NASA Draws a Line in the Sand

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■ NASA contractor Perkin-Elmer (now Hughes Danbury Optical Systems) built the flawed mirror for the Hubble Space Telescope; contractor Morton Thiokol produced the solid rocket boosters that destroyed the space shuttle Challenger—and both still receive NASA contracts. But even the normally forgiving space agency has to draw the line somewhere. And in the 9 March *Federal Register*, NASA did just that, declaring that from now on, its contractors face excommunication for the unforgivable offense of...misusing "Made in America" labels on equipment supplied to NASA.

This patriotic restriction, originally introduced in Congress by Representative James Traficant (D–OH), now states that any contractor or subcontractor found making fraudulent use of "Made in America" labels will lose their right to compete for NASA money. To avoid possible confusion, the rule patiently explains that products eligible for such labels must be produced and manufactured in America, as must at least 50% of the materials that compose them.

A NASA procurement official says that he has no idea how many contractors might be fraudulently using such flag-waving labels, but adds that few, if any, businesses are likely to be affected by the rule. Still, he admitted that the rule was "very unusual," saying, "I have no idea how it got in there."

Patriot Missile Critic Under Investigation

■ Patriot missile critic Ted Postol, professor of science, technology, and national policy at MIT, has been snared in a federal security trap that he says may hamper open discussion of the Patriot's performance.

Postol discovered last week that the Army had retroactively slapped a classification of "secret" on an article he published recently in the Harvard University journal *International Security*. In that article, Postol analyzed the Patriot missile's effectiveness in hitting Scud warheads during the Gulf War and questioned Army estimates of its success. Now he's concerned that the secrecy ruling could prevent him from discussing his evidence in open meetings.

Postol says an agent of the Defense Investigative Services (DIS) asked him in a phone conversation on 13 March to cooperate in a classified inquiry on his sources. Postol declined, though he offered to talk on an unclassified basis. Nothing in the article came from secret sources, Postol says, and as far as he knows, it contains no classified information. But he worries that if he learns classified details from the DIS inquiry, he won't be able to discuss his evidence openly.

It's not clear how the DIS inquiry began. The Raytheon company, manufacturer of the Patriot, has denied a rumor that it triggered the inquiry by sending Postol's article to the Army. Postol himself remains puzzled by the whole affair, since he says many people with access to classified Patriot data saw his article before it was published, and none warned him that it might violate security rules.

NIH Officials Poised to Move Forward With Strategic Plan

■ With NIH director Bernadine Healy signaling a clear intention to involve her agency more directly in improving U.S. economic competitiveness, biomedical researchers have been anxiously watching NIH's gestating strategic plan to see how they might be affected. Now NIH officials are planning two meetings in coming months that will consolidate the input the agency has received from this community over the past 6 weeks and help officials determine exactly where they want to steer the agency.

The first meeting, tentatively set for 27-28 April, will focus on five aspects of the plan: critical technologies, research capacity, stewardship of public resources, ethics, and peer review. Then at a retreat tentatively scheduled for 24 June, extramural and intramural scientists will meet to discuss the plan. Both meetings are expected to be held in Bethesda and will be open to the public. Following the June retreat, NIH top brass will compose a final planning document that will go to the Secretary of Health for approval, probably by fall.

One of the biggest hurdles NIH must still overcome is the widespread notion that the agency is trying to micromanage research, a charge Healy vehemently denied at a House appropriations hearing last week. She told the committee that while investigator-initiated projects will still form the core of NIH's funding portfolio, more planning is necessary to fit the agency's grant-making strategy to the nation's health needs.

Environmental Agency Launches a Study in "Ecological Risk Assessment"

■ As if trying to determine human health risks from radiation, dioxin, and other hazards isn't enough trouble, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) may soon try its hand at the even more difficult chore of assessing ecological risk.

The agency's complicated task is to provide quantitative or qualitative conclusions about the impact chemicals, human actions, or other "stressors"—EPA's term for such factors—would have on a specific ecology. For instance, the agency might want to evaluate quantitatively how draining wetlands could affect a region's ecology. With such risk assessments, EPA might make better policy decisions on development activity in environmentally sensitive areas.

This ambitious effort is in the hands of EPA's Risk Assessment Forum, a group of senior scientists within the agency that in the past has drawn up risk assessment guidelines for developmental toxicity and cancer. The group is now sponsoring a number of case studies that may be useful as it draws up a framework for ecological risk assessment. Although one forum member cautions that the group's deliberations so far are merely "a starting point," EPA documents suggest the agency plans to have ecological risk assessment guidelines available for comment by 1994.

Better ecological assessments could improve EPA policy making.

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