

Getting Poison Gas Policies Wrong.  
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Most weapons of war are frightening enough; they are designed to kill an enemy or protect oneself from being killed. But there is an entire category of weapons of war with just one aim: to terrorize an enemy or the enemy's civilian population into surrender. The inventors make the case that by using such terror weapons, they can shorten a war and ultimately save lives.

Poison gas (chemical warfare) was invented and first used by the Germans in World War I. The scientist who developed this mustard gas justified its use to his colleague, Albert Einstein, who was horrified by this weapon. The justification was that it would shorten the stalemated war and ultimately save lives. Einstein saw the flaw in this rationale; it would not shorten the war, but would expand its horrors when all sides used it.

In the Post-War attempts at promoting global order, chemical warfare was banned. Germany, however, never stopped stockpiling these materials, and when we learned that they were doing so, we stockpiled also. The only thing that kept poison gasses from being used by the various militaries was the knowledge that if used, it would be universal.

Two exceptions against such use was the German use of gas as a means of exterminating the Jews, Gypsies, and other victims of their hideous ideology. The other use, which pains me to discuss, is the chemical warfare weapon of flame-shooters, used to force out or kill Japanese soldiers hiding in bunkers during the Pacific war.

We next see the use of chemicals by Saddam Hussain, dictator of Iraq. He used a particularly nasty one, Sarin, which not only terrifies but murders instantly. We have all seen the indelible horror of the aftermath of such use in a Kurdish village that Saddam wanted to punish. Everybody died, including babies looking like dolls, dead on the ground.

There were reports that the Russians used such gasses on the Chechens, whose rebellion was quashed out of sight of the world press, who were kept away. Another report, never verified but certainly possible, was that the Russians, patrons of the Iraqis, spirited out chemical warfare materials in truck convoys seen from aircraft and satellites, where they were finally stored in Lebanon or Syria (accounts differ). This Russian gambit may have been used to prevent the US invasion of Iraq from finding any significant weapons of mass destruction, making the Bush Administration look like fools. I think they succeeded.

Syria is in the midst of an endless civil war today, endless because Russia and Iran are allies and the initial revolt to unseat Bashar al-Assad, a warlord who knows that he must kill or be killed, the consequence of his own viciousness. He has repeatedly used chemical weapons on his own civilians in areas that he cannot otherwise subdue. His claim is that he is like a doctor, cutting off a gangrenous limb to save the patient's life! This is the same argument made by the original German inventor of mustard gas. The end justifies the means.

Because we are not willing to use chemical warfare ourselves, the saving grace of "mutual deterrence" that we and the Soviet Union had about our nuclear arsenals does not apply here. We have (through the UN) declared Assad a war criminal subject to punishment at the conflict's end. Assad is not frightened because the Russians and Iranians, his patrons, have no intention of punishing him. And we, the United States, have not used appropriate force or even much criticism against Russia, the worst gangster of the lot.

President Obama is excoriated today because he threatened Assad with consequences and then didn't follow up because the Russians promised that Assad would let Russia remove the chemicals. This seemed a better option than spending our blood and treasure, except that the Russians pulled a fast one. Russia secretly let Syria keep a hidden stash that they are using today.

President Bush had been fooled; President Obama had been fooled; and now President Trump seems to be indebted to Russia for something. No clear policy is anywhere in sight.

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