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Potomac Valley Test Facility

If we had had the foresight a few years ago to establish the Potomac Valley Test Facility, several recent national problems could have been handled more satisfactorily. An example was the problem of what to do with a large supply of unwanted poison gas in Colorado. The Army proposed to ship it by train to the East Coast and then to dump it at sea off the coast of New Jersey. Had the Potomac Valley Test Facility been in existence, several containers of the gas could have been dropped into the Potomac River, between the White House and the Pentagon, from an altitude calculated to give the impact velocity expected at sea bottom. Dropping a few containers into the Potomac River would have given congressmen, Army officials, and other interested persons an opportunity to observe at first hand whether the containers survived unharmed, and if they did not, the rate of leakage of the gas and its effects on the neighboring flora and fauna. Nothing quite takes the place of direct, personal experience in evaluating an event and its consequences. The nation's central decision makers should not be denied this experience.

More recently, the Edgewood Arsenal and Fort McClellan have suspended open-air testing of nerve gas until a team of scientists can determine whether such tests are as free from danger as they are reputed to be. The National Academy of Sciences, which is frequently asked to advise the government on difficult technical matters, has its headquarters in Washington. Also nearby are the National Bureau of Standards, the Food and Drug Administration, and other agencies that can provide much technical information and relevant expertise. If open-air tests of nerve gas were conducted in or near Washington, representatives of appropriate agencies and of interested congressional committees could easily obtain the firsthand information which they will no doubt wish to have in evaluating the possible hazards of testing such gases in or near inhabited areas.

Another use of the Potomac Valley Test Facility would be in conducting studies of the sonic boom. Sonic boom tests have already been carried out in several parts of the country, but the test sites have been remote from Washington, and there is still considerable disagreement over the extent of the disturbance and the willingness of the public to accept repeated sonic booms. Again, firsthand information would be useful to the decision makers. If repeated tests were conducted over Washington, members of Congress and officials of responsible Executive agencies could observe the effects on babies, pets, the sick and the elderly, on classrooms and conferences, and also on window panes and other fragile objects. They could learn for themselves just how much or little disturbance repeated sonic booms produce at various times of day and night.

There would be still other advantages of having a general-purpose test facility located in Washington. Studies of the time-zone effect indicate that physiological disturbances, loss of sleep, reduced effectiveness, and impaired judgment follow sudden transportation from a time zone to which a person is adapted to another, several time zones removed. However, there are individual differences in these effects, and the whole matter needs further study. Washington is full of people who make frequent trips to Europe, Africa, the West Coast, or Asia. Clearly they would be good subjects for studies of time-zone effects, and their number could readily be increased, for it would be easy to get nominations of politicians, bureaucrats, editorial writers, and others whose frequent or prolonged absence from Washington would be considered by many to be in the national interest.—DAEL WOLFLE