

We Can End the Threat of Poison Gas Now

An agreement is near, but Bush must resist Defense Department pressure for clauses that could scuttle it.

By Matthew Meselson

WITH STRONG U.S. leadership, an effective treaty banning chemical weapons could be ready for signing within a year.

Today there is no international prohibition against producing and possessing chemical weapons, and they are proliferating in the Mideast and elsewhere. Central Intelligence Agency Director William Webster told Congress last year that as many as 20 countries may be developing poison gas weapons.

The Chemical Weapons Convention being drafted by the United States, the Soviet Union and 38 other nations in Geneva bans the development, production, possession and transfer of chemical weapons, under an unprecedented system of verification.

For the United States, the benefits of a ban would include verified elimination of large stocks of Soviet chemical weapons and production facilities; creation of strong international legal and political norms outlawing such weapons, and a pervasive verification procedure to deter violations and combat proliferation.

Later this month, to gain experience in verification procedures before the convention comes into being, the United States and the USSR will inform each other of the precise locations of their facilities for production and storage of chemical weapons. The information will include the types and total quantity of these weapons in storage and the chemical identity of all agents ever produced at each production site.

By July, the two sides will exchange visits to selected chemical weapons plants. At a time to be agreed upon later, but also before the convention is signed, there will be additional inspections on-site, including short-notice, surprise inspections at locations chosen by the requesting state.

At the outset of the convention as drafted, all parties are required to declare the locations and makeup of their stocks of chemical weapons and agents and the facilities for their production, development and testing. The convention requires that all stocks and facilities then be eliminated over a period of 10 years.

A permanent Organization for the Prohibition



Matthew Meselson is professor of biochemistry and molecular biology at Harvard University.

of Chemical Weapons will implement the agreement by taking inventory of stocks and facilities and monitoring their destruction, and by conducting short-notice inspections of both government facilities and the chemical industry to protect against violations. Finally as a safety net to deal with any suspicious activities and to deter violations, a nation may request short-notice "challenge" inspections, with no right of refusal by the state to be inspected.

There is no substantial peaceful use for any of the

made in pesticide plants, that evidence of production could be quickly cleaned up and made undetectable, and that militarily significant stocks could be hidden in a room. None of these assertions is true. Conversion of a commercial pesticide plant to nerve gas production would require construction of special inspectable equipment not ordinarily present. Highly sensitive instruments, such as the mass-spectrometer, are able to detect the production of prohibited substances even after clean-up. And large quantities of chemical munitions are needed to constitute a major military threat. For example, the U.S. chemical stockpile in West Germany, said by the Army to be enough only for a few days of warfare, is reported to comprise about 450 tons of nerve gas in about 100,000 artil-

lery projectiles, weighting some 6,500 tons. This would fill more than 300 20-ton tractor-trailers.

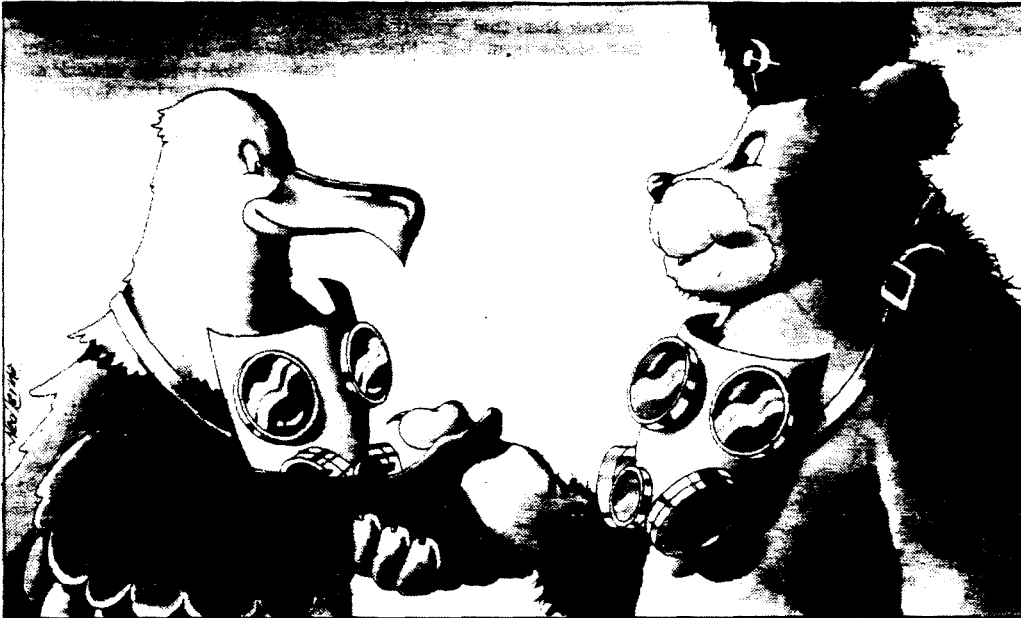
The time is propitious for completing the Chemical Weapons Convention. President George Bush is strongly committed to it. He is supported by nearly the entire international community and by most of the world's chemical industry. The U.S. Chemical Manufacturers Assn. led the way in providing realistic and constructive advice on verification issues. And last June, 74 U.S. senators sent a letter to the president, expressing full support for his efforts to achieve chemical disarmament.

Despite the otherwise highly favorable outlook for the agreement, an unexpected and unnecessary obstacle has recently appeared.

Instead of eliminating all chemical weapons during the 10-year destruction period allowed by the draft convention, Bush is under pressure to append a potentially crippling reservation. This would allow the United States to retain several hundred tons of chemical warfare agents indefinitely, until in our unilateral judgment, all states capable of making chemical weapons have joined the treaty. While intended to secure global adherence, this reservation risks doing the opposite — by leaving a loophole for others to retain chemical weapons too.

Without knowing at the time of ratification what the United States will eventually do, other nations will be reluctant to renounce their chemical option. Of course, U.S. ratification must be made conditional on ratification by certain key nations, including the Soviet Union and other major powers. But any reservation that makes ultimate U.S. chemical disarmament uncertain will encourage proliferation and risks losing the convention.

In order to achieve the elimination of poison gas, a goal to which he is genuinely committed, the president should be willing to ratify an effective treaty without crippling reservations.



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'A ban would include verified elimination of large stocks of Soviet weapons.'

most threatening chemical warfare agents, such as nerve and mustard gas, and the convention prohibits the possession and production of these substances, except for small quantities made in a single internationally monitored facility and restricted to research, medical or protective purposes.

Detection of suspicious activities for challenge inspections will depend on satellite imagery, ultra-sensitive chemical analysis and other intelligence means. Even uncertain indication of prohibited activities at a particular site could trigger a request for a challenge inspection.

The purpose of the verification provisions of the convention is not only to detect violations if they occur but to deter them by confronting potential violators with a serious risk of exposure. Today, no such deterrence exists.

Some commentators, lacking technical knowledge, have asserted that nerve gas could easily be