

## ECO-FREAKS



### ***Ecofreaks: Environmentalism Is Hazardous to Your Health!***

*\*An Excerpt\**

Thomas Nelson, 2006

By John Berlau

### **HOW RACHEL CARSON DISTORTED THE HISTORY OF DDT**

*For many years, the press portrayed DDT as “double death twice.” – a scary chemical that causes cancer and other maladies in both humans and animals. Negative media coverage was largely the reason it was banned in 1972, even though scientific bodies*

*such as the National Academy of Sciences concluded in was harmless in normal use, and provided tremendous public health benefits in controlling the mosquitoes that spread malaria.*

*But this ban is increasingly being seen as the world’s loss of a tool to fight horrendous disease. In the past few years, no less than the New York Times—in what can be seen as a stunning apology for decades of the establishment press parroting greens’ anti-DDT line—declared regarding DDT, “we have forged an instrument of salvation, and we choose to hide it under our robes.”*

*Yet it has been argued even by those who acknowledge DDT’s benefits that Carson can’t be held accountable, because the facts just weren’t known when she wrote the book in 1962. But the new book [Eco-Freaks: Environmentalism Is Hazardous to Your Health](#) by the Competitive Enterprise Institute’s John Berlau demonstrates that Carson distorted even what was known about DDT risks, benefits, and especially its history. And her biggest distortion concerns the U.S. military’s valiant efforts at using DDT to reduce disease in war zones among U.S. troops, foreign civilians, and, later, victims of the Nazi Holocaust.*

*Far from being developed as an “agent of death,” as Carson claimed, DDT was intended and used as an essential “agent of life.”*

### **RACHEL CARSON’S DECEPTIONS**

Rachel Caron’s *Silent Spring* is credited with launching the modern environmental movement. It made a believer of Al Gore, whose apocalyptic rants about the effects of global warming adorn his 1992 book *Earth in the Balance* and many of his recent speeches. In his introduction to the 1994 edition of *Silent Spring*, Gore writes, “Rachel Carson was one of the reasons why I became so conscious of the environment and so involved in environmental issues. Her example inspired me to write *Earth in the Balance*.”

The man-against-nature theme of Carson’s book resonated, creating a movement. “Without this book, the environmental movement might have been long delayed or never have developed at all,” Gore writes.

Then, Gore picked an interesting comparison, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s antislavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. He says, “Both rank among the rare books that have transformed our society.”

That much is true, but there are important differences. While Stowe's book resulted in giving people their freedom, Carson's tome has resulted in the limiting of freedom and life-saving technologies because of the enslavement of society to the false god of "the natural."

Yet there is another crucial, and even more important, difference. Stowe labeled her book as a novel, but it gave very factual descriptions of the abuses slaves suffered. By contrast, Carson's work is labeled nonfiction, yet it is filled with speculation, distortion to fit the author's purposes, and outright misstatements. And the most notorious and consequential of her fictions concern DDT.

It's true that DDT was relatively new in 1962, and reasonable people could be concerned about possible long-term effects. But Carson manipulated facts about what was known even then. One of Carson's most notorious lies—and yes, this is either an outright lie or extremely willful ignorance—is that DDT was developed in World War II as an "agent of death." She compared it to the development of poison gas.

But DDT was specifically developed to fight the insect-borne diseases that were harming US soldiers. The troops then generously shared the powerful new insecticide to save the lives of others in foreign lands, including those ridden with disease from the horrendous conditions at concentration camps during the Holocaust. And nearly everyone DDT touched in World War II came to view DDT as an essential agent of life.

## **AN AGENT OF LIFE**

One of the few factual statements in *Silent Spring* was Carson's assertion that the pesticide "industry was a child of Second World War." She was right about that. But then in describing the development of DDT, Rachel Carson not only managed to mangle science, she also smeared the noble efforts of the American military that was fighting to save the world from the Nazis.

According to Carson's fractured World War II fairy tale, "In the course of developing agents of chemical warfare, some of the chemicals developed in the laboratory were found to be lethal to insects. The discovery did not come by chance: insects were widely used to test chemicals as agents of death for man."

Here is the truth: During World War II, the military never developed insecticides to kill anyone but bugs. DDT and others were specifically developed to save the lives of our troops. The following is what really happened in one of the most valiant achievements of the US military in that war.

It was 1942, and American troops seemed to face an insurmountable problem. America had entered World War II after being attacked at Pearl Harbor the previous year. But although this problem threatened the American ability to win the war, it had nothing to do with the Germans or Japanese. Rather, our troops were being sickened by the thousands from insect-borne diseases.

