

US military loses control of computerized databases

Washington

THE US administration appears to have abandoned its controversial attempt to place control of all computerized databases in the hands of the Department of Defense. With the unanimous passage of the Computer Security Act by the House of Representatives last week, measures to ensure civilian control, worked out with the reluctant cooperation of the administration, are ready to be installed. The act has still to make its way through the Senate but its prospects appear good.

The fight between Congress and the administration over who should control unclassified computer data has now been running for more than two years. President Reagan took up arms in September 1985, when he approved a National Security Decision Directive that gave responsibility for setting security standards for unclassified but "sensitive" information to the National Security Agency.

Opposition grew into outrage when the then National Security Advisor, Vice-Admiral John Poindexter, followed up with a memorandum in October 1986, appearing to extend the area covered by the directive to all unclassified non-government databases. That meant that access to databases carrying journal abstracts, to electronic networks for exchange of scientific data and to any other information service using telecommunications or computers could be controlled by the military. The ultimate aim appeared to have been to find ways to eliminate database and network users who might pass on unclassified scientific information to the Soviet bloc.

Poindexter's memorandum was not fated to survive long. Civil rights groups, library and scientific associations and even bankers, who saw the possibility of military control of electronic cash networks, joined in voicing opposition. In Congress, Representative Jack Brooks (Democrat, Texas) labelled the "expansion of military influence into society" as "Big Brotherism". After Poindexter lost his job because of his involvement in the illegal operation to finance Nicaraguan rebel groups through arms sales to Iran, the memorandum was rescinded. But that did not still congressional opposition. The administration sensed it was on the losing side and compromised by offering its support for a new Computer Security Act.

The urgent need for improved security is recognized by the act's chief sponsors, Representatives Dan Glickman (Democrat, Kansas) and Brooks. But it is not the Soviet Union they are worrying about. The federal government is totally dependent on electronic information systems for

social security, tax and census records and, Glickman says, there is ample evidence of a "disaster waiting to happen" given the potential for "unauthorized access and disclosure, fraudulent manipulation and disruption".

The act gives responsibility for developing security policy on unclassified information to the National Bureau of Standards. It establishes a research programme for developing computer security stan-

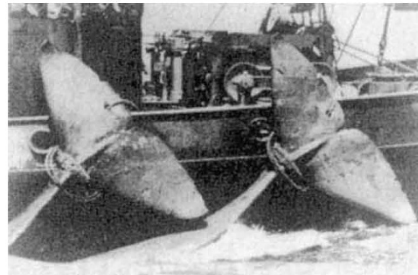
dards and guidelines and requires that training be given by the bureau to computer security officials in each government agency. Private computer databases will not be interfered with. No authority is given to the federal government to control non-government systems and access to government information continues to be guaranteed by the Freedom of Information Act.

Control of classified information remains with the National Security Agency and, in a compromise with the administration, it is given a role in advising the National Bureau of Standards on technical security guidelines. **Alun Anderson**

IWC cracks down on activities of "scientific whaling" nations

London

THE International Whaling Commission (IWC) is cracking down on nations that conduct whaling in the name of science, with a series of votes designed to force Japan, Iceland and Korea into halting their killing of whales.



Whaling ship with catch.

At its annual conference in Bourne-mouth last week, the 41-member IWC was clearly split. "It was very much a case of whaling nations versus nonwhaling nations", says Dr Ray Gambell, IWC secretary. On a 3 to 1 majority, member nations passed various resolutions designed to tighten up the criteria for "scientific" whaling, which is widely seen as providing a convenient smokescreen for a continuation of whaling in the face of IWC's moratorium.

Japan, for example, had announced its plans for a scientific harvest of nearly 900 whales annually in the Antarctic, a programme that clearly provoked nonwhaling members.

The United States put forward a resolution to close the science loophole by strengthening the definition of "scientific" whaling, imposing strict criteria on killing for research. Britain then proposed a resolution criticizing Japan's scientific programme and calling for the Japanese government to put a stop to it. The motion was passed by a substantial majority, as were similar resolutions against scientific whaling by Korea and Iceland.

Norway's proposals for an annual sci-

entific harvest of 200 minke whales were not formally submitted to the IWC and were therefore not the subject of a vote, but the majority does not support the Norwegian plans.

The US resolution also calls for the scientific committee of the commission to review proposed programmes to make sure they would provide useful information about whale stocks that could not be obtained by non-lethal methods.

Even without the support of the scientific committee, the governments concerned would still have a right to issue a permit for scientific whaling, as the IWC cannot legally interfere. But after last week's vote, if a country defies the resolution, the United States could impose sanctions, stopping fishing in its territorial waters and preventing fish imports from the countries concerned. This is seen as a strong deterrent, as the commercial value of these fisheries considerably outweighs the value of the whaling industry.

Whaling nations have argued that their research programmes would be scientifically useful, providing data on whale populations. The programmes would generate income through the sale of whale meat to Japan.

Iceland was particularly upset by the IWC resolutions, arguing that the action is contrary to international law. Early in the meeting, Iceland threatened to quit the commission. Japan's commissioner Tatsue Saito called the outcome "a great disappointment" and said he is concerned about the future of the "conservationist" IWC.

Ironically, if the IWC action brings to a halt all "scientific" whaling, other more legitimate research could also be affected. "Our whale sighting research in Antarctica depends on the presence of Japanese vessels for refuelling", says Gambell. "It would be a serious loss if we had to stop whaling research altogether."

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