

The Greening of the U.S. Military

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The Greening of the U.S. Military

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Organizational Change*

ROBERT F. DURANT

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Safety, Security, and Chemical Weapons Demilitarization

Generations of soldiers in the U.S. Army's Eighty-second Airborne Division know the story well.¹ At the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, German panzers were routing U.S. forces beating a hasty retreat in the Ardennes Forest. At some point in the retreat, a tank commander unfamiliar with the terrain asked a soldier for directions, and the following exchange ensued:

Soldier: You looking for a safe place to park that thing?

Tank commander: I sure am.

Soldier: Well, pull in right behind me, 'cause I'm the Eighty-second Airborne, and this is as far as the bastards are going.

This story not only illustrates the power of heroic myths to inspire esprit de corps, a warrior culture, and a self-image among troops in the U.S. military, but it also captures the U.S. Army's attitude since the early 1980s on demilitarizing (i.e., disposing of) Cold War stockpiles of chemical weapons. To paraphrase the above, "We know how to dispose of chemical weapons safely, so just line up behind us 'cause this is as far as those bastard regulators are going."

The saga of chemical demilitarization during the Clinton years actually begins a decade earlier in Geneva with multilateral negotiations over chemical weapons disposal under the auspices of the United Nations. With these complex negotiations still ongoing, Congress enacted the National Defense Authorization Act of 1986 (PL 99-145), directing the Pentagon to eliminate U.S. stockpiled (obsolete) chemical agents and munitions. The Reagan Pentagon designated the army as executive agent of the program, with the assistant secretary of the army for installations and environment in the OSD in charge of policy and program oversight.

Then, in 1988, Congress created the Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program. The program was charged with developing emergency evacuation plans at the nine designated army installations where chemical weapons were to be demilitarized. These installations were the Lexington Blue Grass Depot located in Kentucky; the Newport Army Ammunition Plant in Indiana; the Tooele Army Depot in Utah; the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland; the Umatilla Army Depot in Oregon; the Anniston Army Depot in Alabama; the Pueblo Army

Depot in Colorado; the Johnson Atoll Chemical Agent Disposal System southwest of Hawaii; and the Pine Bluff Army Arsenal in Arkansas.

Next, in 1990, came a widely heralded bilateral agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union to destroy the overwhelming majority of chemical weapons stockpiles, followed two years later by the enactment of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Ratified by the United States in 1997, the CWC required this nation and Russia to, among other things, destroy 45 percent of Category 1 (the highest “risk” category) chemical weapons by 2004 (without endangering humans or the environment), and all declared stockpiled chemical weapons by 2007. The CWC also permitted a five-year extension, if needed, for destruction of all stockpiles.

Yet by 2003 the United States had to ask for a three-year extension of the 2004 deadline, having by then disposed of only 26 percent of specified chemical agent and 39 percent of all chemical stockpiles. In that same year, the chemical weapons demilitarization program earned an “ineffective” rating on President Bush’s Program Assessment Rating Tool, partly because chemical weapons destruction had begun at only two sites (Johnston Atoll and Tooele). Also responsible for that rating was OMB’s judgment that the program had inadequate measures of progress and accountability. Then, in 2004, a GAO study concluded that, at best, the government would not be able to reach the 2007 destruction target until 2014.² Meanwhile, life-cycle costs of the program rose from 1986 estimates of \$2.1 billion to \$32 billion in 2005. Bad news enough in its own right, in April 2006, Donald Rumsfeld became the first secretary of defense to acknowledge that the United States would need an extension of the CWC deadline to 2012, and was unlikely even to meet the extended deadline.³

To what are these embarrassing delays, cost overruns, and lapses attributable? For starters, chemical weapons demilitarization is a difficult task. Even under the best of circumstances, the CWC’s timetables were challenging due to the unprecedented scale, technical complexity, and risks of chemical weapons destruction.⁴ The army was to destroy in a safe manner a stockpile comprised largely of two thousand M55 rockets containing VX or GB nerve gases; 8-inch, 4.2-inch, and 155-millimeter projectiles containing GB, VX, or mustard gases; reams of MC-1 and MK94 bombs; and more than forty thousand one-ton containers of GB, VX, and mustard gases. Moreover, with the exception of the newer binary chemical weapons begun in 1987, the entire arsenal was over twenty years old and deteriorating, with some mustard gas as old as forty-five years. In total, the stockpile in 1990 consisted of 31,496 tons of chemical agents.

