

ART BUCHWALD REPORTS



It's Not the Germs-- It's Where and Why

WASHINGTON — Sometimes one gets the feeling that the right-hand germs in the government don't know what the left-hand germs are doing. This was brought home to me the other day when I read about the millions being spent to see that the astronauts did not bring back a single germ from the moon.

Across the page from that story was another that the Army was going ahead with open-air testing of nerve gases and germ warfare.

I went to see my friend Prof. Heinrich Applebaum, the government microbiologist and germ warfare expert.

"PROFESSOR, I don't understand why we're going to do so much trouble protecting the earth from moon germs when we are still experimenting with germs for warfare."

"One does not have anything to do with the other," Applebaum said angrily. "We must be certain in our space program that we do not do anything to contaminate the earth. This is essential to the survival of mankind."

"Then why are we experimenting on earth with germs for war?"

"That's different. If we contaminate the earth with

germs, everyone understands that we are only defending ourselves from the other side. But if we brought back moon germs and something happened, no one would forgive us."

"What kinds of germs could be on the moon that are any worse than the germs you're experimenting with?"

Applebaum said, "We don't know what kind of germs they have on the moon, and we have to be particularly cautious to make sure our astronauts don't bring back infection. After all, the space program is devoted to peace. Now, the germs we have here we know about, and those germs are important to our defense program."

"But what if you had an accident in which the earth germs got out?"

"We don't like to think about things like that. If we did, we wouldn't have a germ warfare program."

"But how can the same people on one hand spend all this money to see that no germs come back from the moon, and on the other spend money to figure out ways of spreading germs around the world?"

"You don't understand,"

said Applebaum, slamming his fist on the desk. "It's two different departments. The Defense Department doesn't tell NASA what to do with their germs and NASA doesn't tell the Defense Department what to do with their germs."

"Well," I said, "why doesn't the Defense Department do its germ testing on the moon?"

"BECAUSE," said Applebaum, breaking a test tube in his hand, "we don't want to contaminate the moon. We know the earth is contaminated, but we're hoping to keep the moon clean."

"Why?"

"Because someday we may want to test earth germs in a germless atmosphere."

"I have one thought, professor. They wouldn't let President Nixon have dinner with the three astronauts because the doctors were afraid his germs might affect them. Why don't they make it up to the President by letting him have dinner with the people in the Defense Department who are working on germ warfare?"

Applebaum screamed at me, "Get out of here. And don't come back."

(C. 1969, The Washington Post, Co.)