
Defense Report

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Chemical Warfare—A Nasty Subject that Won't Go Away

For those who have experienced war on a personal level there is no facade of glamour, no illusion of heroics only an overwhelming impression of distaste. And yet, within that overall impression there are corners reserved for the especially distasteful, like chemical warfare.

From its first use in World War I, the technique of killing or disabling with chemicals breathed into the lungs or absorbed through the skin has typified the worst of war and yet nations have gone on refining and producing chemical agents. There are international agreements prohibiting the use of chemical warfare but one major nation, the Soviet Union, has refused to become a party to them. The USSR makes no secret of the fact that they have no qualms about using these weapons to attack opposing front line troops, to attack potential reinforcements and to protect the flanks of their own formations. In the Soviet ranks there are at least 90,000 officers and men whose primary duty is to plan and execute chemical warfare. A British intelligence analyst said recently, ". . . they are preparing to conduct offensive chemical warfare whenever they judge it to be to their advantage."

The United States is the only free world nation that has a believable chemical warfare capability but it lags far behind the Soviets' in size and potential. Scarcely 2,000 U.S. soldiers are involved full time with a chemical mission. The United States has renounced the first use of deadly chemicals so it has limited itself to a retaliation mode. But in order to retaliate quickly and effectively, we must have the weapons at hand. Unfortunately, the U.S. retaliatory capability is both small and obsolescent. The capability shrinks each time a chemical weapon must be deactivated due to deterioration and the Army has a full-time demilitarization program underway to destroy leaking or unreliable weapons.

For several years the Army has had the proven technical capability to build a chemical stockpile that is safe to store for long periods of time. It is called a "binary" system because two, non-toxic, parts of the weapon are kept separated until they are seconds away from delivery on a target. Conversion of our aging stockpile of dangerous chemical weapons to binary weapons would sustain our retaliatory capability and improve safety at our depots. Congress has been reluctant to fund this conversion but the Administration is planning a new effort to get its approval.

We cannot keep our heads in the sand any longer. As unpleasant as it may be, our most likely adversary has both the will and the means to use chemical warfare. We must be prepared to retaliate quickly against its first use. Only that kind of capability will provide a realistic deterrent against that first use.