
Defense Report

AUSA



Chemical Warfare — A Reality We Must Be Prepared to Face

War in any form is abhorrent. There are few professional soldiers who, having seen war, are anxious to see it again. That experience tends to turn the career military person toward ardent support of deterrence against war as the best realistic alternative to having to fight or to simply give up one's freedom. But there is one form of warfare—the use of chemical agents—that occupies a special position of abhorrence. A soldier is no less a casualty when attacked with chemicals than he is when hit by machine-gun fire. It is the insidiousness of chemicals that mark them for special dislike and generate the fully justifiable effort to have them banned from the battlefield.

The United States is committed to an anti-chemical warfare policy and, given some verifiable assurance that all other nations were just as fully committed, would happily destroy its present stockpile of deadly nerve agents. But two very large realities stand in the path of that action: first, the acknowledged commitment of the Soviet Union to the use of chemicals on any future battlefield where it might be to its advantage, in spite of its signature on the Geneva conventions, and, second, the complete lack of success in negotiations toward a workable anti-chemical treaty.

Faced with these realities the United States must, at the very minimum, be so well prepared to retaliate against the first use of chemicals by another nation that the second nation will be deterred from its use. If, for instance, the Soviet Union knew that our troops in Europe were prepared to match every chemical effort they made, their commanders might hesitate to initiate the use of chemicals. Unfortunately, our deterrence is not as believable as it should be.

Congress has shown only moderate hesitancy about providing the funds for gas masks, protective clothing and detection devices, but it has taken a puzzling position on the need to maintain an adequate stockpile of retaliatory chemical weapons that represents our prime deterrent. The present stockpile is small when compared to that of the Soviet Union, but it would probably be adequate if it were in good shape. However, it is old, leaky and unreliable. Much of it is stored on the outskirts of Denver, Colorado, where the residents get understandably nervous when some of the weapons must be moved.

The Army, which provides chemical weapons for all the services, would like to replace this stockpile with binary munitions that are completely safe (no matter how long they are stored) until they are actually fired at an enemy. After several years of being turned back early in the budget process, the Army almost got its wish in the 1981 Defense Budget, only to lose the battle in the last days of the lame duck 96th Congress. Obviously, the Army's arguments are gaining better understanding. Still, it took three years for the Army to convince the Carter Administration to ask Congress for money to modernize the chemical stockpile. Hopefully, the new leaders of our nation will quickly see the logic of the Army's case.