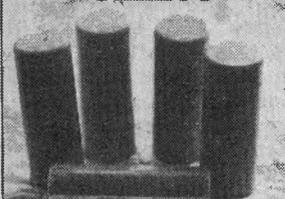


PLASTIC BULLETS



Cover photo: Jeremy Nicholl

Plastic bullets in Northern Ireland

A team of international lawyers and scientists have examined five deaths in Northern Ireland this year caused by the army's use of plastic bullets. Tim Shallice was a member of the fact-finding team. We publish his report. Page 6

The Yop generation

Patrick Wintour looks at the Tories' inability to produce a credible policy for Britain's unemployed youth. Page 5

Radio's broken promise

Jonathan Coe reveals a suppressed IBA document that attacks the poverty of local radio's news coverage. Page 8

The disunity of Solidarity

Gustaw Moszcz interviews the most prominent radical dissident within Poland's solidarity. Page 10

More than socialism

Basil Davidson finds in a new book on Vietnam lessons about the role of nationalism in revolution. Page 17

Policing 19th-century fashion

John Styles on the setting up of our police force. Page 18

Radio times

Nina Hibbin assesses the best and the worst of a week's radio. Page 22

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Tel: 01-405 8471 Telex: 28449

Cables: Newstat, London WC1

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Publishing Company Ltd and

contributors

Published and distributed by The

Statesman & Nation Publishing

Company Ltd. Marketing and sales

representation by COMAG, West

Drayton, Middlesex.

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Duncan Campbell shows the neutron's been in production since 1978

Reagan — 3 years late

THIS WEEK's headlines may have said that President Reagan has decided to go ahead with the neutron bomb but the bomb has been in production for almost three years and stocks are, almost certainly, already in Europe. Divergence between this situation and official statements is a matter of semantics and technological nicety.

The neutron bomb is not, at present, a bomb in the contemporary sense of being dropped from the air. It comes in two forms: a new warhead for the US Lance missile and a new artillery shell to be fired from 8-inch howitzers. There are hundreds of the former and thousands of the latter available to NATO forces in Europe.

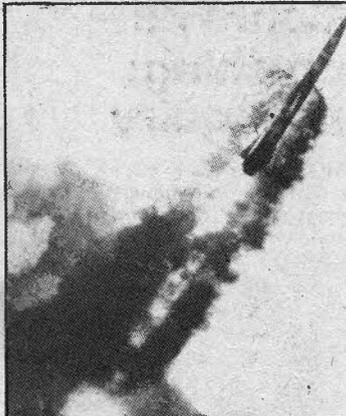
Both of these new warheads were developed by the Lawrence Livermore Laboratories in California during the early and mid-seventies. The US always intended that these would only be neutron bombs — politely, Enhanced Radiation and Reduced Blast.

By the middle of 1977 both

make a bomb which can be converted from 'ordinary' to 'enhanced radiation'. The neutron bomb relies on large quantities of radioactive tritium — a heavy isotope of hydrogen — to release the immense killing neutron flux which is the bomb's distinctive feature. A 'convertible' neutron bomb would need to switch energy from the orthodox blast into triggering the neutron flux from the added tritium. The Lawrence Livermore Labs have now managed to design a weapon which can do this.

But they had not done so when Carter's production decision was made in 1978. At that time the only extant designs were for the solely neutron bomb versions of the Lance missile and the howitzer shell; specifically, Model 3 of the Lance's W70 warhead and the first production design for the W79 8-inch shell. Only now are the later 'convertible' N-bomb designs becoming available.

By NOVEMBER 1979 the US



The two faces of the neutron bomb: the M110 howitzer, which fires a rocket-assisted neutron bomb shell for 30 kilometres; (right) and the Lance missile (left).

varieties had virtually completed development and production was due to start early in 1978. Then the NATO row over the bomb broke out and in April 1978 President Carter announced that the 'ultimate decision regarding the incorporation of enhanced radiation features will be made later.'

This was incorrectly heralded as the withdrawal of the neutron bomb. In fact, they went into production on October 18, 1978 'using designs which would permit their subsequent conversion to enhanced radiation', as it was eventually admitted. In other words, they would not be neutron bombs because the separate components would stand unattached. By exactly the same token it could be argued that Lance nuclear missiles are not nuclear missiles because they are normally stored with the warheads and bodies separate.

Now, it is technically feasible to

the Netherlands to Turkey. The Army and Marine Corps had tested and fired over 55 of the new shells, in which the nuclear components were simulated by inert material. The warheads are completed at a government plant in Texas and are sealed into containers which cannot be unlocked without a presidential code.

Quantity production of the neutron bomb created massive tritium requirements, which explains the opening of new and reopening of shutdown reactor facilities in Savannah River, South Carolina. At about the same time the Ministry of Defence in Britain gave British Nuclear Fuels its first contract to manufacture tritium at Chapelcross, Dumfriesshire — presumably to compensate for the loss of the American supply.

There has been a considerable dearth of information on the production or stockpiling of the non-convertible neutron bomb war-

heads. However, the much publicised decision to withdraw 1000 obsolete US nuclear weapons from Europe applied primarily to old artillery shells and missile warheads which were due to be modernised with the neutron warheads that were designed by 1978. There has never been any official claim that this withdrawal actually meant a reduction in the US European stockpile.

Verification of what is actually happening is well-nigh impossible. Unlike easily enumerable aircraft or ships, the number and nature of such warheads in Europe are concealed within the fences of the numerous US controlled nuclear dumps, whose very location is supposed to be secret.

But, as the US Arms Control Impact Statement commented aptly: 'battlefield nuclear systems must be deployed near the front lines to be effective'. The front line is some distance from Texas, or the continental US. In other words, the bombs which have been made have been made for Europe and are already amongst us.

In Germany, a large depot at Hemer near Dortmund stockpiles Lance warheads and artillery nuclear shells — under US control — for use by the British Army. It is typical of some dozen sites, from

the Netherlands to Turkey. The neutron bomb could be in any of them.

In Britain the US army maintains two large depots at Burtonwood near Warrington, and Caerwent near Newport. The latter would be the most likely site for Britain's stocks of neutron bombs as it was set up to accumulate US army reserve stocks after US bases were thrown out of France in '67.

In early 1978 Prime Minister Callaghan did not repudiate claims that the government had already agreed to Britain's deployment of the N-bomb. It is certainly a development which has been in the pipeline for years.

Reagan's decision is merely the most recent phase in this long period of development. By owning up to a decision which Carter disguised, he is probably declaring that the next phase — deployment, is beginning in earnest. □