

Implementing A Global Chemical Weapons Convention

Matthew Meselson

President Nixon and every subsequent U.S. president has declared his support for an effective treaty banning chemical weapons. In 1984, Vice President Bush brought a draft text for a convention to ban chemical weapons to the 40-nation Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

The U.S. draft convention followed previous thinking in dividing the problem into two parts. The easier part calls for nations party to the treaty to submit declarations of their holdings of chemical weapons, their facilities for making such weapons, and certain other information. The declarations would be checked on-site by an international inspectorate to verify their accuracy. The declared weapons and facilities would then be destroyed according to a prescribed schedule and their destruction would also be verified.

The second part of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) then has to deal with the problem of assuring that there are no undeclared remainders and that no activities contrary to the convention are initiated following its coming into force.

The most novel feature of the U.S. draft treaty was the introduction of the concept of short-notice challenge inspections with no right of refusal.

This was greeted with mixed response. The Soviet Union found it too intrusive and unnecessary. Even some U.S. allies opposed it as being too intrusive, but a fundamental change has come about at the negotiations in Geneva, and in arms control negotiations generally. Intrusive verification has become acceptable to the Soviet Union.

One sign of this change is the implementation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement. U.S. inspectors are now stationed on Soviet soil carrying out their inspection duties at specific facilities, and Soviet inspectors are stationed in the United States. In August, 1987, the Soviet Union accepted the concept of mandatory challenge inspection for the Chemical Weapons Convention.

There are earlier examples of agreements relevant to the Chemical Weapons Convention. For example, the Western European Union (WEU) still functions according to a 1954 Protocol of the Brussels Treaty to verify the non-production of chemical weapons in the Federal Republic of Germany. The WEU includes an active inspectorate that has longstanding expertise on the Western European chemical industry. They continue to make inspection visits to chemical plants to this day.

The International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) conducts inspections in more than 50 nations to verify the non-diversion of fissionable materials from peaceful use. The IAEA conducts approximately 2,000 inspections each year.

Matthew Meselson is the Thomas Dudley Cabot Professor of Natural Science and Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Harvard University.

Verifying a Chemical Weapons Convention — particularly at the start when there would be large stockpiles and numerous declared facilities to be destroyed — would be a very large job. Even after the initial phase it would probably be a larger enterprise than any yet undertaken in the area of arms control.