

Book Review of the "Ultimate Folly" by Richard D. McCarthy  
for the Chicago Sun-Times Book Week

The publication of this book is most timely. Since last Spring, the White House has been conducting a broad review of United States programs and policies for chemical and biological warfare (CBW). Some of the questions considered: Which gas and germ weapons, if any, do we really need to stockpile? How can we discourage other nations from acquiring these cheap agencies of mass destruction? Should we at long last ratify the 1925 Geneva Protocol, thus committing ourselves not to initiate the use of CB weapons? And -- perhaps the hardest question -- should we stop or curtail the use of harassing gas and anti-plant chemicals in Vietnam?

Last week, President Nixon announced some decisions that are in the best interests of the United States and of all mankind. The Geneva Protocol will be submitted to the Senate. The U.S. will destroy its germ weapons stockpile and renounces any use of germs in war. The President reaffirmed our no-first-use policy for lethal gas and extended it to incapacitating war gases such as the mind-shattering psychochemicals. Precisely what limits we will set for ourselves in the battlefield use of agents like "super tear gas" and of anti-plant chemicals remain to be announced and may not be firmly settled until the Geneva Protocol is considered in the Senate.

Congressman Richard D. McCarthy, Democrat of Buffalo, has done much to get the Congress and the public thinking about these matters. His brief is that, under the veil of secrecy and without much attention from top government officials, CBW advocates in the Pentagon instituted programs and policies that ran counter to our national interests and traditions. McCarthy describes our CBW programs, explains the origin and current status of the Geneva Protocol and recounts some of his own experiences investigating these matters after he and his wife were deeply disturbed by an NBC television report on CBW last February. Most useful for the inquiring reader are the tables and documents reproduced at the end of each chapter.

There are many disturbing revelations in McCarthy's book, but perhaps the most surprising to many readers will be the description of chemical warfare in Vietnam.

Our operation, "Flying Ranch Hand," has sprayed anti-plant chemicals over an area almost the size of the state of Massachusetts, over 10 per cent of its cropland. "Ranch Hand" no longer has much to do with the official justification of preventing ambush. Rather, it has become a kind of environmental warfare, devastating vast tracts of forest in order to facilitate our aerial reconnaissance. Our use of "super tear gas" (it is also a powerful lung irritant) has escalated from the originally announced purpose of saving lives in "riot control-like situations" to the full-scale combat use of gas artillery shells, gas rockets and gas bombs to enhance the killing power of conventional high explosive and flame weapons. Fourteen million pounds have been used thus far, enough to cover all of Vietnam with a field effective concentration. Many nations, including some of our own allies have expressed the opinion that this kind of gas warfare violates the Geneva Protocol, a view shared by McCarthy.

Whether the military advantages of these new styles of warfare outweigh the ecological damage and the hazard of breaking down the worldwide restraints against gas and germ warfare would be a matter for reasonable judgment if, at least, the facts were known. But we can have little confidence in statements from the Defense Department on this score, especially while the war is on. They are under pressure to exaggerate the advantages and to underestimate the risks. This is one reason why Congressman McCarthy's efforts to open our CBW policies to public and congressional scrutiny have placed us all in his debt.

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