

40 of 52 DOCUMENTS

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'Open up in the name of the ... Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons?'

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The Chemical Weapons Convention would be the first arms control agreement to reach into the lives of non-military U.S. businesses and impose costs and regulatory burdens. It would oblige the government to adopt implementing legislation to compel a wide range of American businesses--including tire, paint, pharmaceutical, fertilizer and electronics manufacturers, distillers, food processors and oil refiners -- to keep special records. (The Commerce Department guidance on record-keeping for affected businesses runs more than 50 pages.) Affected businesses would be forced to submit to routine and possibly "challenge" inspections by officials of an international organization--the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

The warrantless inspections, which may run afoul of U.S. constitutional rights under the Fourth and Fifth Amendments, could jeopardize important private proprietary information. The regulatory cost is just one of a number of flaws.

In the final analysis, what the CWC amounts to is a general declaration, a statement of disapproval of chemical weapons that would be made sincerely only by the world's law-abiding nations.

The treaty would accomplish little more than the typical United Nations General Assembly resolution.

Such rhetorical exercises are not necessarily bad or useless, but they do not amount to a whole lot. We would favor paying a substantial price for a ban on chemical weapon possession if such a ban covered the relevant countries and it could be made effective through reliable detection of illegal production and stockpiling.

But such results hardly seem likely.

We tend to think of the Chemical Weapons Convention this way: Even a price you may be willing to pay for a new car will appear ridiculously high if you learn that the car cannot be made to drive.

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