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Worse Than Nothing

The fifth anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks is drawing near, and Congress still has not passed a law to improve chemical plant safety. The Senate is scheduled to hold important negotiations today on a chemical plant bill, but the bill could actually make the country less safe. If senators are afraid to stand up to the chemical industry and pass a good bill, they should at least have the courage to do nothing.

A terrorist attack on a single chemical plant in a densely populated area could **kill** tens — or even hundreds — of thousands of Americans. Senators Susan Collins, Republican of Maine, and Joseph Lieberman, Democrat of Connecticut, have drawn up a security bill that, in its current form, is barely better than nothing. It needs tough language added requiring chemical plants to replace dangerous chemicals with safer alternatives. The chemical industry is resisting.

An even bigger disgrace is that the **industry** is pushing hard to get "pre-emption" language added to the bill. That would prevent states from imposing their own tougher rules. New Jersey has begun to do so, and now that Jon Corzine, a strong proponent of chemical plant safety, is governor, it could adopt even stricter rules. A pre-emption provision could wipe away New Jersey's laws, and prevent other states from protecting themselves.

George Voinovich, Republican of Ohio, is taking the lead on pushing pre-emption. It is important that Lincoln Chafee, Republican of Rhode Island, and Mark Pryor, Democrat of Arkansas, who could be the swing votes, resist along with Senator Collins, the committee chairwoman. If the final bill pre-empts state laws, it should be killed or at least be renamed, to make clear what it is: a chemical plant antisecurity bill.

