

MORE 'HUMANE' WARFARE IN VIETNAM?

The use of chemical weapons by the U.S. in Vietnam, the author argues, may be more 'humane' than bullets or bombs but they threaten to break down the taboo against far more deadly germ and chemical warfare.

By Amitai Etzioni

The United States appears to be considering an expansion of the use of chemical weapons in Vietnam. This raises anew these questions: Do these weapons provide a less lethal means of warfare? Who promotes their use and why?

Chemical weapons, first used in Vietnam only against non-human targets, have already been extended to cover people, including civilians, and extended from innocent tear gas to considerably more vicious gases.

As far as is known, the use of chemicals in the Vietnam War began in 1961 when American planes sprayed jungles with a defoliation mixture. Now, approximately 20,000 acres per month are sprayed to denude the jungles that hide the Viet Cong guerrillas. More recently, rice fields were sprayed in areas considered to be under Viet Cong control under a "food denial" program.

The use of tear gas began around March, 1965. Reports such as the following (*New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1966) have become common: "Helicopters dropped hundreds of tear-gas grenades today to douse a small patch of jungle—believed to be a fortified Viet Cong area—265 miles northwest of Saigon in preparation for a bombing raid."

The U.S. is not restricting itself to the use of tear-gas, however. In fact, the *London Observer* (Oct. 30, 1965) reported that U.S. helicopters on Dec. 23 and 25, 1964, in an effort to free Americans held as prisoners of war by the Viet Cong, sprayed "immobilizing" gas over areas in the Mekong delta and War Zone C. This gas is reported, in some instances, to leave people permanently "disarranged," which is fine talk for driving them insane.

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It is uncertain what other gases the U.S. is considering using. Some gases included in the U.S. arsenal are sufficiently deadly to kill anyone inhaling even a small dosage. It is unlikely that these will ever be used for anything other than as a deterrent to others who might want to use them.

However, if escalation continues, the U.S. might apply nerve gases and hallucinating agents that cause "mental disarrangement" in some instances and in others, paralysis and blindness. Although some claim these afflictions are only temporary, *there is evidence from pharmaceutical research indicating that at least part of the population would be permanently afflicted* and those "only" temporarily affected might become beserk buffaloes rather than the docile cattle for which the military apparently hopes.

Germ Weapons Too

Experimentation in laboratories is also taking place with biological weapons. These include typhus, smallpox, the plague and disease bacteria which have been "mutated" to make them resistant to all known antibiotics.

An important argument used in favor of chemical weapons is that, being non-lethal, they are therefore more humane. However, these weapons are often less innocent than their official descriptions suggest. Defoliation sprays, for example, are reported to burn the skin of those who are sprayed. The "spiced-up" tear-gas, which causes vomiting and diarrhea, may not hurt a 170-pound marine, but when it is inhaled by a poorly-nourished, lightweight Vietnamese, not to mention children, the damage is considerably more severe.

One danger of gases lies in the fact that they cannot be aimed. Any change in wind direction might blow these gases into the civilian population. *Nobody knows who is going to be hit when gas grenades are thrown.*

Another danger of use of chemical weapons in Vietnam is that this breaks

down the psychological taboo against the use of such weapons. Psychological taboos do not make the fine distinction between varying degrees of toxicity in different gases. *Weakening the anti-gas taboos might mean there would be no stopping this or that category of chemical weapons. The continued extension of chemical warfare could lead to conventionalization of its use, not only in Vietnam, but in general.*

The Federation of American Scientists, in a statement released on June 19, 1965, condemned chemical warfare and pointed out that "most nations, large and small, could easily and secretly acquire a significant biological and chemical warfare capacity. . . . Large scale efforts in our own country are certain to stimulate similar efforts in other countries."

The United States will be unable to influence other countries to refrain from using chemical weapons when it is engaged in such warfare itself. For instance, U.S. protests against the Egyptian use of poisonous gas in the war against Yemen were extremely mild as compared, for instance, with objections to the burning of an American library in Egypt.

One of the side issues of the use of chemical warfare in Vietnam is raised by the repeated report that gas was used without authorization. The first use of tear-gas was unauthorized. The second was reported to have been ordered by a marine colonel newly arrived in the war zone who was not aware that, according to a U.S. spokesman in Saigon, "permission to use it is supposed to come from the highest authority," namely, "the U.S. military command," which clearly was not consulted in this case.

In the nuclear age, when limited local wars might readily lead to a confrontation of the U.S.S.R. and/or Communist China with the U.S., the need to suppress all unauthorized action is obvious. But there has evolved

a curious situation in which the unauthorized use of chemical weapons goes unpunished. One cannot but gain the impression that some higher authorities want to wash their hands of the responsibility for chemical warfare, and leave the door open for its use by lower echelons.

Moreover, both the American public and Congress were kept uninformed about this important development in the Vietnam War. The fact that U.S. and South Vietnamese troops are equipped with chemical weapons and were the first to use them became known only when a non-American reporter, returning from a flight to the combat zone, spotted empty gas canisters and pieced together the rest of the story. This surely is a matter so important in its implications that Congress should examine it systematically so that the public can be better informed about it.

Who is it that favors chemical weapons? It should come as no great surprise that chemical industries and the U.S. military have an interest in the expanded use of chemical weapons. U.P.I. reported from Washington on Sept. 4, 1965, that Richard L. Kenyon, director of publications of the American Chemical Society, urged the use of chemical weapons in Vietnam. Frank J. Grunzeier argued in the August, 1965, issue of *Industrial Research* that "toxic weapons can be more humane than other instruments of war."

Parts of the U.S. military seem to be interested in the use of these weapons in Vietnam for experimental reasons, in much the same way other powers used the Spanish Civil war as a testing ground for weapons used in World War II. For instance, the Army Chemical Corps has been inviting reporters to its laboratories to brief them on its various weapons while, at the same time, espousing the theory of "humane warfare."

Even More Lethal?

There seems to be a serious question that the objective of the military services is really to develop "humane" warfare techniques. Four distinguished professors, including a professor of biology from Harvard and a professor of biophysics from M.I.T., wrote on Dec. 17, 1964: "What little information is publicly available about the Army's highly secret research program suggests that much effort is being expended to develop chemical and biological agents even more lethal than those presently deployed."

It appears that the Army may be underplaying the lethal aspects of chemical warfare and emphasizing the "humane" aspects because it knows that once chemical warfare becomes conventionalized, the flood gates will be open for all chemical weapons.

It should be remembered, finally, that the military in general is more concerned with costs and immediate results than with public opinion, the U.S. image in other countries, and psycho-

logical taboos limiting future wars. Chemical weapons can often provide the shortcuts that a field commander wants in the frustrating operations in Vietnam.

Thus, the use of chemical weapons in Vietnam raises and accentuates three problems. First is the question of the relationship between short-range military considerations and long-range foreign policy problems. Chemical warfare in Vietnam is a typical example of seeking quick tactical gains at the expense of wider political implications. This is true both in terms of maintaining the general taboo against chemical warfare and in terms of the U.S. image in the neutral world, where much is made of the fact that chemical weapons are employed against non-white people in a way, it is said, that recalls the U.S. decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan.

The second problem involves authorization. It is not enough for the Joint Chiefs of Staff to examine chemical warfare and to pass judgment on its future status. Congress also should examine and ponder all the extensive and long-run implications, and the public, in whose name these weapons are used, should be heard from.

The third problem concerns the relationship between humaneness and chemical warfare. How humane is it to use weapons that basically fail to distinguish civilians from guerrillas, children from fighters? No war is "humane" but some are less inhuman than others.