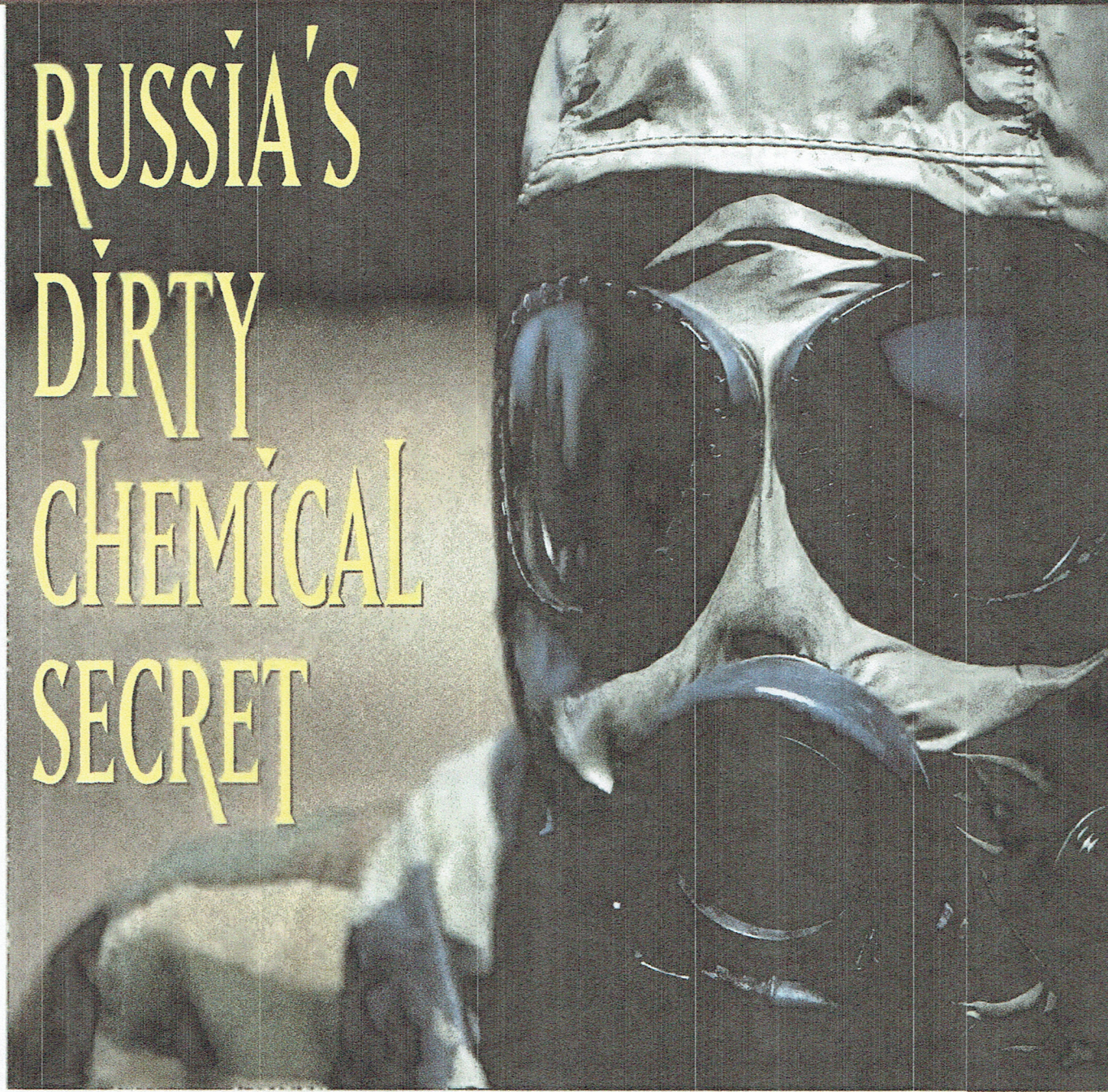


# RUSSIA'S DIRTY CHEMICAL SECRET



By Cliff Kincaid

**B**URIED in last year's explosive report of Michigan Sen. Donald W. Riegle Jr. concerning chemical and biological warfare agents was the assertion that Iraq may have acquired chemical agents from the former Soviet Union.

