

FBI's Credibility With Hill Slumps Amid Missteps

Computer Systems Improvements Far Behind Schedule, Over Cost

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The FBI, long accustomed to staunch support in Congress, is facing increasing congressional criticism because of a series of expensive and embarrassing management miscues, including more than \$200 million in cost overruns on two enormous computer systems.

Difficulties with the computer systems—coupled with recent allegations of evidentiary problems at the FBI forensic laboratory and other controversies—have led to complaints on Capitol Hill about the bureau's stewardship at a time when the FBI is trying to expand its role as the central repository of law enforcement data in the United States.

"I think the leadership of the FBI has brought the entire organization into question, and you are the leader," Rep. Bob Livingston, (R-La.), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, told FBI Director Louis J. Freeh during a hearing earlier this month.

Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa), chairman of the Senate Judiciary administrative oversight subcommittee, recently declared, "The issue is trust and confidence in the nation's number one law enforcement agency. And in the context of other recent management fiascos at the FBI, skepticism is . . . the order of the day."

Grassley and other congressional critics blame overly ambitious planning and administrative shortcomings at FBI headquarters for the computer system setbacks, which have forced police agencies around the country to postpone long-promised enhancements to their crime-fighting capabilities.

One of the troubled systems involves a massive upgrade of the National Crime Information Center, the FBI's central database of criminal records, which handles an average of 100,000 requests a day for information from police agencies. Originally, FBI executives estimated the upgrade would cost \$73 million, but that has since soared to at least \$183 million—a 151 percent increase, according to congressional and bureau documents. Known as NCIC 2000, the project is more than four years behind schedule, and the FBI is uncertain whether it will ever perform as originally anticipated.

The other FBI computer project under fire from

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Cost Overruns for FBI's Computer Upgrades

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members of Congress is the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS). Envisioned as a quantum leap in law enforcement technology, the system is designed to enable police officers in their cruisers to use portable computers to scan an individual's fingerprints and obtain a quick identification from the sprawling FBI computer center in West Virginia. FBI executives estimated the cost of the IAFIS system initially at \$520 million, it is now expected to cost \$640 million—approximately \$120 million or nearly 25 percent over budget. It is also at least 16 months behind schedule.

Concern over FBI management of the two computer projects has led Congress to balk at financing other high-tech initiatives proposed by the FBI and to tighten oversight of bureau spending by demanding, for example, monthly

reports on how \$300 million is to be used on new counter-terrorism initiatives.

"The bureau has not delivered vital law enforcement systems, such as NCIC and IAFIS, anywhere near within budget or on time," appropriations subcommittee chairman Rep. Harold Rogers (R-Ky.) told Freeh recently. "And you haven't shown the committee any ability to hire and train personnel and spend the resources we provided to respond to the threat of terrorism."

The rebukes over the computer systems follow another setback for one of the FBI's most important new crime-fighting initiatives, a \$500 million upgrade of the nation's telephone system that would allow the FBI to install court-authorized wiretaps on new digital switching systems. That project has been delayed because of FBI miscalculations and planning shortcomings, according to bureau statements and congressional records. Last summer, the Senate temporarily suspended funding for the wiretap initiative, cit-

ing "the FBI's poor track record of delivering high-tech contracts on-time and on-budget."

The problems with technical projects like

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the IAFIS and NCIC 2000 systems have occurred against a backdrop of controversy over operational snafus such as the highly questionable interrogation of security guard Richard Jewell following the bombing during the Atlanta Olympics and the transfer of summaries of hun-

Create Congressional Skeptics

dreds of sensitive FBI personnel files to the Clinton White House,

While some management problems clearly predate Freeh's appointment as director, in April 1993, delays and cost overruns on the two computer systems have continued during his tenure. FBI reports to Congress show that the estimated cost of NCIC 2000 increased \$58 million in October 1995 and another \$45.8 million through August of last year. An independent audit of the IAFIS fingerprint system last summer found that despite attempted fixes, the FBI still lacks a "built-in infrastructure for large-scale systems development."

