

WMDs: the biggest lie of all

Chemical and biological weapons are a red herring. They are banned because they provide low-cost defence to poor nations. Cluster bombs are just as lethal. By **DAN ROSENHECK**

It is easy to forget what the advocates and adversaries of going to war with Iraq had in common. Neither side would tolerate Saddam Hussein possessing chemical and biological weapons; only the question of how to disarm him divided Britain. The possibility that he might have “weapons of mass destruction” (WMDs) temporarily convinced a majority of Americans and Britons to support the war.

The continuing struggle to find the weapons has prevented critics from thinking twice about why we are looking for them. George Bush and Tony Blair did not create the west’s special fear of chemical and biological weapons, but they fought their war to enforce the international arms control regime that bans them. The taboo against unconventional weapons – along with an arms control system that prohibits entire classes of weapon rather than specific uses of them – set the terms for the prosecution of the war on shoddy evidence and without international support.

The special aversion to chemical and biological weapons (CBWs) is at root irrational, while the arms control policy discriminates against poor countries, can only be preserved by further wars and actually restricts the possibility of less destructive forms of global conflict. It’s time to examine the taboo and reform the system.

The Bush and Blair case for unilateral war depended on two false assumptions. The first was that such weapons should be classed as uniquely sinister, the second was that their mere existence should be regarded as a threat. Neither withstands scrutiny.

Chemical weapons, legally defined as compounds “which through [their] chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm to humans or animals”, and biological weapons, “microbial or other biological agents, or toxins . . . that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes”, kill in different ways from conventional weapons. But CBWs are neither more dangerous nor more evil. They are criticised for being invisible and indiscriminate and for killing in an agonising, drawn-out fashion, but many conventional weapons share these characteristics. High-speed bullets cannot be seen before they hit their targets, daisy-cutter bombs destroy an entire area, explosives and bullets rarely kill quickly or painlessly – not to mention the suffering caused by the child-killing cluster bombs of the RAF and US air force.

“[The moral distinction] is arbitrary,” says Andrew H Kydd, an assistant professor at Harvard University who writes on unconventional arms control and international relations theory. “How much worse is it, if at all, to die from sarin than to bleed to death from a bullet in the stomach while you lie around on the battlefield for five hours?” No less a luminary than Winston Churchill once questioned the special stigma attached to chemical weapons. “I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas,” he said as secretary of state for war and air in 1919.

“In the Middle East, they are not seen as illegitimate,” says Gary Samore, a weapons expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies and a former adviser to Bill Clinton. “They are seen as the only viable way to balance Israel’s nuclear capacity.”

The only reason a canister of VX gas is classified as a WMD while a cluster bomb is not is that western militaries use one but not the other. “WMD” is a meaningless, catch-all term that the US and Britain have recently discovered can be used to drum up support for invading hostile countries. No one would call machetes WMDs, but they were used to butcher 800,000 Rwandans in 1994.

The treaties that prohibit the possession of chemical and biological arms rest on the idea that a weapon’s morality is determined primarily by how it kills, not whom it kills or how many. But what determines a weapon’s destructiveness is its use. It is one thing to drop a bomb in a desert, another to drop one on enemy

The US can deploy nuclear weapons in 45 seconds, yet no one is calling for an invasion of America

troops, and a third to drop it on a city – regardless of whether its contents are explosives or poisons. As the gun lobby reminds its critics, “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people.” Saddam Hussein may or may not have been able to deploy chemical weapons in 45 minutes, but the US can deploy nuclear weapons in 45 seconds, yet no one is calling for an invasion of America. The war on Iraq could have been justified either by arguing that Saddam started aggressive wars with his neighbours – in which case the west should have ousted him in 1980 or 1991 – or that he killed and starved his own people, which he had done since 1979. That he did so with a mixture of chemicals and bullets is not the point.

Banning CBWs does not make the world any safer – it just means money is spent on conventional arms instead. As long as weapons exist, the only way to protect civilians is through governments that respect and value human life. There are no bad weapons – only bad leaders. “There’s a big body of opinion that says general arms control is a waste of time,” Kydd says. “Good states don’t use their weapons in bad ways, bad states do. So you should just stop bad states from having any weapons at all.”

International law gets this backwards, tolerating repressive regimes but banning classes of weapons, a system which arose from a few historical coincidences of politics and psychology. Before the 20th century, “technologies were not regarded as in and of themselves immoral”, according to an article by the University of British Columbia arms historian Richard Price, author



Chemical weapons: who used them and where

1914-18, First World War: First use of modern chemical weapons, by all sides. Ninety-two thousand deaths and 1.3 million casualties.

