



Heylin

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Dr. Matthew Meselson
Department of Biochemistry
Harvard University
7 Divinity Avenue
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

Dear Matt:

Here is a copy of my response to the Wall Street Journal. I do not have any great hopes it will be published.

Sincerely,

Michael Heylin
Editor

MH/plo
Enc.

OP-ED TO WALL STREET JOURNAL

Yellow Rain: Science not Polemics

The Wall Street Journal recently devoted its lengthiest editorial in three years to a critique of Lois Ember's article on yellow rain published in the Jan. 9, 1984, issue of Chemical & Engineering News. Both Ember and the WSJ agree that the evidence supporting the Administration's charge of Soviet complicity in the use of trichothecene toxin weapons in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia has weaknesses and that further investigation is needed.

The difference comes in the interpretation of the limited evidence that has been presented to the public. The Ember article indicates that it is so flawed that it proves nothing.

The WSJ contends that, despite its shortcomings, the Administration's case is still "impressive" and leaves no doubt that the Soviet Union has violated two arms control treaties. The editorial implies that scientists or journalists who think otherwise are misguided or naive, at best. At worst, they are

dissenting for their own political reasons.

This is not a constructive approach to an unresolved issue of such critical importance to national security. It is unconscionable for the WSJ to try to discredit Harvard University biochemist Matthew Meselson by implying that he is deliberately undermining the government's case to protect a "personal and intellectual stake in the issue." Meselson, it should be remembered, served Democratic and Republican Administrations for 20 years as a consultant on chemical warfare matters.

The charge that Ember is "making the brief for Prof. Meselson" serves only to highlight the WSJ's tunnel vision. If the WSJ's editorial page staff ever follows in Ember's footsteps and thoroughly investigates all aspects of yellow rain it might for the first time grasp the full complexity of the issue. It has not done so to date. Although the WSJ has been editorializing about Meselson for at least a year no member of its editorial page staff interviewed him until this February, after the C&EN article was published. As the esteemed WSJ at one time understood, polemic does not make up for sloppy journalism.

The woeful attempt to discredit the Ember article by pointing out that she failed to identify the political leanings of one of 64 sources she named, but making no complaint about the lack of such information on the other 63, is a dark reminder of the red-baiting tactics of the 1950s. It is unworthy of professional journalists.

The yellow rain debate will not be settled by such tactics.

What is needed is a dispassionate look at the data available. For instance, the sum total of physical evidence from Afghanistan is the finding of a trace of a toxin on the face of a gas mask obtained, probably purchased, in or near Kabul. According to the WSJ editorial, scientists who dare suggest that this is hardly a preponderance of evidence are irrationally demanding "methodology to withstand the scrutiny of a dissertation committee." In addition these dissenters are calling for "some new standard of evidence," and insisting there is "some new hypothesis yet untested." Also, according to the WSJ's perception of such matters, the doubters are so abusing science that "men of affairs" will lose faith in it. Does the WSJ believe that one mask makes a solid case for toxin warfare in Afghanistan?

"Men of affairs" who have been bamboozled into believing that yellow rain is a closed issue would do well to pay heed to the writings of Lois Ember and to the doubts expressed by a host of respected scientists. This issue can be resolved only by science, not by dirty tricks, journalistic or otherwise.

Michael Heylin

Editor, Chemical & Engineering News