

## BOOK REVIEW

KINKELA D.: DDT & THE AMERICAN CENTURY. GLOBAL HEALTH, ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS, AND THE PESTICIDE THAT CHANGED THE WORLD. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2011, 256 pp., cloth, alk. paper, 235 × 155 mm. ISBN 978-0-8078-3509-8. Price USD 68.95.

DDT is an insecticide on which there are still conflicting views! Its history is intimately linked with the USA. In 1941 Henry Luce wrote an essay "The American Century" in which he asserted that the United States should take its rightful place as the Good Samaritan of the entire world in terms of the possibility of eradicating disease, (e.g. insect-borne diseases), famine and poverty. Entomologists, public health officials and agriculturalists promoted DDT as an American product. The historian David Kinkela of New York University (Fredonia) combines these themes in the above book.

After the accidental synthesis of DDT in Austria by Othmar Zeidler (1874) and the discovery in Switzerland by Paul Hermann Müller in 1939 that DDT is an excellent insecticide (Nobel Prize 1948) the Americans realized its potential and used it extensively during the second world war. It undoubtedly saved the lives of millions of soldiers and at the end of the war enormous quantities of DDT were being produced. After the war there were further amazing successes in for instance Sardinia where the application of DDT reduced the number of cases of malaria from tens of thousands to almost zero and in famine stricken Mexico where it enabled this country to become an exporter of wheat. Some people thought that in DDT mankind had a tool for eradicating all insect pests.

But the situation became complicated when some insects developed resistance to this pesticide. Then there was a gradual realization that DDT occurred and accumulated in human body fat, might be a carcinogen and not only killed noxious but also beneficial insects, and as DDT was often applied recklessly, the opposition to its use gradually increased.

The turning-point was the publication of Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" (1962) in which DDT and other chlorinated insecticides were described as toxic and endangering nature and humans. From that time DDT was no longer seen as means of improving conditions for mankind but a threat to life in general.

In 1972 the production and use of DDT in USA was banned and other countries slowly followed. But that was not the end of DDT as in 2006 WHO officials saw it as one of the best tools for use against malaria! They argued it was indispensable for spraying the insides of houses, cheap and effective, and if used properly, without risk to the health of humans!? They dismissed the negative claims as myths and "junk science"!

In 2005 President Bush jr. announced a \$ 1.7 billion aid package for Africa to be devoted primarily to combating malaria. That is "The American century" would be renewed with a drive to eliminate perpetual poverty, disease and famine. The program would provide indoor spraying, long-lasting insecticide-treated nets and a new combination of drugs for treating malaria. However, this raises the question: indoor spraying with what? It is possible that after some time David Kinkela will write a sequel to this well written, highly informative and useful book.

*J. Chalupský*