

OCT 14 1973

Handling Civil Disorder in the Future

SFChronicle

Weapons That Don't Kill

(They Say)

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Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles

THE TRAGIC consequences of violence during campus confrontations, prison riots, militant demonstrations and street crimes have spurred efforts to develop nonlethal — or more accurately, less lethal — weapons.

Results thus far have been mixed, with some of the new weapons proving as potentially deadly as the service revolvers and nightsticks they are intended to replace.

While researchers have experimented with devices that would permit policemen to stop fleeing felons with silly putty, water guns or rubber bullets, controversy has smoldered and officers have stuck by their guns.

But attempts are still being made to find and develop a practical weapons system that will allow a police officer to stop or subdue a suspect without seriously hurting him or putting the officer in danger.

These efforts have ranged from realistic to ridiculous, but several systems have shown promise and others currently are being tested and perfected.

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THE WEAPONS include a shock device that fires connectors attached to thin wires to snag a suspect's clothing and deliver an incapacitating electric charge; a device that uses sound and light waves to induce an artificial epileptic seizure; a gun that shoots tranquilizer darts; bazooka that fires dye markers, another that hurls a net; and still others that pew instant mud, chemical cocoons and something called "instant banana peel."

"The idea of nonlethal weapons is a popular concept with certain segments of the community," said Los Angeles District Attorney Joseph P. Busch, who has launched a task-force effort to find more humane weaponry.

"But even before I formed the task force last year, I was aware that there is no such thing as a nonlethal weapon.

"The truth is that any weapon which can cause injury may cause death under certain circumstances, although some manufacturers have made claims to the contrary."

THE ACCURACY of Busch's statement was shown recently in Grants, N.M., where an 18-year-old youth became the first known fatality of a popular less-than-lethal police weapon.

Grants Police Chief Edgar C. Bell said the death occurred when police tried to disperse about 150 youths involved in a gang fight.

The youth was struck directly over the heart by a shot-filled bean-bag fired from a range of about five feet, Bell said.

A spokesman for the firm, Bell said, indicated the beanbag projectile was designed to be fired from a range of 60 feet.

"Tragic incidents such as the one in New Mexico can be a serious setback to our efforts to develop a workable system of less lethal weapons," said Burton S. Katz, legal liaison for Busch's task force.

"And yet, they provide dramatic evidence of the need for more study and more research in this area before any system can be adopted and put into the field."

Such incidents also add fuel to the controversy over less lethal weapons.

Many police officers object to less lethal systems, Katz said, because they fear that adopting them will lead to subsequent moves to disarm the police and eliminate lethal weapons altogether.

"I sure as hell don't want to be standing out there with a beanbag gun or a shotgun full of silly putty, facing some SOB with a loaded pistol," said one veteran officer.

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THE WHOLE IDEA is to stop a suspect or subdue him, or to make a demonstrator so uncomfortable that he wants to leave rather than cause trouble," Katz said.

"So far, the kinetic energy impact weapons such as the shot-filled bag have proved the most effective, and there are any number of variations such as the water-filled balls, rubber and wooden bullets like the ones being used in Ireland and a hard plastic ball similar to the 'super' ball that children play with."

One problem inherent with all types of projectiles operating on the kinetic impact principle, Busch said, is that all of them cause serious injury, even death.

"There is a direct correlation between accuracy of the system and the speed or velocity at which the projectile leaves the weapon," the district attorney said.

"So, as you increase the speed and therefore the accuracy, the greater the likelihood that the suspect will sustain a serious injury."

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SEVERAL TYPES of less lethal weapons were under development, Katz said, during his recent trip to the Land Warfare Laboratory in Maryland.

They included such exotic devices as:

- Electrical weapons such as the shock baton, powered by several standard flashlight batteries, which operates like a cattle prod, and the "Taser" that fires barbed contacts from a hand-held weapon which attach to the suspect's clothing.

- "The 'Taser' can deliver immobilizing, low-energy shocks to the suspect 300 feet away, which makes it excellent for courtroom situations where a prisoner might attack a judge, or in an airliner hijacking where you couldn't use a gun," Katz said.

- Systemic drug weapons like those used to subdue animals by firing a tranquilizer-filled dart with enough force to penetrate the skin without causing serious injury.

- Light emission, acoustical and temperature weapons that use light, sound, heat or cold to disorient demonstrators or make them uncomfortable. British scientists are currently testing an anti-riot device that uses sound and light waves to induce nausea and epileptic-like seizures.