General Douglas MacArthur expressed alarm. At any given time, two-thirds of his troops in the South Pacific were afflicted with malaria. Even in cases when malaria wasn't life threatening, the

fever, chills, headaches, and a weakening of the joints that resulted left the soldiers incapable of fighting in some of the most vital theaters of war.

MacArthur and others were also worried about typhus, a deadly disease spread by lice. Today, of course, lice is only associated with mild discomfort and special shampoo. But before DDT, lice, by spreading typhus, had killed millions before and during World War I, and were a threat throughout the war zones as soldiers were placed in close quarters where the disease could spread. It was going to be “a long war,” MacArthur said, unless those diseases could be brought under control.

Indeed, throughout history, there had been many “long wars” due in significant part to insects. Author Jared Diamond is right that “germs”—i.e. transmission of diseases—have certainly made a difference in military victories and the “collapse” of nations. (He is not right, however, about most other things, as we will see in upcoming chapters.) Soldiers traditionally fought very close together in the mud and muck of trenches and foxholes, the ideal place for insect-borne diseases to spread.

Just after World War I started in 1914, Serbia got a nasty surprise when it captured Austrian prisoners. An epidemic of typhus broke out and killed 150,000 soldiers and civilians in six months. This outbreak gave an advantage to the Central Powers of Germany and Austria, an advantage they kept until the United States entered the war in 1917. Diseases that were probably typhus also killed thousands of soldiers in various global conflicts from the Thirty Years War to the Crimean War. Wrote O.T. Zimmerman and Irvin Lavine, two chemical engineering professors from the University of New Hampshire and University of North Dakota, in 1946, “In all the previous wars of history, the louse [singular for lice] had killed more men than ever died from bullets, swords, or other weapons.”

But in World War II, military leaders such as MacArthur had an unyielding faith in American ingenuity. They believed that for the first time, man could conquer not only the traditional enemy but nature’s wrath as well. So the army charged an obscure laboratory of the Department of Agriculture in the then sleepy, swampy town of Orlando, Florida, to find a better way to protect US soldiers against insect-borne diseases.

In its pre-Disney days, Orlando was the ideal place to test insecticides because it had so many insects. The massive Everglades swamps, which ironically the government is now trying to restore, were similar to tropical regions like the South Pacific and had plenty of mosquitoes and flies of their own. Thousands of chemicals were tested, but one compound won hands down: DDT.

Dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane was synthesized in a Swiss lab in the 1870s. But a use for it was never found until the late 1930s, when chemist Paul Muller at the firm JR Geigy (now a part of Ciba Specialty Chemicals) accidentally discovered—after leaving flies in a DDT-laced container overnight—that DDT got rid of insects better than anything.

These tests were confirmed by the agricultural lab in the lakes and swamps of Orlando. And the scientists also found that DDT was persistent; one spray would kill and repel insects from a certain area for months. But production—getting a large amount to the troops who needed it—was still a problem.

The government went to the pharmaceutical company Merck, the only company that knew how to mass-produce chloral hydrate, which contained essential ingredients for DDT. Merck gave the assignment to one of its top chemists, Joseph J. Jacobs. In 1943, Jacobs worked day and night to retrofit a fifty-year-old plant to mass-produce DDT to protect the troops. During the final rush to get the shipment out the door, a valve at the bottom of a large vessel was accidentally opened. Jacobs happened to be standing under it and was covered with hot DDT.

“When it dried, I had DDT an inch thick all over me,” Jacobs recalls in his autobiography *The Anatomy of an Entrepreneur*. “In my hair, in my ears, and in my mouth and nose. I took off my clothes, showered, and scrubbed, but probably ingested more DDT during that one incident than is today considered safe to absorb over many years.”

Before we move on to DDT’s achievements in World War II, I know many readers are wondering about the fate of Joseph Jacobs. After all, in the years after *Silent Spring*, DDT was called “double death twice.” One touch could kill you. And sadly, after being exposed, Jacobs did die—more than sixty years later in 2004, at the tender young age of eighty-eight.

After the war, Jacobs left Merck and formed what is now Jacobs Engineering Group, one of the largest engineering firms in the country. A pioneer among Lebanese Americans, Jacobs also became a noted philanthropist and author. He wrote about everything from science to politics, and is considered to have coined the phrase “Compassionate Conservative,” which was the title of his 1996 book. (Radio host Michael Savage also used the phrase early on and claims credit for coining it.) Texas governor George W. Bush would write Jacobs a letter in 1999 about how much he liked the phrase, and Bush would, of course, use the phrase to help win the 2000 presidential election. But Jacobs had friends from across the political spectrum, including the liberal and fellow Lebanese American Casey Kasem, the popular disc jockey.