Yet these delays and cost overruns also stemmed from a bouillabaisse of self-inflicted wounds traceable to army traits consistent with its heroic Cold War self-image. Most notable in this civil–military imbroglio were the service’s predisposition toward creative accounting; getting single answers to complex and controversial technical questions; and “deciding, announcing, and defending” decisions rather than exploring alternatives. All of which led to an Army Audit

Agency report issued one month after Clinton left office, which charged that the program repeatedly “ignored cost, schedule and *environmental impacts* and violated rules both inside and outside the military in order to keep the program going.”⁵

To illustrate how and why this was the case, this chapter focuses on the patterns of politics that drove and were driven by three major challenges related to chemical weapons destruction during the Clinton years. First, how safe and reliable was the army’s preferred option of incineration for chemical weapons demilitarization? Second, could the states use their regulatory authority to get the army to revise or jettison incineration? Finally, how much transparency of demilitarization operations would the army and its allies allow?

The Safety and Reliability Challenge

As noted in chapter 3, the army’s approach to system, operation, and requirement analyses during the Cold War was summarized best as “getting a single answer (often a number) rather than illuminating the alternatives in the face of recognized uncertainties.” Moreover, the army tailored its analyses to internal rather than external audiences, and viewed the process as calculating answers to problems defined exclusively by its military professionals. Marginalized was “illuminating and understanding problems” as others might see them.⁶ Nor did this “single answer” mentality erode after the army lost many of its better analytic staff in the early 1980s.⁷

Certainly, no more apt characterization could be applied to the army’s relentless technical hubris when it came to chemical weapons demilitarization in the post–Cold War era. By the Clinton years, the army had decades of mostly unchallenged experience with this task and had settled in 1988 on incineration as the centerpiece of its chemical weapons demilitarization program. Later renamed the Office of Program Manager for Chemical Weapons Destruction, this office reported to the deputy assistant secretary for chemical demilitarization, and ultimately to the deputy under secretary for acquisition, technology, and logistics. But in crafting accounting structures for chemical weapons demilitarization programs, including the army’s, the OSD retained policy oversight and funding responsibilities. Interestingly, this was the army’s preference, fearing otherwise that program costs for incineration might be taken out of *its* budget rather than that of the DoD.

By the mid-1990s, however, the army’s preference for incineration became decidedly misaligned with post–Cold War ENR sensibilities. Greening proponents touted incineration’s potential health risks and lambasted the army’s “half-hearted efforts” to explore alternatives.⁸ Holding firm to incineration as its so-called baseline technology, however, the army countered that incineration alternatives were unproven, would jeopardize its ability to meet CWC deadlines, and might drastically escalate costs.

Framing and Reframing the Safety Issue

What prompted the army's allegiance to incineration during the Cold War? The technical merits of the decision aside, the political logic was compelling. Congress had banned chemical weapons disposal in oceans in 1984, opposition mounted in state legislatures without disposal sites to transporting chemical weapons elsewhere for burial, and pressures from ENR activists on the army grew during the 1980s to abandon its domestic "cut holes and sink 'em" program. The army complied but expressed concern over the instability of chemical weapons stockpiles unless an expeditious way was found to dispose of them. To the army, that expeditious way was incineration. Most worrisome, service officials claimed, was that aging rockets might leak or detonate accidentally, and the igloos storing them could rupture after airplane crashes, natural disasters, or terrorist attacks. Also troubling was the threat to civilian populations posed by the instability of M55 rockets loaded with VX and GB nerve gases, flammable fuses, burster charges, and propellants. M55 accidents might even cause "sympathetic" explosions of nearby rockets.⁹

