Framework

USII.T5; WHII.T5

Prior Knowledge and Skills

Students should have a working knowledge of the Cold War and the hazards of nuclear weapons. Students should also know how to analyze a political cartoon.

Historical Background and Context

The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic bombs marked the end of World War II and the beginning of the nuclear age. As tensions between East and West settled into a Cold War, scientists in the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union conducted tests and developed more powerful and efficient nuclear weapons. But, as scientists and the public gradually became aware of the dangers of radioactive fallout, they began to raise their voices against nuclear testing. In 1959, radioactive deposits were found in wheat and milk in the northern United States. Backed by growing public sentiment against nuclear testing, leaders and diplomats of several countries sought to address the issue.

In May of 1955, under the auspices of the U.N. Disarmament Commission, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and the Soviet Union began negotiations to end nuclear weapons testing. Diplomats disagreed about whether to link a ban on testing to general arms control. Conflict over inspections to verify underground testing impeded later talks because the Soviet Union feared that on-site inspections could lead to spying that might expose the fact that Khrushchev had vastly exaggerated the number of deliverable Soviet nuclear weapons. As negotiators struggled over differences, the Soviet Union and the United States suspended nuclear tests -- a moratorium that lasted from November 1958 to September 1961.

John F. Kennedy had supported a ban on nuclear weapons testing since 1956. Believing a ban would prevent other countries from obtaining nuclear weapons, he took a strong stand on the issue in the 1960 presidential campaign. Once elected, President Kennedy pledged not to resume testing in the air and promised to pursue all diplomatic efforts for a test ban treaty before resuming underground testing. He envisioned the test ban as a first step to nuclear disarmament.

President Kennedy met with Soviet Premier Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961, just five weeks after the humiliating defeat of the US Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Khrushchev took a hard line at the summit. He announced his intention of cutting off Western access to Berlin; and threatened war if the United States or its allies tried to stop him. Many US diplomats felt that Kennedy had not stood up to the Soviet Premier at the summit, therefore, giving Khrushchev the impression that he was a weak leader.

Fearing secret underground testing by the Soviet Union and gains in Soviet nuclear technology, political and military advisors pressured Kennedy to resume testing. And, according to a July 1961 Gallup poll, the public approved testing by a margin of two-to-one.

In August 1961, the Soviet Union announced its intention to resume atmospheric testing, and over the next 3 months it conducted 31 nuclear tests. It exploded the largest nuclear bomb in history—58 megatons—4,000 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Discouraged and dismayed by the Soviet tests, President Kennedy pursued diplomatic efforts before allowing renewed testing by the United States.

In his September 25, 1961 address to the United Nations, he challenged the Soviet Union “not to an arms race, but to a peace race.” Unsuccessful in his efforts to reach a diplomatic agreement, President Kennedy reluctantly announced the resumption of atmospheric testing. American testing resumed on April 25, 1962.

Following the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev sought to reduce tensions between their two nations. Both leaders realized they had come dangerously close to nuclear war. As Khrushchev described it, “The two most powerful nations had been squared off against each other, each with its finger on the button.” JFK shared this concern, once remarking at a White House meeting, “It is insane that two men, sitting on opposite sides of the world, should be able to decide to bring an end to civilization.”

In a series of private letters, Khrushchev and Kennedy reopened a dialogue on banning nuclear testing. In his commencement address at American University on June 10, 1963, Kennedy announced a new round of high-level arms negotiations with the Russians. He boldly called for an end to the Cold War. “If we cannot end our differences,” he said, “at least we can help make the world a safe place for diversity.” The Soviet government broadcast a translation of the entire speech, and allowed it to be reprinted in the controlled Soviet press.

Kennedy selected Averell Harriman, an experienced diplomat known and respected by Khrushchev, to resume negotiations in Moscow. An agreement to limit the scope of the test ban paved the way for a treaty. By excluding underground tests from the pact, negotiators eliminated the need for the on-site inspections that worried the Kremlin. On July 25, 1963, after only 12 days of negotiations, the two nations agreed to ban testing in the atmosphere, in space, and underwater. The following day, in a television address announcing the agreement, Kennedy claimed that a limited test ban “is safer by far for the United States than an unlimited nuclear arms race.”

The Treaty was signed in Moscow on August 5, 1963, by US Secretary Dean Rusk, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, and British Foreign Secretary Lord Home—one day short of the 18th anniversary of the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Over the next two months, President Kennedy convinced a fearful public and a divided Senate to support the Treaty. The Senate approved the Limited Nuclear Test Ban on September 23, 1963, by an 80-19 margin. Kennedy signed the ratified Treaty on October 7, 1963. The Treaty:

- prohibits nuclear weapons tests or other nuclear explosions under water, in the atmosphere, or in outer space
- allows underground nuclear tests as long as no radioactive debris falls outside the boundaries of the nation conducting the test
- pledges signatories to work towards complete disarmament, an end to the armaments race, and an end to the contamination of the environment by radioactive substances.

In September 1996, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. Signed by 71 nations, including those possessing nuclear weapons,

the Treaty prohibits all nuclear test explosions including those conducted underground. Though it was signed by President Clinton, the Senate rejected the treaty by a vote of 51 to 48.

Materials

- Website: [Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty overview](#)
- Handout: *Negotiations on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*
- Website: [Editorial Cartoon “How about one more try?”](#) by Herb Block from May 29, 1963
- Website: [Handout for cartoon analysis](#)
- Website: [Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963](#)
- Website: [Nuclear Testing Table, 1945-2006](#)

Procedure

1. Have students read the [Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty overview](#) from the Kennedy Library website.
2. Provide students with the handout *Negotiations on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*, and examine the [editorial cartoon “How about one more try?”](#) by Herb Block from May 29, 1963, drawn in response to Kennedy’s May 22 Press Conference.

