

US research funds

Defense Department to shed unwanted monies

Washington

A FIGHT is brewing in the US Senate over provisions in a money bill to divert \$80 million of defence research funds to support unreviewed research and construction projects at 10 named universities. The Department of Defense (DoD) has refused to allocate funds that Congress has already pressed upon it for the purpose, and support is growing for an amendment that would free the \$80 million for competitively awarded research.

The disputed funds were added piecemeal to DoD's appropriations during the legislative process as rewards for political favours by influential members of Congress. None of the 10 named projects has been subjected to competitive merit review, and the favoured institutions are "not the sort of places where one would normally go" to find the best high-tech research, according to one DoD official.

Academic and scientific organizations are uniformly opposed to Congress awarding research and construction funds by political horse-trading. But most of the disputed projects are in the home states of members of Congress who occupy senior positions on key committees, and the effort to block them, to be introduced in the Senate by John Danforth (Republican, Missouri) will be hard fought.

Ten such "pork barrel" projects worth \$65 million were provided for in DoD's 1986 appropriations bill, which passed Congress at the end of last year. Several of them, notably the \$13.5 million proposal of Northeastern University for a research complex, consist mainly of buildings and look more like campus improvement schemes than defence research.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger refused to spend the \$65 million on the grounds that DoD had no legal authority to support construction projects from its research account, and that the sums were recommended, not mandated, in the bill.

DoD also invited the universities in question to submit research proposals that would be subject to normal competitive review; the reviews are still in progress. But Weinberger has also made plain that DoD would oppose non-competitive construction funding even if it had legal authority to spend the money. "It isn't a matter of legality, it's a matter of policy", says Robert Rozenzweig of the Association of American Universities, which has consistently opposed pork-barrelling.

In response to DoD's refusal, seven US Senators last month introduced wording into an emergency supplemental bill ap-

proved by the Senate Appropriations Committee that would, if approved by Congress, oblige DoD to spend the money anyway. In addition, the committee introduced a special provision that would allocate an extra \$25 million for a proposed Center for Science and Engineering Technologies at Arizona State University. A spokesman for the university explained that the proposal was the consequence of efforts to help the university by Senator Dennis DeConcini (Democrat, Arizona).

A sum of \$10 million that had been intended for a Floating Point Systems supercomputer at Cornell University was dropped after Cornell's president, Frank Rhodes, refused on principle to accept the grant unless it had been awarded by competitive review. Cornell's proposal is now

Space launchers

Launch failure; boardroom fracas

THE failure of the third cryogenic stage of Ariane, Europe's space launcher, at the weekend, coming after the recent serious setback to the US space programme, has put the West's space launching capacity into jeopardy. It has also thrown into vivid relief the sacking just a couple of days earlier of the president of the company that makes Ariane rocket motors.

Ariane has now lost two out of its last three launches and four out of the past eighteen — the last two as a result of third-stage failure. Last week's launch was aborted with an Intelsat communications satellite aboard. A long investigation by an independent commission of all possible sources of error in the manufacture of the liquid hydrogen-liquid oxygen third stage will now be started, and delays to the programme now seem likely to be months rather than weeks. A complete redesign of the third stage engine might be necessary, so even longer delays are possible.

Strangely enough the president of the company, Roger Lesgards, was precipitately sacked last week in circumstances that suggest that the reasons may have been political rather than commercial.

M. Lesgards had been a close adviser of the previous minister of research and technology, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, and is thought to have been letting his feelings about the recent reductions of research support become widely known. Contracts with the government and government agencies are the chief source of work for SEP (Société Européenne de Propulsion).

Late last week, M. Lesgards had al-

being scrutinized by DoD; ironically, one DoD source close to the review process says that of all the original pork-barrel proposals, the supercomputer is the most likely to be successful in the review.

Pork-barrel provision have been used in numerous federal appropriations bills over the years to buy special favours for universities, but there is now alarm in the academic community over the unprecedented scale of the proposals in the 1986 DoD appropriation.

One previous attempt to defeat the pork-barrel provisions, led by Senator William Proxmire (Democrat, Wisconsin) was defeated in the appropriations committee. But supporters of Danforth's amendment believe that the bipartisan support now emerging gives it a good chance when it is introduced on the floor of the Senate, probably in the first half of June. Among the supporters of the move is, surprisingly, Senator Barry Goldwater, the Arizona Republican who heads the Senate Armed Services Committee. DoD's stand might carry the day.

Tim Beardsley

ready quit his office and could not be reached at home, but he has made no secret of his anger at his treatment by the board of SEP. The company appears to be doing well commercially, having increased its turnover by 42 per cent in the year to October 1985 and having taken orders worth FF 3,000 million (£300 million) during last year. With half of the company's activity concerned with Ariane, whose commercial prospects have been strengthened since the shuttle disaster and failures of US Titan and Delta rockets, SEP's future seemed bright.

Lesgards' successor is M. Jean Sollier of the aerospace company SNECMA, another supplier for the Ariane programme. SNECMA happens to hold a marginal majority (50.14 per cent) of the shares of SEP, and there has recently been some friction over the rate and regularity with which SEP has been supplying components for Ariane.

Robert Walgate

• Meanwhile, Britain changed its mind last week about which rocket will launch the first Skynet military communications satellite. The Ministry of Defence can get a guaranteed launch date "several months" earlier by using Ariane, rather than the US space shuttle, to launch Skynet 4B, the first satellite in the series. It has therefore cancelled its booking with the shuttle and Ariane will launch Skynet 4B in late 1987 unless the latest setback calls for more changes to the schedule. The shuttle will still carry the next satellite, Skynet 4A, in 1988, and Ariane will carry Skynet 4C in 1989. □