

## In The Nation: Nerve Gas and National Security

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, Aug. 10—In all the remarkable circumstances of the nerve gas affair, the least of the available evils may be the Army's plan to ship 3,000 tons of the deadly stuff through seven Southern states, then dump it in the ocean 283 miles off Florida. Even so, the gross offensiveness and latent risks of the scheme suggest what a mess the nation has got itself into.

In the first place, the gas GB was derived from Nazi German research and manufactured by the American "defense" establishment during the Korean War as a weapon against mass Chinese infantry attacks. Yet, there is no evidence that the Chinese were using gas. These circumstances alone make a mockery of all those solemn assurances given by every President and innumerable generals that this country would never be first to use gas warfare. Luckily for the Chinese, the Korean War was settled before that pledge could be put to the test.

In the second place, as near as anyone can tell, or has told, the manufacture of this ghastly concoction was undertaken so mindlessly that, once it existed, there was no way to disarm or neutralize it. One would have thought that American scientific

genius, which has found a way to arms and disarm nuclear weapons, might have provided this safeguard for GB.

But apparently it didn't, and the "defense" establishment simply stockpiled tons of the stuff, waiting to see what would turn up. When there began to be leaks—of gas, on the one hand; to the press, on the other—the Army's technological wizardry came blundering to the rescue. The gas rockets were enclosed in concrete vaults—aptly called coffins—which had the dual flaw of neither preventing leakage nor allowing anyone to get at the rockets safely even if a way to neutralize them had been developed.

### The Watery Dump

Finally alerted after fifteen years to the obvious dangers of the situation, the Army cast about for something to do with all that GB. Having already dumped some off New Jersey several years ago, without provoking outcry, it consigned the latest shipment to Florida waters. (How much more GB and other such misty horrors exist? And what will be done with them?)

It does no good to say that the New Jersey dump was not protested; since then, environmental dangers have made a deep if belated impression on

many people, and what was not then recognized as a threat—or, indeed, even known to most Americans—has no meaning in the present situation. The State Department can dismiss U Thant's protest, for instance, on legal grounds; it cannot dismiss the impact he, and the dumping of the gas, will make on the people of the world—perhaps literally.

Nor is it convincing when august scientists, mostly in the pay of the Government, assure us there is no danger from the dump. It is conceded that they cannot know what effect it may have on the plant and animal life of the seas, even if there is no present danger to humans. When will we learn that life is of a piece, a vast and mysterious entanglement of species; that the earth is the home of all, and that what endangers one must have its ultimate effect on others? Who thought there was any "danger" to humans in dumping a little mercury into some big lakes?

The most frequently suggested alternative to the ocean dump—an underground nuclear explosion to destroy the gas—may seem more sensible and "scientific" but it could well prove more lethal, too, as at least one example suggests. The Atomic Energy Commission stoutly pledged that no radio-

active gas would escape from its Project Rulison underground explosion in Colorado; but it is now a debated question whether, in fact, it did. The hard truth is that in such matters all the consequences can never be foreseen.

### Perilous Immunity

About the only redeeming thing that can be said of the nerve gas dump is that, this time at least, people know about it. Generally, they have not known when the gas was made, why, how much, where it was stockpiled, what dangers it presented, and how careless had been the preparation, if any, for neutralizing or disposal. All of this was concealed under the arrogant and corrupting stamp of "national security."

What blunders and atrocities have been committed in that name? Given its imprimatur, with the immunity to public discourse and rational protest that it confers, no nerve gas has been needed to paralyze citizen responsibility. But if nothing else, the train of GB moving through the South to its uncertain fate ought to alert a few more Americans to the dangers of an unchecked, unchallenged, unexamined bureaucracy, particularly in the "defense" establishment.