

204 Crystal Court
Little Rock, Arkansas
72205

Lyons

1 June 1983

Prof. Matthew Meselson
Dept of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology
Harvard University
7 Divinity Ave.
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

Dear Prof. Meselson:

The enclosed letter will appear in the summer 1983 FOREIGN AFFAIRS. I think it's self-explanatory.

I'm sending it to you not only for the sake of information, but because I'd like to ask your advice. The Bartley-Kuczewicz article, as well as some other reading I've been doing, has got me going on this subject again. I'm thinking of putting together a book proposal on the entire "yellow rain" business. As I now work for NEWSWEEK--book reviews, primarily--I can afford to spend time and energy on something I know won't pay very well, but which I think has the potential to be of great use and interest. What has amazed me from the start in this entire affair is the way rumor has metamorphosed into journalistic and political "fact" without the intervening stages of proof. I suspect that, if properly told, the "story" of how and why this has happened could tell us a great deal about the larger dilemma in which we as citizens find ourselves. Alice Mayhew at Simon & Schuster--I think you know her--has shown interest. My friend Jim Fallows, the ATLANTIC MONTHLY Washington editor who wrote the book NATIONAL DEFENSE also thinks the idea worth pursuing. Andrew Cockburn, who I met in New York recently after reviewing his book on the Soviet Army, encouraged me too.

I'd like a chance to talk with you at your convenience about your opinion of the likelihood of such a project's success. The idea has self-evident dangers: not simply the logical impossibility of proving a negative (thus opening oneself to the ever-popular charge of special pleading for the Russians), but what from here looks like the near impossibility of my being able to determine what IS going on out there and who may be responsible. I am convinced, however, that if anybody can point me in the right directions, it's you. I'd appreciate it if you could write or call me (collect, of course). My number is 501-663-0184. It's my office and home, so I'm generally easy to get. If you do think such a book might be written, I'd be quite willing (indeed eager when the Red Sox are in town) to come up to Boston to talk. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Gene Lyons
Mr. Gene Lyons ✓

204 Crystal Court
Little Rock, Arkansas
19283
April 1983

Mr. William P. Bundy
Editor, FOREIGN AFFAIRS
58 East 68th St.
New York 10021

Dear Mr. Bundy:

I was amazed and angered by the following two sentences from "Yellow Rain and the Future of Arms Agreements," by Robert L. Bartley and William P. Kucewicz on page B14 of the Spring 1983 issue of FOREIGN AFFAIRS: "Gene Lyons, a freelance journalist who had written previously on chemical warfare, wrote on the op-ed page of THE NEW YORK TIMES that 'yellow rain' might be a 'CIA hoax.' The urge to dismiss the gathering evidence reached absurd lengths."

In fact I wrote nothing of the kind. I didn't even imply it. The article in question appeared on March 3, 1982. Its occasion was a curious statement by then-Secretary of State Haig that while the Soviets were undeniably guilty of "yellow rain" atrocities, they might not have broken the 1972 treaty in which they and the US had agreed to renounce biological warfare. I found that bewildering (as I do your authors' neglecting to mention it), wondered as a result whether US officials really believed their own charges, and went on to a too brief discussion of why many biological warfare experts outside the government remained dubious of State's case. I mentioned the CIA exactly twice: once to say that it told a House subcommittee in 1980 that it could not confirm Soviet use of poisons in Afghanistan (it suspected tear gas); the other to point out that of the Hmong refugees who spoke of "yellow rain," "most if not all...<were> former allies in the CIA's 'secret war' in Laos." That, of course, is a matter of fact. Several paragraphs followed, all but one devoted to what biochemists and chemical warfare specialists outside the government had told me and other journalists about tricothecene mycotoxins--quite at odds with what the State department was saying. Then came my conclusion, as follows: "We have all been victimized by intelligence hoaxes too often to accept such shaky evidence on faith. If the Administration wishes to be believed, it will have to do much better."

I meant exactly that. No more and no less. As it is not my habit to indulge in unbuttoned speculations of the sort Bartley and Kucewicz attribute to me, I shall refrain

from wondering where the phrase "CIA hoax" came from. The "yellow rain" issue is, I agree, a grave one. Indeed as your authors should have been aware, I did an extensive review of Sterling Seagrave's YELLOW RAIN--written before, but published after the TIMES piece--in the March 15, 1982 INQUIRY magazine. "Given the seriousness of the matter..." I wrote "the State Department and the Reagan administration have been, if anything, underplaying the significance of their own charges. Why bother to negotiate arms agreements with the Soviets at all, one might well ask, if they violate them so cynically, so viciously, and on so small a pretext? The Russians could squat on Asian peasants forever without using poisons."