In testing at its Black Hills Depot and Dugway Proving Ground, for example, the army found that an M55 explosion created a chain-reaction fire that released an estimated 3 percent of the toxic agent GB (roughly 570 pounds), plus 37 additional pounds of VX. Premised on these data, army technicians estimated what they called the lethality rate or "maximum credible event" for each of its nine disposal sites if an explosion occurred. Ignoring the variability of terrain and atmospheric conditions and assuming that only 2.5 percent of stored gases were released, a 1 percent lethality rate was likely among populations living within 4.5 to 27 miles of any igloo.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, these projections shattered the complacency of many citizens living near existing and future sites. Yet critics alleged that the army was strategically manipulating its models to exaggerate the instability of chemical weapons destruction in order to sell its incineration plans to the public: The quicker the army could burn chemical weapons, the shorter the stay in igloos and the less the risk of explosion. Nor were citizen fears about incineration assuaged when, in 1979, chemical smoke pots burning at the Lexington Blue Grass Depot in Kentucky created a toxic cloud that drifted over nearby Interstate 75. The incident sent more than forty people to the hospital with respiratory problems. The army's image suffered further when, for two weeks, officials denied responsibility.

Also distrust-inspiring during the 1980s were revelations that weapons volatility might not be as likely as the army claimed. By then, twenty-five- to thirty-five-year shelf lives for M55 rockets were well established in the literature, a fact confirmed in several studies commissioned by the army itself, but that program officials downplayed. Likewise undermined were army claims that chemical agents could not be separated from M55 rockets for safe and prolonged storage.

Indeed, a study the service commissioned by Arthur D. Little researchers said that separation *was* possible.¹¹ Nor did it help the army's cause that a National Research Council (NRC) study used by service officials to tout the instability of M55 rockets was premised on incomplete data the service had supplied. These were data that demonstrated a longer shelf life for the rockets and, hence, less need to move ahead with incineration.¹²

The Grassroots Revolt

With charges and countercharges spiraling, citizens in rural and economically dependent areas near existing and future stockpile sites grew ever more wary of deferring to the army's claims. Meanwhile, opponents provided expanded wind transport models showing that toxic fumes from incineration would actually extend over more densely populated (and hence more politically powerful) metropolitan areas, thus tripling to quadrupling the number of deaths predicted by the army's models. Included were urban and suburban populations in Salt Lake City near the Tooele Army Depot, in Atlanta and Birmingham near the Anniston Army Depot, and in Little Rock near the Pine Bluff Arsenal.¹³

Equally distressing was the army's attitude toward incorporating the concerns of these populations into disposal decisions. Granted, during the 1980s, it did follow NEPA processes by incorporating citizen participation into programmatic environmental impact statement scoping hearings at potential sites. But the issues broached in the programmatic environmental impact statement did not involve the choice of disposal technology. Tapped only was input regarding *where* incineration would take place: onsite or offsite.¹⁴ Thus, as the Cold War wound down in the late 1980s, a litigious grassroots movement took root, one that dramatically altered the post-Cold War context of the army's incineration program.

Not surprisingly, after the I-75 incident the anti-incineration offensive began in Kentucky with a grassroots group that expanded to become known as Common Ground and, later, the Kentucky Environmental Foundation. Based near the planned Blue Grass Depot incineration site, the movement subsequently spread to anti-incineration groups near the first four scheduled host sites in Alabama (Pine Bluff), Colorado (Pueblo), Oregon (Umatilla), and Utah (Tooele). By 1989, the DoD had become so concerned about mounting opposition to incineration like this that it sponsored a conference in Maryland bringing together concerned citizens from Alabama, Colorado, Oregon, and Utah.