1919, Russian civil war: The British use Adamsite against the Bolsheviks; Red Army uses various chemical weapons against insurgents.

1920s, Iraq: British army conducts gas attacks against tribes in southern Iraq.

1925, Morocco: Spain uses chemical weapons against the Rif rebels in Spanish Morocco.

1930, Libya: Benito Mussolini secretly authorises Italy's use of gas bombs against Libyan rebels.

1936, Ethiopia: Italy repeatedly uses mustard gas against Ethiopian soldiers and civilians following its invasion of Abyssinia.

1937-45; Second World War: Japan experiments with biological weapons in Manchuria, 1937, killing 10,000 prisoners; two years later, poisons the Soviet Union's water supply with intestinal typhoid bacteria at former Mongolian border; in 1940, drops grain mixed with plague-carrying fleas over China and Manchuria.

Mustard gas, used in China, is still causing casualties.

1960-75, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia: US uses tear gas and four types of defoliant, including Agent Orange, in Vietnam.

1963-67, North Yemeni civil war: Egypt uses phosgene and mustard against Yemen.

1975-83, Laos and Kampuchea: Alleged use of "yellow rain" (trichothecene mycotoxins) by Soviet-backed forces.

1980-88, Iran-Iraq war: Iraq uses mustard gas extensively against Iranian troops.

1985, Cambodia: Vietnam uses hydrogen cyanide and phosgene.

1987-88, Chad: Libya reportedly uses Iranian-supplied chemical weapons against Chadian troops.

1987-88, Iraq: Hydrogen cyanide and mustard gas used against Kurds, notably at Halabja in 1988.

1990s, Sudan: Government allegedly uses mustard gas against southern rebels.

Dan Rosenheck

With thanks to Igor Khripunov

of *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*. "Their moral value was understood to depend on how they are used." But in 1899, before civilians became major targets in warfare, the western powers convened a peace conference in The Hague. Some delegates mistakenly conflated their prescient fear of mass civilian casualties with their knowledge of research into chemical weapons, and convinced colleagues to ban any first use – although not possession or retaliatory use – of "projectiles whose purpose is to spread asphyxiating gases".

"The emergent chemical weapons norm at The Hague," Price wrote, "did not follow [the prior] understanding and simply ban particular uses of such shells... The ban [on first use] served to define gas shells as a particular and distinct category of weapon."

The treaty failed: both sides in the First World War used gases. Afterwards, many thought the Hague Protocol unenforceable, including the then US secretary of state, Charles Evans Hughes, who recommended that it be replaced by a ban on chemical weapons use against non-combatants, "in the same manner that high explosives may be limited". Many governments saw no point to the ban, since armies using chemical weapons had killed so many of their own men that they were expected to abandon them. The chemical industry, writes Price, countered this threat by advertising the military value of chemical weapons. The lobbying backfired, sparking a panic about chemical weapons' inhumanity that led to the Geneva Protocol of 1925 proscribing their first use – as well as any use of biological arms. The treaty

formalised the taboo in international law, ensuring that future generations in the west would shudder at lethal chemicals and germs while shrugging at deadly explosives.

Yet the possession of unconventional weapons remained legal until the cold war. During the Vietnam war – where the Americans made legal use of skin-burning napalm – Richard Nixon tried to distract domestic doves by unilaterally ending America's biological weapons programme, which his advisers had told him was useless. Although Nixon authorised the move for political reasons, it created a moral groundswell in the UN that led to the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, which banned the production or possession of biological weapons. This treaty established a new principle: even defensive stockpiling of certain types of weapons should be banned.

Chemical weapons had not been included in the convention, but in 1983 the US proposed an outright ban. The Chemical Weapons Convention was signed in 1993 and came into effect in 1997, requiring that all chemical weapons be destroyed by 2007.

The legacy of these treaties is a public so terrified of CBWs that it will support pre-emptive action to destroy them. But the current system serves exclusively western interests, disempowers developing nations and can require unjustifiable wars.

CBWs are dramatically cheaper than conventional weapons. According to Igor Khripunov, a former military secretary at Russia's embassy to the US, "[civilian] casualties might cost about \$2,000 per square kilometre with conventional weapons, \$800 with nuclear weapons, \$600 with nerve gas weapons and just \$1 with biological weapons". The arms control treaties thus preserve the hegemony of wealthy states with expensive conventional forces. "If [CBWs] were legal, poor countries would be able to pose a greater military threat to rich countries," says Bruce ►

► Unger, a professor of political science at Randolph-Macon College, Virginia. "You'd give weak states militarily a seat at the table." Denied that seat, they are vulnerable to attack. A developing country cannot legally make gas weapons to deter richer aggressive neighbours, but those neighbours are allowed to build or purchase as many conventional weapons as they can afford.

