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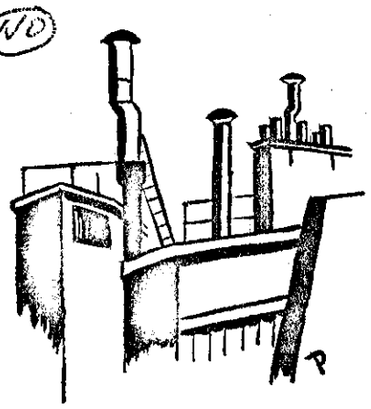
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

THE Department of Defense, not because its leaders wished to do so but because they were apprehensive about the political consequences of not doing so, has decided to withdraw from Vietnam its stockpile of a million and a half gallons of the defoliant Agent Orange—consisting of an equal mixture of the herbicides 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T—which it was about to hand over to the South Vietnamese authorities last fall to spray on their own countryside and people. As far back as 1966—when the Americans had already been waging herbicidal warfare in Vietnam for five years—samples of 2,4,5-T studied under government contract by Bionetics Research Laboratories, of Bethesda, Maryland, were shown to exert teratogenic, or fetus-deforming, effects on experimental animals. But it was not until about two years ago—after protracted delays, successive evasive maneuvers, and downright distortion of the facts by the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Defense, and even the concealment of important data about the potential hazards of 2,4,5-T by a former science adviser to President Nixon—that pressure, resulting from a Senate subcommittee investigation headed by Senator Philip Hart, obliged the Administration to place restrictions or prohibitions on certain uses of 2,4,5-T in this country. Since then, the herbicide has been shown to be inevitably contaminated with a dioxin known as TCDD, one of the most toxic substances known to man; even in as purified a form as science has been able to achieve, 2,4,5-T, in large doses, has been shown to have teratogenic effects on experimental animals. Confronted with these facts, the Department of Defense, in 1970, was forced to suspend its use in defoliation operations in Vietnam. As late as this past August, however, the Department was attempting to propagate the fiction that although the American military had stopped its own use of 2,4,5-T in Vietnam, it had no power to prevent the South Vietnamese authorities from using the million and a half gallons of Agent Orange remaining in Vietnam as they saw fit in defoliation operations conducted by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. But further pressure, from responsible biologists and representatives of environmental groups in this country who are aware of the damage the use of this defoliant in Vietnam has already done, has now made it too difficult for the Department of Defense to hand over the stocks of 2,4,5-T under the subterfuge that it no longer owns the stuff.

Currently, the United States Air Force, after considering various alternatives for the disposal of its stockpiles of Agent Orange in this country and in Vietnam—one was to sell the herbicide to some foreign country—has made tentative plans to attempt to render the stockpiles harmless by burning them in a commercial incineration plant here, with preference apparently given to a plant, with a smokestack a hundred feet high, that occupies a two-hundred-acre site just southeast of Houston. The amount of Agent Orange to be brought back here from Vietnam and the stockpiles of Agent Orange already in this country total 2,338,900 gallons. The Air Force plan calls for the burning of the herbicide at the rate of five thousand gallons a day for four hundred and sixty-eight days, with the incineration process, which results in the formation of hydrochloric acid and carbon dioxide, going on day and night. The drums in which the herbicide is now stored would, according to this plan, be flushed with an alkaline detergent solution, then mechanically crushed, and buried in a deep pit. An Air Force report estimates that the temperatures involved in the incineration process would decompose the herbicide and its dioxin contaminant, but in order to make sure that this decomposition would indeed take place the Air Force proposes to study the problem with the Department of Agriculture. However, since the Department of Agriculture has consistently argued in the past that 2,4,5-T, potent contaminant and all, is innocuous and benign, one can hardly feel sanguine about the reliability of whatever assurances the Department of Agriculture and the Air Force may come up with as a result of their joint study.

NO



While agencies of the United States government are pondering the best ways of rendering the remaining stocks of Agent Orange harmless, others can ponder what the American military has wrought so far in its program of herbicidal warfare in Vietnam. In the last ten years, it has sprayed or dumped upon the Vietnamese countryside and the Vietnamese people approximately fifty thousand tons of herbicides. In order to hurt the Vietcong and to turn inhabitants of Vietcong-controlled areas into refugees, it has carried on a huge campaign of crop destruction, but that is not all. In the course of the herbicidal warfare in Vietnam, the Americans have defoliated a seventh of the land, ruined a large part of the timber resources that in the postwar period would have to be considered South Vietnam's principal potential export, and caused other grave ecological damage, some of which—like the infestation of certain defoliated areas by ineradicable bamboo—cannot be reversed for many generations. All this has been carried out to the accom-

paniment of repeated claims by the American military, and by the State Department as well, that the herbicides used are "not dangerous to man or animal life." A couple of years ago, a spokesman for the Department of Defense claimed as one of the benefits of the defoliation campaign in Vietnam that charcoal burners could easily move in on the defoliated hardwoods and could sell the resultant charcoal in the Vietnamese towns. The Air Force now appears to be happy that it has found a hundred-foot tower in this country to carry off the combustion products of the herbicide, with its potent dioxin. But the Vietnamese people have no such towers. Many Vietnamese women cook family meals over charcoal obtained from trees killed by the 2,4,5-T herbicidal spray. If the charcoal these women use still contains traces of the dioxin contaminant—or if, as some scientists have reported, the burning of 2,4,5-T can itself produce dioxin—they are running a risk of ingesting quantities, though small, of one of the most poisonous and teratogenic substances known. As long ago as 1967, a confidential memorandum from an American official connected with the herbicidal program in Vietnam reported that "no American program is more bitterly resented by the Vietnamese peasant than defoliation and crop-destruction operations." And now the Vietnamese people may be breathing the results of this American folly.

