

Sideshow at Geneva

The Geneva disarmament conference, which reconvened this week, is essentially a sideshow, something to keep the smaller powers occupied while the Big Two thrash out the larger disarmament issues in the bilateral SALT talks which are scheduled to resume on March 15 in Vienna. But the Geneva conference should be able to produce something more substantive than banning bacteriological weapons, as President Nixon has urged.

A bacteriological weapons ban would be more cosmetic than real. Like the treaty banning certain weapons from the seabed which was produced by the disarmament conference last year, a bacteriological pact would deal with weapons nobody expects to use anyway. President

Nixon unilaterally ordered the destruction of United States bacteriological stockpiles more than a year ago after it had been widely concluded that such agents pose as much of a threat to the potential user as to the potential enemy.

If they want their work to be meaningful, the nations assembled at Geneva have to try to persuade the major powers to reconcile their persisting differences over an additional prohibition: against chemical weapons. The United States is undoubtedly on solid ground in demanding more substantial verification procedures in a treaty on chemical weapons than the Soviet Union has yet been willing to concede. But the United States position in this area is seriously weakened by this country's inexcusable delay in ratifying the Geneva Protocol of 1965, which bans the use—but not the manufacture—of chemical weapons. The President submitted the protocol to the Senate only last August, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee still hasn't held hearings.

The United States position at Geneva is also compromised by Washington's continuing insistence on excluding tear gas and herbicides from the Geneva Protocol. An overwhelming majority of nations at the United Nations has insisted that these chemical agents, which the United States has used in Southeast Asia, should be included.