

Polonium and Terrorism

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To the Editor:

“The Smoky Bomb Threat,” by Peter D. Zimmerman (Op-Ed, Dec. 19), reflects an unnecessarily alarmist view of the apparent poisoning of the former K.G.B. spy Alexander Litvinenko with the radioisotope polonium 210 by projecting the incident as a terrorist threat to the public.

I take strong exception to Mr. Zimmerman’s view of Nuclear Regulatory Commission regulations and the International Atomic Energy Agency’s Code of Conduct on the Safety and Security of Radioactive Sources.

Alpha emitters were considered by the N.R.C. and the I.A.E.A. in the development of the code. But some alpha emitters, like americium 241, made the cut, and others, like polonium 210, did not.

Polonium 210 is not widely used in the United States. In small quantities and secure forms, it is used in devices that control static. Such devices are designed according to tough national standards.

Mr. Zimmerman underestimates the difficulty for any potential terrorist in accumulating enough of these devices and extracting the tiny amounts of polonium 210 from their housings.

Former Russian spies may tremble at Mr. Litvinenko’s fate. The American public should not. More information is available at www.nrc.gov, under “Key Topics.”

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Commissioner

Nuclear Regulatory Commission

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