

Letter

Chemical War's Toll

To the Editor:

I am saddened to read of the aspersions that have been cast by the Pentagon on the study, conducted by Dr. Matthew S. Meselson of Harvard and others, of the damage and long-run effects of the chemical war in Southeast Asia. Your Jan. 9 news story makes one feel that the Pentagon is doing everything possible to detract from the findings of this team, which was commissioned by the American Academy for the Advancement of Science.

My own experience with war victims was especially embittering. During four years in South Vietnam with International Voluntary Services, I had numerous encounters with victims, either having their crops destroyed or having suffered personal injury of the type that maims but does not kill.

Farmers in Cantho province had their watermelons, their only dry-season cash crop, destroyed. Rural people in Tayninh suffered countless losses from the defoliation of their fruit trees and vegetable gardens. A fellow volunteer's efforts at rehabilitating mental patients by teaching them vegetable gardening was utterly frustrated.

Still worse was seeing the patients at the hospital in Tayninh with limbs and faces burned mercilessly by phosphorus. And later, while helping another young American in several hospitals in the Mekong Delta, I interviewed child after child scarred or disfigured in some hideous way.

The most disheartening aspect is that the chemical war will continue long after President Nixon's policy of Vietnamization has succeeded in changing the race of the dead in the casualty figures each week. For our "air support," including phosphorus bombs and rockets, will continue. And the poisons and defoliants remain in the soil, persisting in killing almost all forms of photosynthetic life.

The heroic task of estimating the postwar commitment that will have to be made—in terms of foodstuff, because of the destruction and desolation of farmland—has been begun by Dr. Meselson and his team. And they are to be applauded, not condemned. It is the Pentagon which is to be condemned for having perpetrated these heinous acts against humanity.

ROGER MONTGOMERY

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