Consider the Morning Glory

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Consider the morning glories on the vine, how they grow; they toil not neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these [Matt. 6: 28, 29].

According to documents recently released by the CIA, an unidentified member of Princeton's chemistry department was paid $765 to extract and study the alkaloids in a species of morning glory seeds. The chemist was supposed to test the efficacy of the lovely and lowly morning glory for producing agents affecting the central nervous system of human beings. It was part of the CIA's nationwide effort to learn how to control the human mind. Another researcher is alleged to have compiled in 1958 a comparison of American culture with that of an unnamed foreign country.

As a defense of these projects one might offer that at that time (the 1950's and early 1960's) researchers "were rather proud of their cooperation with the government." So stated one of this nation's great newspapers, the Daily Princetonian. Another defense is that the chemist did this on his own time. It was his own chosen use of his talents—like former Dean of the Faculty Douglas Brown helping to write federal Social Security legislation or my submission of a position paper to the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research. Still another defense is that there was reliable intelligence that the USSR was well along in research on agents to control the human mind. My colleague who tried (if indeed he did) to unlock the glory of the morning glory was practicing pre-emptive deflowering necessary for the common defense. Finally, one might say that if such research was done, it cannot happen again. It is now contrary to university policy to engage in research that must be kept secret and whose results cannot be immediately shared with a wider community of scholars.

The hullabaloo on the Princeton campus and in the country generally over the latest revelations about CIA projects reminded me of my own scholarly activities as a member of the faculty of Princeton University over that same period of time. I too was conducting certain investigations. Not in the laboratory, but out of books and articles. There was nothing secret about it, and the only human experimentation involved was sitting on my fanny for long hours thinking about the possible meaning of the "just war" tradition when applied to modern warfare and weapons technology. Cross my heart and hope to die, I was never paid by the CIA.

More than once in recent weeks I have had occasion to wonder over the irony of all this. I have also sorrowed over the pathos of a people, of a major power, and of our churches that steadfastly refuse to think very seriously about the morality of warfare (with congruent weapons) lest war become thinkable again. By fixing our minds on other national goals we imagine we have "prioritized" out of existence the reality of war and weapons systems. We succeed only in excluding war from the world we think about. What is out of mind is the urgent need to impose some justifiable limits upon war should it occur, and upon preparations for defense that constantly go on without waiting for the last resort. As a result, research efforts aimed at humanizing warfare by making it less lethal are made to look like a great scandal.

All this needs to be sorted out. For the sake of orderly reflection let us set aside, first, the fact that the CIA may have sponsored the investigation that looked into the properties of the morning glory. Myself, I have always thought it a "likely tale" that Daniel Ellsberg was a CIA agent sent in there to purloin the Pentagon Papers and give them to the New York Times. While such a scenario is doubtless partly a product of my conspiratorial mentality, it is supported by my observation that in the Pentagon Papers the CIA reports came off better than all other sources of intelligence, and its recommendations and warnings to our policymakers were, at least, better than those from other sources.

Let us set aside, secondly, the fact that the research was secret. Perhaps our universities and their faculties ought not to engage in secret research for the government or for drug companies that have a property-interest in the outcome. Many have now adopted this policy. This defends the objectivity and purity of the university as an
open community of scholars and scientists. At the same
time, however, it means that the government must set up
its own research laboratories or contract with indepen-
dent research centers, that are not universities—whose
staffs will be made up of men and women who have been
trained at the centers of learning that do not accept secret
research. Secrecy as such is not the issue, unless one is
going to say that national security is not a political
problem.

Let us set aside, thirdly, the possibility that much of
this secret CIA-sponsored research may have been
fruitless, redundant, unnecessary, and serving no
principal national purpose. Maybe much of it was even
silly, deserving Senator Proxmire's "golden fleece"
award. A great deal of "research" is like that, especially
when there seem to be unlimited funds from Wash-
ington. Anyone who has ever been a referee for grant
proposals to the National Science Foundation, the
National Institutes of Health, or the National Endow-
ment for the Humanities knows that. A friend of mine, a
physician engaged in the study of childhood illness, tells
me that most medical research done today is
unnecessary, quantitatively excessive, and qualitatively
low-grade. It does seem redundant to ask a Princeton
professor to compile a comparison of American culture
with that of an unnamed foreign country: Someone in the
high echelons of government service should have known
that. Still, I will suggest, both Scripture and reason
indicate that we should have considered the morning
glory.

A general charge of lack of necessity or urgency
cannot be lodged against military research that is not
lodged also against much other governmental and
nongovernmental research as well. In any case, that is
not a principal, or isolatable, issue here. In recent years
the present writer—a bookish scholar who does
experiments in his head and not on bodies—has received
stipends from public funds for participating in
conferences and the such that I thought not worth the
costs. It helped to pay my income tax; after all, even New
York City tries to get back some of the money its
residents send to Washington.

