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Before We Spend Billions on Chemical Weapons

To the Editor:

In a letter you published on Oct. 8, one of us [Prof. Stephen M. Meyer] made a reference to extensive Soviet chemical warfare preparations which needs clarification.

It is true that, following the large U.S. procurements of lethal chemical weapons in the 1950's and 60's, the Soviets made impressive efforts in the 60's and 70's on the defensive side, particularly in training their forces to operate with masks, suits and other anti-chemical protective equipment. This tells us little, however, about the extent of their offensive chemical warfare programs.

Indeed, U.S. intelligence apparently has no hard evidence that the Soviets have or have not produced lethal chemical munitions since the U.S. stopped production in the past decade. And what was alleged to have been lethal gas used by the Soviets in Afghanistan is now viewed as probably having been a nonlethal chemical, possibly a riot-control agent. In short, we simply do not know to what extent the Soviets are prepared to use poison gas.

What we wish to emphasize, however, is that sound U.S. policy is more likely to emerge from a careful analysis of military needs than from an uncritical appraisal of adversary capabilities.

No adequate analysis has been done, yet the U.S. is on the verge of committing itself to a multi-billion-dollar chemical weapons procurement program. The first step, approved by Congress in September, would be to build a plant to make more nerve-gas artillery shells, of which we already have a large supply.

A better course would be to continue to improve the anti-chemical protective equipment and training of our forces while determining, in close consultation with our NATO allies, what expenditures, if any, are warranted for additional chemical weapons.

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Cambridge, Mass., Nov. 5, 1980

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