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'Just Put a Little
In the Bottom Drawer'

DAO 9/19/75

Many people come away from the Senate CIA hearings with the feeling they're lucky to be alive.

It certainly isn't because the CIA failed to "keep up to speed" as they like to say, in the brewing of health hazards. In the test kitchens which the agency shared with the Army at Fort Detrick, Md., there was enough cobra venom, shellfish toxin, strychnine and cyanide to "terminate with extreme prejudice" any number of human lives, cattle, crops and subway systems.

The CIA says it has gone out of the Borgia business. But they said that before — when Richard Nixon in 1970 ordered them to smash all their vials and they didn't.

It is best to be careful.

IF YOU SEE an able-bodied man leaning on a cane, for instance, be wary. Avoid anyone carrying a large umbrella on a sunny day.

If you notice exploding buttons, an exploding fountain pen or cigarette lighter, you are in trouble. These are all "delivery systems" devised for getting the deadly product into the consumer.

Why was the CIA cooking up these lethal batches? None of the witnesses could say. Former Director Richard Helms spoke soothingly of the agency responsibility of "being in the vanguard of those exotic things."

They were "defensive weapons," apparently. Helms suggested that the poisons had to be manufactured so that we would be able to repel a toxic attack by the enemy.

But Dr. Edward Schantz, a professor at the University of Wisconsin who once presided over the Fort Detrick laboratory, said that as far as he knew the United States is the only country which produces shellfish toxin, Detrick's proudest product. It can render a person eternally inoperative in 20 seconds flat. So the overall rationale that "the Russians are doing it" did not apply.

THE ONLY "feasibility study" so far confessed to was conducted in a New York subway between 14th Street and 54th Street. Its aim was to discover the "vulnerability" of the system, to which many passengers, fearful of being squashed, stepped on or possibly stabbed, could have at-

tested.

Point of View

The test, according to a participant, Charles Senseney also formerly of Fort Detrick, was a success. He dispensed nontoxic gas from an aerosol can and so provided "a threat model." Probably no one noticed him. New York subways are full of troubled people and his fellow passengers may have taken him for a germ freak trying to purify the environment instead of measuring it for disaster.

Sen. Gary Hart, D-Colo., couldn't understand why the CIA was plotting so many coups against cattle, crops and subways.

He had, of course been listening to the story of how the CIA circumvented President Nixon and saved a little poison from its crowded shelves. The CIA version is that a couple of middle-level fanatics, reluctant to destroy poisons created at great expense, had made the decision on their own.

Could not, Hart asked Helms, the same kind of people decide to conduct some live experiments with the other deadly agents at their disposal.

Helms bridled, accused Hart of "drawing a long bow" and of being unfair. He haughtily demanded that Hart rephrase the question.

HART ASKED what guarantees there were to insure that middle-level maniacs would not take matters into their own hands again.

Helms replied stiffly that he knew of "no such case."

The committee, thwarted in its efforts to find out why the fatal potions were produced, drew up a letter to CIA Director William E. Colby, suggesting that the remainder be given to medical schools and laboratories to be used for "benign and decent" purposes.

The letter has been sent. But after listening to CIA witnesses for three days, many people can see it happening all over again, men drawing the wagons around the potions, murmuring, "this will pass" or "just put a little in the bottom drawer."

THE POISONS were not destroyed. The records were. Helms told the committee the order to deep-six the stuff in 1970 was given "verbally" and explained that if a secret intelligence organization wrote everything down it wouldn't last long.

Much talk was heard about revising the "command and control" structure of the agency. But the question that hung over the hearings was whether those in command really tried to control those who were in favor of saving the poison, or whether they were in secret agreement with the agency's general philosophy, which seems to be that you can't have too much of a bad thing.