
Defense Report

AUSA



Chemical Warfare—A Reality We Must Be Prepared to Face

Chemical warfare is morally and philosophically repugnant; it is a reality upon which we would like to turn our backs. And yet we face the certain knowledge that the Soviet Union is, at the very least, experimenting with new chemical agents in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia and considers chemicals to be standard weapons available to its field commanders for use without special permission from national authority.

Although the United States has disavowed the first use of chemical weapons, in order to deter their use by the USSR we must present a real ability to retaliate in kind, just as we seek to deter the use of nuclear weapons by the sureness of our counterstrikes. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of our existing retaliatory capability is questionable. The existing stocks of chemical weapons were all produced before 1969, when President Nixon halted all production, and each passing year reveals more "leakers" or other defects that force their destruction as unsafe.

The Army, which acts for all the services in this area, has developed a new kind of chemical agent called a "binary" munition, that is safe to store and transport. It has been trying for several years to get the funds to produce binaries so the old, deteriorating retaliatory stockpile can be gradually replaced. The fiscal 1983 defense budget submitted by President Reagan would support initial binary production and the Senate, by a very narrow margin, approved it. The House, after a highly emotional debate, rejected it. The issue had to be decided by a joint conference.

One would like to believe the conferees were guided by fact, not emotion. Even if binary production began immediately, it would be years before the stockpile could be completely replaced. To deny our forces in the field the ability to retaliate in kind only encourages the USSR to initiate the use of chemicals and increases the likelihood that we would have to resort to nuclear weapons.

In short, it is time for us to suppress our emotional reaction to chemical weapons and recognize that they are a necessary, if distasteful, part of being prepared for an entirely unpleasant undertaking—war.