

Why He Saved the CIA Poison

Chemist Found Loophole in Order to Destroy Toxin

By Norman Kempster
Washington Star Staff Writer

Dr. Nathan Gordon is the sort of bureaucrat who talks about searching his "memory bank" when he is trying to recall something and who can narrow the meaning of words until all communication disappears.

Gordon, a chemist who formerly headed the CIA's three-man biological branch, apparently decided on his own 5½ years ago to keep deadly shellfish toxin which former President Richard M. Nixon clearly wanted to be destroyed.

But the way Gordon spun out his story to the Senate Select Intelligence Committee yesterday, he was not violating a presidential order — he said he would be a "darn fool" to do that — but just obeying it very selectively.

ON NOV. 25, 1969, Nixon announced that the United States had decided to renounce the use of biological weapons. He ordered stocks of such weapons destroyed.

Gordon related that he was distressed by the order because "we were beginning to see the demise of the military biological and chemical warfare program."

But then he spotted a loophole. The order applied to biological weapons. Shellfish toxin, although seemingly of biological origin, was a chemical. The order, Gordon told the senators, said nothing about chemicals.

Apparently that same ambiguity was brought to the attention of the White House, because on Feb. 14, 1970, Nixon issued a clarification. He said he wanted toxins to be destroyed, whether biological or chemical.

BUT, GORDON explained, the second order was directed to the Defense Department and the CIA is not part of the Defense Department.

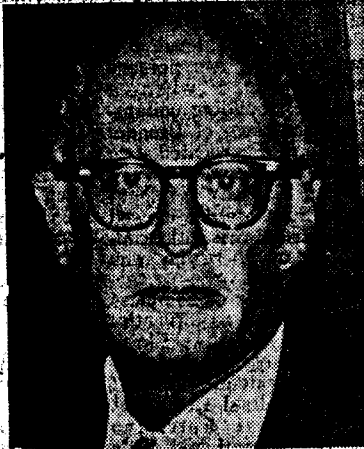
That explanation left many of the senators gasping for breath. They repeatedly asked Gordon to explain the distinctions. For more than 2½ hours, Gordon obliged. He went over his explanation again and again.

Gordon said the decision to keep 11 grams of the shellfish toxin, enough to kill at least 11,000 people and perhaps more, was made by him and his two assistants. He said he did not inform his superiors of the decision.

Gordon said when he first heard of Nixon's order he discussed ways of circumventing it with his immediate superior, Dr. Sidney Gotlieb, then head of the CIA's Technical Services Detail.

HE SAID Gotlieb, who also supervised CIA tests with LSD, suggested that methods of evasion be put into memo form.

Gordon said he drafted a memo for the signature of Thomas H. Ka-



DR. NATHAN GORDON
Didn't tell superiors

ramessines, then head of CIA covert activities. But when he returned with the draft memo, Gordon said, Gotlieb had decided that the CIA must comply with the presidential order and terminate the poison program which was code named MKNAOMI.

Gordon said later he received a telephone call from Charles Senseny, head of the special operations division of the Army's Biological Laboratories at Ft. Detrick, Md., asking if the CIA would like to save its supply of shellfish toxin from destruction.

Gordon said he accepted the offer without checking with higher authority.

As it turned out, the CIA received not only its 5 grams of the poison but also 6 grams from some other agency. Gordon said he accepted and stored the poison without noticing that the shipment was more than twice as big as expected.

From the CIA's standpoint, the explanation could hardly have been more agreeable. Instead of a high-level decision in the CIA to defy a presidential order, the incident was reduced to a simple case of bureaucratic hair-splitting.

RICHARD HELMS, the U.S. ambassador to Iran who was CIA director at the time, sat in the audience section of the committee room and listened intently.

Meanwhile, President Ford told a press conference that he is considering a series of reforms to prevent future CIA abuses. But he declined to spell them out. Although the President hinted in an interview with the Chicago Sun-Times published earlier in the day that he might recommend moving CIA covert political activities to another agency, he provided no details.

Asked if he would prohibit U.S. interference in the politics of another country, Ford said, "I wouldn't rule

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out necessary political activities by the United States if it involves our security."

The President also renewed his order to provide no additional classified material to the House Intelligence Committee, headed by Rep. Otis Pike, D-N.Y., until he receives assurances that classified material will not be made public. Ford issued the order Friday after the committee overruled CIA objections and released a document without removing four words dealing with Egyptian communications.

"IF A PRIVATE citizen were to release that information involving communications intelligence, it would be a serious criminal offense," Ford said. "I am not saying that the Congress has violated a

criminal law, or this committee has done so. I only use that as an illustration to show how serious the Congress felt the release of that information would be because they passed a law saying if you or any one of you released it, it would be a serious criminal offense."

The Senate committee's probe of the CIA's retention of the poisons marked the panel's first public hearing after eight months of a closed-door investigation of plots to assassinate foreign leaders.

Sen. Howard Baker, R-Tenn., said the assassination investigation should be the subject of public hearings, but other members of the committee apparently were unwilling to go along.

CIA Director William E. Colby told the committee that a "middle level employe" had decided to keep the poison "based on the fact that the cost and difficulty of isolating the shellfish toxin were so great that

it simply made no sense to destroy it," Gordon admitted that he was the employe and he supported Colby's version of the happening.

GORDON SAID he left the CIA at the end of 1972, but Colby said another person who had been involved in the matter is still employed by the agency. The director said disciplinary action was "under advisement."

Gordon's explanation of how the toxin was retained did not answer questions about the possible uses of a deadly poison for which there is no known antidote.

Colby said one possible use was as a "suicide pill," which a CIA agent could use in the event of capture. Colby said existing pills using more conventional poisons are slower and more painful.

But Colby said the shellfish toxin was issued in a suicide kit just once, in 1960 when U2 pilot Francis Gary

Powers took it on his sp flight over the Soviet Union. Powers was shot down but did not prick his skin with the poisoned needle hidden in a silver dollar.

COLBY ALSO indicated the toxin could be used as a murder weapon, although he said it never has been. He showed the committee a battery-powered dart which could poison a victim at a range of 100 yards.

A lethal dose of the fish toxin is so small it probably could not be detected in an autopsy.

Sen. Barry Goldwater, Ariz., a committee member whose attendance has been criticized by Sen. Church, made his appearance. He had a hearing until an opportunity to come around. He sued an emotional outburst of the CIA and did not return for a day.