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Peer reviewed

Review: The War on Bugs
By Will Allen

Reviewed by Byron Anderson
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Allen, Will. *The War on Bugs*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008. xxix, 268 pp. ISBN 9781933392462. US\$35.00, paper. Printed on chlorine-free, 20-percent post-consumer-waste old-growth-forest-free recycled paper, using soy-based ink whenever possible.

The book's premise is "that advertising and propaganda campaigns have historically played, and continue to play, a very important role in guiding a farmer's choice in which products to buy" (p. xxi). The content proceeds chronologically from the 1840s to the 2000s. For the past 160 years, farm magazines have advocated for chemical use in agriculture through editorials, testimonials from both scientists and farmers, and saturation advertising. Farm magazines have had undue influence on farmer decisions, especially in convincing them to use chemical-based solutions in declaring a war on bugs, weeds, and declining soil fertility. Early magazines had a near monopolistic advantage with no media competition and free subscriptions.

Use of toxic pesticide on a large scale started in the 1860s with the use of arsenic to control potato bugs. There was notable farmer resistance to adopting chemicals through the 19th century, but by playing on fear of loss of crops and profits, chemical companies, government agencies, and farm magazines convinced farmers to use chemicals in place of biological farming strategies. By the early 1900s, cyanide had replaced arsenic, and later came synthetic nitrogen, hormones, antibiotics, and more recently, genetically modified organisms. Use of farming chemicals reach a phenomenal growth rate, for example, in the 1930s, 3.5 percent of farm acreage used fertilizer with synthetic nitrogen, by the 1990s, it was used by 90 percent.

Through the nineteenth and early twentieth century, farmers did not see chemicals as synthetic poisons and did not know how dangerous they were. Heavy reliance on chemicals did produce, in many cases, short-term benefits, for example, eradication of unwanted bugs. This would last only until the bugs became resistant to the pesticide, a fact well documented in the book. Marketers pictured farmers as being engaged in a war, and this is reinforced by the fact that some of the chemicals used by farmers, for example, parathion and malathion, were also used in war, in this case as nerve poison.

The book contains dozens of copies of advertisements from farm magazines that were used to promote chemical usage over time. Even Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel) becomes involved. The chapter, Pesticide Spray Devices, Household Poisons, and Dr. Seuss, reproduces a number of cartoons by him and others which helped to promote the myth that poisonous chemicals were necessary and not to be feared. The chapter Liebig and the Industrialists provides a good overview of agricultural chemistry and chemists and the emergence of agricultural science. The chapter Twentieth-First-Century Populism: Organic Farming and the Anti-factory-farm Movement ushers in a more hopeful future. The author ends by calling for "an agricultural policy that emphasizes sustainability" (p. 240) with the goal to "be able to buy safe food wherever we live" (p. 241).

Will Allen has a doctoral degree in anthropology and co-manages a large organic farm in Vermont. The book has two useful timelines covering 1865 to 2007, and numerous photos and illustrations ably supplement the text. An appendix outlines the amount of pesticide use on certain crops from California. Notes, a bibliography, and index complete the book. Recommended for public libraries, undergraduate collections, agriculture collections, and anyone interested in the history or expansion of agricultural chemicals.

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