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Ratify the Chemical Weapons Treaty as a Force Against Terrorism

■ ■ **Poison gas:** Senate failure to approve the pact will undermine efforts to bring this global menace under control.

By MATTHEW S. MESELSON

The Senate is due to vote this week on whether the United States should ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention, the international treaty that prohibits production, possession, transfer and use of poison gas weapons. Negotiated and signed under the administrations of Presidents Reagan and Bush, the convention was submitted to the Senate in 1993 by President Clinton.

Sixty-two nations have already ratified the treaty. Only three more are needed to bring the convention into force, even without the United States. Considering the effective measures for turning back the proliferation of chemical weapons that U.S. negotiators built into the convention, it would be shortsighted in the extreme to block U.S. participation. Yet this is just what a misguided minority in the Senate is threatening to do. What they fail to understand is that membership in the convention will provide the United States with important new tools for combating the proliferation of poison gas weapons in the hands of terrorists and countries hostile to the United States.

* The convention requires every member state to declare and destroy, under international on-site verification, any chemical weapons and chemical weapons production facilities. Membership in the convention's treaty organization will allow the U.S. to employ its intelligence and scientific resources to ensure that other member states submit accurate declarations and that the destruction of chemical weapons and production facilities is reliably verified.

* The convention requires each member state to submit annual reports on the production and disposition of certain sensitive chemicals and on each plant site where they are made. Membership in the convention will give us access to this information and, together with information the United States acquires by other means, will enhance our ability to track and forestall diversions of such chemicals to illegal purposes.

* Membership in the convention will give the United States the right to trigger short-notice, on-site challenge inspections any time, anywhere in any member state where we have reason to believe there are prohibited chemical weapons activities. The prospect of such inspections will face potential violators with a very real deterrent threat of detection and U.S.-led international sanctions.

* The convention requires every member state to enact legislation making production and possession of chemical weapons a crime and also requires mutual cooperation and provision of legal assistance in the implementation of such a law. Membership in the convention will help us to cut through the thicket of national legal and political impediments to obtain effective international action to investigate, apprehend and prosecute offenders, wherever they may be.

What about Russia, the country with the world's largest declared stockpile? President Boris Yeltsin has consistently supported the convention. The general commanding Russia's chemical forces has urged the Duma to ratify it, and Russian officials continue to reaffirm that their country will ratify before the convention enters into force. The plain fact is that the convention constitutes the only means available to the United States for bringing about the elimination of the stocks of chemical weapons in Russia and for initiating on-site inspections in cases of unresolved concern.

While the United States negotiated the Chemical Weapons Convention principally to increase U.S. security, the U.S. chemical industry participated closely to make sure that American business interests would not be compromised. As a result, the Chemical Manufacturers Assn. unconditionally supports ratification. Indeed, nearly all of the world's largest and most competitive chemical producers, including France, Germany, Japan, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, have already ratified the convention.

If, after having been its prime architect and leader for many years, the United States now turns its back on the Chemical Weapons Convention, international efforts to eliminate poison gas weapons will be crippled and prospects for going on to create effective international measures against the even greater menace of biological weapons will collapse.

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