US science's 'stealth agency'

Washington

A SHADY White House office working under Vice President Dan Quayle is emerging as one of the biggest behind-the-scenes players in Washington science politics. Not surprisingly, that is starting to make a lot of people nervous.

The President's Council on Competitiveness is the successor to the Reagan-era Task Force on Regulatory Relief — and to the Task Force's controversial deregulation policies. Almost every government policy and decision is eligible to be sent through the Council for approval, if the White House sees fit.

The Council looks for policies in fields such as the environment, drug approval, risk assessment and laboratory regulation that may damage the country's economic health. Potentially, this could include nearly everything. In practice, the Council has chosen to make research fields one of its highest priorities, arguing that over-regulation and an excessive focus on government support in science and technology is particularly damaging to competitiveness.

For instance, at a meeting last week of the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), Allan Hubbard, executive director of the Council, said his staff is exploring ways to improve technology transfer at the national laboratories of the Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health. "We're thinking that perhaps we should take away a little R&D money and require the labs to find private co-investors" to make up the difference, he said.

PCAST member John Foster, a former director of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, thought it was a great idea. "We're spending too much on the labs," he agreed. "Let's cut their spending by 10 to 15 per cent to get their attention. Then take half of that and offer it back to them as long as they can find matching funds from industry." Hubbard promised to offer Foster's proposal to a Council working group on the issue.

Whether or not such a cut actually shows up in the national laboratory budgets, the episode illustrates the power the Council can wield.

Last year, after long negotiations with industry and activist groups, Congress passed a bill to make it more difficult for a drug to qualify as an 'orphan', one whose target audience is too small to justify research and development cost without special market protections. But on 9 November, President Bush vetoed the bill, catching almost everyone off guard. Who was behind the reversal? A fact sheet explaining the veto told the whole story with its letterhead alone — it came from the Council on Competitiveness.

Critics charge that the Council is essen-

tially a law unto itself. Operating in secrecy, free from Freedom of Information Act requests and answerable only to the President, the Council is a 'stealth agency', they claim. This month, for instance, the non-profit investigative group OMB Watch offered a dozen cases of Council 'interference' in environmental and health regulations, from reduction of wetlands standards to delays in quality-control reforms at clinical laboratories. "The Council has turned the term 'competitiveness' into a buzzword for eliminating regulations that corporations oppose," says OMB Watch executive director Gary Bass.

Industry takes a different view. Biotechnology companies showered the Council with praise in February, when it released a report calling for a reduction in the 'burden of regulation' on the industry.

Hubbard defends the Council as the last bastion of good sense in a bureaucracy that would regulate the country to an economic standstill, given the chance. "The role of the Council is to see that government is not interfering any more than is necessary in business," he told PCAST. "I don't see why cost-benefit analysis shouldn't enter into every regulation."

In the upcoming months, the Council will have even more opportunities to flex its muscle on:

■ **Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** drug approval. A council task force chaired by Former Health and Human Services deputy director Constance Horner is about to recommend major FDA reforms. One option that has been considered is privatizing the drug-approval arm of the agency by running it as a business based on user fees, much like the UK Medicine Control Agency. Other ways to streamline drug approval include 'fast tracking' more cancer and AIDS drugs, harmonizing US standards with those in other countries, including accepting data from foreign trials, and increasing the use of outside advisory bodies like the institutional review boards at many hospitals and universities.

■ **Biotechnology.** A Council working group is preparing to release a final version of its 'SCOPE' plan for biotechnology regulation. The new plan is expected to change existing regulation by setting levels of regulatory oversight based on the real risk inherent in the product rather than the process used to make it, an approach known as 'performance based' regulating.

■ **Clean Air Act.** The Council has been given the lead in turning last year's Clean Air Act into actual regulations. Hubbard says that the principal aim will be to reduce the measure's estimated \$25,000 million cost to US industry.