Jacobs would come to view with alarm the growing status of the environmental movement. In *The Compassionate Conservative* and in a 2000 interview with him that I was privileged to conduct for *Investor’s Business Daily*, Jacobs expressed fear that environmentalism would harm innovations that could better society. Until he died, Jacobs considered directing the early production of DDT to be one of his finest achievements.

At Merck, Jacobs was also involved in developing the antibiotic penicillin. He put DDT on the same level as this miracle drug, referring to penicillin as “the other great life saving chemical that I am proud to have helped bring to market.” As shocking as this comparison might sound, Jacobs is far from the only bright person who has made it. The perceptive journalist Malcolm Gladwell, author of the best-selling books *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*, wrote in 2001 in the

New Yorker that if DDT was still being used to eradicate malaria, it would today be viewed “in the same heroic light as penicillin and the polio vaccine.”

But I would modify Gladwell just slightly. Based on what DDT achieved in World War II alone, it should already be viewed in that heroic light.

## **PRIVATE DDT**

Shortly after the army picked up the first shipment of DDT that Jacobs had produced in the Merck lab in New Jersey, Private DDT was called up to report for duty on several battlefields.

In the fall of 1943, American troops established a beachhead in Salerno, at the southern point of Benito Mussolini’s fascist Italy. They were advancing up the Italian peninsula when army leaders were warned of trouble. No, it wasn’t a strengthened contingent of Italian or German soldiers. It was the beginning of an outbreak of typhus among the population of Naples. The lowly typhus-spreading louse had stopped or delayed military advances in previous wars. And the generals knew that a typhus epidemic had never before been stopped in the dead of winter. Medical professionals had to wait until March or April for the lice to die out.

But the siege of Italy couldn’t wait, so Brig. Gen. Leon Fox set up an ambitious program to put to work America’s new secret agent of life: DDT. As the soldiers entered Naples, the army also brought gallons and gallons of DDT powder. They spray-dusted the streets, buildings, and even the people. Over one million citizens of Naples were dusted in January of 1944. In places like train stations, US troops sprayed DDT on the people of Naples from their shirt collars down to their shoes. Troops would also spray DDT on themselves in Naples and many other places.

By mid-February the typhus epidemic was completely licked, saving not only our troops, but millions of Italian civilians as well. Gladwell writes that the Naples dusting “sav[ed] countless lives,” and even pesticide critic Edmund Russell acknowledges in his book *War and Nature* that this was “the first instance a typhus epidemic was halted in wintertime.”

After Naples, DDT was called up again and again to defend the soldiers who were defending freedom. The United States Army Air Force attached tanks of DDT under the wings of B-25s and C-47s, and sprayed Pacific beachheads in advance of America’s arrival. When US Marines fell ill from mosquito-borne dengue fever after the 1944 invasion of Saipan, leaders called for a DDT air strike. The dengue was conquered and soon so were the Japanese occupiers at Saipan.

So effective was DDT in the war, that its discoverer, Muller, won the Nobel Prize in 1948. But after the Allies won, there was still one final, vital mission for DDT. The victims of the Holocaust, kept in horrendous conditions in the concentration camps, needed to be liberated from disease after they were liberated from the Nazis.

## DDT RESCUES HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

To understand the epidemic of typhus that struck the Jews in several of the camps, consider the living conditions soldiers and civilians faced during the war and multiply it by one hundred, one thousand, or even one million. There were no bathing facilities and no changes of clothes.

The victims were worked to the bone outdoors, weakening their ability to resist insects such as lice. The insects also swarmed on the mass graves, which were in close contact with the living. Then there were the unimaginably cramped conditions. At Bergen-Belsen, six hundred to one thousand victims were crowded into huts that liberating soldiers judged should have held, at most, one hundred.

Thus many who were not shot, beaten to death, or gassed fell victim to the lice. At Bergen-Belsen, typhus is what killed Anne Frank— whose diary would bring home the horrors of the Holocaust—just three weeks before the camp was liberated by the British. When the liberators arrived, the typhus epidemic was so bad that five hundred victims a day were still dying.

Since America had generously shared DDT with its allies, Britain was able to employ it to save the Bergen-Belsen victims. British forces transformed the lavish barracks of Nazi leaders into hospitals, where the survivors of the camp were “shaved, washed, dusted with DDT powder, [and] wrapped in clean blankets,” notes Holocaust historian Paul Kemp. It was a difficult task, but DDT once again brought the typhus epidemic under control.

When American soldiers liberated Dachau, they instituted a similar DDT dusting program. Writes Jon Bridgman in the authoritative book *End of the Holocaust*, “Seventy-two hours after the first American troops entered the camp a full-scale DDT dusting program was underway which quickly brought the incipient epidemic under control.”

