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HEADLINE: **My Favorite Menace**

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The Law of the Sea Treaty has become a hot-button item in the Republican presidential race.

Say what?

"One of the defining issues of our time," declared Mike Huckabee, who is leading an anti-treaty charge.

People, what do you think of when you hear "defining issues of our time?" Middle East? Global warming? Did it ever occur to you there are Americans who would say: "Law of the Sea Treaty?" Americans who are running for president of the United States? Americans who are rapidly moving up in the Iowa polls? This is close to "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" territory.

The treaty has been theoretically under consideration in Washington for a quarter of a century. Some might regard it nostalgically, like a 202-page lava lamp. It was approved by the United Nations in 1982, after endless negotiation during which attending Law of the Sea debates was named one of the Ten Most Boring Things To Do in New York. Its intent was to clarify rules for navigation and mining in international waters and set up a system for settling disputes. When it got to Washington, Britney Spears was still a toddler and Rudy Giuliani had a full head of hair. Ronald Reagan rejected it because he was worried about deep sea mining rights -- manganese module mining to be exact.

Happily, that's no longer an issue because:

- a) The United Nations fixed the part Reagan had a problem with.
- b) Manganese modules not quite as hot an item as they were when disco ruled.

Bill Clinton wanted the treaty, but gave up trying to find 67 votes in the Senate. Nothing much has happened since, except 155 other countries have ratified it, including several that didn't exist when it was first passed. The United States, of course, is not the only nation holding back because of well-

considered reservations. I hear Libya made some excellent points. And our side also includes all the parts of the Axis of Evil we have yet to invade.

Huckabee gave a speech to the values voters convention recently in which bashing the Law of the Sea got a roaring response from the social conservatives. This seemed to unnerve the other Republican candidates, most of whom are burdened by a personal history that does not involve quite as big a dose of family values as they might wish. Perhaps they are hoping that having a crazy position on the treaty makes up for one divorce. (Mitt Romney would want it to wipe out one waffle.)

I would love to give you all the arguments about the virtues of the Law of the Sea Treaty, but it seems like a cruel thing to do to readers on a Saturday. One problem with the debate is that the earnestness of the proponents is equaled only by their lack of pizzazz. (The opponents call the treaty "LOST," causing many innocent journalists to open their e-mails in hopes of getting new information on what really killed Mr. Eko in Season Three. The advocates call it "The Law of the Sea Convention.") While the pros will tell you all about the importance of having a rational system for arbitrating disputes over the Alaskan continental shelf, the cons spin up conspiracy theories about how the International Seabed Authority will force us to give up our cars and cancel the war on terror.

Just take my word. The Navy wants the treaty. Greenpeace wants the treaty. The oil and gas industry wants the treaty. George W. Bush wants the treaty. (Look at it this way: he's definitely due to be right on something.)

The number of people who really care about stopping the treaty is not large. But even if there were only 200, what if 120 of them go to the Iowa caucus? John McCain, who used to support the treaty, recently waved the white flag on a conservative Web site. "I think that we need a Law of the Sea," he blogged. "I think it's important, but I have not frankly looked too carefully at the latest situation as it is, but it would be nice if we had some of the provisions in it. But I do worry a lot about American sovereignty aspects of it, so I would probably vote against it in its present form."

The other candidates have issued statements that seem to reflect an inability to come up with any rational arguments. Rudy Giuliani said he "cannot support the creation of yet another unaccountable international bureaucracy that might infringe on American sovereignty and curtail America's freedoms," and Fred Thompson roused himself long enough to announce that "the efforts of treaty proponents would be better spent reforming an ineffective, unaccountable and corrupt United Nations." Mitt Romney's spokesman just said Mitt has "concerns."

Meanwhile, Mike Huckabee called the treaty "the dumbest thing we've ever done."

Pause now to make a list of things we've done that you think might be dumber.

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