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The C.I.A. Toxins

Should Be Preserved

To the Editor:

Unfortunately, the recent investigation of the C.I.A.'s "stockpiling" of two toxins has led to serious misconceptions on the part of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, headed by Senator Frank Church, and the news media.

Although we do not condone the C.I.A.'s apparent intended use of saxitoxin (produced naturally by "red-tide" bacteria and concentrated in shellfish) and cobra toxin, we applaud the foresight of the C.I.A.'s chemical section to preserve these invaluable substances. It is ridiculous to assert that the eleven grams (less than one-half ounce) of saxitoxin and the eight milligrams (a tiny drop) of cobra toxin could be used as a "mass murder weapon" in the same sense as the tons of nerve agents and the countless plague and other germs that were stockpiled by the Defense Department until recently. Indeed, most pest exterminators have much larger quantities of lethal chemicals (e.g., parathion, the rat and insect poison that is only 200 times less toxic than saxitoxin) on hand than the C.I.A.'s stockpile."

To destroy this priceless supply of saxitoxin would be nothing short of criminal and makes as much sense as destroying the heart drug nitroglycerine because it is used in explosives or morphine because it is found in the opium plant.

Saxitoxin's potential value to medical and chemical research cannot be overstated and we urge that the Senate Committee recommend that these materials be turned over to the research laboratories of the National Institutes of Health. Not only does it seem probable that knowledge about saxitoxin and its toxic effects will provide an antidote to "red-tide" (paralytic-shellfish) poisoning, which can be fatal to people who eat contaminated shellfish, but also, as Dr. Murdock Ritchie of Yale points out, it will provide essential knowledge about nerve action and the diseases of the central nervous system.

This supply of saxitoxin must not be destroyed simply because it was studied as a possible espionage agent.

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