

CIA Denounces Allegations of Coverup in Gas Attacks

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The CIA held a rare on-the-record news conference yesterday to denounce as untrue two former employees' allegations that the agency covered up Iraqi poison gas attacks and other cases where U.S. troops were exposed to chemical weapons during the Gulf War.

"We have held nothing back," Nora Slatkin, the CIA's executive director, told reporters summoned to a small, crowded theater at the agency's Langley headquarters.

But Slatkin, who manages the agency's day-to-day operations, announced that the CIA's inspector general had been directed to examine the former workers' allegations, including their complaint that they suffered discrimination in their jobs as a result of their charges.

The fact that the secretive agency went to such public efforts to deny the charges by the husband-and-wife team of former analysts Patrick and Robin Eddington of Fairfax illustrates the CIA's sensitivity to the couple's charges, which were first aired Wednesday in the New York Times. In that interview, Patrick Eddington alleged that there were 60 incidents in which nerve gases and other chemical weapons were released near U.S. troops.

Yesterday, Eddington told an interviewer on the cable MSNBC news network he believed that in "8, 10, 12 incidents" U.S. forces came directly under chemical attack by Iraqi forces during the brief 1991 war.

Like the CIA, the Pentagon and an independent presidential commission have rejected those allegations, saying they have examined the same data cited by the Eddingtons and found that it falls short of confirming such suspicions.

"On the basis of a comprehensive review of intelligence, we continue to conclude that Iraq did not use chemical or biological weapons during the Gulf War," Slatkin said yesterday. The CIA official also rejected Patrick Eddington's suggestions that fallout from aerial bombing of Iraqi chemical plants could have reached U.S. troops.

She said that a CIA analyst, Larry Fox, discovered the first evidence that U.S. troops could have been exposed to some chemical fallout as they were exploding a cache of Iraqi munitions at a remote desert site after the war. The Pentagon has cited that disclosure as a "watershed" event and has ordered 20,000 troops who were in the area to be contacted to determine if their health was affected.

Slatkin said Fox was washing dishes at his home, listening to a Baltimore radio talk show as he heard Gulf veterans discuss explosions at the site. The analyst later returned to Langley and reviewed a tape of the broadcast, discovering that U.S. troops were at a place called Khamisiyah, where he knew chemical weapons might have been present and thus released when Iraqi munitions were blown up following the war.

Patrick Eddington's lawyer, Mark Zaid, said yesterday evening that the

CIA's news conference was "just a public relations tool" and that his client demands a congressional investigation.

Patrick Eddington, who is planning to publish a book with his conclusions on the Gulf War, was asked in the MSNBC interview if there was a "smoking gun" in the nearly 60 classified documents that he and his wife contend show evidence of use of chemical weapons in the war zone. He replied, "That depends on what you mean by a smoking gun."

"When you take that raw data and marry it up with what we have in terms of eyewitness testimony—American soldiers and chemical specialists who were on the ground through the war—you get a very conclusive picture," he said. "Quite frankly, I don't know how anyone can make the claim an Iraqi prisoner of war who has just told you that chemical munitions were with his unit and then you turn around and get evidence for your own soldiers on the ground that, yes, we found chemical munitions in a particular area. To me that's conclusive. It's there."

Slatkin said all of the documents cited by the Eddingtons have been provided to a White House panel that is reviewing the illnesses of Persian Gulf soldiers and said the CIA was reviewing others with an eye to posting them on an Internet site.

In October 1995, Patrick Eddington spoke with and gave his findings and documents to the independent Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illness. Gary Car-

ruso, spokesman for the panel, said the data did not show evidence of chemical exposure. "There would have to be more information to back up that claim," he said. Caruso described the documents as "raw intelligence data with [Eddington's] own interpretation and analysis."

"They are not being suppressed by the CIA," said Caruso, whose panel has been somewhat critical in the past of both CIA and Pentagon handling of the issue of illnesses reported among Gulf War veterans. "Patrick Eddington was working off the same CIA databases we have access to."

Zaid, Eddington's lawyer, said Thursday that Eddington was too busy for an interview "because it's been so crazy here." Zaid quoted Eddington as saying that the commission did not have access to all his documents because some of them were marked top secret and panel members were not allowed to read data at such a high clearance level.

Caruso said instead that certain members of the panel have clearance to read top secret papers.

