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Report Backs U.S. Program For Computer Development

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Feb. 3, 1995


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A Federal program begun three years ago to support the development of advanced computers and computer networks is essential to the nation's half-trillion-dollar information technology industry, a report to be issued today by the National Academy of Sciences contends.

The Government is spending $1.1 billion annually on the program, known as the High Performance Computing and Communications Initiative, which has been cited by Congressional Republicans as a program that could be eliminated to offset proposed tax cuts.

But some of the nation's leading computer researchers at corporations and universities, who prepared the report, argue that Government support for research is crucial for the American economy to remain competitive.

"There is a great threat to the economic future of the country as corporations continue to retract their research horizons," said Larry Smarr, director of the National Center for Supercomputer Applications and a member of the committee that prepared the report.

The panel gives credit to the Federal program, which began in 1992 and is planned to continue for two more years, for having helped bring about wide acceptance by the industry of massively parallel computers and for having built the advanced computer networks that are the backbone of the Internet, a collection of computer networks used for research, education, commerce and entertainment.

Among the recommendations of the panel was that financing be focused on a new class of distributed information systems that would allow people around the country to manipulate large data bases that might be spread over various sites.

The panel also recommended that support be continued for a series of research goals known as Grand Challenges -- thorny scientific problems that are intended to push the limits of computer technology.

In light of the debate over national industrial policy, the panel called for the elimination of direct project financing for the development of commercial hardware by computer vendors.

That has been a bitterly contested issue: The critics of Government support for new technology development have said that it amounts to handing out "pork barrel" contracts to various Congressional districts.

One prominent critic of the program said he was pleased with the shift in direction.

"Part of what's wrong with this program is that we absolutely should not be funding any commercial development of any kind," said T. J. Rodgers, chief executive of the Cypress Semiconductor Corporation in San Jose, Calif. "We're hurting American companies."

But Mr. Rodgers said he agreed with the idea of financing dozens or hundreds of small research programs at universities to support advanced education and research.

But Mr. Smarr, the committee member, said he was worried about the "slash and burn" approach to Federal support for scientific research and technology development. He said it could be decades before the country realized what had been lost.

"If we lose the information technology, and all we do in this country in the future is flip hamburgers, no one will remember the reason why it happened," he said.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section D, Page 2 of the National edition with the headline: Report Backs U.S. Program For Computer Development