CRASHED SPACECRAFT YIELDS DATA
Scientists pick out solar-wind samples from pieces of the Genesis mission.
www.nature.com/news

USAF 388TH RANGE SQD/NASA

Security issues plague US research

A high-level 'science and security commission' is needed in the United States to limit bureaucratic restrictions on research that could thwart terrorist attacks, says a report from the National Academies.

The report's authors — an independent panel convened from the US research and security communities — agreed that universities must keep an open culture to make discoveries, even if some of those discoveries could be used by terrorists. "You need to stay ahead," says Alice Gast, president of Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and the panel's co-chair.

The group also called for an easing of visa, technology-transfer and contract restrictions — many of which still reflect the mentality of the cold war. Today, international collaboration and rapid communications render many restrictions pointless.

Research contracts are particularly

troublesome, the panel found. US defence agencies often offer companies contracts that contain clauses preventing the dissemination of knowledge. That presents a problem when the companies subcontract to universities, which have an obligation to publish. The panel also found growing restrictions on research involving 'sensitive but unclassified' technology, a murky term in the view of the panel. According to a Reagan-era presidential directive, research should either be classified and restricted, or unclassified and unrestricted.

Government research-contract officers have more incentives to be cautious than open, says Tobin Smith of the Association for American Universities in Washington DC, which advocates fewer research restrictions.

"They don't want to be the ones to blame for a major security breach," he says.

The proposed commission — which would be co-chaired by the director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and the president's national security adviser — would push government agencies to apply more consistent rules. Smith is pleased that the proposed commission involves the national security side as well as the science side. Having both at the table would increase

its effectiveness, he says.

Gast says she doesn't know if the commission will be created, but she is pitching the idea to the OSTP, the National Security Council and congressional committees.

Eric Hand

"The proposed commission would push government agencies to apply more consistent rules."