Pro and Con

Should U.S. Gear Up for Gas Warfare?

YES—"It's necessary to keep a balanced deterrent force"

Interview With Amoretta Hoeber

Senior Policy Analyst, System Planning Corporation

Q Ms. Hoeber, why do you favor production of new kinds of chemical-warfare weapons?

A I favor production because I believe it's necessary to modernize our chemical-weapons stockpile in order to keep a balanced deterrent force across the whole spectrum of possible conflicts.

Q Why is a new kind of gas weapon needed when we already have thousands of rounds of such weapons stockpiled?

A The thousands that we have around are essentially Korean War-era munitions. They are becoming old and obsolete; some are leaking. Some also are not usable with the current weapons-delivery systems.

Q You mean they don't fit the guns we are using now?

A Not all of them do, no.

Q If we start production of the new binary weapons, won't that set off a chemical-warfare arms race by stimulating the Russians and other countries to do the same?

A Actually, I would argue that it is more likely to create incentives for arms control that don't exist today. Today we're bargaining from a position of relative weakness rather than strength. The only time arms control has historically worked has been when the U.S. has shown real willingness to go ahead and build what it needs.

I don't believe the Soviets would be stimulated to follow. I have never believed in the action-reaction hypothesis. Most studies of that hypothesis have shown that it really, in fact, has not operated.

Q Won't it cost a great deal of money to produce these weapons? Couldn't that money be spent better elsewhere—for example, on defenses against Soviet chemical weapons?

A I'm not arguing that we should concentrate on offensive chemical weapons at the expense of defense against those weapons. I really argue that defense is the first priority. But you have to balance offense and defense.

Q If we can defend our soldiers against a Soviet gas attack, why do we need chemical weapons ourselves? What's their value militarily?

A You see, defense against chemical weapons slows down the military forces. It is cumbersome and awkward; people cannot perform all of their military tasks. Therefore, an imbalance is created if one side must wear defense and the other side does not have to wear defense. The military effects of that imbalance would be rather extreme.

Consequently, if you have a response-in-kind capability, then both sides have to be—as they say—"suited up." Both would be equally slowed down.

As a matter of fact, the Soviet protection is not technically as good as ours. Therefore, they would be slowed down

NO—"Chemical weapons threaten civilians more than soldiers"

Interview With Matthew Meselson

Professor of Biochemistry, Harvard University

Q Professor Meselson, why do you oppose production of chemical weapons by the U.S.?

A We haven't made any poison-gas weapons for 10 years. The proposal now is to build a factory to produce poison-gas artillery shells, without adequate congressional hearings, without conclusion of the ongoing interagency review in the executive branch, without input from the public sector and without consulting allies—such as West Germany—who have renounced gas weapons.

The resumption of production of poison-gas weapons is something that needs to be discussed and evaluated because there are risks.

Q What are they?

A One of the chief risks is the likelihood that other nations will follow our lead, and give increased priority to chemical weapons. In the long run, this would be bad for us. It's unnecessary to run that risk.

We already have a weapon in plentiful supply that is essentially the same. We already have hundreds of thousands of nerve-gas artillery shells that deliver exactly the same gas as the proposed binary shells. The difference is that the binary would generate the gas while the shell is in flight.

Q Isn't the binary weapon much safer to stockpile and to handle?

A It is safer, but this has been exaggerated. The Army has had large stocks of nerve-gas ammunition for nearly 30 years without a single serious accident in transportation or storage.

It would cost more than 3 billion dollars to replace our stockpile with binary weapons. This money could buy more security if spent on other needs.

Q How long will the existing stockpile last?

A With proper maintenance, indefinitely.

Q Aren't these old weapons leaking?

A Only a tiny fraction of the many hundreds of thousands of nerve-gas weapons have leaks, and the leaks are minuscule. These weapons can be discarded.

Q Do you favor continued stockpiling of these old chemical weapons?

A I favor retention of the existing stockpile. But I see no reason to manufacture additional poison-gas shells. What we already have is more than ample to force the other side into their masks and suits, which will slow them down to some degree.

Beyond that point, using chemicals can become counterproductive. Every chemical round a commander has to carry is some other kind of round he doesn't have. And, round for round, conventional, nonchemical munitions are more

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Interview With Ms. Hoeber *(continued)*

more. So if we had a threat of response in kind, the Soviet willingness to use chemical weapons would be reduced by the fact that they would be slowed down more than we would be.

Q What does protection involve? Why are soldiers wearing protection at such a disadvantage over those who do not?

