

Book Reviews

Why Not Poison?

Chemical Warfare. A Study in Restraints. FREDERIC J. BROWN. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1968. xx + 356 pp. \$9.

After years on the sidelines at international discussions of arms control, chemical and biological weapons may soon come up for serious negotiations. President Nixon and Premier Kosygin have recently declared interest in starting CBW talks in the Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee at Geneva. Great Britain has proposed an unconditional ban on the production and use of germ weapons. Negotiations at the ENDC may start in July, when Secretary-General U Thant is expected to release a report on the characteristics and security implications of CB weapons, now being prepared in accord with a unanimous resolution of the U.N. General Assembly. (On the committee appointed to help prepare this report are Ivan Bennett, dean of the School of Medicine at New York University and former deputy director of the U.S. Office of Science and Technology, and Sir Solly Zuckerman, scientific adviser to the British government.)

Against this background of prospective international talks, it is important to ask what policies guide current CBW programs and what objectives are to be pursued in negotiations. CBW matters have received almost no careful public or congressional scrutiny. Has the subject been given thorough and farsighted consideration within the Executive Branch? Not much reassurance on this score can be drawn from the numerous changing and conflicting official statements or from the often simplistic and misleading testimony

presented to Congress by CBW officers and defense officials. There was a time when CBW policy may not have required the most thorough analysis or high-level attention, especially in comparison with more pressing matters. In the early 1950's the annual CBW budget was under 10 million dollars, no significant use of CB weapons had occurred since Mussolini used mustard gas against Ethiopia, and no serious international talks were impending. But the CBW budget is now said to be 350 million dollars; poison gas has been used in the Yemen; riot gas, defoliants, and anti-crop chemicals are in use in Vietnam; and negotiations are on the horizon. This is the time to think carefully and chart the wisest course we can.

The recent publication of several books on various aspects of chemical and biological warfare has greatly increased the amount of information easily available to the public and should help in the formulation of wise policy. One of these books is discussed below.

Chemical Warfare: A Study in Restraints is the doctoral dissertation of Lieutenant Colonel Frederic J. Brown, recently transferred to Vietnam from the Office of the Special Assistant to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for Counter-Insurgency and Special Activities. Based on military and diplomatic records as well as on more widely accessible sources, Brown's study traces U.S., British, German, and Japanese chemical warfare policies and preparations from World War I until the end of World War II in an attempt to learn why, "for the first time since the advent of the nation at arms, a major weapon employed in one conflict was not carried forward to be used in a

subsequent conflict." His conclusion is that "in World War II, the lesson was clear. . . . Military lack of interest kept the question of initiation from reaching civilian elite groups."

During the war, the United States produced a large supply of gas bombs and shells as well as masks and other protective equipment. However, only the latter were shipped overseas in great quantity. The policy was to keep enough gas in forward locations to permit significant retaliation in case of enemy initiation, but not enough for immediate resort to full-scale gas warfare. Shipping facilities were insufficient even for conventional weapons and other supplies. Military leaders saw little merit in diverting resources from conventional to gas combat. World War I had taught many military men that "the logistic demands were enormous. Gas substituted for nothing. Its requirements were an additional load to an already overloaded battlefield . . . the range of problems was infinite: how would the soldier eat, drink, sleep, perform bodily functions, use his weapon, give and receive commands . . . how would he know when his immediate area was contaminated?" Decontamination of a mile of road was a "stupendous undertaking." Morale problems were acute. In the words of a chemical officer, "Nothing breaks a soldier's will to fight so quickly as being gassed, even slightly. His imagination magnifies his real injury a hundred-fold." Impressive numbers of military police were required to keep the men at the front, and malingering was rampant. In summary, according to Brown, "chemical warfare was an enigma from the perspective of tactical military employment. If it could be used unilaterally, there was no question that it was effective. Unfortunately, however, it could not be used unilaterally. Once the enemy retaliated, the game did not appear worth the candle."

In World War II, it was only after the death of President Roosevelt and the defeat of Germany that the United States seriously considered the possibility of initiating gas warfare. Although we had not ratified the Geneva gas protocol (and still haven't), Roosevelt, like all the interwar presidents, was convinced that gas should be categorically prohibited. In 1943, he announced to the world that "we shall under no circumstances resort to the use of such weapons unless they are first used by our enemies." But after

Roosevelt's death, according to Brown, "planners could evaluate the merits of toxic agents with the foreknowledge that any recommendation would be seriously considered at the highest level rather than being rejected due to personal bias." (A rather different attitude toward Roosevelt's policy and its effect on the War Department is found in the official history of the U.S. Chemical Warfare Service, which says that "military leaders would have presented arguments in rebuttal had they entertained any deep-seated doubt as to the wisdom of the Presidential view.")

With the defeat of Germany, gas could be used in the Pacific without fear of retaliation against Britain or in Europe. The Chemical Warfare Service recommended poison gas as the most promising of all weapons for overcoming cave defenses, a pressing objective in view of the high American losses experienced in fighting dug-in Japanese island defenders. (A study by the War Department General Staff, not cited by Brown, took a less favorable view of the effectiveness of gas against cave defenses.)

In June 1945, plans for a continuous large-scale gas bombing of the Japanese home islands were put forward in a General Staff study that recommended an immediate increase in gas production for this purpose. Later that month, the question of U.S. initiation of gas warfare was raised by the Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall. But because of what Brown calls "procrastination" by the Joint Chiefs, the question was not decided in time to prepare a recommendation for President Truman before the Potsdam Conference. And before the President returned, the atomic bomb was successfully tested at Alamogordo.

Although the possibility of Japanese retaliation against China and against U.S. Pacific forces had some restraining effect, Brown feels that the central reason for the failure of the United States to use gas against Japan "lay in the general military disinterest in gas which had retarded readiness sufficiently to preclude timely, serious consideration of initiation. Decades of conditioning to a second-strike philosophy prevented such logistic preparedness in the forward areas which could have provided an incentive to striking the first blow." He speculates that

President Truman would probably have agreed if the Joint Chiefs had unanimously recommended U.S. initiation of gas warfare and remarks, "It is my feeling that civilian thought processes revealed in the decision to employ the A-bomb are generally transferrable to toxic agents."

While devoting most of his attention to the United States, Brown also presents considerable information regarding Britain, Germany, and Japan. At the start of the war, Britain, France, and Germany exchanged assurances that they would abide by the Geneva Gas Protocol, which all three had ratified. Britain may have considered using gas to repel the German invasion anticipated in 1940 but otherwise was eager to avoid gas warfare, as was Germany. Until late in the war, Germany continued large-scale production of tear gas, phosgene, mustard gas, and nerve gas, the last known only to her. Hitler may have ordered the use of gas near the end. However, no gas of any kind was used in combat in Europe. Japan employed tear gas and mustard against the Chinese before Pearl Harbor but later halted its CW training programs and stopped gas production. Brown attributes this policy of "unilateral chemical disarmament" in large part to reliance on the U.S. pledge of no first use.

Coming up to the present, Brown offers his views on the restraints against U.S. employment of lethal chemicals in Vietnam. He suggests that a persistent lethal agent would be effective in preventing enemy reoccupation of captured base camps and tunnels. He considers public opposition to be the restraining factor and asserts that the military would agree to such limited use of a lethal agent, presumably the U.S. standard persistent nerve agent VX, and that "by the nature of the conflict, particularly the logistical capabilities of the enemy, retaliation is not a significant restraint." Coming from a rising young officer and a former West Point assistant professor, this off-hand evaluation of the retaliatory threat seems to me rather shocking. Does it take account of the effects of possible retaliation with gas rockets or mortar shells on Saigon or on U.S. base camps? Do we wish to encumber U.S. forces with masks and protective suits, or to face demands for these items by the frightened citizens of Saigon? Has Brown ever considered that mortar

cartridges and rockets loaded with nerve agent could place insurgents at a sizable advantage over government forces? Such weapons are standardized in our own arsenal and could presumably be made or obtained by the enemy. They weigh no more than the rockets and shells now being used. Relatively light toxic weapons able to cover large areas could serve the guerilla well, for he often knows the location of the opposing force, and it less often knows his. Of course, the counterinsurgents could employ greater quantities of lethal gas, even spreading it over large areas from the air. But is this the kind of combat we wish to encourage?

Brown's book is a highly readable source of much interesting history. His theme that military acceptance and preparedness are a prerequisite for the use of any weapon is almost axiomatic. It follows that arms control advocates should try to address their arguments not only to "civilian elite groups" but also to the professional military establishment. And, as Brown rather disdainfully points out, public opinion can also be a potent restraining force, especially through its effects on peacetime policies and programs. As an attempt at objective research and historical analysis, the book is badly flawed by a gratuitous admixture of Brown's own largely unexamined judgment that the United States should not accept the prohibition against initiating gas warfare embodied in the Geneva protocol. Without attempting even an elementary analysis of this judgment, he repeatedly implies that military and civilian leaders who have held the opposite view had only public opinion and personal prejudice to support their case.

Weapons with the radical potentials of chemical and biological agents deserve something more than case-by-case policy decisions. Such decisions can have major effects on the nature of the military and political environment we face years after they are made. The time is past due for a thorough, long-range, and broadly based review of U.S. CBW policy.

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