view Group (RARG), which is headed by Charles L. Schultz, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), and includes among its other members representatives of about a dozen economic and regulatory agencies. An executive committee selects 10 to 20 regulatory analyses a year (with no more than four from any one agency) for review by the analysis review group as a whole because of their inadequacy, large potential economic effect, or whatever.

The CWPS prepares a draft report on all regulatory analyses chosen for such review, and, once accepted by RARG, this report goes into the public record along with all other comment by government agencies and private parties on the proposed regulation.

The final upshot of such a review may be a decision by Schultz, as chairman of RARG, to intercede personally in an attempt to have the proposed regulation modified or withdrawn. He could either meet personally with the head of the agency involved or even take the matter to the President.

The RARG mechanism has not existed long enough to have really been tested. The only environmental regulation to undergo a formal review by the new group so far is one proposed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration

Briefing

Social Security Computers Vulnerable, GAO says

The Social Security Administration's (SSA) vast computer network, which authorizes the distribution of $103 billion each year to one out of every seven Americans and keeps records on nearly all Americans, is vulnerable to electronic snoopers, dishonest employees, bogus beneficiaries, and even janitors and repairmen, according to a report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) released on 5 July.

The report includes a long list of security problems in the system, which consists of a central data bank in Baltimore that can be "accessed" by any one of the 3700 terminals located in more than 1300 regional, district, and branch offices around the country.

The terminals are capable of both creating and changing records in the central data bank.

Spokesmen for the SSA say that since the GAO investigators made their visits to field offices, security has been heightened. The report is the result of an investigation that lasted more than 2 years and was sought by John E. Moss (D–Calif.) and Charles Rose III (D–N.C.).

"The data banks maintained by SSA constitute a large national resource that must be safeguarded against alteration, destruction, abuse, or misuse . . . [M]any other government agencies, as well as industry, rely on information generated from these automated data banks in managing their operations," the report says. "The personal files . . . are valuable to the workers and their families in that they contain private personal information gathered to support present and future payments made under Social Security and Medicare." For these reasons, it says, the accuracy and integrity of these files should be closely guarded.

However, it says, the system was designed for ease of use and speed of service to the beneficiaries—the elderly, the disabled, and the poor, many of whom rely on SSA for their income—rather than with security considerations in mind. Noting that SSA plans to expand its 3700 terminals to 4600 and eventually to 35,000, it urges that the expansion "include systems changes to correct existing security deficiencies."

The report states that the physical security of the 1300 field offices where these terminals are located is not strong; some are not even locked at the end of the day, and "whereas some offices have their terminals in a separate, locked room within the office," other "offices have dispersed terminals throughout the office and reception areas in order to better serve the public . . . [which] leaves the automatic system open for possible use by those who have access to the office," including the public, janitors, landlords, and other non-employees. The manual files which contain beneficiary records at each field office—and thus contain personal, health, and financial information—are left lying around in the open where anyone could view or take them.

An insecure feature of the computer system, the report says, is that the majority of terminals have the physical capability of not only accessing, but creating and changing files. "A user at any of these terminals can access and make changes to the millions of active beneficiary records stored with the national data bank," it says. Even though employees are instructed to perform more limited functions—such as only retrieving information—the system itself allows them to perform more important tasks if they so wish. The terminals also include a feature that provides "cash payments" to beneficiaries in cases where the need is deemed "critical"—a feature that could lend itself to abuse by employees.

The report noted one press story in which an SSA employee told the computer that a beneficiary had moved, when in fact he had died, so that the computer went on authorizing payments to be sent to the new, false address—netting the employee $20,000 before he was caught.

The report also criticizes SSA's level of employee security, noting that the administration does not make background checks on employees before they are hired, and that "passwords" for accessing the computer system, which should be frequently changed, are changed only rarely and not when employees who know them leave their SSA jobs.

Toni Lenane of the SSA's Office of Program Operations, which is in charge of the security of SSA computers, says several steps are under way to tighten the system's security. For one, the central system can now "lock" terminals electronically at closing time each day, solving the problem of after-hours security in the field offices. Another program being added to the system will require that an individual user at a terminal be personally cleared by the central system before he can access the central files. Also, high-level officials responsible for security are being hired in Washington and in branch offices.

Mad at the Soviets? Try the Chinese

Next to athletes, scientists are perhaps the most useful group of U.S. professionals for warming up ties with distant, politically remote lands. This happened in 1971, when a group of nongovernment scientists became the first Americans to visit the People's Republic of China, following on the heels of an American Ping Pong team. President Nixon's historic

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(OSHA) to establish more stringent exposure limits for the bulk industrial chemical compound acrylonitrile, a suspected carcinogen.

