

taken as a guarantee, not a warning."

The original executive order had been signed by Carter during his final days in office. It was written primarily because of export disasters in which Third World citizens inadvertently became victims of product safety regulation in the United States. For example, when the Consumer Product Safety Commission banned children's sleepware treated with the carcinogenic flame-retardant Tris, U.S. manufacturers instantly made it available in such places as Puerto Rico at cut-rate prices. In all, about 2.4 million garments were shipped abroad.

After Carter signed the order, Lewis A. Engman, president of the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association, said it was an "11th-hour act of arrogance. It only results in a loss of American jobs. All the order will accomplish is to ensure that sales go to foreign firms or to those U.S. firms that shift production overseas."

At the recent House hearing, S. Jacob Scherr of the Natural Resources Defense Council said the Carter order had been a "finely-honed scapel" that would have been used to control only the most dangerous products. The Reagan rescision, he said, gives "higher priority to short-sighted commercial interests than to the protection of human health and safety and of our nation's reputation as a reliable trading partner."

Not affected by the Reagan rescision are existing regulations that call for the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the State Department to notify countries to which hazardous materials are about to be shipped. Scherr, however, said that the Reagan "revocation has sent a message to officials . . . to relax the existing procedures and policies." For years, the ways in which various agencies notify countries have been notoriously variable, some agencies being much more thorough than others.

When he revoked the Carter executive order, Reagan called for the Departments of State and Commerce to jointly review existing mechanisms for dealing with the export of hazardous products, and "to find ways to accomplish the same goals at a lower cost." The results of that review are expected in about 6 months.

—William J. Broad

Solving Louisville's Friday the 13th Explosion

The explosion that ruptured the sewers and wakened the residents of Louisville, Kentucky, early on the morning of Friday 13 February is still something of a mystery, although state officials say they are fairly certain they know what happened. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the source of trouble was a leak of an industrial solvent, hexane, from a local processing plant owned by the Ralston Purina company. One investigation has concluded that the sewers blew up when a car with a hole in its catalytic muffler passed over a manhole and ignited the hexane vapor.

The company has not accepted responsibility, and city officials are saying as little as possible about the blast because they do not want to compro-

The city estimates that between 3 and 12 miles of sewers were wrecked and that repairs will cost between \$40 and \$42 million. Had it rained the week after the explosion, Louisville's public health office notes, the city would have been compelled to evacuate 15,000 people to get them out of the way of a flood of raw sewage.

According to reports in Louisville's newspapers, something clearly was amiss at the Ralston plant the night before the explosion. Workers told the *Louisville Times*, for example, that they were using buckets to bail excess hexane out of the processing system on the night of 12 February, and that the plant had to be shut down at 11:30 p.m. The company called a city sewer official at 1 a.m. to check for hexane leaks. He reportedly found nothing.

Ralston Purina has not commented on the details of the accident. A spokesman said last week, "There



Louisville's streets the morning after

Wide World

mise testimony they expect to give later in court.

State officials in Frankfort, who are less involved in the legal maneuverings, have made an investigation and reached a preliminary finding. According to Assistant Fire Marshall Gilbert Ellis, his office has "proved" that hexane was in the sewers that Friday morning and caused the explosion. He is confident that the source was the Ralston plant, about a mile from the point of ignition, for the company uses hexane to extract oil from soybeans. Local officials began a formal investigation at the Ralston plant 3 weeks later, on 9 March.

A mayor's aide, Alec Van Ryan, says simply, "We lucked out. The explosion came at 5:16 a.m. A few hours later it would have hit the rush hour traffic." As it happened, only four people were injured, none seriously.

has been no determination that hexane caused the explosion," and he called the fire marshall's conclusions "speculation."

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Washington, this is the largest sewer explosion in recent memory. Akron and Cleveland experienced similar but smaller explosions when gasoline was dumped down filling-station drains.

Although the EPA has given the city some help in analyzing the accident, the federal government has offered no emergency relief. The White House has turned down Louisville's request to be declared a disaster area, arguing that the city has adequate cash resources to clean up the mess. Exploding sewers, it seems, have become another hazard of city living.

—Elliot Marshall