It would be unwise to conclude that the return of the remaining stocks of Agent Orange to this country means the end of herbicidal warfare in Vietnam. The American military provided the South Vietnamese authorities with several hundred thousand gallons of two additional herbicidal agents it has been using in Vietnam. They are Agent White, which is a mixture of 2,4-D and picloram (the latter is the most persistent of all herbicides), and Agent Blue, which is fifty-three per cent arsenic. Now these agents are being sprayed around fire bases and on the Vietnamese countryside by the South Vietnamese military. When will this destruction be brought to an end? Hasn't fifty thousand tons of herbicide been enough? We think that the proposed withdrawal, at last, of the remaining stocks of Agent Orange from Vietnam, having in effect knocked the props out from under the rationalizations of the American military about the harmlessness and humaneness of herbicidal warfare, should enable the United States Senate to ratify the Geneva Protocol of 1925, outlawing chemical and biological warfare. The Geneva Protocol has not been ratified by the United States, partly because the President, almost alone among the leaders of civilized nations who have expressed themselves on the question, is unwilling to recognize herbicidal warfare as one of the forms of warfare that the Protocol was intended to outlaw forever.

Towns

LAST week, Our Town—badly put down of late by upstaters—was a sanctuary for about nine hundred of the nine hundred and thirty-one small towns in the state. From Monday to Wednesday, more than three thousand elected or appointed town officials took over the New York Hilton and the Americana Hotel to pick up tips from one another—and also from some New York City officials—on how to do a better job of running their towns. It was the fortieth meeting of the Association of Towns of the State of New York, which has its headquarters in Albany, and which exists, in the words of its annual report, "to provide the officers of member towns with the information they need to perform properly their official duties." To explain the choice of New York City as the site of the annual meeting, one official said it is the only town in the state that can comfortably hold all the other towns at one time. And, according to another official, it is the best place "to have a little fun on the side."

We learned all this last Tuesday afternoon at the Hilton, as we moved among delegates from towns like Aurora, Colonie, Watson, Austerlitz, Fabius, Kinderhook, Guilderland, Pittsford, Monroe, Otego, Oneonta, Hartland, Irondequoit, Norwich, Guildford, Vestal, Pomfret, Ramapo, Southold, and Tonawanda—most of which, we must say, we hadn't heard of before. The majority of the delegates proved to be town supervisors, but there was a healthy sprinkling of assessors, town clerks, town boardmen, constables, town historians, town justices, collectors, fire officers, and highway superintendents. At the Hilton, they were rushing between suites and ballrooms, on their way to and from clinics and seminars that, we saw in our program for the three days, included such topics as "Suggestions on Conducting Meetings and Hearings," "Snowmobiles," "How to Be an Ethical Historian," "Meeting the Public," "The Small Rural Type Food Market and Gas Station," "Collector's Cash Book," "Review of Questionnaires on Dog Law Matters," "Cable Television Regulation Today," "Sand and Gravel Mining," "Roadside Vegetation," "Special Districts: Accounting Problems," and "Planning a Town's Growth."

We stopped a plump, gray-haired middle-aged man hurrying out of the Georgian Ballroom, where the clinic on "Meeting the Public" had just broken up. He carried a heavy-looking briefcase and wore a rumpled blue suit; his tie, which was gray, was loose at the collar of a gray-striped red shirt; he looked tired, and a tag on one lapel said his name was Emmett Sullivan. He told us that he was the town supervisor of Hartland. "You'll find us in Niagara County," he said. "We are a small town, I guess. In 1970, our population was forty-one hundred and sixty. Still, we are bigger than a lot of towns. Why, you'll find that a lot of the towns that are here today have no more than five hundred people, and sometimes as few as one hundred. I've been a Hartland man all my life—was born there. Matter of fact, all my folks, going back more than a hundred years, were born there."

We asked him to tell us a little about his job.

"Well, as town supervisor, I'm the chief elected officer," he said, resting his briefcase on the floor. "I chair the town-board meeting once a month, represent my town on the Niagara County Water Authority, keep all the records of our income and disbursements, manage the books, pay all the salaries and bills, and recommend the appointment of zoning officers, attorneys, and members of the planning board, the youth committee, and the board of ethics."

We said that it sounded like a tall order, and that we hoped we wouldn't embarrass him if we asked about his salary.

He smiled, and said, "I'm waiting to tell you. Twenty-seven hundred a year. It's really a part-time job. I don't know any supervisor who can live off what he gets. My wife helps me keep the town books, while I go out and work as a building contractor. That's true of most supervisors. I know one who works part-time doing what I do. I know another who has a dairy farm with eighty head of purebred Holsteins. But if you're not dedicated there's no sense in running for a job like supervisor. There's no money in it."

A few minutes later, we stopped in at the Sutton Ballroom, where about four hundred delegates were attending