Christopher Anderson

US RESEARCH POLICY

A new role for DARPA?

Washington

SINCE the end of the Second World War, the US Department of Defense has been by far the leading supporter of research and development (R&D) in the United States, and even with the collapse of the Communist Bloc, that is unlikely to change soon. Nonetheless, as economic competitiveness becomes a more important part of national security and military superiority becomes less urgent, the US government may start to look to defence R&D for more than high-technology weaponry.

That, at least, is the suggestion of a report released last week by the Carnegie Commission on Science, Technology and Government, a private group comprising distinguished scientists, community leaders and former government officials. The report, which was the subject of a hearing by the congressional Joint Economic Committee, contains a variety of prescriptions for helping US economic performance, but the most controversial centres on the interplay between military and commercial R&D.

"The United States now has two technology bases, a defence technology base and a commercial technology base," said retired Admiral Bobby Inman, chairman

of the group that prepared the report. "The nation must move toward a single national technology base." To that end, the report says, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which funds research into advanced technology with potential military applications, should be transformed into the National Advanced Research Projects Agency (NARPA). NARPA not only would fund military research but also would support research into advanced civilian technologies that federal agencies other than the defence department request.

DARPA, Inman noted, has a good record in funding 'dual use' technologies — those with both a military purpose and potential commercial applications. Reconstituted as NARPA, it could be expected to play a big role in promoting research with long-term commercial rewards.

The suggestion for a NARPA-to-DARPA transformation, however, has much more to do with assuring that the defence department has access to the best technology than in improving economic competitiveness, said Lewis Branscomb of Harvard University, a member of the group that prepared the report. When the military employs dual-use technology, it

often ends up with less advanced products than are available commercially, for a variety of reasons, including the rigidity of military specifications. "It is through partnerships in dual-use technology that defence has the best chance to gain access to leading commercial technologies," Branscomb said.

Inman acknowledged that the defence department will not be happy with allowing other government departments to have a say in the direction of DARPA, which would be inevitable if it were transformed into NARPA. But, he added, "the bulk of the opposition at the Department of Defense to NARPA arises from the sense that it will take money away from defence research and give it to commercial research." That is not the intention of the report's recommendation, he said.

Murray Weidenbaum, an economist from Washington University in St Louis, argued that expanding NARPA's mission to include civilian technologies would damage its effectiveness by asking it to do too many things. To make sure that the military gets the best dual-use technology, it is not necessary to change DARPA; instead, "the Pentagon should reduce the obstacles to its procurement of state-of-the-art products available in commercial markets."

The Carnegie group would also include economic and technology issues in the purview of the National Security Council (NSC), the group that advises the president on national security matters. As the NSC has regular access to the president, this should help make economic and technology policy a priority for the president.

The recommendations of the Carnegie Commission are unlikely to be embodied as legislation; at present, they are little more than food for thought. But they do clearly illustrate an issue that is likely to grow in importance in the United States over the coming years. As the threat of war with the Soviet Union and its erstwhile allies recedes, the major threats to US national security are likely to be economic ones. This in turn will greatly change the way in which science and technology research is funded, and the struggle to determine how those dollars are spent will not be over soon.

Robert Pool

CORRECTION

The first sentence in the news article "Cold fusion tempest at MIT" (*Nature* 353, 98; 12 September 1991) should have read: "A former Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) official has requested a scientific misconduct inquiry at the university's Plasma Fusion Center, claiming that researchers there manipulated data and the MIT press office in conducting an 'orchestrated attack' against cold fusion and its advocates." Because of an editing error, the original sentence incorrectly represented the MIT official as claiming that the press office, rather than the researchers, attacked cold fusion.

