9 August 1971

SHOULD THE UNITED STATES CONDUCT BIOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN SECRET?

President Nixon has declared that, "The United States will not engage in the development, procurement or stockpiling of biological weapons. We shall restrict our biological program to research for defensive purposes, strictly defined- such as techniques of immunization, safety measures and the control and prevention of the spread of disease."*

This statement makes clear the President's policy of renouncing any and all uses of biological warfare. However, questions have arisen regarding the sorts of biological research that are permissible and authorized under the new policy. In particular, two closely interrelated questions have come up:

1. Will any biological research be conducted in secret?
2. Will there be continued biological research aimed at developing new types of biological warfare agents?

The principal argument for maintaining a secret research program in biology is that secrecy would be required for the development of new biological warfare agents and that the development of such agents is necessary for defensive purposes. To take an example, the preparation of vaccines for immunization requires specific knowledge of the microorganism against which the vaccine is directed. An enemy, bent on attacking with germs, could develop a new strain of bacteria of which we could be ignorant and against which we could, therefore, not prepare vaccine. This example could be used to argue for a secret U.S. research effort aimed at developing new biological warfare agents for defensive purposes.

It is important to recognize that the recently presented U.S.-Soviet draft treaty on biological weapons does not clearly prohibit such development of new biological warfare agents. This is a serious loophole. Probably the only way to minimize the likelihood of such continued development of BW strains is to accept the principle of no secrecy in biological research.

Arguments for continued secrecy in biological research, such as the one given above involving the production of vaccines, are subject to very serious objections. All countries are already open to biological attack and can do very little about it. There are so many different strains of viruses and bacteria from which an attacker might choose that no agent-specific defense, such as a vaccine, would make much sense. The problem is that a vaccine against one strain of virus or bacteria is generally useless against all other strains of viruses and bacteria. It would, of course, be useful to have a vaccine if one knew the precise identity of the agent to be used by the enemy. However, this is an argument for making intelligence operations effective, not for developing new biological warfare agents in secret. Indeed, the principle of non-secrecy could be of great benefit to such defensive intelligence operations.

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* 'State of the World' Message, 19 February 1970.

Our soldiers can already be protected against chemical and biological attack with existing protective masks and suits. These are generalized defenses that do not depend for their effectiveness on the particular type of biological warfare agent that might be encountered. Detailed knowledge of all possible biological warfare agents is, therefore, not necessary for the design of protective equipment. Moreover, the best defense against biological attack consists in discouraging the development and production of such weapons by others and in maintaining a variety of deterrent capabilities based on completely different weapons systems.

Not only is secrecy in biological research unnecessary for the conduct of a defensive program, it would undermine the main security benefits of President Nixon's policy of renouncing this form of warfare. Attempts to develop improved biological warfare agents would perpetuate and expand the technology of biological warfare. Even if such work were not deliberately aimed at the production of weapons, it would stimulate interest in the possibilities of biological warfare and could place highly developed biological warfare agents in the hands of those who might at some time be tempted to engage in this form of warfare. The result could be a much more serious threat to our security from biological weapons than now exists.

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