

The Myth of 'Humane' Weapons

By J. H. ROTHSCHILD

Myths are of great value—they make thinking unnecessary. One of the biggest myths is that war can be made humane. It is certainly possible from an organizational viewpoint to eliminate war and still provide adequate safeguards for all nations, if that is what the nations want, but trying to make war more humane is futile.

The major efforts to control war are directed not against the weapons which are the most painful or damaging, but against those which seem to be most vulnerable. For example, the Hague Peace Conference of 1899 tried to limit the rates of fire of automatic weapons. Flame is about the most horrifying method of warfare, but it remains in use.

Chemical weapons appear to be a vulnerable target because they have not been used on a large scale for fifty years and, in this country, our military services are not trained to any extent in their use.

This situation is ironical. Chemical weapons offer about the only means of reducing suffering and loss of life in war. When you use any of the other weapons such as bullets, bombs, mines and flame, all control over damage is lost the moment the munition is released. With chemical weapons the decision can be made ahead of time as to the minimum amount of damage necessary to accomplish a mission.

If it is possible to accomplish the mission without unnecessary killing chemical agents are available, and more can be developed, which will incapacitate temporarily, but which will allow full subsequent recovery. This permits a much greater degree of control, and opportunity for humanness. As an example common in all countries, the chemical incapacitating agents CS and CN, tear gases, are used to control domestic rioters.

Possible use of chemical weapons must be considered in perspective—what are the alternatives? The decision must be made among nuclear weapons, high explosive weapons such as shells, bombs and mines, flame weapons such as napalm bombs or flame-throwers, or chemical weapons.



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Chemical agents, even the lethal ones, do not leave permanently maimed men, and the amount of suffering on the battlefield is less than when the other weapons are used. The percentage of deaths to those affected will be far lower with chemical agents.

An Army doctor who made a thorough study of casualties following World War I stated that gas "is not only one of the most efficient agencies for effecting casualties but is the most humane method ever applied on the battlefield."

The fear is sometimes expressed that gas will affect noncombatants over large areas. Within acceptable limits, the areas affected by the agent can be controlled.

The damage done will depend more on the philosophy of the user than the weapons available. Lidice was destroyed with small arms and fire; Rotterdam and Coventry were razed with high explosive bombs; Tokyo was levelled with incendiary bombs.

Possible ratification of the Geneva Gas Protocol (1925) has again arisen. This Protocol prohibits the use of "asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of all analogous liquids, materials or devices" which have "been justly condemned by the gen-

eral opinion of the civilized world." The ambiguity is obvious, hence the international dispute over whether the riot control agents and the herbicides are included.

The arguments against ratification are as pertinent today as they were in 1925 when the Senate refused its approval. In the first place, chemical weapons are powerful and the U.S. may need them to reduce the enemy manpower superiority. The only other weapons for this purpose are the nuclear, and for obvious reasons we desire to avoid them.

We must be prepared to fight with chemicals even if the Protocol is ratified, as our retaliatory strength will be a much surer deterrent than the Protocol. We can't depend on the myth that treaties are sacred to all nations, e.g., Italy used gas against Ethiopia in 1936 even though both had ratified the Geneva Protocol.

Furthermore, the U.S. must be ready with defensive measures.

Unfortunately our approach to the question of chemical warfare has been almost entirely an emotional one. We cannot tolerate myths in determining our future security.

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