Discuss the following:

- What does the saying "The genie is out of the bottle" mean?
- Have students analyze the political cartoon by:
 - listing the objects or people they see in the cartoon.
 - identifying the cartoon caption and/or title.
 - considering which of the objects are symbols; what do they think each symbol means.
 - describing the action taking place in the cartoon.
 - explaining how the words in the cartoon clarify the symbols.
 - explaining the message of the cartoon.
 - considering what special interest groups would agree/disagree with the cartoon’s message, providing their reasoning.

A [handout for cartoon analysis](#) is available from NARA.

Discuss with students:

- Do you think the cartoonist is saying that the genie can or can't be put back in the bottle when it comes to putting nuclear weapons under control? Explain.
- What were some of the challenges in getting the genie back in bottle in 1963? What were some of the opportunities for getting the genie in the bottle? What role did the Cuban Missile Crisis and its aftermath play in promoting negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union? What public signals did Kennedy send to the Soviet Union of his desire for a nuclear test ban agreement (consider his American University speech of June 10, 1963)?

3. Have students read the finalized [Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963](#) (and see signatories [here](#)). Note for students that the United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France were the only countries that had previously tested nuclear weapons. However, it was known that China was preparing to test.

Discuss:

- What are the major points of agreement noted in the Preamble?
 - What are the major provisions of the agreement in Article I?
 - Why was Article III necessary? (What needs to happen in the United States for an international treaty to become law?)
 - What are the key provisions in Article IV?
 - What major players did not sign the treaty? How many nations signed it?
4. For homework, have students write an essay responding to these questions: To what extent might the signing of the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963 have helped “put the genie back into the bottle”? (What aspects of the Treaty would help “put the genie in the bottle”? What would discourage it? What provisions do you think might have been added or deleted to make the agreement stronger?)
 5. Show students the [Nuclear Testing Table, 1945-2006](#), and discuss the history of nuclear testing from 1963 to the present. Note that the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union complied with the LNTB agreement and did not test nuclear weapons in the atmosphere, space, or underwater, although they each continued a significant number of underground tests until the early 1990s. Also, discuss how this agreement paved the way for future non-proliferation agreements.

Assessment: Assess students’ essay responses and answers to questions.

Extension

Have students look at the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Signed by President Clinton in 1996, and have them write about or discuss as a group why the Senate did not ratify it.

Additional Resources

[Treaty of the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the IAEA - A Chronology](#)

From the International Atomic Energy Agency, this web page provides a chronology of key events in Nuclear Non-Proliferation from 1957 to 2014.

[The Making of the Limited Test Ban Treaty, 1958-1963](#)

This web page not only provides an excellent essay from the National Security Archive, but also includes links to a large number of primary sources.

Negotiations on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty

On September 25, 1961, President Kennedy spoke to the United Nations General Assembly and said:

“Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us.”

Around the same time, however, both the Soviet Union and the United States were escalating their aggressive rhetoric towards each other regarding Germany and West Berlin and, after a moratorium that had begun in November 1958, resumed testing of their nuclear weapons.

Negotiations took place over the next two years, even as testing continued. After the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, however, both President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev re-opened a more substantive dialogue about a test ban. One of the stumbling blocks of the treaty involved the issue of how to verify compliance with the test ban. Also, both the Soviets and the US wanted to make sure they could still develop forceful nuclear weaponry to maintain their status as superpowers.

During a May 22, 1963 Press Conference, President Kennedy was asked the following by a reporter:

QUESTION: I have a question about the nuclear test ban proposal. Mr. Harold Brown [Director of Defense Research Engineering in the Department of Defense from 1961-1965] has said before a Senate committee that we could accept as few as six on-site inspections. Do you think that there is further ground for us to move now to approach the Soviet Union in the test ban situation?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that is the position we have taken more publicly...Mr. Brown, whose judgment I value highly, has not set the official Government position. He was giving his judgment as a scientist. There are a good many other questions to be settled. We have suggested to the Soviet Union that we would consider the make-up of the inspection team, the rules under which the inspection team would operate, the area where there could be drilling, all of these questions, and then if we can get those settled, we could then come finally to the question of the number of tests. The Soviet Union has refused, however, to consider these other matters until we agree with their position of three. That has not been an acceptable negotiating position. We feel that we ought to try to wind up all the other questions which divide us, and then we could finally come and decide what would be, given the arrangements we have made for these other matters, what would be a responsible number of tests. But we are back and forth to the Soviet Union and we are still hoping that we can find a perhaps easing of their position.

QUESTION: Where is the genie, sir? Is it out of the bottle or in the bottle?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it is neither in nor out right now. But I would say that we will know by the end of the summer whether it is finally out. I said from the beginning that it seemed to me that the pace of events was such in the world that unless we would get an agreement now, I would think the chance of getting it would be comparatively slight. We are, therefore, going to continue to push very hard in May and June and July in every forum to see if we can get an agreement which I regard, but I will say as of now, since December that has been no change in the Soviet position on the number of tests nor

willingness to discuss in any way any of these other questions until we accept their position of December, which is not a satisfactory position for us.

QUESTION: Are we about to move, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: We are not going to move. On the question of the number of tests? As I indicated, what we are proposing, we settle the other matters and then come to the number of tests. So in answer to your question, we are not moving at this time on the number of tests.