

## Rachel's Environment & Health News #224 – The Nation's Greatest Danger: Secrecy March 13, 1991

Imagine, for a moment, that a foreign nation has dispatched a band of terrorists to the United States. The intruders silently move across the landscape depositing toxic chemicals at thousands of sites around the country. Some of the toxic compounds quickly enter the rivers and underground reservoirs that supply America with drinking water. Other chemicals contaminate our neighborhoods and backyards where our children play. Still others sit like time bombs, destined to contaminate our water supplies after months, years, or even decades. The toxic chemicals carried by these enemies are the products of the most sophisticated laboratories on earth. They cause birth defects, liver disease, and cancer. Their effects may be felt for generations.

Unquestionably, if this imagined threat were real, we would turn to the Pentagon to combat this threat to our national security. After all, the Pentagon's job is to defend the nation against outside enemies.

But what do we do when the threat comes, not from abroad, but from the Department of Defense (DOD) itself? What if our own worst enemy is the same institution charged with defending us?

These are the opening words of the new report (The U.S. Military's Toxic Legacy--see RHWN #223) on 14,401 military toxic chemical sites that our armed services have deposited at 1579 military installations in every state in the Union (see Figure 1--a map of the U.S. showing how many military dumps have been identified so far in each state). The Pentagon currently estimates that cleanup of these sites will cost \$100 to \$200 billion and will take at least 30 years. This cost projection does not include military toxics deposited at American bases on foreign soil. Nor does it include cleanup of the nuclear weapons production plants known within DOD as The Weapons Complex (Hanford, Rocky Flats, Fernald, Oak Ridge, and so forth). Nevertheless, as astronomical and as incomplete as these cost projections are, they at least give the impression that the situation is understood and under control. Unfortunately, this is a false impression.

What the military does not explain is that they have never defined what they mean by cleanup (just as the Superfund cleanup for non-military chemical dumps has never defined how clean is clean). They have never evaluated health effects that may be occurring to military personnel affected by chemicals, and they have never evaluated possible effects on civilians who live near contaminated military bases. Therefore, they cannot know what kinds of cleanups may be needed, or what kinds of liabilities they may have already engendered. And, finally, what they do not explain is that, for many of the toxins that have already moved into groundwater, there is currently no known technology for effective cleanup at any cost. Therefore, the \$100-to-\$200 billion cleanup figure is a ballpark guesstimate based on optimism and not much more.

On the bright side, the military has finally acknowledged that these sites exist and require attention. For decades, a stone wall

of lies was all you got if you asked for information about military toxics.

The U.S. Military's Toxic Legacy was published just last week by a savvy environmental organization--the National Toxic Campaign; it appeared within a month of another new report called Complex Cleanup; The Environmental Legacy of Nuclear Weapons Production, published by the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA)--an investigative arm of the U.S. Congress. Together, these two reports flesh out details of a massive scandal first revealed, a piece here, a piece there, by Keith Schneider of the NEW YORK TIMES--that the U.S. military is the nation's largest polluter bar none, and that over the years the military has exposed thousands (perhaps millions) of innocent Americans to deadly amounts of radioactivity and to a witch's brew of potent chemical toxins, has covered up these facts, has lied to the victims and their families, has lied to the press, has lied to Congress. It is a scandal and an outrage on such a scale that it takes your breath away.

Here are just a few quotations from the OTA report to help get this problem into perspective:

"The past 45 years of nuclear weapons production have resulted in the release of vast quantities of hazardous chemicals and radionuclides to the environment."

"Contamination of soil, sediments, surface water and groundwater throughout the Nuclear Weapons Complex is extensive. At every facility the groundwater is contaminated with radionuclides or hazardous chemicals. Most sites in nonarid locations also have surface water contamination. Millions of cubic meters [a meter equals approximately a yard] of radioactive and hazardous wastes have been buried throughout the complex, and there are few adequate records of burial site locations and contents." They don't even know where it's buried.

The military has had a gold-plated budget for many decades. With their big budgets, they can buy the best raw materials, the best equipment, the latest gadgetry. Because of this, they have attracted some of the best brains--smart researchers, bright minds. And what they have managed to create is the biggest, deadliest toxic mess on earth.

How could this have happened in America?

The answer is secrecy. Because the military operates largely under wraps, they are free to make huge mistakes--release enormous quantities of deadly radioactivity into communities, bury appalling quantities of deadly chemicals below ground in contact with drinking water supplies, then falsify records, destroy evidence, and lie about it all with a confident smile. No one can check on them because they have cloaked their work in the American flag--they are protecting "national security" and the rest of us are prying troublemakers if we ask questions.

This must change. Americans must come to see that "national security" requires open scrutiny of whatever goes on at military bases, or behind corporate fences. The military and its

counterparts in industry have proven--and it has now been documented beyond any possible doubt--that they are incapable of conducting their business safely, prudently, or even honestly. They require alert, committed public citizen watchdogs to curb their toxic excesses.

Get: THE U.S. MILITARY'S TOXIC LEGACY: AMERICA'S WORST ENVIRONMENTAL ENEMY (Boston, MA: National Toxic Campaign Fund, 1991). Executive summary available for \$2.00; full 128-page report available for \$20.00 from: Military Toxics Network, 2802 East Madison, Suite 177, Seattle, WA

98112. (206) 328-5257. And get: Peter A. Johnson and others, COMPLEX CLEANUP; THE ENVIRONMENTAL LEGACY OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS PRODUCTION (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991). Document No. 052-003-01222-7; 224 pages; \$10.00 from: U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402-9325. Phone: (202) 783-3238.

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