The CIA frequently holds background sessions in which reporters are briefed about conditions overseas, but rarely does the agency conduct public news conferences at which its officials can be televised and quoted by name. Spokesmen said the agency previously had held one such conference since John Deutch arrived as CIA director in 1995, and they said they could not recall the agency holding a conference to publicly denounce two of its former employees.

Patrick G. Eddington and Mark S. Zaid

The True Cost of Gulf War Syndrome

Charles Krauthammer's column "What Gulf War Syndrome?" [op-ed, Dec. 20] seeks to debunk one allegation—that American troops were exposed to chemical or biological weapons—and to trivialize the scope of another—that the U.S. military was aware, prior to the gulf war, of the effect low-level chemical exposures could have on its troops. Krauthammer repeats the fiction that unless acute symptoms are visible, no damage has occurred. His blanket assertions do not stand up in the face of evidence already in the possession of the U.S. government.

Ample scientific evidence suggests, for example, that exposure to low levels of chemical nerve agents (or their cousins, organophosphate pesticides) can cause serious long-term health problems. More than 20 years ago, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute published a 47-page report detailing the chronic health problems associated with low-level exposures to such agents. The symptoms listed in the report are virtually identical to those being reported by more than 100,000 gulf war veterans.

The Defense Department has known for years that there were significant risks associated with chronic low-level exposures. In 1990 members of the U.S. 330th Ordnance Company, 59th Ordnance Bri-

gade, in Germany—a repository location for more than 170,000 chemical nerve agent rounds—were required to sign a document that outlined the potential risk associated with low-level chemical exposure.

These risks, as detailed in the document, included memory loss, decreased alertness, decreased problem-solving ability and language problems—some of the core symptoms now being experienced by our

Taking Exception

veterans as a result of the allegedly non-existent Gulf War Syndrome. After requiring the members of the 330th to sign these "Information sheets," the Defense Department classified both the sheets and the medical records of the entire unit secret.

Defense Department research into the effects of low-level exposure was conducted in 1991 at the Armstrong Laboratory at Brooks Air Force Base in Texas. The authors of the study explained that "[t]he military requirement that drove this program was concern about the bioeffects of single and repeated exposure to low levels of nerve agent."

The results of the study are all too familiar. Motor skill deficits and oth-

er cognitive problems appeared in primates after only one week of exposure to the nerve agent soman, which is known to be within Iraq's chemical weapons arsenal. The primates showed few if any of the classic symptoms associated with nerve agent poisoning, yet their motor functions were demonstrably degraded.

The key question yet to be answered is why, having suspected prior to the gulf war that there may be adverse effects to low-level exposures, the Defense Department took no action to further study the matter and seek to prepare a treatment.

As for the rate of illness among gulf war veterans, Krauthammer cites as support for his thesis a recent study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, which concluded that gulf war veterans were not dying or being hospitalized at unusual rates, at least through 1993. But he chose to ignore the Nov. 26, 1996, announcement of two studies by the Centers for Disease Control and the U.S. Navy that found gulf war veterans are suffering illnesses at up to nearly six times the rate of their non-Desert Storm counterparts.

Nor did he mention the announcement last month by Dr. Eub Dingham, chairman of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Persian Gulf Ex-

pert Scientific Committee, that gulf war veterans were clearly falling ill at unusually high rates, which might be explained by exposure to low levels of Iraqi chemical weapons and other agents. Finally, the low death rate of gulf war veterans clearly lacks any true significance. The passage of even five years after the war is unlikely to produce a high death rate based on low-level exposures.

Krauthammer's characterization of Desert Storm as a "clean" war with few "dramatic, conventional war-related casualties" can only be seen as a mockery of the sacrifice and daily agony suffered by tens of thousands of gulf war veterans and their families. Notwithstanding his conclusion, the cold reality of the gulf war should now be recognized. Based on the number of Americans who likely sustained prolonged low-level exposure to Iraqi chemical and perhaps novel biological weapons, far from the victory we still perceive to have occurred, the gulf war was in actuality a defeat, with a tremendous cost that the United States must soon come to acknowledge and bear.

Patrick G. Eddington, a former CIA analyst, is the author of a forthcoming book on Gulf War Syndrome. Mark S. Zaid is a Washington lawyer.