

Playing with poison *Star 9/19/75*

You have to bear in mind that the advertised purpose of this week's sensational Senate hearings on the CIA's stock of deadly poisons, in keeping with the Church Committee's mandate, is to learn why a 1970 presidential order to destroy them was not obeyed — and thus, presumably, to throw more light on the bizarre immunity to ordinary checks and controls the CIA has developed over the years.

At this writing, the answer to that question appears to be fairly simple: The White House order, relayed orally down the ranks by CIA Director Richard Helms, bounced at the middle level. A chemist familiar with the difficulties of distilling toxins from Alaskan clams decided on his own to lock the supply away, in case there should be a future "requirement." A mere collapse of the chain of command in any agency seems, after all, dully routine. It is far more interesting to ponder the more interesting, if subsidiary, question of why the CIA got into the poison business.

Certainly the revelations of the week are as lurid as a page from Baron Corvo's history of the Borgias, evoking pictures of sinister rings menacingly tilted over wine glasses at Renaissance dinner tables.

At the committee hearings, there were wan efforts to pass off the agency's interest in poisons as a search for effective suicide potions for foreign agents — although in the only known instance in which the option was provided, that of Colonel Powers, the U-2 pilot, the poison needle was not used.

Estimates varied, as estimates will, of how many deaths could be compassed by the CIA's secret cache of poisons, but they range from 14,

000 up to 50,000, which seems a lot of suicides. The suicide theory is further clouded by the exhibition at the hearing of what was called a "nondiscernible microbionoculator," that is, in plain words, a pistol that shoots barely visible toxic darts with accuracy at 100 meters, causing rapid suffocation difficult to detect in an autopsy. No one suggested that these weapons were to be standard-issue suicide guns, and it must be assumed that more aggressive uses were in mind. But what? Who authorized the development of this weapon and with what "projects" in mind? Or was the microbionoculator an idle spinoff of chemical warfare technology?

No answer to such questions, but perhaps a clue to an answer, is suggested by a related project — the experimental use of the New York subways as a "threat model" for a chemical or biological attack — and by the evasive language in which a memo reported on it. A world in which a poison dart pistol becomes a "nondiscernible microbionoculator" and a public transportation system in a major city a "threat model" is a world out of touch with common standards of decency, good sense and civility. Its language, accordingly, becomes a kind of verbal curare, numbing the thought processes to a point of technical preoccupation.

It has been suggested — notably by William F. Buckley — that there are some questions about secret intelligence work we should not ask nor want the answers to. But sometimes we get the feeling that the answers are probably less sinister than one might fear. It may be that the CIA got into poisons because, in secret agencies, grown men like to play with poisons — especially if the curse can be taken off the word by calling them "toxic substances." But who knows?