Riegle — who has since retired from the U.S. Senate — and his staff said the agents were developed by the Soviet Union under the name, “Novi-

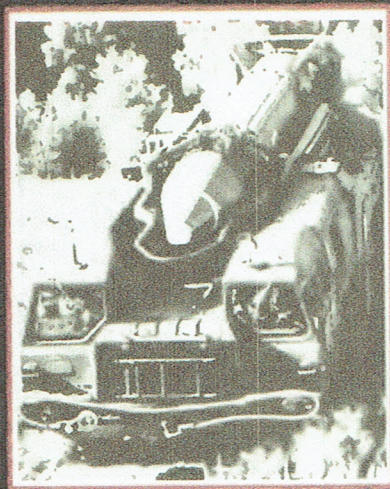
**RUSSIA MAY HAVE  
DEVELOPED A NEW  
KIND OF WEAPON  
AND TESTED IT ON  
OUR TROOPS IN  
THE GULF WAR.**

chok,” meaning newcomer.

The Riegle report is just the latest piece of evidence pointing to the Russian development of a new class of poisons that may have been transferred to Iraq for use against American forces in the Gulf War.

This could explain why the Department of Defense (DoD) has engaged in what looks like a frantic effort since the war to dismantle the Russian chemical and biological warfare

*Washington-based Cliff Kincaid, who writes the Washington Watch column in this magazine, also writes for Human Events and other publications.*



**FULLY CAPABLE**—Russia could unleash chemical agents with most of its conventional weapons, including this SCUD missile.



**CHEMICAL AGENT**—Michael Waller of the American Foreign Policy Council was told by Russian scientists that exposure to the chemical agent, Novichok, causes birth defects.

people like Petrenko said their symptoms resembled those of the Americans he had been reading about in the papers — the sick veterans of the Persian Gulf War.

In short, the Russians may have pulled off one of the most spectacular and deadly deceptions in the history of warfare. Waller believes that Novichok may be what Russian extremist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy had in mind when he warned that his country has a “secret weapon” capable of destroying the West. Zhirinovskiy’s party dominates the Russian Parliament, and Zhirinovskiy has ties to the old Soviet KGB.

Indications that Zhirinovskiy’s threat was a boast, not a bluff, came when Vil Mirzayanov, a Russian scientist who publicly disclosed the existence of Novichok, was charged with revealing the “state secret.” On two occasions, in 1992 and again in 1993, he was arrested by Russian authorities for talking about Novichok.

Mirzayanov’s arrests caught the worldwide attention of scientists, including Nobel Laureate Joshua Lederberg of The Rockefeller University in New York, who headed a special Pentagon panel on Gulf War illnesses. He said if the Russians proceeded to prosecute Mirzayanov, “we must conclude that Mirzayanov was telling the truth and a whole new class of deadly binary chemical weapons was created.”

However, Mirzayanov was not prosecuted, apparently because of the international attention. But that did nothing to diminish concern that he was telling the truth, the implications of which are ominous for U.S. national security.

The prospect of humanity being wiped out by disease has always fascinated and horrified the public mind. Michael Crichton sold more than 3 million copies of his *Andromeda Strain*, a book about a lethal virus from another world that threatens Earth, which also was made into a successful film.

In an effort to distract international attention from its own offensive biological warfare program, the Soviets in the early 1980s came up with a fantasy that rivaled the fiction of Crichton. They claimed the deadly AIDS virus was literally made in the United States.

At the time, the world was preoccupied with AIDS. It wasn’t clear where

**PREPARED?**—An undetectable chemical agent may have been used on U.S. troops in the Gulf.

(CBW) program and develop effective defenses against the agents.

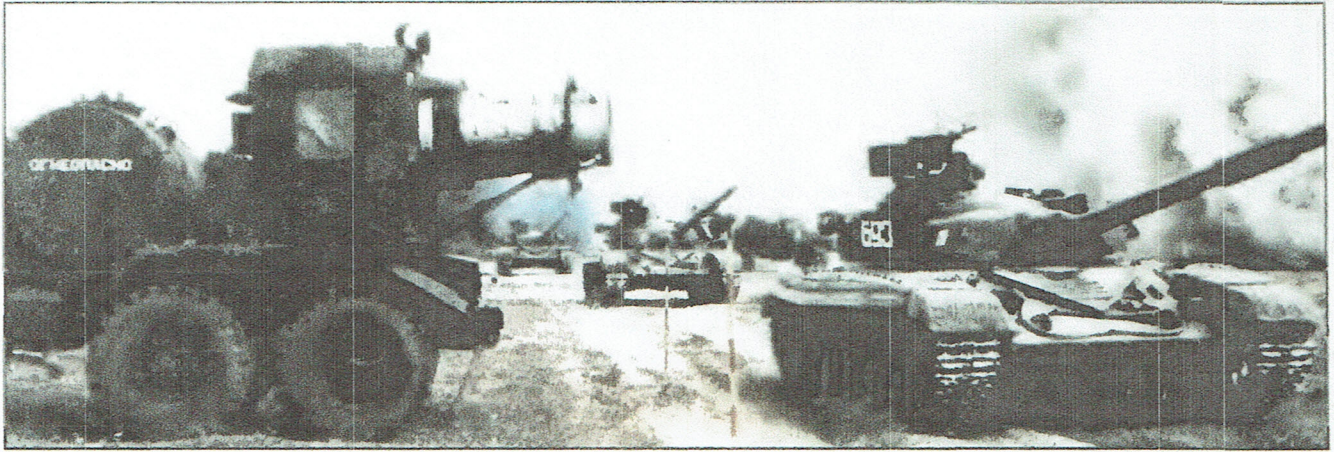
Vladimir Petrenko is a victim of the Russian CBW program. As a young Soviet Army lieutenant in 1982, he volunteered to test a new chemical warfare suit and was exposed to a poison that the Soviets had been secretly developing since the late 1970s.

