

Sen. Frist's obstructionism
Chattanooga Times Free Press
4/18/2004, Opinion-Editorial

It's been apparent for some time that the Republican Party is gradually being hijacked by its far right wing - the fringe that sees dark conspiracies in every United Nations treaty, that finds no value in multilateral relations, and that despises all taxes and all regulatory guidelines. A ready example of the far right's outsized grip is the way it is about to capsize U.S. participation in the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) - despite rare and broad support for the vital treaty from the Bush administration, the Pentagon, centrist Republicans and Democrats, commercial interests and environmentalists.

Sen. Frist yielding to far right

The irony is that, in the view of every responsible advocate from the Bush White House down, the U.S. stands to gain nothing but lose much - not least, its influence over future developments in international sea policies - by shunning the treaty, which already has been adopted by 145 countries. For Tennesseans, a further irony is that our senior U.S. senator, the powerful Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, is yielding to the GOP's far right fringe by refusing to bring the long-awaited treaty to the Senate floor for a vote, though passage, with broad Republican support, is virtually certain.

Indeed, it's not too much to say that Mr. Frist, who is known to harbor presidential ambitions, is simply afraid of crossing the Phyllis Schlafly crowd, and is acting contrary to U.S. interest to keep his party's small but vocal far-right-wingers happy.

Of course it's embarrassing that Ms. Schlafly, a harsh ring-wing columnist who can stir up right-wing voters who see black-helicopters and international cabals behind every U.N. treaty, has such power over the Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate. Yet it's hard to deny: It's that corner's opposition that has stalled a treaty that Mr. Bush, the oil industry and the military want passed in order to protect international and U.S. rights to strategically critical sea lanes, airspace and commercial sea-bed exploration and resource use.

Wide range of issues at stake Those rights, to be sure, are not all the treaty guarantees to participants. The treaty, some 30 years in the making, covers a range of issues important to an interdependent, trade-linked world and crucial to the wise use of the seas' overtaxed and rapidly declining marine life and environment.

Policy areas covered by the treaty include navigation and overflight rights across the ocean, exploitation and conservation of ocean resources, protection of the marine environment, and marine research and exploration. The U.S. unquestionably has a significant interest in all these areas, not just within the jurisdictional waters off U.S. coasts, but also in the open seas. Yet if the U.S. Senate does not act soon to adopt the treaty, it will lose the ability to influence possible future changes in the treaty by other signatories. Deadline coming in November That risk will arise beginning in November, when a provision kicks in allowing present signatories to consider possible changes. The treaty stipulates that no changes may be made until 10 years after the treaty was signed by at least 60 signatories. November marks that deadline.

That's just one reason the far-right's opposition to the treaty is counter-productive. The nation's historical support also argues for adoption of UNCLOS. Negotiations on the treaty, led by the U.S., began in 1973 and concluded in 1982. Though the U.S. and other industrialized nations declined to sign it then pending re-negotiation of deep seabed mining, then-President Ronald Reagan committed to make the provisions of the treaty U.S. policy pending a deep seabed mining agreement.

That condition was met in 1994 with what was called the Implementing Agreement, which President Clinton agreed to and submitted to the Senate that year. The U.S. has operated since then under the provisions of the treaty, but without a voice in any possible changes. Bush administration backs treaty The relatively few but vocal opponents of the treaty claim it would obligate the U.S. to abide by rules issued by an untrustworthy U.N. bureaucracy. Yet the treaty's stipulations are not considered controversial even by the Bush administration, which has never been accused of rolling over for the U.N. Military and commercial spokesmen, moreover, believe that U.S. participation in the treaty will help guarantee rights that both sectors hold critical. The oil industry, for example, views as reasonable the modest payment the treaty would require for exploitation of deep seabed resources. Proceeds would go for monitoring and enforcement. For its part, the Navy believes the rights to sea lanes in territorial waters of other nations, for military and trade purposes, also is critical.

In reality, there are ample reasons for the overwhelming support of most advocates for the treaty, and none worth serious debate for opposing it. Sen. Frist would do the nation a service by bringing the treaty up for a vote before the campaign season fries the rest of the Senate's legislative session. Question is, will he risk the wrath of a few far-right elements to serve a higher national cause?