And up to this point, the RARG review of this matter has gone no further than the filing of the CWPS report as a part of the OSHA rule-making record. OSHA has taken sharp exception to some of RARG's conclusions, contending, for instance, that there are not enough reliable data available to attempt to quantify the cancer risks associated with various levels of exposure to acrylonitrile. (The widely publicized dispute within the Carter Administration over cotton dust exposure standards and their economic impact on the textile industry was never dealt with by RARG as such, for the standards were proposed by OSHA long before this review group existed. A compromise said to be acceptable both to OSHA and the economic agencies such as CEA was finally reached, and the cotton dust standards have now been issued.)

The RARG executive committee has considered three EPA regulations, having to do with restrictions on synthetic organic chemicals in drinking water supplies, guidelines for pretreatment of discharges in municipal sewer systems by electroplaters, and the prevention of sig-

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journey to Peking to resume relations with that country followed.

Something of the same sort may be taking place now. The White House has announced that a group of high-ranking U.S. science officials will visit Peking for several days, in early July.

The 14-member delegation will be led by Frank Press, science adviser to the President, and include such people as Richard C. Atkinson, director of the National Science Foundation, Robert A. Frosch, administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and Donald S. Fredrickson, director of the National Institutes of Health.

The trip will differ from previous Chinese-American scientific visits, which since 1971 have been conducted under private or semiofficial auspices, mainly under the aegis of the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, made up of the National Academy of Sciences and two other scholarly organizations. The rationale for these semiofficial visits has been that government-to-government science exchanges would have to await the normalization of relations between Washington and Peking. Clearly, then, the President's decision to go ahead with governmental science contacts could be a signal that the United States and China are moving closer to formal relations.

According to the White House, plans for the visit were first discussed with the Chinese during National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski's trip to Peking in late May.

The China trip was announced at a time when numerous American scientists, both in and out of government, are voluntarily deciding to not continue their cooperative endeavors with Soviet scientists or travel on scientific exchanges to that country. This severance of ties has not been officially orchestrated, apparently, but has developed voluntarily at the grass roots by working scientists upon whose interest the government exchange program with the Soviets depends. It has been largely a reaction to the sentencing of Yuri Orlov, a Soviet scientist whose fair treatment by the Soviet authorities had become a cause among Western human rights and scientific organizations.

Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev has not been blind to the implications of the American scientists' trip. He is reported to have denounced it as "a short sighted and dangerous policy. . . . I hope its authors do not have to bitterly repent it."

But presidential press secretary Jody Powell, probably speaking as much with Brezhnev in mind as the group of reporters before him, said the 4-day visit was not intended as a signal to the Soviet Union or an attempt to play the Soviets and Chinese off against each other.

Boland Committee Cuts NSF Research Funds

On 19 June, the House of Representatives voted an appropriation for the National Science Foundation (NSF) of $806 million dollars, or $44 million less than the foundation had requested. The cut had originated in the subcommittee headed by Representative Edward P. Boland (D–Mass.) of the Appropriations Committee, and was sustained by the full committee before also being approved by the House. The cuts were centered on the latest version of the Rann program, which is now known as the Applied Science and Research Applications (ASRA) Directorate, which the Boland subcommitee evidently thinks has been biting off more than it can chew.

Although the cut still leaves the NSF some $23 million ahead of its fiscal 1978 appropriation of $783 million, the effect of the cut will probably be to reduce the final, fiscal year 1979 figure from the generous $850 million that the Administration requested. The Senate, once it gets to work on the NSF appropriations bill in August, is expected to uphold this figure and compromise with the House.

The House Appropriations Committee report on the NSF budget, and staffers for the Boland subcommittee explain that, while the committee approves of the generous increases the Administration has sought for research in the mission-oriented agencies, it does not necessarily follow that NSF is automatically entitled to a boost above a level that will compensate for inflation.

Too often, the report states, the NSF applied research has overlapped with the work of other mission agencies, such as in earthquakes, water management, and social science.

The report fingered NSF's economic studies as funded by its Biological, Behavioral, and Social Sciences Directorate, saying "it is difficult to believe that these . . . are basic research efforts whose primary aim is advancing the discipline of economics." And, in the ASRA Directorate, the committee slashed earthquake policy research by $9 million from the request (the largest cut in any single program) because of "lack of effective management control of grant awards" by the NSF.

The cuts Boland did not specify would entail a reduction in some basic research areas, NSF says.

Since the Boland subcommittee successfully cut the NSF appropriation request last year as well, the reduction seems to serve as a bellwether of feelings and frustrations about science in the House.

It might be noted on the plus side, however, that the subcommittee, after cutting other programs, increased the request for science education, which is perennially popular among House members.

—Deborah Shapley