

Feld

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13 March 1980

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Dear Bernie,

The manuscript from Wadlow gives considerably more credence to the allegations of the use of poison gas--particularly in the case of Afghanistan--than I think is deserved. According to the March 8 statement by Hodding Carter, "We cannot, at this time, confirm reports that napalm and poison gas have been used..." William Beecher reported in the Boston Globe on February 3 that "American officials discount reports that the Russians have used lethal chemical weapons against the guerillas to date." Having been press secretary of the Department of Defense, Beecher may be assumed to have good sources. The Wall Street Journal reports in the same vein on February 4. From what I know of the situation U.S. intelligence has no definite evidence for the use of poison gas in Afghanistan. What does exist is a few largely anonymous claims by Afghans in Pakistan and at least one of these reports denies the use of poison gas, saying that only a riot control-like agent had been used. It is true that Soviet chemical/radiological decontamination equipment has been seen in Kabul; but this equipment, the TMS-65 decontamination truck, is organic to Soviet divisions and moreover has been seen in use for diverse purposes, such as melting ice on roads and runways and generating smoke screens (the TMS-65 is a turbo-jet engine mounted on a truck). In the case of Laos and Cambodia the situation is different in that there are many more or less carefully conducted interviews between U.S. consular and medical officials and refugees claiming to have witnessed gas attacks. But the U.S. Army medical team found the symptoms reported did not match well with any known lethal chemical warfare agent and the two samples provided by Laotian refugees, when analyzed by the Army, were not found to contain toxic agents.

Thus, the evidence for the use of chemical weapons in Afghanistan is flimsy at best and, if such weapons have indeed been used in Laos, they may well be similar to the riot control agents heavily used by the U.S. and to a lesser extent by the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam war.

I think that Wadlow has a point in urging the consideration of methods for dealing with claims of chemical warfare but I think the article is extremely top heavy in its detailing so extensively the various allegations without providing a corresponding analysis of the possible falseness of the Afghan reports or any reference,

in the case of Laos, to agents which the U.S. itself considers permissible in war.

What would be particularly regrettable is to cry wolf to such an extent that the real restraints, including those in the U.S. government, are eroded.

I enclose a xerox of an advance copy of our Scientific American article, which will appear in about 10 days.

as ever,

Encl.