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Battlefield Instruments of Blindness

In the field of violence prevention, one group has been working with solitary zeal to keep a horrific weapon out of production. Since 1989 the Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been convening meetings among physicians, scientists, technologists and others to organize opposition to laser weapons that cause blindness.

As an instrument of battlefield combat, the hand-held weapon would be aimed by one ground army at another with the intention of inflicting permanent blindness. Ophthalmologists at a Red Cross conference explained that a laser beamed from as far away as a kilometer causes "photodisruptive action" that tears eye tissues and blood vessels. Damage to the retina cannot be treated.

In the glossary of military strategy, the "anti-personnel potential" of blinding enemy soldiers is greater than killing them. Corpses can be stepped over or around during combat but someone who is suddenly sightless demands attention from fellow soldiers. If enough enemy troops have their eyes taken out of action, the strain of evacuating those casualties weakens the other side's manpower.

Laser weaponry has an additional military benefit: Eye impairment is long-term, with no chance of a soldier being patched up by medics to fight another day. An estimated 60 percent of U.S. soldiers injured during the Korean War were treated and ordered back to combat. In future wars it wouldn't be that way for the sightless.

In its belief that blinding people in warfare should be forbidden under international law, the ICRC has rallied the governments of 25 nations to oppose laser weapons. The United States isn't among them. Its position, as explained in early February by President Clinton, is that "addressing this contentious issue" at this time "risks diverting attention from the more immediate humanitarian problem of anti-personnel land mines."

That patronizing explanation—other governments lack the mental attentiveness to deal with more than one weapon at a time—is sure to be rejected in September when a United Nations review conference in Vienna is scheduled to consider a laser prohibition. The administration's policy already has been rejected by Sen. Patrick J.

Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who has done as much as anyone in Congress to begin ridding the world's war zones of about 100 million uncleared land mines.

Leahy, along with Reps. Ronald V. Dellums (D-Calif.) and Lane Evans (D-Ill.), wrote to the president recently: "We too would not want to see negotiations on blinding weapons divert attention

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from the land mine issue. However, given the brevity of the proposal, its support among other countries and the unique opportunity presented by the review conference, we believe this is too important an opportunity to miss."

The threat of laser weapons is still containable, if only because the genie remains in the bottle with the cap loosened but not yet off. Mass production has not begun. In 1990, Defense News reported that the U.S. Army field-tested two hand-held laser rifles—one called the Dazer, the other Cobra—at military bases in Florida, Texas and Alabama. An Army spokesman called the technology "impressive."

Last month, Christopher Hanson of Hearst Newspapers reported that "interviews with officials and arms experts inside and outside the government, and a review of documents from the Pentagon, Congress and other sources, make it clear that the world has seen the opening flash in a new laser weapons race. Defense officials say America's edge on the battlefield is at stake."

That's the customary rationale. What's the sense in being the world's superpower—the only superpower, we are now being told—if we aren't number one in blinding people?