

Page 24

A Hard Look at Gas Warfare Is Overdue

President Nixon, in ordering a review of chemical and biological warfare policies, responded both to the problems posed by CBW and to the public pressures building up against it. Last April Representative Richard McCarthy, leader of the current effort to challenge the country's unthinking drift on CBW, had requested the President to rescind the 1925 Geneva Protocol to the Senate (the Protocol commits ratifiers not to initiate the practice of CBW). The Administration was mindful that a Senate hearing could easily become a wide-ranging confrontation, particularly on the controversial issues surrounding American use of tear gases, herbicides and defoliants in Vietnam. So it decided after a two-month internal struggle to make its own private case for a more open and candid policy and practice—trading out secrecy for breadth. This is progress, for one of the more disturbing aspects of CBW has been the suspicion that it

was not only beyond public view but beyond White House attention as well. Representative McCarthy, with his able staff, has done an important service by making CBW an issue. The current general interest in looking hard at the Pentagon has spurred his personal concern, and he has been the recipient of some arresting leaks of Government information. For instance, he learned that the Army intended to dispose of a simply phenomenal quantity—1.5 million—of obsolete nerve gas bombs that had been accumulated mindlessly over the years. Disposal was to consist of carting off the bombs from Colorado in freight cars, piling them on old Liberty ships and sinking the boats at sea. The risks of this operation terrified Mr. McCarthy and he raised an alarm which halted it. Other disposal methods are now being sought. The episode indicates the casual atmosphere which has made CBW a menace not only to potential enemies but to American citizens. It indicates the urgency of a probing review.