House Reopens Nerve Gas Issue

On 27 June the House passed an amendment to a military construction appropriations bill which would make $3.2 million available for beginning construction of a binary nerve gas manufacturing facility in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. In so doing, it made an important military decision without benefit of debate and in absence of a presidential request.

For years, the Army has been asking for money to replace existing stocks of nerve gas with a binary weapon involving two inert substances that would mix in flight and become lethal. The Administration has repeatedly put off any decision. But now the House has acted, largely at the initiative of Representative Richard H. Ichord (D-Mo.), former chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee, who believes that a flourishing nerve gas capability will act as a deterrent to nuclear war. Linked to the construction appropriation is a measure, now in the House Appropriations Committee, which would add $19 million to the Department of Defense (DOD) budget for procuring and installing binary production equipment.

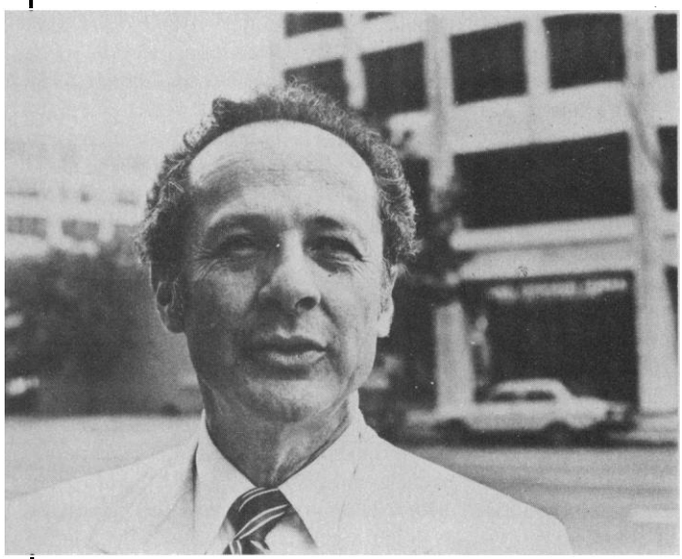

Photo by Constance Holden

Matthew Meselson

So far, there has been little or no discussion of the House action in the Senate or anywhere else. But Harvard biologist Matthew Meselson, one of the country's few civilian authorities on nerve gas, is trying to change that. In July he spent 2 weeks in Washington making the rounds of the White House, the DOD, and Capitol Hill in an effort to persuade authorities that such a commitment is a costly and foolhardy exercise that is only likely to undercut current efforts at negotiating a chemical warfare treaty with the Russians.

The United States currently has about 3 million nerve gas projectiles in storage, most of them in the form of artillery shells located at Tooele Army Depot in Utah. It also has nerve gas bombs residing in Denver at Stapleton Airport. The total collection, according to an Army spokesman, would be good for a month of war in Europe.

The Army claims that existing stocks need to be replaced both because they are deteriorating and because modern delivery systems are rendering them obsolete. Its position is that binary weapons are much cleaner and safer and thus will give the military much more flexibility in their shipping and handling. (Civilians in Denver have made a considerable fuss over reports of leakage from Weteye nerve bombs stored at Stapleton Airport.) Although both the United States and the U.S.S.R. have agreed to eschew first use of chemical weapons, according to the Geneva Protocol of 1925, the military believes U.S. possession of up-to-date nerve gas stocks can both serve as a deterrent to Soviet use of nerve gas and raise the threshold of nuclear war by expanding the repertoire of military options.

Meselson does not believe there are any valid arguments for upgrading the U.S. nerve gas inventory. He says existing stocks of artillery projectiles are not deteriorating significantly and will be usable for years ahead with proper maintenance, a view he says has been confirmed in private discussions with military officials. He states that the obsolescence argument applies only to a small supply of rockets (for which delivery systems are no longer being manufactured) and not to artillery shells, which the proposed facility would replace.

His major concern, though, is that converting stocks to binary form would make nerve gas much more "psychologically acceptable" within the military. At present, nerve gas substances are regarded as "dirty chemicals" that have a kind of "pariah status" in everyone's mind. Replacement with binary substances would involve a kind of psychological laundering of nerve gas, making it a routine and acceptable part of the modern armamentarium.

Meselson points out that making nerve gas seem respectable would be far more disadvantageous for the United States than for the Soviets. The most likely arena for deployment of nerve gas would be Europe. But since all combat personnel are equipped with antichemical clothing and gas masks, the poison would take its toll almost entirely on civilians—European civilians. The only possible benefit Meselson can see is use of nerve gas for bombing of Soviet airports, which would slow down operations a bit by compelling personnel to wear bulky antichemical garb.

Meselson believes a decision to produce binary weapons would cancel what has been in effect a 10-year moratorium with the Russians. He claims there is "no hard evidence" that the U.S.S.R. has made "any major effort to improve its chemical warfare capability in the past decade." Nor, he says, is there any hard evidence that they have used nerve gas in Afghanistan, Laos, or Cambodia. Thus, by going binary, the United States would be offering the Russians an excuse to get even more defensive and paranoid than they already are, and very possibly setting the stage for a new kind of arms race.

Although public discussion of the topic has been minimal, it may soon gain visibility as a result of two current initiatives. One is a 2-week summer study on chemical warfare being held by the Defense Science Board, under the direction of MIT chemist John Deutch; the other is an interagency review of chemical warfare being run by the National Security Council which will examine, among other things, the assumption that chemical weapons act as a deterrent to their use.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

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