

safety violations, following a laboratory inspection in 1998. Specialist Inspector Simon Warne says HSE found inadequate safety cabinets, a lack of proper equipment to fumigate the laboratory, poor facilities for waste disposal, and “confused, inadequate, and apparently untested” onsite lab rules.

Although other researchers concur with the aims of the project, they backed the government’s action. “I am very supportive of this kind of research, but there is never any excuse to take risks with health and safety,” says John Oxford, a virologist at St. Bartholomew’s and the Royal London School of Medicine and Dentistry.

Scientists in the project declined comment, but Imperial College issued a statement expressing regret and emphasizing that no one was hurt. A spokesperson says that since the safety breach was identified, the college has hired extra staff devoted to monitoring and safety and that it does not intend to continue work in this area.

Predicting the virulence of a hybrid virus is tricky, scientists say, and for that reason this work requires the highest safety standards. “The problem,” says Richard Sullivan, an expert on bioweapons issues at University College London, is that “no matter how cautious you are, you get situations where you create something of a far higher risk than predicted.” Usually a hybrid virus is less virulent than either of its parents, says Warne. But there are exceptions. A striking example: In January, Australian researchers accidentally created a highly deadly mousepox virus (*Science*, 26 January, p. 585). “We are all on a big learning curve; the golden rule is always to assume the worst and have much greater security than you think you should have,” concurs Oxford.

The court ruling is the second major embarrassment this year for Imperial College, which was fined about \$28,000 in March after a similar court hearing for exposing the public to unacceptable risk by manufacturing the HIV virus in an inadequately sealed hospital laboratory. However, Warne does not see a deeper safety problem. Noting that

the college has recently incorporated many disparate institutes, he says “it’s inevitable that in a large research organization standards will vary across the board.”

—JOHN PICKRELL

## NATIONAL SECURITY

### MIT Military Critic Rejects Secrecy Claims

Physicist Ted Postol—a relentless critic of missile defense schemes—is fighting a Pentagon allegation that he has given away classified information. This is not the first time Postol has been targeted for a security investigation. But it may be the first time that he has accused his superiors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) of agreeing to help the Pentagon.

In mid-July, Postol says, he learned by chance that he was being investigated by the U.S. Defense Security Service (DSS) for distributing a report on a defensive missile test. Although the report was labeled “unclassified draft” last year when Postol obtained it, the government has since ruled that it includes secret information. Postol rejects the notion that he can be held accountable for a retroactive decision like this—especially since the material has “gone around the world” on the Internet.

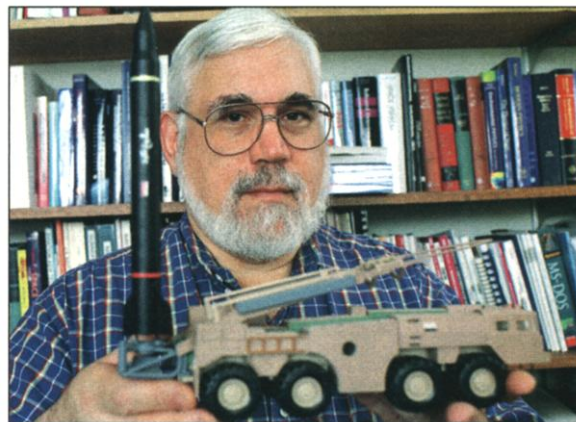
Postol claims the Pentagon is trying to silence him. He also charges that Defense officials pressured MIT to search his office and “retrieve” materials. Pentagon officials say they’re just trying to protect national secrets. When the dispute surfaced in *The New York Times* on 27 July, MIT President Charles Vest issued a careful statement noting that MIT “abides by the laws that protect national security” but also defends Postol and “the right of our faculty to serve as responsible critics within the limits of the law.”

Postol is not reassured.

The contretemps has roots in Postol’s decades-old battle with the military over access to data on weapons design and testing. During the Persian Gulf War, for example, Postol argued that the U.S. defensive weapon, the PATRIOT missile, was unable to stop Iraq’s SCUD missiles. Afterward, military agents began investigating him for a possible security violation but later dropped the inquiry when Congress intervened. During the past year, Postol has been publicly accusing scientists at MIT’s Lincoln Laboratory in Lexington, Massachusetts, a research center largely funded by the military, of giving “fraudulent” support to a contractor’s claims about missile testing. He brushed off a warning that he was at risk of violating his

security clearance. Then on 17 April, Postol sent detailed fraud allegations—including data from the now-secret report—to the Government Accounting Office (GAO), a congressional agency. The GAO forwarded his letter to the Pentagon and Lincoln Laboratory, apparently provoking the Pentagon to seek a formal investigation of Postol.

Postol says he learned of the inquiry a few weeks ago from a campus security official. DSS wrote to MIT and Lincoln Laboratory on 10 July, informing them that the U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense Organization (BMDO) had reported Postol for a security breach—sending out a report “that BMDO has determined to be classified SECRET.” The Pentagon asked MIT to make Postol



**Self defense.** Postol (with model SCUD) refuses to cooperate with security investigation.

stop sharing the report, to “retrieve” it, and investigate the violation. Postol appealed to Vest for support.

Vest responded to Postol on 24 July that he had been “scoping out” possibilities that would “maximally defend” Postol’s rights “without violating our contractual obligations” to enforce security. Vest warned that MIT “may be contractually obligated to move forward with at least the initial steps that we have been ordered to take by DSS.” Indeed, Vest sought to have an MIT attorney explore how to recover the report. Vest noted, however, that if the report is as widely available as claimed, “the Provost and I intend to work privately through the best channels” to have the government withdraw “what seems to be a pointless request to MIT to take action.”

Claiming Vest “was ready to throw me to the dogs,” Postol has refused to cooperate and threatened to go to court. He accuses MIT of risking the freedom of “other scholars who don’t have the notoriety that allows me to fight back.” Vest had no comment beyond last week’s prepared statement, withholding a full discussion “until MIT has learned all the necessary facts.”

—ELIOT MARSHALL



**Dangerous liaisons?** Researchers hoped to splice dengue fever virus (above) and hepatitis C virus.

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