Yet so disgruntled did these citizens become with the army's "decide, announce, and defend" presentations at the conference that they joined with attendees representing Greenpeace, the National Toxics Campaign Fund, and the Sierra Club to form the Chemical Weapons Working Group (CWWG). Thus midwived ironically by the conference was a group that became the army's most relentless grassroots opponent in the post-Cold War era. The group then gained

additional anti-incineration allies, including the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, who shared a common animus toward the army's handling of Agent Orange claims against the government. They were joined next by Gulf War veterans' associations incensed by the military's position on Gulf War syndrome, as well as by anti-incineration groups from Russia.¹⁵

The Data Never Speak for Themselves

Unfazed, the army refused to back down from its position that incineration was the only proven technology that would allow the United States to meet CWC deadlines. But as Congress turned up the heat on the program in the early 1990s, the army altered its tactics by trying to demobilize key components of its opposition. Following a directive in the 1993 National Defense Authorization Act to report to Congress on alternatives to incineration while going full speed ahead with incineration, the army proposed in 1994 to allow neutralization as a backup to incineration of chemical agents at its two low-volume bulk storage sites, Aberdeen and Newport.

Officially, the two sites were chosen because they stored chemical wastes in bulk containers rather than in actual weapons (e.g., in rockets), thus making them the only safe locations for studying neutralization. Environmentalists countered that "no logical basis" existed for the army to make such a distinction.¹⁶ Instead, they offered three reasons for hiving off the two sites in this fashion, two political and one pragmatic. First, Aberdeen and Newport (along with Kentucky) were seedbeds of incineration opposition. Second, and more pragmatically, these facilities were handling very small amounts of chemical agents and weapons.¹⁷ Finally, and again more politically, part of the proposal required offsite transportation of chemical agents, transport that the army knew many members of Congress already opposed.

Nor did the army let the results of studies on neutralization at these sites or elsewhere deflect them from their position on incineration. For example, in 1996, a team of technical experts from the army and potential contractors selected neutralization (followed by onsite biodegradation) as the best of five alternative techniques for chemical weapons disposal. But service officials again played the scheduling card.¹⁸ Despite making major progress in research on neutralization, the army pointed to major and likely time-consuming obstacles to the safe disposal of neutralized materials produced by the process.¹⁹

It is important to note that some of the army's positions during the Clinton years were validated by outside studies.²⁰ By the same token, however, whenever research findings contradicted its assurances that incineration would allow it to reach CWC deadlines, officials always questioned the reliability of the data informing them. For example, a 1998 study by Arthur Anderson identified a 95 percent probability that five of the nine chemical weapons incineration disposal sites would take many years beyond the 2007 CWC deadline to complete their

work.²¹ The army discredited the study as predicated on obsolete data. Nor, in 1999, were chemical weapons disposal program officials any less unwilling to challenge the army's own Soldier, Biological, and Chemical Command when it found that storing M55 rockets did *not* pose higher risks than incinerating them.²² Moreover, these denials became surreal in 1997 when the DoD proudly announced a \$600-million contract to a U.S. company building a nonincineration project in Russia. The project, the Pentagon said, would assist our former adversary "in meeting destruction milestones contained in the Chemical Weapons Convention."²³

The Race to the Top Challenge

As noted, by 1994 events on the ground were making it increasingly clear that the substance, pace, and progress of the army's incineration program lay less under the control of the chemical weapons disposal program office than in the hands of stockpile states and localities. As one DoD interviewee observed, mounting state regulatory and legal challenges were "giving ultimate veto power to the citizens in whose backyard the plants will be built."²⁴ In effect these grassroots actors tried persistently during the Clinton years to begin a "race to the top" when it came to rules affecting chemical weapons demilitarization in the post-Cold War era. In response, however, the army mounted a determined counteroffensive "to storm the states into accepting incineration."²⁵

Brushfires Spread at the Grassroots

To appreciate the fury unleashed in state legislatures by the incineration issue, consider the steps taken in four states slated for disposal sites: Colorado, Indiana, Kentucky, and Maryland. In Indiana, Kentucky, and Maryland, state legislatures focused on stopping incineration plants before they were built. Kentucky, already with the strictest laws on incineration in the nation, followed Colorado and Indiana in giving local governments the ultimate authority to offer or block construction of incinerators affecting their jurisdictions. Also, were actions like these not threatening enough to the army's plans, meeting the emission standards that these states began issuing far exceeded the existing technical capabilities of public or private incineration sites. This was no accident; state solons were trying to make it impossible for the army to meet them.²⁶