Michael Waller, a senior fellow with the American Foreign Policy Council, visited with Petrenko and says his health is deteriorating. At age 34, Petrenko looks 20 years older. He is haggard and gaunt, has a grey beard and is developing serious illnesses that require almost constant treatment.

Novichok has similar effects. It can be toxic like a chemical agent or cause diseases like a biological agent. It can be lethal or debilitating.

Equally frightening, Waller says he was told by Russian scientists who have worked on the Novichok program that the poison affects human genes, causing birth defects and infant illnesses among offsprings.

These weren’t the only surprises that greeted Waller as he traveled Russia in 1993 gathering information about Russian military activities that still continue under President Boris Yeltsin. He was also caught off-guard when a Russian physician who treated



the virus came from, who was at risk and how it could be spread. There still is no cure in sight.

The Soviets spread the AIDS lie through their front groups and propaganda organs, claiming the AIDS virus had been manufactured at Fort Detrick by the Pentagon as part of an effort to develop biological weapons. The charge flew around the world, even ending up on the *CBS Evening News* with Dan Rather.

Like most effective lies, this one contained a kernel of truth. Fort Detrick had been the U.S. Army's biological warfare research and development center from 1943 to 1969.

But mainly because of criticism over the use of herbicides like Agent Orange in Vietnam, the Nixon administration in 1969 had abandoned research into germ weapons, and Fort

Detrick was converted to defensive research.

In 1972, the United States and the Soviets signed an international agreement supposedly outlawing chemical and biological weapons. But history shows the Soviets never intended to comply, and could kill people with impunity and lie about it.

The Soviets have long been interested in the use of poisons. Pavel Sudoplatov, deputy director of foreign intelligence of the NKVD (later called the KGB), reveals in his book, *Special Tasks*, the existence of a poison laboratory, called "Lab X" as far back as 1937. The lab developed poisons used to assassinate enemies of Moscow at home and abroad.

But poisons are also useful against groups of people, even nations. Oleg Penkovsky, a Soviet military intelligence officer considered the greatest Soviet spy to serve the West since World War II, provided detailed reports to U.S. officials about the vast Soviet chemical warfare program during the early 1960s.

In the '80s, the Reagan administration publicly confronted the Soviets and their allies about using germ agents called mycotoxins, known as "yellow rain," on anti-communist freedom fighters in Southeast Asia.

Other key Soviet clients, such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq, were also proceeding with CBW programs. In fact, Hussein deployed chemical agents against the Iranians in their war in the 1980s.

He had the Soviets to thank. In a 1984 book, *CBW: The Poor Man's Atomic Bomb*, intelligence and security experts Neil C. Livingstone and Joseph D. Douglass Jr. offered evidence that the Soviets provided

**CHEMICAL BATTLEFIELD**—Soviet tanks are cleansed by a decontamination vehicle during a training session. The Soviets began a chemical warfare program in the early 1960s.

CBW raw materials to Baghdad.

They said, "As reported by a top-level defector, in the mid-1960s Iraq and other Arab nations were deeply concerned that Israel was going nuclear. Iraq pressed the Soviet Union for nuclear weapons, but Moscow turned Baghdad down. As a result, Iraq opted for a C/B warfare capability. In late 1967, in the wake of the Six Day War, Moscow made the decision to provide Iraq with both chemical and biological agents in their raw non-weaponized form."

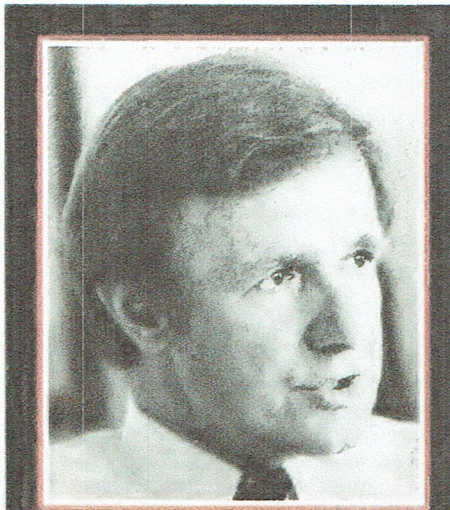
Livingstone and Douglass said the word was that the Soviets transferred the agents to Iraq via a third party, most likely the PLO, another Soviet client.

