

The Army's Germ Warfare Against Civilians

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The Army's biological warfare program has drawn heavy criticism in recent months.

Habitually unsafe laboratory practices, as well as plans to ship dangerous biological materials by mail, have both come under fire. Yet, not enough has been said about an activity that is just as alarming - germ warfare experimentation in which bacterial agents are sprayed directly into the air.

Since 1979, the Army has conducted more than 170 open air tests at Dugway Proving Ground, 70 miles from Salt Lake City, as part of an expanded biological warfare program. Moreover, Army officials steadfastly assert their right to test outdoors anywhere in the country, including in urban areas. The Pentagon insists -despite a pile of contrary evidence -that the tests are harmless.

The Army admits it is releasing a bacteria called Bacillus subtilis in Utah "from time to time" to simulate biological warfare attacks with the more lethal Bacillus anthracis, which causes anthrax. Other bacteria, including Serratia marcescens, have also been used there in open air tests.

These bacteria are the same "simulants" that were sprayed in cities during the 1950's and 1960's to see how well they could spread and survive. Hundreds of mock attacks were conducted, including the release of bacteria during peak travel hours in New York City's subway system and in the main terminal of Washington's National Airport.

In the late 1970's, when the tests became public knowledge, the Army insisted that they were harmless. But in 1950, one San Franciscan died and others became ill from urinary tract and heart infections after the Army sprayed Serratia marcescens on the city.

Unaware of the Army's test, doctors in San Francisco wrote about the unusual Serratia infections in a medical journal. They had never before encountered such an outbreak. Although the infections began three days after the spraying, the Army decided that the timing was "apparently coincidental" and that testing should continue. Neither then nor in later tests has the Army monitored the health of the people exposed.

Pentagon spokesmen testified at a Senate hearing in 1977 that open air tests were n longer taking place but that they would be resumed if the Army felt the need. It is t newly felt need that is making Utah residents, among others restless. Although Bac subtilis is not as dangerous as some other micro-organisms, it can cause infections and, among the very old or young and people weakened by other conditions, fatalities. The Army's denial of risk is simply not supportable.

Stranger still is the remark by an Army public affairs officer that Bacillus subtilis is not a "genuine bacteriological agent." Rather, she said, it is merely a simulant that "mimics characteristics of biological material."

The suggestion that any bacteria are not biological material is Orwellian newspeak. Yet, it

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serves a purpose. A 1969 Federal law holds that the military must notify local civilian officials when tests might expose people to biological or chemical agents.

And this could easily happen. Bacteria sprayed at Dugway Proving Ground, for example, could float over the fence - as nerve gas released there in 1968 did, killing 6,000 sheep 20 miles away. Yet, county health authorities near Dugway say they have never been notified about the spraying of biological agents.

Most disturbing is the Army's claim of a right to test whenever and wherever it thinks necessary. A retired major general, William M. Creasy, commander of the testing program in the 50's and 60's, testified at a court trial in 1981 that the public was kept in the dark to avoid panic. Testing in cities was necessary, he said, because biological warfare agents are "designed to work against people, and you have to test them in the kind of place where people live and work."

Some may doubt that open air testing with bacteria should take place at all. But if it does, the public has a right to know what bacteria are being used, when and where. No matter how safe the Pentagon thinks its tests are, it should not use people as guinea pigs without their knowledge or consent.

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