

BACK IN THE mid-sixties, Congress blocked studies of a national data center because many feared that such a project would facilitate the collection and exchange of dossiers on millions of Americans. Now the same apprehensions have sparked a lively battle over FEDNET, a massive \$100-million computer network which the General Services Administration has been planning, without consulting Congress, for about two years. The system's possible implications for personal privacy were first spelled out eight weeks ago by Rep. John E. Moss (D-Calif.) and reported by Seth Kantor in a series of articles in the Detroit News. Since then, GSA's plan has also been challenged by Vice President Ford; Sens. Sam J. Ervin (D-N.C.), Barry M. Goldwater (R-Ariz.) and Roman Hruska (R-Neb.); Rep. William S. Moorhead (D-Pa.); the Office of Management and Budget, and the House and Senate appropriations subcommittees which control GSA's budget.

GSA officials profess astonishment at all the fuss. They claim that in developing FEDNET—which the agency prefers to call its “new equipment project”—GSA is just doing its statutory job of promoting more efficient and economical government computer services. The new system is intended, GSA maintains, simply to provide the most modern nationwide data communications facilities for itself and the Agriculture Department. Critics charge, however, that the agency has much larger long-range plans. They note that FEDNET, with its network of remote terminals and sophisticated equipment, would be modular in design and therefore capable of infinite enlargement. Several legislators have received reports that GSA has already urged other agencies, including the VA, the Bureau of Customs and the Social Security Administration, to plan to add their vast files of sensitive per-

sonal data to the network when it has been set up. Moreover, critics reject GSA's claim that technological safeguards exist to keep the various files in such a system separate and secure against improper use.

The most ominous aspect of FEDNET is that GSA has been preparing to procure all of this electronic hardware without paying much, if any, attention to what information the system might include or what kinds of privacy problems might be raised. GSA spokesmen say, essentially, that privacy isn't their department—and they are right, in the sense that basic federal data-bank policies ought to be set by Congress. But this underscores the dangers of letting the system get so far ahead that an enormous nationwide network of this type can be on the verge of procurement before Congress even discovers it.

Under pressure, GSA has backed off part way. The agency still wants to go ahead with purchasing the new computers now but has decided to postpone the telecommunications part of the project until next year. That isn't good enough. The entire FEDNET scheme ought to be shelved until Congress has developed strict policies and tough controls for governmental data banks to insure that citizens' rights will be protected. House hearings have already been held on comprehensive legislation sponsored by Reps. Edward I. Koch (D-N.Y.) and Barry M. Goldwater Jr. (R-Calif.). Meanwhile, the Vice President's committee on privacy is studying the subject, and Sen. Ervin is starting hearings on several bills today. Among other things, those hearings may clarify the many aspects of FEDNET which are still too murky and mysterious. What is clear is the importance of congressional action to regain control over the use to which such advanced technology is to be put.