Fort Detrick: Redeployment?

As a result of President Nixon's decision to renounce biological warfare (*Science*, 5 December), one of the nation's largest collections of microbiologists, plus assorted other scientific personnel at the Army's Fort Detrick, Md., have been left in a state of uncertainty about the future. Detrick's personnel and laboratories represent such an important scientific resource for the containment and study of infection materials, that the key question seems to be not whether Detrick, but whither.

The home of germ warfare research lost the most controversial part of its mission when the President decided to terminate preparations for offensive biological warfare (BW). Defensive BW research is to be continued, but at this time it is not clear (i) on what scale, (ii) where, and (iii) if at Detrick, under whose auspices. A White House spokesman, since identified as Henry A. Kissinger, on 25 November said the Administration hopes to transfer much defensive BW research to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. A Pentagon research official recently acknowledged that the future of Detrick is under study, but neither he nor a spokesman for the Public Health Service could explain the ramifications of Kissinger's statement. And Riley Housewright, director of research at Detrick, said in an interview that "we have no word whether we will remain in the Army or will be shifted elsewhere in the Defense Department or to some other agency of government." Meanwhile, Housewright said, a combination of the President's decision and budgetary reductions have led to a 12 percent cut in personnel at the biological laboratories over the past year, to about 1550, and further sizeable cuts are in prospect after the first of the year. Housewright said he has the Pentagon's approval to explore the possibility of obtaining research contracts for Detrick from the National Cancer Institute and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

On the assumption that Detrick is up for grabs, witnesses at a recent Congressional hearing on chemical and biological warfare offered two novel proposals. Joshua Lederberg, a Stanford geneticist and Nobel prizewinner, proposed that the installation be devoted to "public research available to the international community for defenses against biological attack, both natural and . . . from other sources." Lederberg told a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee headed by Representative Clement J. Zablocki (D–Wis.) on 2 December he thinks "there is a considerable amount of self-delusion . . . that the antibiotics will take care of any bacteriological infection; . . . that the plague has been conquered by medicine; that virus infections will somehow be taken care of."

But "when you see a pandemic like the Hong Kong flu, you have a foretaste of what really can happen. That was a world-wide epidemic. The attack rate was something like 20–30 percent of the world's population. . . . It was not a particularly lethal one, but it is only a minor accident that it was not. Such events are undoubtedly going to occur in the future that will be very much nastier. . . .

"I think many public health authorities are reluctant to arouse public alarm and they are afraid that this would happen if they properly exposed the dimensions of the problem. . . . [Now] we have the opportunity to combine many motives in a constructive way in the furtherance of a very high level of micro-biological research, partly dedicated to the international, multinational defensive measures that each country would like to know are available to it, so that some neighboring small country can't just take a pot shot at them. . . . We also need exactly the same measures against world-wide disease."

In a different vein, Yale biologist Arthur W. Galston suggested at the hearing that "if Fort Detrick were turned into a center for testing the many chemicals in our everyday life" for their toxicological effects, "it would become a national shrine." Scientists in other specialties would appear to be better suited to such a task than Detrick's biologists, but Representative Benjamin S. Rosenthal (D–N.Y.) was enthusiastic. "We could call it the Rachel Carson Center," he said.—ANDREW HAMILTON

pending in the Michigan legislature which would give Michigan conservationists a potent new weapon. Under this measure, any citizen could bring suit against any person or agency to safeguard the natural resources of the state and to protect the "public trust."

If courts should ever apply the trust doctrine or the Ninth Amendment argument in a wide variety of environmental cases, this would force the executive and legislative branches to move at a faster pace in setting and enforcing standards for environmental protection. Although the environmental problem and the racial problem are not closely parallel, it may be instructive to recall that the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling against racial segregation in public schools triggered the release of dynamic social and political forces that produced the major civil rights legislation of the 1960's.

If courts leap too far ahead of public opinion, they do so at their peril, for, being empowered of neither the "sword nor the purse," they depend on the executive and legislative branches—and ultimately on the electorate—to see that their edicts are obeyed. But today courts are probably behind public opinion with respect to questions of environmental protection. During the 19th century and the early 20th century the courts became, in a real sense, the instruments of laissez-faire economics. In one classic case, decided by a Tennessee court in 1904, two copper smelting companies were allowed to continue their practice of reducing copper ore by cooking it over open-air wood fires, a process that produced billowing clouds of sulfur dioxide smoke which made a wasteland of the surrounding valley.

Farmers who had complained were told by the court that they were not entitled to injunctive relief because "the law must make the best arrangement it can between the contending parties, with a view to preserving to each one the largest measure of liberty possible under the circumstances." Roberts, the Cornell law professor, observes that " 'liberty' here meant that the companies were free to create a wasteland if they paid for it [some damages were awarded], whereas the farmers were free to take jobs with the industry and continue to reside in a valley totally polluted with chemicals."

Judicial attitudes have, of course, been evolving and, in a variety of matters involving the public interest and the social welfare, the private entrepre-