

Open Air Discussions

From:
The Miami Herald
Friday, November 9, 1984

Making and stockpiling biological agents "in quantities that have no justification for prophylactic, protective, or other peaceful purposes" was outlawed by a 1972 international treaty that is, admittedly, difficult to enforce.

One way to track the United States' compliance is to require open discussion of its biological-warfare research programs. This is crucial because experts say the line that separates defensive research from offensive is thin. Offensive purposes are illegal.

Thus the way in which the Army recently requested \$1.4 million to work with large quantities of lethal biological sprays causes concern. The Army has sought the money for a maximum-security aerosol-test facility at Dugway Proving Ground in Utah through a special budget process called reprogramming. That process bypasses congressional approval. The laboratory is needed, the Army says, to evaluate biological defensive readiness and to test protective equipment and detection-and-warning systems.

That may be. However, the use of a funding process that avoids full public scrutiny arouses congressional suspicion. Under budgetary reprogramming, unspent money from prior years is shifted to another use. This requires only the approval of the ranking majority and minority members of the appropriate House and Senate subcommittees. The procedure usually is used for routine projects that Congress has authorized.

Sen. Jim Sasser, the Tennessee Democrat, is the ranking minority member of the Appropriations Committee's military construction subcommittee. Senator Sasser withdrew his

support for the request last week. He asked Sen. Mack Mattingly, a Georgia Republican, chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee, to do the same. Senator Sasser contends that the Dugway facility "raises important questions with regard to potential capabilities for testing and production of offensive lethal biological and toxin weapons."

Senator Mattingly has the option of polling subcommittee members to get approval. However, Senator Sasser suggests that the request be withdrawn and submitted to Congress in the normal way. That's the appropriate way to proceed.

Village Advertiser Commentary:

Just how much credence should our adversaries give an American promise neither to make nor stockpile biological agents illegally? Small wonder the Soviets show little enthusiasm for treating with us negotiating with us for arms control when Tennessee Senator Sasser apparently suspects the Army is attempting to achieve, through duplicity, something Congress might disapprove, given the opportunity.

And while we're on the subject, is it not astonishing that a special budget process exists to bypass Congress and to avoid public scrutiny? Budgetary reprogramming, we learn, enables funds authorized for one purpose to be diverted to almost any other purpose. Tricky.

Small wonder the average taxpayer has little knowledge of, and even less control over, how or for what purposes his dollars are removed from him and spent. Small wonder the average taxpayer rebels.