

24 July 1969

AUG 1 1969

Dear Dr. Meselson,

I have thought of many ways to begin this letter, and none of them seems quite satisfactory. I am aware that my feelings as I begin are comprised in no small measure of indignation, and yet something tells me there are larger issues, or at least more noble ones than mere verbal retribution. I hope I can somehow communicate to you the gist of my sentiment without widening the apparent gap between us. In fact I dare to hope to narrow it.

You are known to me only through television and the printed pages of Science and the news media, so my impression of you as an individual is vague indeed. I must, and wish to, believe, however, that you are, by virtue of your status and your affiliation, a rational scientist, who loves truth more than self. If this be the case, let me speak openly to you as a fellow scientist and fellow human being, of my thoughts and feelings regarding your expressed views on CW research in this country, our country.

First, I suppose in a sense we are at opposite poles on certain questions. I am a career medical officer in the Army, a psychiatrist by training, who for more than 8 years (with a two-year interruption to be a post-doctoral fellow in Neuropsychology at Stanford) has been engaged in clinical research with chemical agents at Edgewood Arsenal, Md. I hold the view that chemical warfare agents, as a class, are inherently no worse, and in many ways may be less evil, if such comparisons have any meaning, than the other weapons of war which man has already put into use. Perhaps I am overlooking something, but I cannot see how any chemical agent can compete with the macabre agony which projectiles, flame and bayonets can produce. Surely we are not at odds on this point. I presume, however, that we do entertain different opinions on some related matters. Will you allow me to discuss this, in hopes that our differences may prove not to be fundamental ones after all?

As I understand your position, you oppose our nation's efforts to investigate and develop chemical agents for use in war, on the grounds that other nations will be likely to match our actions in this area, and may indeed be tempted to use lethal agents because of their cheapness and effectiveness. You argue against the ostensibly less objectionable "incapacitating" agents on the grounds that the temptation to escalate would be hard to resist, or that their allegedly humane purpose might be subverted by employing them only to render an evasive opponent more accessible to annihilation with conventional weapons. Finally, you criticize the experiments with volunteers on the grounds that they may be deleterious (even carcinogenic) in spite of scrupulous precautions.

Will you forgive me if I defer taking issue with any of these specific arguments and try instead to get at something which I cannot help feeling is more relevant? Why is it that you take such a dim view of the military-industrial complex which directs and supports this endeavor? I must confess I often ruminate myself upon the stupidity, cupidity and

spiritual barrenness of the faceless bureaucracy in which I find myself enmeshed, but I must also confess that apart from such moments of desperation I console myself with the fond illusion that somewhere in this faceless universe of orbiting bodies there must be a mind or two that is alive and aware and perhaps even creative.

No doubt you have even better devices for maintaining your perspective. I am handicapped in trying to converse this way by the fact that we have not met, and consequently my impressions of your thinking are limited to those gained from brief exposure to what seem to be very partisan utterances, as might be expected in the context of public debate. My decision to write this letter was predicated on the faith that just as you could have only a shadowy idea of me as someone who engages in a somewhat perverse form of scientific activity, I no doubt have come to think of you only as an opinionated and prejudiced man using your prestige and credentials in the service of petty and destructive emotions. That, believe it or not, is the way you come across to me when I am feeling personally implicated and castigated by your reproachful comments. I doubt this is a very fair characterization.

If your forbearance has stood up this far, you will no doubt perceive that I am wrestling, not too successfully, with the problem of articulating something other than the fact that you think and say bad things about CW and CW research by the Army, and I feel that such work is highly defensible. No doubt you get lots of letters endorsing and disputing your published statements, and I have a hunch that the side the author takes is often predictable from his affiliation alone, as my own plainly illustrates. So while I feel I could argue, perhaps brilliantly (in my own evaluation) and stunningly demolish your glib pronouncements one by one with impeccable logic and cogent eloquence, the foreseeable consequence is that you would think me a jerk, or perhaps just a misguided fellow, while I secretly classified you as an idiot or a naive zealot.

What seems infinitely more important to me than whether I could prevail in debate (and at times that does actually seem quite important in itself) is whether the world has indeed become one in which men of comparable training and similar cultural traditions can regard the same universe of discourse and develop Gestalts which are fundamentally incompatible. If this is the case, can we ever hope to submit our differences to rational arbitration? Or, to frame it differently, can we trust even the most disciplined human mind to reach objective formulations of the events it observes? Harry Stack Sullivan, though regarded by most as a rather tough-minded empiricist, was forced to appeal to "consensual validation" as the ultimate authority in matters of ~~ultimate~~ reality. He also provided clinical examples of failure to reach a consensus between patient and therapist, or patient and patient, because of the distortions in perceiving which "selective inattention" creates. We have access (theoretically) to the same set of events but we see two different subsets and reach different conclusions.

If any of this makes sense to you, and if it seems worth the

bother, perhaps you will wish to join with me in an introspective dialogue on what we see and do not see, respectively, in this matter of OW, and why we might differ in our perceptions. Surely we will remain free to differ; perhaps we will gain some additional understanding of ourselves in the process. And if we can find a base of mutuality and agreement, perhaps we can even meaningfully debate the issues.

I hope I have not offended you by writing what must no doubt seem a very strange letter. Please feel no obligation to reply, though of course I would welcome hearing from you. In spite of the occasional lapse into irony or sarcasm, I am sincere in my wish to discuss the substantive issues which evidently interest us both deeply. I only suggest that to avoid polemics and further polarization it would seem necessary ~~to~~ openly and trustingly to include in such discussion some consideration of the possible sources of our respective prejudices.

With deepest respect,



James S. Ketchum, LTC MC  
Chief, Clinical Research Department