Gloria Hollander Lyon remembers well the DDT spraying she credits with saving her life. A Hungarian Jew, Lyon was sent by the Nazis to seven different concentration camps, including the horrific Auschwitz and the lice-infested Bergen-Belsen. She was rescued from her last camp, Ravensbrück, by the Swedish Red Cross. Then fifteen, she arrived in Sweden on a stretcher, and her hair and body were covered in lice.

At the gymnasium of a Swedish high school, she was given food, a shower, and a new set of clothes. But she was also given something she was not familiar with: a spraying of DDT all over her body. “Everywhere, from head to toe,” she recalled in an interview. And the DDT was applied directly to her skin. “We were totally undressed, naked,” she said.

Before the “dusting,” Lyon recalled, Red Cross officials explained that this was being done to kill the lice before typhus could set in. “They were very open with us, and they had to be, because we were very suspicious of anything,” she said. “We didn’t trust yet. It had just been a few hours since we were in freedom. But they said they had to kill this vermin, the lice, to keep us healthy.”

Lyon described a feeling of relief. The DDT may have stung a little bit, she said, but “we wouldn’t complain about a little thing like that. We were survivors.” She added, “When I think back, I felt really relieved to know that they [the lice] were not going to plague me at night.”

Now seventy-five, Lyon lives in San Francisco and frequently lectures about the Holocaust. In telling her story, she almost always recounts being sprayed with DDT and how it saved her from the potentially deadly lice. She feels strongly that young people should know that sometimes society and individuals have to take risks to prevent a larger risk.

“Every time I talk about it in the schools, the students laugh as if to say, ‘If you had only known how harmful that was,’” Lyon said. “I have heard that it is harmful, but at the same time, we have to make choices at times like that. I just felt that they did it for my benefit. Maybe there was nothing else that they could use. Certainly on so many people.”

### **PRECAUTION CAN BE DEADLY**

Today’s environmentalists wax eloquently about the Precautionary Principle. In green manifestos like the Wingspread Consensus, they argue that if there is any doubt about a certain chemical’s effects, it should not be introduced. Advocates liken it to the adage “Look before you leap.” But, points out science writer Ronald Bailey, the principle goes against another wise adage, “He who hesitates is lost.”

Imagine if the army had followed the Precautionary Principle of today’s advocates. The military and drug companies did do some tests and found that DDT posed no harm to humans, but they could not be certain. But, had DDT not been used in World War II, millions of soldiers, civilians, and Holocaust victims would have died of insect-borne diseases. When talking to students, Gloria Lyon expresses a principle similar to that stated by University of Texas environmental law professor Frank Cross, that in protecting public health, “there is no such thing as a risk-free lunch.”

Chemical pioneer Joseph Jacobs was also critical of the Precautionary Principle. He noted that one of the products he helped develop saved many lives, but also “caused quite a few deaths.” But this substance was not DDT. It was penicillin, which has caused allergic fatalities. No deaths of humans, by contrast, have been linked to DDT.

Yet “no one has ever bemoaned the discovery of penicillin or caused it to be banned,” Jacobs wrote. “If this had been given the Rachel Carson treatment, think of all the lives which would not have been saved.”

And the initial DDT tests have turned out to be right. DDT, used as intended, poses no harm to human health. Even Rachel Carson had to square her apocalyptic warnings with DDT’s successful use in World War II. After all, the war had only ended seventeen years before *Silent Spring* was published, and DDT’s use in the battlefields would be in many readers’ memories. So she conceded in a line that during the war, “so many people came into extremely intimate contact with DDT and suffered no immediate ill effects.” But she never conceded that DDT saved lives. And she then tried to explain that DDT would have long-term effects that could not be known.

But now DDT's benefits and risks—or lack of them—are known. And some perceptive journalists, even some who are liberal, are noting them. Alexander Gourevitch, a scribe for the pro-Democrat *American Prospect*, wrote in the liberal opinion magazine *Washington Monthly*, “But when it comes to the kinds of uses once permitted in the United States and abroad, there's simply no solid scientific evidence that exposure to DDT causes cancer or is otherwise harmful to human beings.

Not a single study linking DDT exposure to human toxicity has ever been replicated.”

A 1971 study in particular demonstrated that DDT posed no hazards to people. In that long-term study, volunteers ate thirty-two ounces of DDT for a year and a half. Sixteen years later, they had suffered no increased risk of adverse health effects.

As for DDT's benefits, Malcolm Gladwell stated in the *New Yorker*, “Between 1945 and 1965, DDT saved millions—even tens of millions— of lives around the world, perhaps more than any other man-made drug or chemical before or since.”

After the war, DDT was used in a variety of applications, from combating insects that spread devastating diseases such as malaria to fighting pests that devastated crops and plants. Humans were not the only ones to benefit from DDT's use—nor were they the only creatures of nature to suffer when DDT was banned.