NCIC 2000 was hurt by an initial failure to clearly define the software requirements, officials said, and poor communication between FBI supervisors and the software contractor. Upgrades to the system were slowed because its three largest segments, which transmit fingerprints, identify the images and then search

criminal records, were not properly integrated. Both NCIC 2000 and the IAFIS fingerprint system were further delayed when new features were added to the original designs.

In an interview, outgoing Deputy Attorney General Jamie S. Gorelick said that "both of these projects were mismanaged, and it is my impression that as soon as we heard about it and raised it with Director Freeh, he took steps to address it. Whether he knew about it earlier, I don't know."

Late last year, FBI executives surprised the Justice Department by requesting another \$50 million to complete the IAFIS fingerprint system, which was already \$118 million over budget. Attorney General Janet Reno rejected the FBI request and ordered the agency to live within the existing budget.

Freeh declined numerous requests to be interviewed for this article. Instead, the bureau's

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BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST
Rep. Bob Livingston, (R-La.) points to FBI leaders for cost overruns.

SLOW GOING

These two FBI crime-fighting systems have been held up by poor oversight.

NCIC 2000

The National Crime Information Center serves as a central repository of criminal history and fingerprint records. NCIC 2000 is a massive computerization and telecommunications project designed to give police agencies around the country instant access to a vast a storehouse of information including mugshots, prison records and handwriting samples. Some of that data could be retrieved by a police officer in patrol car.

■ **Cost overrun:** \$110 million

IAFIS

The Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System will create a computer database out of 213 million fingerprint records currently on paper cards. Urgent fingerprint identifications could be completed in as little as two hours instead of the current manual system, which can produce long delays.

■ **Cost overrun:** \$120 million

FBI, From A10

press office produced a "status report" on the two computer projects. The reports lauded Freeh's troubleshooting efforts.

During a review of the FBI's fiscal 1997 budget request last year, Freeh testified about the two big computer projects, "I can't guarantee it's going to work, but I'm very hopeful," the director said of the NCIC 2000 system. About IAFIS, Freeh said he was "confident" the system could eventually be brought "on-line, albeit at a great delay and a great cost."

Those glum assessments contrasted with Freeh's assertions at a March 1994 hearing that no further funding was needed for NCIC 2000—which Freeh declared "a little bit ahead of schedule"—or the fingerprint system designed to complement it, which he said would be "fully on-line with state participation" in January 1998.

But Stephen Pomerantz, a former assistant director, said in an interview that the projected time and cost schedule for completing NCIC 2000 was long considered unrealistic.

"There was a recognition from Day One, in fact, in 1988, that we were not going to be able to do this within the time frame or within the budget that was appropriated for the project," Pomerantz said. "So it was only a question of how much over in time and money."

FBI officials said Freeh was not informed of the computer system problems until 1995. Stephen R. Colgate, the Justice Department's assistant attorney general for administration, said he was shocked to learn of NCIC 2000's shortcomings after assurances from the bureau of steady progress.

"I do feel that I was misled," Colgate said in an interview. "I was presented too rosy of a scenario."

While acknowledging the FBI's problems, the Clinton administration defends Freeh's management record.

"We're going through such a major, fundamental expansion of infrastructure all at once," Colgate said. "Freeh rightly identified the infrastructure of the bureau in all areas as needing improvement."

Nevertheless, the cumulative impact of the management problems has added to doubts about the FBI's assertion that it is "the most appropriate and capable agency" to serve as architect and custodian of the national information systems that support all state and federal police agencies.

Last year, during the congressional

review of the FBI's 1997 budget request, the bureau's legendary reputation for winning congressional support for high-tech law enforcement projects suffered an unusual setback. Chagrined by disclosures about the computer system snafus, the Senate refused to provide the first \$100 million for the digital telephone eavesdropping initiative.

Freeh recently told a House subcommittee the IAFIS and NCIC 2000 projects are adhering to revised schedules, and he emphasized he is personally watching for further "slippage" in progress. "We're following that closely, closer than any other single two projects in the FBI," Freeh said.

But Grassley's skepticism seems undiminished. "Confidence and trust in the nation's premier law enforcement agency," the senator said, "is dwindling."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For the FBI's press release on one of their proposed computer systems, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site at www.washingtonpost.com