

## *A Historic Decision to Renounce Germ Warfare*

For decades the United States has been mindlessly and massively preparing itself to use disease as a weapon of war, despite all the horror summoned up by bacteriological devastation, all the threats it poses to user as well as target, all the irresponsibility involved in tampering with the health of the human race. Now President Nixon has declared that the United States will renounce biological warfare, cut back its BW research to "defensive measures such as immunization and safety," and undertake to dispose of its BW stocks.

The decision is a historic one. In making it, the President took hold of an enterprise that had been abandoned years ago to its practitioners in the military bureaucracy. He examined it systematically, and—like other students of the matter—discovered that BW posed great dangers to the general health and no advantages to the national security. Then, defying the established behavior patterns of Washington, Mr. Nixon acted swiftly and decisively on his findings: he abolished the American BW programs. Such a performance is as refreshing as it is rare. Every American can take pride that his government intends to stop its part in what Congressman Richard McCarthy calls, in the title of his new book on the matter (published today), "The Ultimate Folly."

Of quite another order is Mr. Nixon's decision to ask the Senate to ratify the Geneva Protocol of 1925. The principal instrument of international restraint on biological and chemical attack, the protocol prohibits the first use in war of "asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases and of bacteriological methods of warfare." The United States, has suf-

fered serious diplomatic and moral embarrassment from its failure to approve the protocol until now.

Mr. Nixon damages his initiative somewhat by reserving the right to employ the tear gases and chemical defoliants widely used in Vietnam. Many Americans, and most countries which have accepted the Geneva Protocol, believe that those items should not be excluded from protocol coverage. They will surely argue against unilateral interpretation which has the effect of legitimizing practices they question. The pressure on the White House to submit the Geneva Protocol for ratification has been great. But the important point is not ratification; it is the practices the protocol regulates. If Mr. Nixon feels that the exigencies of the Vietnam war require continued use there of tear gas and herbicides, then he might do better to go slow on the protocol until the international community comes near to a consensus on its application. His pledge to renounce not only "lethal" but "incapacitating" chemical weapons suggests the pitfalls: a herbicide which destroys one's foods has aspects of the "lethal" and the "incapacitating," as does a tear gas which drives one out of a bunker into the range of an iron bomb.

While a President is responsible for his own decisions, the role of Congressman McCarthy in those on CBW is too great to be ignored. From a layman's shock at his first glance at CBW, Mr. McCarthy proceeded to inform himself thoroughly about it, to break through much of the military's thick shrouds of secrecy, and to rouse the public to many of the implications and perils. While a combination of circumstances and accidents helped him in his task, his own clarity of conscience and soberness of method underlay his success. The country owes Richard McCarthy an immense debt.