

# Pentagon Defends Use of Herbicide on Vietcong Rice Crops

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The Pentagon has apparently rejected a request by the American Association for the Advancement of Science to stop using a chemical containing arsenic to destroy Vietcong rice crops.

A reply is being drafted by the Defense Department right now to a July 19 report of the AAAS, in which the 105,000

member group urged the Pentagon to stop spraying Vietcong rice crops with a herbicide called cacodylic acid.

The chemical contains pentavalent arsenic, which the Pentagon insists is non-toxic and which the AAAS claims is a potentially serious health hazard.

While details of the Pentagon reply to the AAAS are still secret, evidently the

AAAS claims are completely rejected.

The Pentagon's view is that the chemical it is using was used in the 1930s as a treatment for syphilis and has since been used as a herbicide in cotton and tobacco fields. "this chemical," said one Pentagon aide, "is no more poisonous than aspirin."

In its report of last month, the board of directors of the AAAS expressed "special con-

cern about the use of arsenical herbicides in Vietnam, and we urge that their use be suspended."

One AAAS board director, who did not join in the part of the report that was critical of the entire defoliation program, said he had to speak out on the use of cacodylic acid.

Dr. John A. Wheeler of Princeton University agreed that cacodylic acid had been used as a leaf remover, "but it

is now being dropped for the same reason that arsenical sprays are being given up in tobacco land."

The Pentagon says the poisonous form, of cacodylic acid is tri-valent arsenic not pentavalent arsenic and is found in things like rat poisons.

AAAS scientists take a different view of it all. One board member said that pentavalent arsenic is quickly bro-

ken down by organisms in the soil to trivalent arsenic.

In one animal study, Dr. Wheeler said, half the animals fed cacodylic acid were "lethally affected" by as little as one or two grams of the acid for each 1000 grams of their own body weight.

"Arsenic slowly accumulates," Dr. Wheeler said, "and in time can become a liability to animal health."

The U. S. has been spraying

cacodylic acid on suspected Vietcong rice crops for seven years now. Just how much of it has been sprayed is classified, but in one year (1967) an estimated 121,400 acres of cropland in South Vietnam were sprayed with the chemical.

Whatever answers the Pentagon gives to the AAAS to explain its use of cacodylic acid, it is sure to feed the feud between the Defense Depart-

ment and the Nation's scientists. The battle over defoliation has now been going on between them for two years, and each side has only hardened its position on the issue in that time.

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