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FBI Angles for Computer System

The FBI has an insatiable itch to get its hands on a forbidden new computer telecommunications system that eventually could compile dossiers on virtually every person in the United States.

Officials at the fortress-like J. Edgar Hoover headquarters building recently made a quiet pitch to obtain the Orwellian system despite promises by the White House and Justice Department not to make a move without consulting Congress.

The system is known in government circles by two innocent sounding words: message switching. Once it becomes operative, it could place the FBI in physical control of all state criminal data in the country, with access to every data inquiry from one police jurisdiction to another.

Through the wizardry of electronics, the FBI would transmit each message between local police departments. By delaying or expediting messages, the FBI would be in a position to hinder or help local authorities for their cooperation with the FBI.

The flood of information throughout the country could easily be copied and stored in computer banks and pulled out with a flick of an FBI finger. By offering the service free of charge, the FBI would swiftly gain a tight monopoly on all criminal data.

Advocates of making more use of computers in the war against crime contend that a computerized master file would provide the FBI with speedy and accurate information needed to solve crimes. This information could be flashed instantly to any police unit in the country.

But critics fear the FBI message switching would create a national data bank and, thereby, turn the FBI into a national police force.

Even if computers could be restricted to police records, these contain names of thousands of Americans who have never committed a crime but have become innocently involved in investigations.

In the past, the FBI abused the rights of people whom the late J. Edgar Hoover didn't like. Agents illegally tapped private phones, opened mail and used entrapment tactics against antiwar and minority groups that were ideologically unpopular.

These excesses have now been stopped, and the FBI is returning to the tenacious police work that made it famous. Conscientious officials felt they could improve FBI efficiency by installing a message switching system. They obtained permission from the Justice Department hierarchy to go ahead with it.

But vigorous protests from Rep. John Moss (D-Calif.) sidetracked the moves. White House aide Jack Watson wrote concerned members of Congress on Dec. 12: "It is my understanding that no final decisions have been made. . . In fact, a comprehensive study on privacy is now underway."

Three days later, the Justice Department was even more emphatic in a private letter to Capitol Hill: "We shall not be undertaking any initiatives in this area [message switching] without prior consultation with and approval by the Congress."

Yet only four days later, unbeknownst to Congress, the FBI sent out special instructions to computer firms inviting them to bid on telecommunications equipment. Their proposals had to include "the hardware and software components necessary for message switching," the FBI declared, in direct violation of the White House and Justice Department pledges. Furthermore, competitors for contracts would be judged on the message switching factor, the FBI emphasized.

Jay Cochran, the FBI's assistant director for technical services, argued that the solicitation was proper because it advised the bidders that the message switching system had not been actually authorized. The bureau wished the option proposal included just in case message switching should later be approved, he told our associate Gary Cohn.

Cochran said he was unaware of the promise that Congress would be consulted. But congressional sources believe the FBI tried a sneak play, operating on the assumption that if they could get contractors to include specific message switching proposals in the bids, they could confront the Carter administration and Congress with a fait accompli.

Cochran also claimed the FBI had been given permission by the General Services Administration, the government's supplier, to include the message switching language in the bid invitations. But Frank Carr, GSA's computer commissioner, said the FBI has not complied with his guidelines.