

Opinion

Pentagon hedges on GI exposure to toxics

American GIs, particularly those placed in harm's way in the Persian Gulf War, should be able to trust their government not to deceive them.

So why did the Pentagon not inform 400,000 troops they were being given an experimental drug to counter the effects of potential nerve-gas attacks in the 1991 conflict?

More than two years ago, a U.S. Agriculture Department scientist concluded that the drug, pyridostigmine bromide, could intensify the effects of other chemicals to which other Persian Gulf troops were often exposed. This has led to speculation that these effects could have triggered the various maladies that have plagued an estimated 10,000 Desert Storm veterans after the war.

Pentagon spokesmen rationalize that the secrecy was necessary for security reasons. Had Saddam Hussein known of these medical countermeasures, the explanation goes, he could have altered his military strategy. That's cold comfort to those whose debilitating ailments, ranging from chronic fatigue to memory loss, may have been caused in part by this experimentation.

The ominous news about GIs being used as guinea pigs comes on the heels of revelations that as many as 25,000 U.S. troops may have been exposed to toxic chemicals unleashed after bombing raids destroyed a sprawling Iraqi ammunition depot. While U.S. commanders sealed themselves in protective shelters, GIs in the field were told to disregard the black cloud that descended upon them.

Last June, Pentagon officials admitted that 5,000 or so combat engineers may have been exposed to nerve gas when they blew up the same ammo dump. Last week, the Pentagon revised that estimate to more than 15,000.

The facts began to surface last year when the Defense Department placed intelligence documents on the Internet for gulf war vets. The documents concerning the ammo depot and the toxic chemical fallout were subsequently removed from the Internet at the behest of the CIA because of "intelligence sensitivities."

Now, the Pentagon, while conceding that some troops may have been exposed to toxic chemicals, says there is no evidence that large numbers of GIs were adversely affected by that exposure.

Why should vets who have been kept in the dark about being inoculated against nerve gas accept the Pentagon's assurances — particularly when the Defense Department appears to be engaged in damage control, releasing the information in dribs and drabs?

A Defense Department spokesman, Navy Capt. Michael Doubleday, conceded that the military should have been more forthcoming with the troops. After stonewalling Vietnam vets for more than 20 years on the deleterious effects of Agent Orange, the Pentagon should deal forthrightly with Persian Gulf vets.

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