

## Going Critical Over CTI

■ Technology policy, long a sparring point for Congress and the Bush Administration, is about to become publicly contentious again. Last year, Congress gave the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) \$5 million to create a Critical Technologies Institute (CTI) that would bolster the agency's ability to analyze the complexities of technology policy (p. 1350). But on 27 July, OSTP director D. Allan Bromley asked Congress to take the money back, explaining that OSTP neither needs nor wants it. Congressional leaders, who are unlikely to comply, are not pleased.

Envisioned as a civilian counterpart to the Pentagon's Institute for Defense Analysis, CTI was designed as a think tank that would allow OSTP to "think more than 2 minutes ahead,"



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*Critical technologies don't need a think tank, says the White House.*

according to an aide to CTI godfather Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM). The extra \$5 million, to be spent over 2 years, would have almost doubled OSTP's budget.

Unsurprisingly, this plan ran into trouble with free-market conservatives in the White House, who "recommended"

the recision to Bromley, the congressional aide says. "We hope the pragmatists like Bromley and [Office of Management and Budget director Richard] Darman will rein in the ideologues," the aide says. "We hate to see the Bush Administration become more ideological than the Reagan Administration was."

## Computer Security Firms Protest a New Federal Cryptography Standard

■ A fight is brewing between firms in the computer security industry and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) over what the firms say is NIST's "flawed" selection of a controversial data encryption standard for the federal government.

NIST recently developed the Digital Signature Standard (DSS), a new encryption algorithm intended to help users of computer networks ensure the authenticity of electronic data, and last month proposed making DSS the standard algorithm for routine encryption tasks on federal computers. But private companies that use rival systems, such as the patented Rivest-Shamir-Adleman (RSA) algorithm or the Data Encryption Standard (DES)—both widely used methods—have claimed that DSS is technically flawed.

Of course, these firms have a vested financial interest in existing commercial algorithms. If NIST makes the proposed DSS standard final in early 1992, as

one agency official predicts, companies that provide equipment and services based on rival data-security methods will need to retool their machines to DSS or cater exclusively to the private sector.

With so much at stake, the company holding the RSA patent isn't counting on sweet reason alone to make NIST

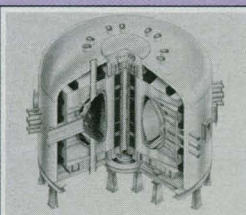
change its mind—it's taking its complaint directly to Congress. In a letter to the House science subcommittee that oversees NIST, RSA Data Security, Inc. officials claim that DSS is far slower and more vulnerable to codebreaking than RSA. An aide to the subcommittee refused to say how seriously the committee would take the letter.

## DOE Priorities

■ In the first sign that Department of Energy (DOE) research programs are beginning to feel a budget pinch, Energy Secretary James Watkins has convened an advisory panel to help him set

priorities among programs funded by DOE's Office of Energy Research (OER).

Earlier advisory groups have set priorities within specific fields such as high-energy physics, but the new panel is the first to set priorities across disciplines. One member of the new panel says OER director William Happer Jr. is "wor-



*The \$1-billion Burning Plasma Experiment (left) and the SSC may go head to head in DOE's priority review.*



ried that the funds he foresees are short of what all the initiatives in OER would cost." Happer has reason to be concerned. Pressed between the escalating costs of cleaning up environmental disaster at the nuclear weapons complex (now estimated at \$100 billion over the next 30 years), the 1990 budget agreement, which placed a strict ceiling on domestic discretionary spending, and projects such as the \$8.25-billion Superconducting Super Collider (SSC), basic research funded by DOE is facing its grimmest forecast in years.

## Grant Caps at the VA

■ Research funds are tight everywhere, but the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has taken an unusual approach to a common problem by limiting the grants it will award to doctorate-holding, non-clinician researchers at its hospitals.

Alarmed by a decline over the last decade in funded VA grants from 50% to 20% and the fact that nearly 40% of available research funds were going to non-clinician researchers, acting R&D director Franklin Zieve last summer capped non-clinician research grants at 33% of the total funds available. One consequence of the new policy is that non-clinicians may require a higher peer-review priority score than clinicians in order to receive funding.

Zieve, who has since returned to the VA medical center in Richmond, Virginia, says the cutoff really just clarifies a longstanding policy that encourages clinical research whenever possible. The cap might not even have much practical effect, since many grant applicants this year have been disqualified by a stringent eligibility review he has already instituted, Zieve says.

Even so, the cap may not last beyond this year, since new R&D director Dennis Smith is "re-evaluating" the policy.