Governors such as Evan Bayh (D) of Indiana also began petitioning Congress to slow down, if not halt altogether, the service's march toward incineration. Bayh's attitude, like those of other governors, was not helped by his state's repeated problems in getting safety information from the army, as well as by inconsistent reports on army destruction plans at Indiana's Newport facility. In mid-1996, Bayh wrote to Clinton's secretary of the army, Togo West: "In particular,

argued that “the contracts can carry a number of drawbacks, such as a significant increase in state regulatory oversight, major changes to cleanup work plans and funding states receive from DoD for oversight work they do, confusion over how to resolve disputes, and changes to public input into cleanup decisions.” In particular, state regulators were “concerned that [they would] have little or no input into [contractors’] work efforts until too late in the [cleanup] process to have significant impact on the project.”⁶⁴ ENR activists worried, too, that even if sufficient resources and staffing could be generated by DSMOAs, the same resource-dependency situation discussed in earlier chapters held the potential for mischief. Hardly insolvable, debates like these four years after Clinton left office and eight years after privatization was first proposed afforded a distressing sense of *déjà vu*. The military would budge, but it would budge most readily and profoundly only when the Pentagon perceived that delay in taking greening actions directly threatened its warfighting mission.

Chemical Demilitarization

Upon taking office, Secretary Rumsfeld immediately was confronted by long-time critics of the army’s chemical demilitarization program: Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL). They implored Rumsfeld to include the program in what he said would be a comprehensive review of DoD operations. In urging him to pay special attention to safety, management, and public outreach flaws in the program, they were joined by Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK). As chairman of both the Senate Appropriations Committee and its Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, Stevens threatened to shut off funding for the program until these concerns were addressed to the senators’ satisfaction.⁶⁵

Were this not enough to get Rumsfeld’s attention, a leaked internal army report about the program in early 2001 projected that it would “likely be years off” its target for destroying U.S. chemical weapons.⁶⁶ Feeling vindicated, grassroots populists such as the CWWG ramped up their longstanding complaint that the army had disingenuously used the 2004 statutory and 2007 CWC deadlines as ruses to eliminate nonincinerator options. Thus, with calls increasing for more oversight and restructuring of the chemical weapons disposal program from senators such as Shelby and McConnell, Secretary of the Army Thomas White acted preemptively by shifting oversight responsibilities within the service. As during the Clinton years, White’s reorganization left the PMCD responsible for the program’s day-to-day operations. But rather than have oversight responsibilities split between the army’s assistant secretary for installations and environment and its assistant secretary for acquisitions, logistics, and technology, the army consolidated this responsibility within the former.⁶⁷

Lauded by many environmentalists, White’s reorganization was overturned in 2003 amid congressional pressure for reform.⁶⁸ In this instance, oversight responsibilities were shifted to acquisitions, logistics, and technology. This happened

after a leaked memo indicated that the army's assistant secretary for installations and environment at the time, Mario Fiori, planned to blame local and state officials for shoddy emergency preparedness plans if any emergencies developed at the nine disposal sites.⁶⁹ As Craig Williams of the CWWG explained, "We thought putting de-mil in the Army Environmental Office made sense at the time, but we didn't count on a management style based on covert operations and the total exclusion of public participation."⁷⁰

In the end, the reorganization provoked by these crises over authority, scoping, and position rule sets left in its wake the kind of halting, halfway, and patchwork consolidation of structures, processes, and procedures that typified greening efforts throughout the post-Cold War era. The army reassigned oversight of all policy matters relating to the chemical weapons disposal program to the assistant secretary of the army for acquisitions, logistics, and technology, plus responsibility for the emergency management components of chemical demilitarization. The secretary of the army then ordered this assistant secretary and the commanding general of the Army Materiel Command to create the Chemical Materials Agency (CMA). The CMA, in turn, was given responsibility for handling storage and disposal of the chemical weapons stockpile. The CMA then redesignated the old PMCD position as the program manager for the elimination of chemical weapons. The person holding this position became responsible for sites under construction. Meanwhile, the CMA director of operations had responsibility for managing three sites (Newport, Pine Bluff, and Umatilla) from operation to closure, whereas the Assembled Chemical Weapons Alternatives program retained oversight for Aberdeen, Anniston, Johnston Atoll, and Tooele. The fabled Rube Goldberg could not have fashioned a more fractionated system.

