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Benjamin Pockros

Washington University in St. Louis

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LESIONED LEGACIES: UNITED STATES MUSTARD GAS EXPERIMENTS DURING WORLD WAR II

Benjamin Pockros

Mentors: Elizabeth Borgwardt and Kenneth Ludmerer

The U.S. military intentionally subjected thousands of their own servicemen to toxic mustard gas as the country prepared to wage and to defend against chemical warfare during World War II. Military officials and physician researchers coerced, threatened, and outright forced some of the most vulnerable soldiers—teenagers, low-income draftees, or people of color—to “volunteer” for a variety of dangerous experiments. Some historians have excused the coercive nature and injurious results of these experiments due to the absence of clear legal standards applicable to research on human subjects in the 1940s. This thesis presents clear evidence of contemporaneous research protocols involving informed consent and principles of “beneficence”—a concept related to the later, clearer Hippocratic oath principle of “do no harm.” The designers and executors of the mustard gas research program knowingly transgressed these ethical boundaries. By analyzing archival testimony by veterans exposed to the toxin, as well as laboratory reports from these once-confidential experiments, this thesis seeks to analyze how and in what ways the relevant ethical standards and the U.S. mustard gas research program intersected. Additionally, this thesis explores some of the implications of the fact that these human research subjects were disproportionately soldiers of color. This thesis shows how, given the prevailing mid-century social values around issues of race and ethnicity, white researchers rationalized transgressions of widely-accepted ethical research standards by exploiting the enhanced vulnerability of minority soldiers. The resulting analysis—in many cases based on never-before published evidence—transposes more traditional categories of race and ethnicity onto a wider canvas of vulnerability and exploitation, even as it moves traditional analyses of law and criminality into a greater forum of normative transgressions.