Montagu

P.O. Box 27611
San Francisco, CA 94127
August 1, 1991

Matthew Meselson
Department of Biochemistry
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Dear Dr. Meselman:

I am an historian currently engaged in writing a book about napalm, and an arms control advocate whose major concern is with incendiary weapons. In the course of my research I have had occasion to read your article, "The Myth of Chemical Superweapons," in the April, 1991 issue of The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, and was disturbed by the philosophical principles upon which you base your argument, principles which could make warfare less rather than more humane.

You argue that the nerve gases, which had not yet been developed when the 1925 Protocol was signed, are more inhumane than agents like mustard because they are more lethal. If you are referring to the effect of these weapons on the individual, your argument is flawed. Superior lethality is in fact a virtue in a weapon. A bullet in the head is more potentially lethal than a bullet in the stomach, but to the extent that it is likely to kill quickly, it is also more humane. Given the extreme cruelty of the wounds inflicted by mustard gas, many people who survive attack with this agent might well envy those who have been killed by one of the nerve gases.

Would it not be preferable to argue against the nerve gases on the basis of their potency? It seems to me that the real danger of these weapons lies in the fact that they are so powerful as to be incapable of use in a limited and precise manner. If even a small amount is directed against a military force, its effects might well extend to civilians as well. And there is always the possibility of a catastrophic accident caused by the mishandling of these agents. Though my approach to arms control stresses unneccessary suffering, I would be prepared to acknowledge the danger of a weapon which, though humane in its method of killing, is inherently indiscriminate.

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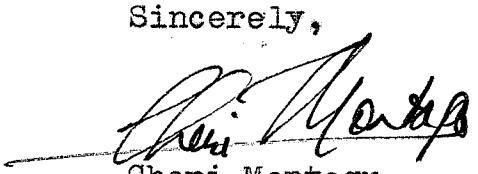
The problem with using lethality as a criterion for banning the nerve gases is that a law enacted on such a basis would also apply to toxic agents which are neither inhumane nor inherently indiscriminate. The 1925 Protocol's restriction on the use of asphixiating gases without distinction as to their effects has always seemed a great mistake to me. Those of us who deal primarily with incendiaries know that victims who are killed by carbon monoxide, an exceptionally humane gas, are much more fortunate than many burn victims who survive. Similarly, an agent such as hydrogen cyanide, which is used in the execution of criminals and for voluntary euthanasia, might be far preferable to many of the weapons which are not even under consideration for elimination.

I am also concerned that this nation's hysteria about toxic agents may conceal an unwillingness to come to grips with the problems posed by other, still more dangerous weapons. Because it is so easy to protect oneself against it, poison gas is the weapon least likely to be used on the battlefield. Would it not be preferable to strive for limitations on the qualitative improvement of nuclear weapons, whose extreme heat makes them much more useful and therefore, much more likely to be used? Your late Harvard colleague, Louis F. Fieser, considered gas weapons to be inhumane just as you do. Yet he lent his talents to the development of a weapon that is at least as cruel as mustard gas and crueller than the nerve gases. How can you justify an arms control stance which would eliminate weapons of superior humanity, while leaving the cruellest and most dangerous weapons completely untouched?

Sincerely,



Cheri Montagu
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P.S. I hope you did not have too much trouble reading this letter. My printer is out of commission, which makes it impossible for me to use the word processor, and I am not much of a typist.