I confess my part in the general corruption of the
research profession. My guilt is a little less, perhaps,
than liberals who seem not to realize the dangers in a
government that does more and more for us and therefore
can do more and more to us. I confess this personal
involvement in the general uselessness, while I utterly
deny that (during the time of the Morning Glory Project)
I ever received a red cent from the CIA for my article on
"Incapacitating Gases." There, it's out! Now you know
my scandalous complicity in believing that I, a
university scholar and Princeton faculty member, ought
to try to do something for the good of my government;
and toward the reformation of contemporary warfare,
something similar to the morning glory.

For a quite different constellation of reasons—even
opposite ones—we could, finally, set aside the fact that
the CIA experiments with central nervous system agents
for the control of the human mind were performed on
unsuspecting subjects, and with some fatalities. Since
my reasons for bracketing the charge that these agents

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glory."
were tested on unconsenting subjects are complex and quite different from the foregoing, the manner of setting this charge somewhat to the side and whether to do so must also be quite different. Let it be proclaimed throughout the land that to place unsuspecting, unconsenting subjects at risk is outrageously and inherently immoral—no matter what the “good” expected to come. That proclaimed, I have no doubt that, if the purpose and risks of some of the trials had been explained, a number of individuals would have given informed consent to participate in them. (Just as the researchers in the conquest of malaria made themselves potential or actual martyrs for the cause.) Other CIA tests of central nervous system agents are reported in which this could not have been the case; for example, spraying people in subway stations. That by no means measures up to an approximation of a “field trial” in medical research. In either medical or military research I say that no experiment should be conducted if it must be, of necessity, on unconsenting, unsuspecting subjects—again, no matter how indispensable that stage in the research and no matter what the military or medical “good” to come.

Why, then, do I say that we could set somewhat to the side the fact that unsuspecting subjects may have been used in Morning Glory or in other CIA experiments? In what manner set this consideration aside? The point is simply to isolate whether we think that medical good, fallibly expected to come, justifies such means while military good and making war more humane, also fallibly expected to come, do not justify such means. Approving of medical justification while denying military justification reveals a prejudice to which our whole age is inclined. The common defense, possibly with less cost in lives lost, is no less a good than the common health with less loss of life. Means sometimes used to attain the medical good are no less immoral than the equivalent means used to attain the military good. In both cases I suggest that if the “protocol”—as it is called—requires the use of unknowing, unconsenting subjects, the end in view should not be obtained by such means. It should be reached, if possible, by more prolonged, more expensive, and less scientifically certain means, or not at all.

My suggestion is, therefore, that those who censure the CIA experiments because they used unsuspecting subjects should also censure medical research that uses unconsenting subjects. The fatalities of medical research are not given as much notoriety as the CIA cases. Those who rush to judgment against the military experiments should ask whether they are not apolitically willing to justify similar means when the goal is the medical common good.

There is a case going through the courts—Nielsen v. Regents of the University of California—that involves the use of unconscious patients in medical research that has no relation to their own treatment, emergency or otherwise. One court ordered the use of a minor child so retarded that he could not answer consecutive questions about the situation in which he was to be a “participant” in experimental bone marrow transplants. Our rubella vaccine was tested on retarded, institutionalized children in Conway, Arkansas; the British used nuns who volunteered. What morally significant difference is there between these cases and the CIA’s use of unsuspecting subjects? The reader should perhaps know that the present writer has made no headway opposing our going American medical research ethos, which permits the use of children and other incompetents in experiments for the medical common good. I see no difference between this and the military common good, especially if war could be made less lethal by mind-controlling agents that do not kill.

In the case of medical research goals, the excuse is that someone gives “proxy” consent. But suppose a military man (or a CIA agent) is knowingly willing to volunteer himself for Morning Glory and is also willing to give “proxy” consent for his children to be enlisted in the experiment. How different would that be, morally, from the unsuspecting subjects the CIA actually used? Anyone who is morally outraged about the CIA research but is not morally outraged about accepted American medical research ethics is outraged over the goals of the former and not—at least not significantly—outraged over the means used in both. Such a person should clear his head by deciding whether to oppose both or approve both. It is too easy an “out”—and it is incoherent moral reasoning—for someone to wax emotional about the CIA’s use of unsuspecting subjects (or about one subject who as a result jumped out a window to his death) and not wax emotional also about medical research that uses unconsenting subjects. I grant, of course, that the CIA used adult subjects who, if informed, could have consented or not and that (as I have said) medical research more or less routinely obtains “proxy” consent (even if only from the head of the institution in which a retarded child has been abandoned). But these differences do not seem to me to be as signal as the similarities.

