



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Department of Public Health

State Laboratory Institute

375 South Street, Boston 02130

FEB 12

February 10, 1970

Prof. Matthew Meselson
Biological Laboratories
Harvard University
16 Divinity Avenue
Cambridge, Mass. 02138

Dear Matthew:

Enclosed are copies of letters that finally went out yesterday to President Nixon and Secretary Laird. I hope they serve a useful purpose.

Also enclosed is a photostat of an article which illustrates the value of some military research on biologic warfare. The essential point, as I see it, is that the Department of Agriculture (wearing its usual blinders) has refused to pay any attention to Venezuelan Encephalitis because "it is not yet a problem" in the U.S., but the Army Medical Unit at Ft. Detrick has developed an excellent vaccine which, incidentally, was used extensively in some of the recent outbreaks of Venezuelan Encephalomyelitis in horses in Latin America. The article makes this quite clear, but it doesn't sufficiently highlight the extent of the problem that occurred in, for example, Colombia. The outbreak in the Cali area was so striking and so extensive that a special documentary film was made of it and the studies carried out in connection with it. I saw the film a year ago when I was there.

Please keep me posted of your thinking or your actions; I am delighted to do anything I can to help keep the present movement going in the happy direction that you have done so much to instigate.

Sincerely yours,

Geoffrey Edsall, M.D.
Superintendent
State Laboratory Institute

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Encs.

* Not really true. It exists in Florida and has recently proved to be a problem!

February 9, 1970

The Honorable Melvin R. Laird
Secretary of Defense
Washington, D.C.

Dear Secretary Laird:

I shared -- with countless other people throughout the world -- a feeling of deep gratification and relief at the recent decision to curtail the American commitment to chemical and biological warfare, and to terminate development and stockpiling of biological warfare weapons. I feel sure that this decision has greatly increased the stature of the United States and the prestige of its present leadership.

However, I am deeply concerned by the more recent reports that bacterial toxins might be exempted from the ban on the development or use of biological warfare weapons -- on the grounds that they may be considered by some as "chemical" agents. It is true that a case can be made for classifying bacteriological toxins as chemical rather than biological agents. However, it will not stand up to adequate scrutiny either from the public point of view or on the basis of history. I have been involved with biological warfare since early in World War II, and have followed the subject with close attention and interest ever since then.* From the time that intensive work on botulinus toxin was started about 1942, it was recognized by everyone as a bacterial product, it was developed at Ft. Detrick, and it was dealt with in terms of bacterial warfare. Bacterial toxins have been widely publicized as important agents under the general category of "germ warfare", they have been so described in books such as the one by Theodor Rosebury 20 years ago, and many publications since then. Thus both the scientific world in general and the public at large have known such agents as belonging in the biological rather than the chemical warfare category. Bacterial toxins have never, to my knowledge, been treated as "chemical" agents by any group of significance until the recent UN report. Bacterial toxins are derived from bacteria, and they cause the disease that the respective bacteria are responsible for. They are dealt with extensively in books

*I don't want to belabor my credentials, but they can be checked in American Men of Science, in Who's Who in America, and by a call to the Chief, Civilian Personnel, Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

The Honorable Melvin R. Laird

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on bacteriology, but not in books on chemistry. Thus by all ordinary criteria, except for a possible semantic play on words, they are bacterial products. Although some experts (including the UN group) have classified bacterial toxins as "chemical" agents, apparently because toxins do not multiply, and because they could some day be characterized or even synthesized chemically, this view is not generally accepted for the reasons just mentioned.

Consequently, if the United States decides to exclude these products from the ban on bacterial warfare agents, I believe that the credibility of the United States' position will be seriously injured. I am sure that you believe that it is immensely important for us to maintain that credibility. As a scientist, as a public health official, and an individual long concerned with biologic warfare, I have given this question a great deal of thought, and I am sure that there would be worldwide dismay if the proposed exception was made a part of U.S. policy. Therefore I hope very deeply, not only for our country but for all those who represent its leadership, that this idea will be rejected.

Very sincerely yours,

Geoffrey Edsall, M.D.
Superintendent
State Laboratory Institute
Massachusetts Department of Public Health
and
Professor of Applied Microbiology
Harvard School of Public Health

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