

A Disease By Any Other Name . . .

In deciding last November to renounce biological warfare, President Nixon left beclouded an area of policy which has since become the scene of a sharp bureaucratic skirmish. The area concerns toxins. These are poisons generated by living bacteria. Hence, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency told a House committee recently, it is "pretty clear" the President meant to ban them as biological agents. Last year, however, the Pentagon reclassified toxins as chemical agents, ostensibly on grounds that they are not in fact living bacteria. Hence, declared the Pentagon in its House testimony, they are not under presidential edict. So the argument goes. The military, which reportedly has stored 20,000 botulinum bullets and God knows what other weaponized toxins at Pine Bluff Arsenal in Arkansas, wants to retain them. Some nongovernmental critics charge that the President pulled a trick, renouncing the militarily unreliable part of the American biological arsenal while reclassifying the useful part as "chemical."

We have no evidence for accusing the President of such duplicity. Rather, we assume the matter was left gray by inadvertence. To be sure, in Mr. Nixon's CBW statement and in the accompanying White House briefing on it, the distinction drawn between biological and chemical agents was that biologicals spread epidemics randomly and chemicals affect only their direct victims. By this standard, most toxins are chemicals. Only a complete cynic, however, can believe that this is the distinction Mr. Nixon really wanted to draw. The revulsion gen-

erally felt against biological warfare arises from the conviction that disease should not be used as a weapon of war. Surely the President did not mean that, while a disease induced by living bacteria is out of bounds, a disease induced by a toxin is acceptable. He can scarcely have renounced typhoid only to embrace botulism.

Finding itself seized of this issue, the administration may choose to extract some tactical advantage from it—by trading off toxins for tear gases and chemical defoliants. That is, it may conspicuously abandon its claim to toxins in order to mollify the considerable congressional and public opposition to the tear gases and defoliants used in Vietnam. This issue is likely to come to a boil in forthcoming Senate hearings on the Geneva Protocol. The protocol commits signers not to use chemical or biological agents first in war and the President has asked the Senate to ratify it. He has specified, however, that in his reading the protocol does not cover the widely used tear gases and defoliants.

Our own view is that these agents are an integral part of the Vietnam war; that repugnant as they are, the President is not likely to stop using them while American troops are still fighting in Vietnam; and that the important consideration is to avoid the kind of situations where the pressures for their use become so strong. Regardless of that, botulism and the other diseases induced by toxins admit of no similar ambiguity and dispute. They must be banned.