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May 25, 1943

Dr. Enrico Fermi  
Metallurgical Laboratory  
University of Chicago  
Chicago, Illinois

(257)

Dear Fermi:

I wanted to report to you on the question of the radioactively poisoned foods, both because there are some steps that I have taken, and because Edward Teller has told me of the difficulties into which you have run.

When I was in Washington I learned that the Chief of Staff had requested from Conant a summary report on the military uses of radioactive materials and that Conant was in the process of collecting the material for that report. I therefore, with Groves' knowledge and approval, discussed with him the application which seemed to us so promising, gave him a few points of detail and some orders of magnitude. I raised the question of what steps, offensive and defensive, should be taken in this connection. It is my opinion, and it was also Conant's, that the defensive measures would probably preclude our carrying out the method ourselves effectively, and therefore I asked that in his report the question of policy be raised as to which of these lines we should primarily follow. This report, and you will undoubtedly have heard of it in other connections, is to go directly to General Marshall so that it will have authoritative if not expert consideration. I hope to discuss the question further when Conant visits here in ten days.

I also plan to go into the matter a little more deeply with Hamilton, although of course only on the physiological side. As you know, he has already made studies of the strontium which appears to offer the highest promise, and he expressed his willingness to look into these questions more fully. I think that I can do this without in any way indicating the nature of our interest, but it will be some time, perhaps three weeks, before I get to see him.

I understand the difficulties that you have had in getting this subject developed without telling anyone about it,

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For The Atomic Energy Commission

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and it is hard for me to give very sound advice on what to do. I think that there is at least one quite well defined radio-chemical problem, which is the separation of the beta-strontium from other activities. It is my impression after talking it over with Teller, that this is not a very major problem except in so far as provision would have to be made for carrying it out by remote control at the actual site of operations. I do not see how this can be done without letting a number of people into the secret of why we want the strontium. I should therefore like to ask you what you think the latest safe date is for the solution of this and other problems. It seems to me that we have a much better chance of keeping your plan quiet if we do not start work on it until it is essential to do so. If, in your opinion, the time for such work is now, I believe that you should discuss it with Allison and Franck and on their advice, if absolutely necessary, with Compton, and that perhaps this group of people will be enough to get the work done without more wide-spread discussion. In a general way I think we have better facilities here for keeping things of that kind within a well defined group, namely, the scientific personnel of the laboratory, than exists in other places. On the other hand, I do not think that we are equipped to tackle the problem with anything like the expedition that you can in Chicago.

To summarize then, I should recommend delay if that is possible. (In this connection I think that we should not attempt a plan unless we can poison food sufficient to kill a half a million men, since there is no doubt that the actual number affected will, because of non-uniform distribution, be much smaller than this.) If you believe that such delay will be serious, I should recommend discussion with a few well-chosen people. Finally, I should postpone this action until I have had an opportunity to reopen the question with Conant and if possible to obtain information on the decision of the General Staff.

Things here are going quite well and we are still remembering with pleasure and profit your fine visit. I hope that you can come again late in June, and that we shall have at that time some less programatic problems to discuss with you.

With all warm greetings,

*Robert Oppenheimer*

Robert Oppenheimer

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