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## Insane Military Practices of Burning Explosives Near Neighborhoods

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In January 2016, I wrote about the awful practice of burning explosives out in the open by the US military in Kingsport, Tennessee. My inspiration for the article came from Judge Mark Toohey and his wife Connie. They are vigorous opponents of the military's careless policy. Connie, in particular, is the soul of resistance. She and Judge Toohey are victims of the downwind plumes of dark toxic air each time the Holston Army Ammunition Plant burns weapons and explosives.

Here's a military base in Kingsport, Tennessee, using a British company to manage the open burning of dangerous explosives that, the neighbors of the base complain, poison them and the natural world.

This contemptible behavior by the military is not restricted to Kingsport, Tennessee. It also includes the Radford Army Ammunition Plant, Blacksburg, Virginia; Clean Harbors, Colfax, Louisiana; China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake, California; and Vieques, Puerto Rico.

The residents of the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, have suffered for more than sixty years seeing their home being bombed by the US Navy. They also complain the military has been using their island for developing and testing of all kinds of weapons, including napalm, Agent Orange of Vietnam War infamy, depleted uranium and explosives.

In addition to the physical annihilation of the natural environment, bombing Vieques has had deleterious effects on the health of the island's people, about 9,000 of them. They have had high sickness rates in cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer.

When the news broke out, that US Navy was bombing land next to Americans in Puerto Rico, the embarrassed Clinton and George W. Bush administrations ordered the Navy to stop bombing Vieques. But to its everlasting shame, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which investigated the incidence of disease in the bombed island, failed to find a connection between the illnesses inflicting the people of Vieques and the devastation of the island by the military.

In addition, the people of Vieques have had to endure the health insults of the burning of weapons and explosives out in the open – exactly like those Americans living near other military bases. A Vieques woman, Myrna Pagan, denounced the burning of dangerous explosives in her neighborhood. She said that practice has been responsible for alarming health effects in her community: children contaminated by heavy metals suffering from high rates of cancer and other catastrophic diseases.

Another woman, Laura Olah, director of an environmental and public health organization known as Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger in Wisconsin, is also angry. The military burned explosives in her neighborhood from the 1940s to 1970s. Then the residues of burned explosives contaminated groundwater, which brought disease. She finds the military's policies of disposing its excess weapons and explosives unacceptable.

"Open burning and detonation of munitions causes the uncontrolled dispersion of toxic heavy metals including chromium and lead, energetic compounds, perchlorate, nitrogen oxides and other munitions-related contaminants to the environment," Olah said.

Olah has also been active in a nationwide Cease Fire Campaign of some sixty small environmental, labor, veterans and social justice organizations urging Congress to put a break on the military's dumping its hazardous and explosive wastes in the nation's air and waters.

This campaign is slowly bearing fruit. Two powerful Senators, Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Mitch McConnell (R-KY), coauthored a provision in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act ordering the US Army to move to safer alternatives in destroying its vast amounts of explosives and obsolete weapons.

But the new law, lest it offended the military, it rushed to add science to make the transition less arbitrary. The Army is supposed to fund a two-year study with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine for a report that would identify the safe alternative technologies of destroying military wastes.

This "study" provision is unnecessary because safe alternatives have been available for some time. The military simply has been ignoring them.

According to Mark Toohey, in July 13, 2016, Thomas Connelly, director, American Chemical Society, wrote to the Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and EPA administrator Gina McCarthy. He reminded them that in the context of our "nation's evolved and enlightened environmental laws and regulations it seems outdated to have open burning remaining as an acceptable method of disposal for munitions and chemicals."

But the real rebuke to the failure of the military to be a responsible citizen in America comes from its own ranks. The US Army Corps of Engineers offered solutions. In its March 2012 study, "Alternative Treatment Options for Open Burning of Explosive Waste at Holston Army Ammunition Plant," the military engineers recommended several methods for destroying explosives, including "supercritical water oxidation technologies" as a viable alternative to burning explosives and weapons out in the open.

Mark Toohey wrote me he considers the supercritical water oxidation method the "best solution" in stopping the "insane practice of open burning near residential neighborhoods."

As for the academies study mandated by Congress, Toohey is practical. He says its purpose is "to officially confirm what we already know – many of the same technologies which were developed to treat chemical weapons can be used to treat conventional munitions. The real problem [in] our view is that the military wants to open burn and they will continue to do so until someone gives them a good reason to stop. Perhaps public shame and a demand for accountability will help."

It's possible public shame might work. But until that magical moment arrives when the military is embarrassed for its shameful actions, citizens from around the country need to intensify their campaigns against the military's abuse of power in the United States.

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