Before reaching so dire a conclusion, though, one would want to see the firmest kind of evidence. Atrocity stories are an inevitable product of war. Charges of chemical/biological attacks--hard to prove, impossible to disprove--do make good propaganda. During the Korean War, some will recall, China charged that the U.S. was dropping disease-infested fleas on North Korea and produced "confessions" from captured pilots. (Though the charges were false, it is true that the U.S. Army Chemical Corps was at the time pushing germ warfare very hard as a cost-effective way to exterminate Asian communist "hordes.") But the Seagrave book is almost comic in its ineptitude. As the word "hoax" is in the air, I do find it surprising that State would describe as "instrumental" to its case against the Soviets (and Bartley and Kuczewicz cite approvingly) a book that claims that "the famous Nixon ban <<on biological weapons>> turned out to be just another part of the intricate Watergate hoax. The Nixon ban was a fake. And the only difference between Washington and the Hindu Kush in the end is that in...Afghanistan you know your enemies." Seagrave offers no proof for this remarkable allegation. Nor has he anything to say about "yellow rain" that could not have come from the newspaper. His logic and standards of evidence are often preposterous. Among other howlers, YELLOW RAIN is a book in which poisons can be "metabolized during the...hours the body lay undiscovered." Though his book hints at heroic investigative reporting, an interview Seagrave gave the WASHINGTON POST makes it clear he was merely slipped a classified report by somebody at Fort Detrick--exactly where any US government biological warfare "hoax" would originate, if he had any evidence at all that there were one. But he hasn't.

Neither, I repeat, have I. Indeed I cite the Seagrave book only to show the kinds of evidence the authors find persuasive when it agrees with what their contention that the case against the Soviets is closed. Other kinds of evidence get different treatment. Bartley and Kuczewicz mention the skepticism of Matthew Meselson of Harvard and Julian Perry Robinson of the University of Sussex, the

West's leading academic experts on chemical and biological warfare. But they don't tell us in any detail why these men are doubters, preferring to quote newspaper editorial writers and leave readers to imagine that the scientists have recanted. To my knowledge they have not. Bartley and Kucewicz quote an early State Department assertion that tricothecene mycotoxins are not indigenous to Southeast Asia, when in fact there is plenty of reason to suspect they may well be. (SCIENCE magazine reported in October, 1981 in a "yellow rain" piece that researchers from the University of Maryland had found levels of the toxin several times higher than those of the State Department samples on a Brazilian shrub.) They mention Fred Swartzendruber, a Mennonite relief official who traveled freely throughout Laos from October 1979 through May 1981 and who, speaking the language, heard nothing of "yellow rain." Troubled by persistent rumors in Bangkok, Swartzendruber made it a point to ask. Indeed he says that there was little, if any, fighting going on at all. He is dismissed with a second-hand AD HOMINEM jepe.

All this, as I say, I found surprising. So my curiosity was aroused by Bartley and Kucewicz's mention of a London OBSERVER article of March 2, 1983 that they said showed "persuading opinion among the Allies may take more time...<&and>may require repeating all of the hesitations and mistakes that marked development of U.S. opinion." I took the trouble to look it up. What I found simply astonished me. Written by Peter Fringle in Washington, here in part is what it said:

"Australian scientists have charged that samples of leaves and pebbles said to have been contaminated with 'yellow rain'--toxic chemicals allegedly dropped by the Soviet Union in Indo-China--are fakes.

British government scientists are said to have found similar startling evidence on samples they have analysed....

The Australian samples, apparently collected under US supervision from...Thailand...were given to the Australians in April last year.

After exhaustive tests in the Australian Defence Department laboratories, scientists concluded they had been hoaxed: the samples apparently contained no harmful poisons and were composed mainly of yellow pollen grains 'glued' together with an unidentified binding substance.

The Australian report says the amount of toxic elements, known as mycotoxins, present in the sample was so small as to have 'no military meaning.' The pollen carrying the toxin traces, according to the

Australians, occurred naturally in the local rain forests.

'Since the examples are obviously fakes,' the Australian report said 'they convey no information at all as to the veracity or otherwise of the reports of chemical attacks.'

The Australians said they could only guess at why the local inhabitants, most of them refugees, produced fake samples. It could be 'monetary gain, desire to ingratiate oneself with authority, or as a disinformation campaign.'

The US State Department confirmed the existence of the Australian report, and also that British scientists from the Chemical and Biological Warfare Establishment at Porton Down had tested 'yellow rain' samples and been puzzled by the presence of pollen.

Though the British results are still secret, the Thatcher Government--according to one Washington source--is said to be embarrassed at producing evidence that undermines the US campaign to prove that Russia has violated the 1925 Geneva protocol banning chemical weapons and the biological warfare treaty of 1972."

Only two possibilities, it seems to me, exist here. Bartley and Kucawicz are either very bad reporters or simply propegandists. I leave it to readers to decide which.

Sincerely,

Gene Lyons