

August 28, 1969

Lieutenant John H. Van Vliet III
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Dear Lieutenant Van Vliet:

I hope you will excuse this rather late reply to your letter of July 14. I agree with your very clear statement of the alternatives: the question involved in the use of CS is whether to save the lives of a certain number of American soldiers now or to accept the risk of escalation and proliferation in the future. One's position on this question should be determined by an estimate of the two hazards. My own is as follows.

There is no doubt that the lives of some American soldiers will be saved by the use of CS. I believe the number is not large for the reason that the enemy will quickly acquire masks and practice certain other protective measures. As you probably know, North Vietnamese regulars in areas where gas is used now generally are found to possess factory made masks. In evaluating the cost in immediate casualties to us, one must also take into account the option of destroying as many of the enemy as possible from a distance with ordnance but not going in on the ground when it is thought that heavy losses will result. I realize that this is not a practicable option in all cases but it should be kept in mind. On the other side of the balance we have the risk of escalation and proliferation. My own philosophy runs something like this. If the nuclear non-proliferation treaty succeeds, gas and germ weapons will still remain as a means for non-nuclear nations to acquire the capability to threaten cities. The reasons that these nations do not acquire such weapons at present are in good part psychological and political: most nations don't run through a rational cost-effectiveness analysis for these weapons. They simply don't think about it. These are nasty weapons. You become very unpopular and might even suffer sanctions if you even develop the capability. Your own citizens may refuse to help develop the capability, unless the perceived need is great. It is illegal to use such weapons first. Most military men still have a low opinion of the weapons and wish to avoid their use. But, the point is that direct cost is not the restraint. Therefore, I conclude that the situation in which most countries do not acquire such weapons could

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change very quickly once proliferation of the capability begins. Ultimately this is a risk to the United States itself, to our cities. At a lower level, the introduction of lethal gas, in my opinion, would generally work against us in tactical situations, although the argument here is more complicated and I will not present it here.

Now comes a value judgement. Is it not the case that the role of the soldier is to place his life at risk in order to protect his home country? If we decide to fight wars like the one in Vietnam, we are going to lose soldiers. According to my values, the only possible justification for doing so must ultimately rest on a logic that holds that the war will increase the security and well being of our country. I do believe that in this situation we are foolish to use CS gas. Nevertheless, I must admit that your position is a logical one and that you personally have a totally valid reason for holding it. The only thing I might suggest is that continued evaluation of the long-term hazard might (or might not) alter your view.

I enclose two items on this general subject that you may find interesting. If I come across a more detailed presentation of the proliferation argument, I will send it to you. In any case, I deeply appreciate your taking the time to write. Only if there is a serious dialogue between military officers and civilians interested in arms control will we be able to make good policies.

I wish you the very best.

Sincerely yours,

Matthew Meselson
Professor of Biology

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Encl.