

The new arsenal: poison and plague

THE ULTIMATE FOLLY: War by Pestilence, Asphyxiation, and Defoliation. By Richard D. McCarthy. Knopf. 176 pp. \$5.95; paperbound, \$1.95.

By Gordon Harrison

In the spring of 1968 an Army plane flying over the Dugway Proving Ground in Utah released a deadly nerve gas called VX. It was a test but something went wrong. The gas was carried by the wind down range to where large herds of sheep grazed. At least 6,400 animals died. Promptly and stubbornly the Army denied responsibility. Its opening lie was that no test had taken place. Beaten back from that position during a year of official and unofficial investigations, it came eventually to the point of paying for the sheep but never to the point of confessing guilt.

Documentation of the Dugway case, which the press, the Public Health Service and some members of Congress went after doggedly and well, left a nation blinking at its own double image: a great democracy boasting of itself as defender of humane and civilized values and all the while developing, testing and stockpiling gas weapons that the conscience of the world had long ago at Geneva agreed to outlaw. At least as disturbing was the spectacle of military leaders who, having in their own wisdom decided what was best for the nation, thereafter lied to the people and to their own civilian superiors, the United States Congress, about what they were doing.

Congressman Richard D. McCarthy, a former newspaperman who now represents the New York district that includes Buffalo, happened to see a TV show in February of this year that included coverage of the Dugway incident. His wife, shocked, turned to him and

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said: "You are a congressman; what do you know about this?" Equally shocked, Representative McCarthy confessed he knew nothing but resolved to find out. His resolve led him to probe into the Defense Department's C.B.W. (Chemical and Biological Warfare) programs. Here with almost deadline haste and headline freshness he reports his findings complete with the rebuffs and half-truths he continued to get from the military and their congressional allies.

For various technical and political reasons the United States never became a party to any treaty outlawing poison gas. Yet the record is clear that when the Geneva Protocol was signed by almost every other nation after World War I, U.S. policy was wholly in accord. That remained our policy through World War II.

The first overt shift, Representative McCarthy dates from 1956 when the Army Field Manual was revised to point out that America was not signatory to any international agreement prohibiting the use of poison gases or "bacteriological means of warfare." The obvious implication was that traditional wraps of moral squeamishness having no legal standing need not be observed. Now that we, and presumably the enemy too, had effective chemical and biological weapons, the insane logic of the military mind allowed no choice but to make them and under suitable provocation use them.

Some interesting figures on U.S. progress in C.B.W. emerge through the secrecy screens. Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland, which researches and tests poison gas, is believed to have had a 1969 budget of \$335 million. Thanks to Edgewood and other arsenals America may now have tucked away a trillion doses of nerve gas to help us sleep more easily nights. Other large and elaborate laboratories and plants at Fort Detrick, Maryland, and Pine Bluff, Arkansas, are turning out packages of germs capable of reproducing old-fashioned scourges like the bubonic plague, while researchers look for new pathogens unknown to "enemy" doctors.

Of course, says the Pentagon, the United States would not initiate the use of these gases and germs (despite its clear initiative in using the so-called incapacitating gases in Vietnam as well as chemical defoliants), but we have to have the capability in order to deter the enemy. The clichés are so well worn that one almost does

not pay attention. Representative McCarthy, who paid attention, asks some pointed questions: If deterrence is the object, why doesn't the Defense Department publicize what we have instead of trying to hide it? Is it really credible that rational military commanders, under any provocation, would elect to spread disease, inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable (as well as of uncertain military consequence) when so many other militarily effective forms of force are available? Does the principle of deterrence really require that we stand ready to retaliate in kind? If the Chinese dropped firecrackers on a Columbus Day parade, would we be obliged to disrupt likewise a march for Mao?

But all such questions are beside the point. They demand logical justification for activities that began and continue for other reasons. Representative McCarthy's analysis is perceptive, convincing and terrifying. Asking who decided to change our traditional C.B.W. policy — whether Congress, the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council, the President, or public clamor — he finds no decision anywhere in the record. In the absence of decision, we have rather drifted in the direction of the ultimate folly under "the slow and constant pressures of technicians."

Technicians have come to power because behind curtains of secrecy they have developed a monopoly of expertness. The President consulting them inevitably gets back the bias of men dedicated to doing their own thing. And no one else is in position to put that in proper perspective. Protected from outside criticism and enjoying the comparative obscurity of a multi-million dollar enterprise in a multi-billion dollar establishment, the C.B.W. technicians have grown in numbers and influence by default, to accumulate a bureaucratic momentum now difficult to check.

Representative McCarthy has some suggestions for a return to sanity, suggestions most likely to be tried if an informed public is roused to back them. This small book should help. Written without hysteria, it is an important collection and analysis of the facts, the charges, the countercharges, the suspicions, and above all the questions concerning the Pentagon's preparations to fight with gas and disease. No one who cares about life, much less liberty, should miss it. J*



Four out of 6,400 sheep killed by an accident at the Dugway Proving Ground, 1968