Primate import probe

A MIAMI grand jury and the US Fish and Wildlife Service are investigating charges that the president of one of the largest US primates import companies brought Asian orangutans caught in the wild into the United States, contrary to US law. Earlier this month, the US District Court in Miami issued several subpoenas for documents pertaining to the import activities of Matthew Block, president of Miami-based World Wide Primates, which imports about a quarter of the 12,000 to 14,000 research primates brought into the country each year. This is not the first time Block has attracted controversy, particularly from the International Primate Protection League (IPPL) and its chairwoman, Shirley McGreal. In a statement released early this week Block said that any investigation "which derives from McGreal's false allegations is an outrage. It may well be that United States authorities have been misled by McGreal and her organization." Last August he filed suit against McGreal for damaging his professional reputation after she distributed copies of a 1990 Centres for Disease Control inspection report on his facilities together with a brief letter asking recipients to consider if they should be doing business with him.

C.A.

Satellite lent to US

DOWN to one ageing weather satellite with five more nowhere near ready to go, the United States last week turned to Europe for a loan. An agreement between the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the European Space Agency, and the European Meteorological Satellite Corporation will move the European Meteosat-3 geosynchronous satellite 48 degrees west from its current position over South America so that it can cover the lower 48 US states. The lease of the European satellite should ensure that NOAA has at least one weather satellite operating at all times until the end of 1993, when the first of the next generation of weather satellites — known as GOES-NEXT — is expected to be launched. Budget overruns and technical difficulties have conspired to delay the GOES-NEXT programme by at least three years (see *Nature* 352, 362; 1 August 1991).

C.A.

Sex study dead again

A PROJECT to survey Americans on their sex habits so that researchers can better understand the spread of sexually transmitted diseases has been rejected again, this time by conservative senator Jesse Helms (Republican, North Carolina). During last week's full Senate vote on the 1992 Health and Human Services (HHS) Appropriations bill, in which \$10 million was included for both an adult and a teenage sex survey by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Helms won strong support for an amendment to transfer the funds out of NIH and into a pro-abstinence project known as the Adolescent Family Life

Program. This is more unfortunate for the NIH than it may sound. HHS secretary Louis Sullivan had already cancelled the \$8 million adult survey earlier this year after it was initially approved. That money was to return to the NIH general research fund; now it will leave NIH entirely.

C.A.

Ozone mission up

INAUGURATING its next generation of science missions — the Earth-observing 'Mission to Planet Earth' probes — the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration last week launched the Upper Atmosphere Research Satellite (UARS) with only one minor hitch. Astronauts aboard the space shuttle Discovery deployed the \$740-million satellite last weekend to begin its 26- to 28-month planned mission in a circular near-polar orbit at an altitude of 600 km. A transponder used to receive data from Earth stations failed to work properly, but ground controllers were able to switch to a backup receiver. Four of the ten instruments aboard UARS will measure gases — including CFCs, nitric oxide and chlorine monoxide — thought to be responsible for ozone depletion in the upper atmosphere, while other instruments will measure the intensity of the Sun's ultraviolet radiation, solar particles, and atmospheric temperature and winds.

C.A.

Software protection

SEEKING to spur computer research collaboration between US government and industrial researchers, Senator John Rockefeller (Democrat, West Virginia) wants to keep government software from automatically falling into the hands of the public. He has introduced a bill that would make an exception to current copyright law (which now makes government-developed software freely available to all) for the products of cooperative research and development agreements between federal laboratory and industrial partners. Rockefeller hopes that this will reassure companies that their intellectual property will be protected. But his bill has run into opposition from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Joined by such mainstream computer groups as the Information Industry Association and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, the ACLU testified last week that copyrighting federal software would violate the public right of access to government information.

C.A.

AIDS meet relocates

THE eighth international AIDS meeting will be held in Amsterdam next July, sponsors of the meeting announced last week. The meeting had originally been scheduled for Boston, but its organizers decided to move it because of US restrictions on visitors infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (see *Nature* 353, 96; 12 September 1991). Special-interest groups representing people with AIDS had threatened to disrupt the meeting if it were held in the United States while the travel restrictions were still in place.

R.P.