If anything, relations between Iraq and the Soviets grew even closer over the years, eventually culminating in a 1972 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. They became so close that when the Iraqis invaded Kuwait on Aug. 2, 1990, the Soviets had between 3,000 and 4,000 military advisers in Iraq. Soviet chemical weapons expert Igor Yevstafiev even had publicly advocated withholding from the United States and its allies Soviet information on where the Iraqi chemical and biological weapons were stockpiled.

He said, "Strikes on chemical and biological weapons facilities on Iraq's territory could rebound on us and cause damage to the population of our country."

The big mystery, according to some in the Pentagon, is why Iraq's known stockpiles of CBW agents were not used during the war.

*Please turn to page 58*



**RIEGLE REPORT**—An investigation last year by then-Sen. Donald W. Riegle Jr. uncovered the Russian development of a new class of poisons that may have been given to Iraq for use against U.S. forces.

# CHEMICAL SECRET

Continued from page 34

But what if a new form of largely undetectable CBW agent — Novichok — was used in the Gulf? And what if its effects, like those in the Petrenko case, are very different from those our forces were prepared for?

One analyst who served with both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency agrees this is a distinct possibility. "There are substances out there, and we don't know what they are," he said. "We went into the war without good detection equipment."

Asked if they could be playing a role in the Gulf War Syndrome, he said, "Who knows? It could be the same substances Mirzayanov was talking about. They may not be very toxic but could have lingering after-effects, causing problems for years. This is a nasty, scary issue."

There is no hard proof that Novichok was used in the Gulf War, or even that it was supplied by the Sovi-

ets to the Iraqis. The former analyst said there may be no way of knowing. "We had poor intelligence on this question," he said. "It was terrible."

The terrifying possibility that Russia and other nations may have such a weapon seems to be driving Pentagon policy on the issue today. Less than a year and a half after the Gulf War, on July 30, 1992, the Pentagon made an agreement with Russia to provide up to \$25 million to help destroy Russian chemical and biological weapons.

The U.S. Army then began tests of a Chemical Biological Mass Spectrometer, a hand-held device designed to sound an alarm when it detects CBW agents. Weakened or killed strains of two deadly organisms were used in the test, described as the first in 10 years at the Dugway Proving Grounds near Salt Lake City, Utah.

Continuing the pattern of CBW preoccupation, then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin gave an extraordinary speech to the National Academy of Sciences in December 1993, announcing the formation of a new joint office to oversee all DoD biological defense programs. Aspin candidly declared, "This is the first time the department has organized its collec-

tive expertise to deal with the tough biological defense problems we face."

Although defense spending was under the knife in the White House and on Capitol Hill, the cost of this effort was put at about \$1.4 billion over the next six years.

In official statements, the U.S. government still refuses to accuse Iraq of deploying those weapons and seems reluctant to publicly confront the Russians about their continuing CBW program. CIA Director James Woolsey has only said that the United States is working with the Russian government in an effort to eliminate the "offensive biological weapons program Russia had inherited from the Soviet regime."

The United States also seems to be putting some hope in ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention signed by 156 countries in 1993 in Paris. But Mirzayanov, the Russian scientist who revealed the presence of Novichok, warns that the treaty is full of loopholes and lacks effective verification measures.

President Clinton expressed concern about Russian CBW efforts in a private meeting with Russian President Boris Yeltsin in January 1993. Yeltsin gave Clinton assurances that the program had been stopped.

But the United States was concerned that the man put in charge of a presidential committee supposedly responsible for dismantling the Soviet CBW program, Gen. Anatoly Kuntsevich, also had played a leading role in developing the country's CBW arsenal. In April, Kuntsevich was fired from his post in an apparent effort to demonstrate Yeltsin's commitment to disarmament.

If charges of treaty violations against the Russians are made and pursued publicly, the state of U.S.-Russian relations could undergo serious changes — possibly a return to Cold War tensions. It would mean that Western aid to Russia would be curtailed. U.S. demands also would have to be made for copies of the formulas of the weapons so that antidotes or treatments can be developed.

A confrontation such as this could lead to the acknowledgment that Yeltsin, rather than being a friend of the West, has largely been a captive of the Russian military and former Soviet KGB.

The difference between Yeltsin and someone like Zhirinovskiy, with obvious military and KGB backing, then could very well lie in who is willing to use the Russian "secret weapon" on a mass scale against the West. □

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