For Congressman Marty Meehan (D-MA), ranking member of the terrorism subcommittee, the reasons for doing all this fit neatly into a longstanding pattern:

I feel compelled to mention that politics, indecisive management, and a lack of true commitment to funding has led to the current state within which we find ourselves. I am frustrated that "other DoD priorities" have repeatedly won out in the resource game. I am frustrated that the Army has transferred program management from one office to the next. And I am frustrated with political opportunism—both within the Pentagon and throughout our nation's communities.⁷¹

Moreover, the more things changed structurally, the more the army continued to fight old battles with by now familiar justifications. For instance, despite at last certifying in 2003 that neutralization-biotreatment *was* a cost-effective alternative to incineration at Pueblo and Blue Grass, no additional sites were approved for neutralization. In addition, the Pentagon once more threatened to scale back Assembled Chemical Weapons Alternatives funding at both sites because of cost overruns, argued for accelerating incineration because of terrorism threats, and again asked Congress to allow transportation of wastes to disposal sites in other states.

An incredulous Senator McConnell, expressing the frustration of many of his colleagues at this series of déjà vu–inspiring events involving deinstitutionalization, de-skilling, defunding, and issue reframing, pulled no punches:

The department [DoD] claims ACWA [Assembled Chemical Weapons Alternatives] sites must be downgraded to caretaker status because they are over budget due to cost overruns. Yet the department’s own schizophrenic decisionmaking is what led to these costs. The department has repeatedly stopped or slowed down design work and then restarted, adding unnecessary startup and stop-work costs. They stingily parcel out appropriated monies in such small quantities that it is impossible to spend it efficiently. Thus, it is the department’s own bureaucratic mismanagement that has created the cost problems.⁷²

Conclusion

Certainly, nothing has changed since 1989, when then-Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney argued that to “choose between [defense and ENR protection] is impossible in this real world of serious defense threats and genuine environmental concerns.”⁷³ Indeed, sixteen years after Cheney’s charge to the military, President George W. Bush’s new assistant deputy under secretary of defense for environment, safety, and occupational health, Alex Beehler, still was pushing with some success (see chapter 1) for what he called “environmental improvement” across the DoD. But in this contentious arena of civil–military relations, Beehler’s otherwise laudatory assessment of the military’s compliance with ENR laws in 2005 noted that he was still jousting with many of the same windmills Cheney’s reform efforts sought to eliminate. Moving “beyond compliance,” said Beehler, meant “the military . . . dealing with past stovepipes, where all too often [people said] ‘that’s an environmental issue, [push it] over there, [and] let the environmental experts deal with it.’”⁷⁴ Clearly, taking the “harder right” of reconciling national security with public health, safety, and environmental values in the post–September 11 era has not, and will not ever be, a task for the meek, the impatient, or the political unastute.

Notes

1. Peter Eisler, “Pollution Cleanups Pit Pentagon Against Regulators,” *USA Today*, October 14, 2004, www.usatoday.com/news/nation, 1 (April 21, 2006).
2. William Grimes, “How a Struggling Colony Became an Economic Colossus,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/12/03/books/03book.html (April 25, 2006).
3. Thomas Baca, Regional Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Albuquerque, NM, interview with author, Crofton, MD, March 2002.
4. Eisler, “Pollution Cleanups Pit Pentagon Against Regulators,” 5. It is important to note that individual service efforts like the army’s vaunted “Strategy for the Environment: Sustain the