To enforce the current arms control system – which must be done to preserve the credibility of international law – the world must take action against states that develop unconventional weapons. Selectively enforced, the system can become a cover for the interests of powerful nations. Bush and Blair could never have won support if Iraq had just built up conventional forces – as every other repressive dictatorship has done for decades.

Finally, despite the conventional wisdom, banning unconventional weapons actually prevents generals from fighting the least destructive war possible. Non-combatants can be largely protected from chemical weapons by using gas masks, while the only defence against a bomb is to get out of the way.

To fix the flawed unconventional arms control regime, the world needs to turn the clock back not to Geneva in 1925 but The Hague in 1899. The delegates to this conference were properly concerned about the targeting of civilians, but they falsely linked that fear to the development of new types of arms. Governments should revive the spirit of that conference – protecting civilian life and infrastructure – and correct its miscalculation. They should proscribe uses, not classes, of weapons.

A radical corollary, though it may strain western sensibility, would be the legalisation of chemical and biological arms. For as long as weapons are legal, poor countries should be able to defend their territory in the most effective, cost-efficient and damage-minimising way. Similarly, advocates of low-yield, earth-penetrating, "bunker-busting" nuclear weapons believe that the radioactive fallout resulting from their use can be sharply limited. If so – no small technological achievement – even their use should

be conceivable. If Osama Bin Laden is a mile deep in a remote mountain and it happens to take one type of explosion rather than another to kill him, so be it. The moral line in the sand should be drawn not at forbidden categories of weapons, but forbidden targets – with non-combatants leading the list. In accordance with this principle, the world might replace CBW bans with one on cluster bombs such as those used by the US and UK in Iraq, which leave unexploded ordnance posing a major threat to civilians.

Repealing the flawed arms control treaties might have marginally positive effects on the balance of power and costs of war, but they would likely be short-lived. The easy accessibility of protective suits makes CBWs militarily useful only in a surprise attack. And while legalising CBWs would decrease the chance of international conflict over defensive weapons production, it will not make the world an appreciably safer place.

We would be better off directing our intolerance towards bad leaders rather than bad weapons. However, as long as the US co-opts the principle of humanitarian intervention as a cover for pursuing its own interests, "regime change" will remain a dirty phrase to progressives. Still, they should reclaim the concept from the neoconservatives and reform it. Governments must vigilantly advocate democracy, encourage the growth of civil society and tighten the noose on rogue states – through the United Nations, not the United States. Sanctions and the threat of military action should be considered whenever countries start aggressive wars, kill or starve their people, target civilians or aid terrorists.

Liberals have tried to export democracy for a century, with limited success. The world needs to deal with every nation on a case-by-case basis, weighing the potential threat posed by a state with the costs and unintended consequences of intervention. But as the world recognises the equivalency of means of killing, it should punish unjustified killing by any means.

Additional reporting by Alex Stephens



Wonders of PATAGONIA

Experience the spectacular sights and sounds of Patagonia in summer. Our fully escorted tour of Argentina's natural wonders includes the UNESCO National World Heritage-designated Valdés Peninsula and Los Glaciares National Park.

Price includes • return overnight scheduled flights from London Heathrow to Buenos Aires • three scheduled flights in Argentina • airport to hotel transfers • ten nights' accommodation at first class hotels • American breakfasts • all touring and National Park entrances • boat excursions at Peninsula Valdés, Perito Moreno and the Beagle Channel • tour guide services • contribution to FVSA Marine Programme. Single supplement £250.

Optional Iguazu Falls tour • supplement of £369 includes all of the above plus • return scheduled flights from Buenos Aires to Iguazu • two additional nights' accommodation at first class hotel • American breakfasts • airport to hotel transfers • full day at Iguazu Falls including National Park entrance and boat excursion • tour guide services. Single supplement £60.

newstatesman

TRAVEL OFFER

To book this holiday or to request a brochure, call

020 8335 3030

(PLEASE QUOTE CODE: NST PTG)

Flying from London Heathrow

Departs February, March,
September, October &
November 2004.

13 day tour from

£1799

NEWMARKET
The Reader Holiday Company



THIS HOLIDAY IS OPERATED ON OUR BEHALF BY
NEWMARKET AIR HOLIDAYS LIMITED
PARTAVNIG • ATOL PROTECTED £35



