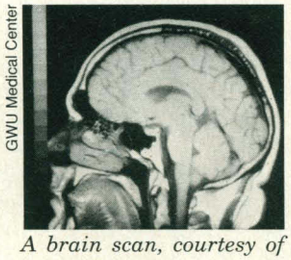
Brain Blueprints

■ In case you haven't noticed, mapmaking is suddenly in vogue—not the geographic variety, but the kind that depicts the structure of living organisms in computer code. In a major new proposal of this sort, an upcoming National Academy of Sciences (NAS) report will urge the government to fund a national effort to build a computerized "atlas" of the human brain. Billed as the National Neural Circuitry Database (NNCD), the project envisioned by the NAS would be a network of interlinked databases combining data from a variety of neuroscience subspecialties, allowing researchers to compare



GWU Medical Center

A brain scan, courtesy of magnetic resonance.

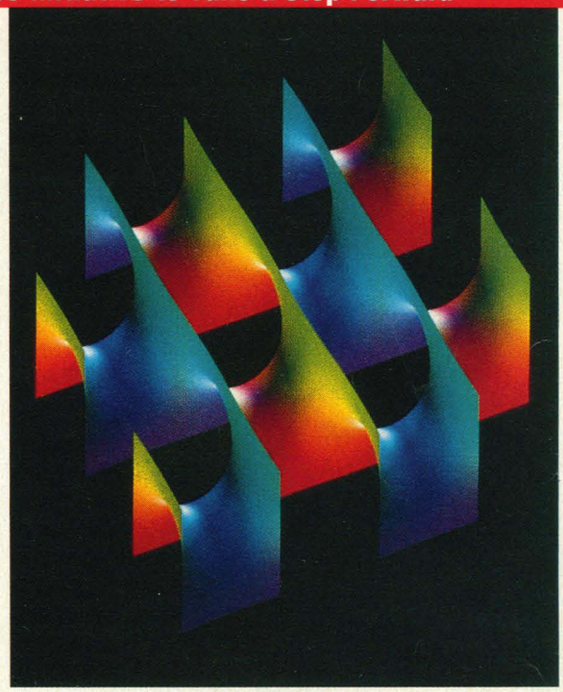
data gathered by different imaging techniques more easily.

Taking a cautious approach, the panel suggests initially funding a handful of independent databases. Each would involve scientists from several universities and could focus on mapping a different aspect not just of the human brain, but of monkey and rat brains as well. Although committee members aren't divulging specifics, a likely candidate would be an effort to map human cognitive functions using various imaging techniques.

Eventually, the independent maps would be combined in a single super-database that would allow researchers to switch back and forth rapidly between the individual collections. Both the National Science Foundation and the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Foundation have expressed interest in funding the project, insiders say. The report will be released in late June.

Material Science Initiative to Take a Step Forward

■ Next month, a key White House committee is expected to urge the federal government to launch a major multiyear national initiative in materials research with the potential to nearly double the estimated $1.4 billion already spent each year.



A computer simulation of certain polymer surfaces.

Approval by the committee, the Federal Coordination Council for Science, Engineering, and Technology (FCCSET), would be an important first step toward the inclusion of a materials initiative in the 1993 budget early next year. Earlier FCCSET-backed projects include this year's much-heralded high-performance computing and science education initiatives.

The Bush Administration is considering pumping more funds into materials science after a series of reports over the past 2 years made an impressive case that the skills and wares of materials researchers—the latter consisting of everything from Silly Putty to super-alloy turbine blades to ceramic-polymer composites in tennis rackets and aircraft—are critical to national well-being.

The embryonic initiative has at least one well-placed fan: presidential science adviser D. Allan Bromley, who has long talked about coordinating materials research. And researchers such as Bill Appleton, a materials research director at Oak Ridge, couldn't be happier. The message that "materials are extremely important to everybody" finally seems to be getting across in Washington, Appleton says.

The Still Waters of Urology

■ When the American Urological Association holds its annual meeting, conference organizers like to invite important politicians to serve as keynote speaker. This year, do you suppose they invited Health Secretary Louis Sullivan? Or perhaps National Institutes of Health director Bernadine Healy? Wrong, wrong, wrong. The urologists have snagged Interior Secretary Manuel Lujan, Jr., who is scheduled to deliver a speech titled "Water: The Life Line of Urology."

Manuel Lujan, Jr.

If you're a bit surprised by the choice of Lujan (not to mention the title of his speech), you're not alone. When *Science* called Lujan's press office for more information on 1 April, a spokesman thought the whole thing was a joke. He explained that because the meeting dates—2-6 June—fall right in the middle of National Fishing Week, Lujan will be busy. But he promised to double check with Lujan's office. A few minutes later, the chastened spokesman called back to say that yes, Lujan had tentatively agreed to speak to the urologists. Lujan, it seems, has a close friend in the upper levels of the urological association who figured he fit the keynote requirements.

The department expects a final decision on the speech will be made later this week. He says Lujan is likely to choose a new title for his speech.

UPCOMING REPORTS FROM THE OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT

U.S. Oil Import Vulnerability
Drawing lessons from the Gulf crisis, details how to reduce increasing U.S. dependence on foreign oil.
Due mid-April.

Rural America at the Crossroads: Networking for the Future
How the U.S. can use new communication technologies to revitalize sagging rural economies.
Due mid-April.

Adolescent Health: Time for Change
First of three volumes outlining major health risks for 10-to 18-year-olds and assessing deficiencies in adolescent health programs.
Due 22 April.

Global Defense Business
Through 11 case studies of Western countries, probes trends in defense technology transfer and arms proliferation.
Due mid-May.

Energy Efficiency in Government
How the U.S. government can set a better example by saving energy in transportation and building overhead.
Due 14 May.

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