A It's essentially wearing a special protective suit over your regular clothing, a gas mask and gloves which reduce your ability to manipulate instruments.

But the main effect is the heat and breathing stress of the suit and gas mask. People just tire very much more rapidly. So it essentially takes two people to do the same job that it would otherwise take one person, because you have to stop and rest so much more often.

Q In other words, the new chemical weapons you favor are intended essentially to deter the Soviets from using theirs, rather than to gain any significant military advantage on the battlefield ourselves?

A Right.

Q How much would it cost to produce these new chemical weapons?

A I tend to believe the Pentagon estimate—2 billion dollars.

Q Do you have any evidence of what the Russians are doing in this area? Are they producing and stockpiling new poison gas?

A The answer is clearly that they are producing and stockpiling. Nobody really knows how much, but apparently it is a great deal.

Q Do you believe that poison gas has been used by the Russians or their allies in Laos, Cambodia and Afghanistan?

A I believe the evidence is fairly conclusive for both Laos and Cambodia. At this stage in time, it's certainly not conclusive for Afghanistan.

Q Wouldn't the U.S. be better off to push for a treaty banning all chemical weapons rather than begin production of a new weapon?

A Yes, we might be better off to go that way if such a treaty were possible. However, I don't believe that verification measures exist that would be acceptable to both sides. You would need inspection measures that were so intrusive that they would be objectionable to both the U.S. and the Soviets.

Q Even to the U.S.?

A Possibly. A recent Arms Control and Disarmament Agency study showed that you could not tell from looking at the outside of a building whether, in fact, it was being used to produce chemical munitions. Consequently, you would have to go inside a building. I don't believe that U.S. chemical industries would be very happy at having Russians wandering around looking at all their industrial secrets.

Q So a treaty against chemical weapons is not feasible in your view?

A Well, I think you could have destruction of some of the older stockpiles openly verified on both sides. But since we don't really know today how much the Soviets have, it would be very difficult to be able to verify when they had destroyed all of their stockpiles. □

Interview With Professor Meselson *(continued)*

effective than gas against troops wearing modern protective gear.

Q Wouldn't the U.S. be at a disadvantage if we failed to build a manufacturing plant to produce new chemical weapons while the Russians produce such munitions?

A There's no hard intelligence information of which I know that the Soviets have been adding substantially to their offensive capability of poison-gas weapons in the past decade. More important, our own stockpile is sufficient.

If you read unclassified Defense Intelligence Agency reports on chemical-warfare capability of the Soviet-bloc countries and the posture statements of the Joint Chiefs, these do not say that the Soviets are increasing their stockpile. The statements say the Soviets are increasing their ability to operate in a battlefield contaminated by chemical weapons. They're training their troops to protect themselves against chemical weapons; they're improving on the defensive side. Most of their defensive equipment is inferior to ours.

Basically, chemical weapons threaten civilians more than soldiers. Millions of civilians could be killed in a large-scale chemical war in Europe. You can protect soldiers against chemical weapons. You put a mask on a soldier, and a protective garment, and he is essentially invulnerable.

Q To deter the Soviets from using poison gas, isn't it necessary to convince them that we can and, if necessary, will use chemical weapons?

A We already do have and can use chemical weapons. Moreover, we are now greatly improving the protective and defensive preparations of our forces. This reduces the incentive an adversary may see in using chemicals against us.

Q So you think this kind of defensive effort is a better way to deter the Soviets from using gas than building new offensive weapons ourselves?

A I do. I think the dollars spent to provide our troops with improved masks and suits does more to remove the incentive the Russians might have for using gas than the dollars spent to buy more poison-gas artillery shells.

Also, our NATO allies support the improvement of anti-chemical defenses, but their opposition to chemical weapons could keep our stockpile from ever getting to Europe.

The real threat of the binaries is this: Today, military commanders don't like poison-gas weapons. They don't think about them too much. And weapons manufacturers are not very imaginative in figuring out how to put poison gas in all the latest weapons. That's all to the good.

If we lead the world to a new kind of nerve-gas weapon that is easy to manufacture, store and handle so that many countries and even terrorists could make and cart them around, and if military officers and civilian planners become preoccupied with chemical weapons, we will bring about a change in the style of war. In the long run, that change will be bad for us.

Our policy should be to have some of these weapons and good defense but not to provoke another chemical-arms race.

And we should give higher priority to obtaining a treaty with reasonable inspection provisions that ultimately would abolish chemical weapons. □

U.S. troops in Europe train with masks and suits that provide good protection against poison gas but hamper movement.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE