cials point out that 20,000 commercial containers enter the United States each day. About 1 million illegal aliens were arrested last year crossing the U.S. border on foot, a subset of the number who tried to get through. Any number could have served as drug carriers.

It is not enough just to have more patrol cars, boats, and planes; the patrol forces must know what to look for. Choosing targets is not simple. Already the guide to suspicious boat profiles is so thick as to be of little use.

The data collected by Reuter show that a skilled player in this game, the Coast Guard, found drugs on only one of every eight boats it boarded in 1986, even when acting on intelligence. It had less success on routine patrols. Therefore, doubling the number of patrols by adding Navy vessels will not double the success rate, unless intelligence is vastly improved. Meanwhile, because of budget cuts, the Coast Guard this year reduced patrols by 55%.

Reuter's well-documented conclusion is that a big increase in the interdiction campaign will bring just a modest reduction, if any, in cocaine imports.

Mark Moore, a senior analyst of drug enforcement who advises the DEA and teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School, also sees interdiction as a tool whose value has been exaggerated, but considers it necessary all the same. "I think it's the weakest instrument we've got in the portfolio," Moore says. He would stress instead what he sees as the weakest part of the adversary's system, the need to rely on contracts that have no legal value.

The main concern of drug dealers, Moore says, is that they will be ripped off. They respond by creating organizations that can enforce contracts with violence and can process money in secret. The biggest payoff for the police, he thinks, would come from attacking the money-handling core of the drug trade, not the transportation system. Over the long term, Moore says, capital is in shorter supply than raw materials or labor.

Recently, as members of Congress have educated themselves again on the complexities of drug enforcement, there has been a scramble to find alternatives to interdiction. There is a new battle cry, heard with increasing frequency—attack demand! By this, legislators mean different things. They would educate children about drugs, invoke harsher penalties for drug users, test workers' urine for drugs, and spend more money on treatment programs. But so far, the debate suggests that most of the new funds for the war on drugs this year will go into the high-cost, low-benefit attack on smugglers and dealers. ■ **ELIOT MARSHALL**

Post Office Nixes Germs by Mail

Neither rain nor sleet nor snow is one thing. Anthrax, Q fever, and plague are another. The Postal Service does not want to deliver disease-causing microorganisms any more. Spurred by apprehension over the Army's growing research program on the implements of biological war, the Postal Service last week proposed a ban prohibiting the mailing of pathogenic organisms.

The ban, however, would prohibit the mailing of all etiological agents, not only those highly infectious microbes of interest to biowarriors. If the proposal is approved, the post office would refuse many common pathogens intensely studied by researchers, including the viruses that cause measles, mumps, herpes, and hepatitis. Mailing enteropathogenic strains of *Escherichia coli* will also be prohibited, as will the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and the cause of the common cold. Commercial carriers will not be adversely affected by the Postal Service ban.

"This is draconian," says Robert Stevenson of the American Type Culture Collection in Rockville, Maryland, perhaps the nation's largest distributor of cell cultures and microorganisms. "Is this going to make etiological agents move more safely through the system? No. What this is going to do is make research ten times more expensive. That's all." The American Type Culture Collections sends about 40,000 shipments a year, of which about 900 include organisms considered extremely hazardous, but these are usually freeze-dried and therefore relatively safe to ship.

Until now, a researcher who wished to send *Yersinia pestis* to a colleague by registered U.S. mail could do so, as long as the investigator placed the bacterial agent responsible for plague in a special canister and affixed a label to the package warning mail handlers that it contained biomedical materials that caused disease.

There are at least 100,000 shipments of etiological agents each year, according to John McVicar, director of the Office of Biosafety at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta. McVicar does not know how many move through the U.S. mail and how many are shipped with commercial carriers such as Federal Express and United Parcel Service.

CDC is responsible for responding to complaints of damaged shipments. McVicar reports that CDC receives about 50 calls each year, and of these, about three episodes involve leaks of etiological agents. "We have never recorded anyone becoming infected as a result of a leak," says McVicar. "It just doesn't happen. . . . The string of improbabilities is too great."

Yet accidents do happen. The CDC, for one, lost track of a shipment of Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever virus it sent to the Army's Fort Detrick facility. Indeed, the package arrived, but it did not contain the hemorrhagic fever agent. CDC went so far as to rifle the dead letter stacks at the post office. In the end, CDC concluded that the shipment had been thrown away and was never mailed to begin with.

According to Robert McKinney, head of the safety division at the National Institutes of Health: "The post office has been transporting biologicals for many, many years. There is absolutely no evidence that anyone has ever been contaminated from handling these materials." McKinney calls the proposed ban "an emotional reaction."

Jeremy Rifkin of the Foundation on Economic Trends is responsible for much of the concern. He first raised the issue in connection with the possibility that the Army planned to increase shipments of highly infectious agents. "A person working in the post office should be provided with the same protections as the technicians dealing with the etiological agent in the lab," says Rifkin.

Ironically, the Army's leading laboratory for biowarfare research at Fort Detrick, Maryland, prefers to use commercial carriers rather than the Postal Service. Last year it mailed 48 shipments of etiological agents to other institutions, according to Thomas Dashiell, director of the Environmental and Life Sciences at the Department of Defense. All traveled by overnight express. Why? "Greater certainty of timely arrival of the specimens rather than any particular safety goal," reports Dashiell.

The ban would not affect shipments of diagnostic specimens such as blood, urine, and tissue. For example, a hospital could still mail blood specimens to a laboratory to test for the presence of HIV. But the lab could not send the positive blood samples back to the hospital, knowing that the samples contained an etiological agent.

■ **WILLIAM BOOTH**