I have postponed long enough a fuller reference to my article—whether because of nowadays imposed guilt-feelings or excessive personal pride over my invention parallel to Morning Glory. A dozen years ago I read a brief article in Commonweal (May 7, 1965) by Julian Pleasants, research associate at the Labund Laboratories at the University of Notre Dame, entitled “Gas Warfare: Reflections on a Moral Outcry.” His reflections still make sense twelve years later when we hear much of the same outcry. Pleasants protested against the moral outcry aroused by the development and use of incapacitating chemicals in warfare. Formerly a member of the Catholic Worker movement,

*I incorporated comment on Pleasants’ article—not without significant criticism—at the end of a long paper that had been long evolving, presented in final form for discussion at the annual meeting of the American Society of Christian Ethics in January, 1966, and now available between covers as “Incapacitating Gases” in my The Just War (1968).
he brought to this issue the same moral sensitivity that originally made him a Catholic pacifist. It now seemed to him entirely justifiable—satisfying the requirement of minimum force and limited destructiveness—to humanize the conduct of war by lessening the lethal and destructive force of acts of war within a target area (upon both combatants and civilians unavoidably collaterally involved), if there was a possible means of doing so. Pleasants argued that the moral outcry against “incaps” was emotional and irrational. He explained the outcry as due to the cake of custom that barbarously habituates us to accept weapons that penetrate and blow bodies apart, maim and destroy soldiers and civilians alike, while we are strangely fearful of erie weapons that work silently, even if more humanely, to thwart combat by temporarily incapacitating the combatants. Against the nonrational response, central nervous system agents that could render a combatant dizzy, disoriented, or nauseated when standing up, and happier lying down, seemed to Pleasants to fit the requirement of using no more force than necessary and also the requirement that the force used be as discriminating as possible. Better to increase up to 90 per cent an invading army’s chances of going to sleep than to reduce the attackers’ residual life expectancy from fifty years to fifty seconds. Better also to get in position to separate the combatants for capture from the civilians who otherwise would also be killed or injured for life. Pleasants’ eminently reasonable analysis is entirely in accord with the principle of discrimination and minimum force in the “‘just war” tradition.” After all, Sir Robert Thompson—who for a decade skillfully led the counterinsurgency against Chinese Communists and managed to extricate Great Britain from colonial rule while leaving behind an independent Indonesia—made effective use of “central alimentary canal system agents” and “bowel decontrol” (diuretics in lemonade).

So I think my unnamed colleague who undertook to consider the morning glory should be honored and not censured at this late date—and the CIA, too—if something like this was the ultimate goal of those investigations. The too frequent use of tear gas (more familiar therefore more acceptable) by U.S. forces in Vietnam simply to force out of caves members of the Viet Cong and hundreds of women and children involuntarily “protecting” them—only then to destroy them all—is no principled argument. Abybus non tollit usum. Abuse does not argue against use, at least not always. There is a positive case for national, and unilateral initiatives in research and development to make the weapons and conduct of war less destructive and more discriminating. Pre-emptive deflowering of the morning glory need not be invoked as an excuse.

Surface appearances to the contrary, it is a short step from Morning Glory to the neutron bomb. I have in mind only the ethical aspects of a decision to deploy such a weapon and the moral revulsion in response to the proposal to do so. As an ethical analyst I prescind from technical questions about the fitness of neutrons in military arsenals, trade-offs that may be desirable in SALT negotiations and so forth. On the question of the morality of having and possibly using *neutron bombs, it seems repugnant to consider a weapon that “kills people without destroying property,” even more repugnant than to consider “incaps” from morning glories.

That description of the neutron bomb is, of course, slanderous. Or maybe it is merely a species of thoughtlessness that has replaced tuberculosis as the plague of the leisure class. The verdict contained in the description is on the surface antibourgeois and humanitarian. Still it bears the imprint of a bourgeois and an apolitical mentality. A proper description of the neutron bomb is that it can be used against invading armies without destroying excessively wide areas of the human habitation in the territory to be protected. The revulsion felt over destroying villages in order to protect them was proper moral outrage. Transfer that to the European theatre and a case can be made for a weapon that will destroy personnel but not entire cities as well. An announced policy of the first use of incapacitating agents or the neutron bomb as an antipersonnel weapon only over one’s own territory or that of an ally (NATO) could make sense, militarily and politically. 5

The front-line countries in NATO are apt to agree with this. The alternative is the higher level of nuclear destruction of both people and property that will rain upon them (the just and the unjust, children and combatants alike) after the first few days of a massive conventional invasion. This would be a more credible U.S. policy and therefore more deterrent ab initio.

Do we not know that present U.S. and NATO policy is and is likely to remain the first use of more indiscriminat- ing nuclear weapons having greater destructive power?

1 I was more cautious than Pleasants because of the possibility that the first introduction of a new kind of weapon might ineluctably and by necessary steps lead to the acceptable use of lethal and indiscriminate gases. If, I said, the first use of incapacitants is already an act out of control, it is inordinate (disproportionate) and “ought never be done no matter how humane it may be in the first instance.”

**The morality of possession and the morality of using any weapons system cannot be separated.

6 First published in 1965 and still available as a pamphlet from the Council on Religion and International Affairs, my The Limits of Nuclear War can be read or reread with the neutron bomb in mind.