

A lid on scientific information?

THE RUSSIANS are getting a lot of technical information from the United States and putting it to use in their military buildup, says Adm. Bobby R. Inman. The deputy director of the CIA thinks a key means of stopping this is for scientists to let U.S. intelligence agents examine their papers before they're published. They should do this voluntarily — or else.

That was the message Adm. Inman delivered recently to a panel session at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He said congressional investigations now in progress will demonstrate that as the Soviets have expanded their military, "the bulk of new technology which they have employed has been acquired from the United States."

Part of his remedy would be an intelligence review of scientists' work to see if any of it should be stamped secret. If

scientists don't agree to this, he predicts a "tidal wave" of public outrage and of laws restricting their work.

Apart from his blatant attempt to throw fear into the scientific community, the admiral's approach is wrong on a couple of counts. For one thing, it implies that scientists are somehow responsible for what he calls a "hemorrhage of the country's technology." They're not.

The Soviets get technology from the West mainly by purchase of our goods and by reading our technical publications. In most instances there's no way to predict or control use. A computer and its programs can be employed in many ways, in both military and civilian sectors. Maybe the United States would want to choke off sales of such equipment — although that seems doubtful — but could a free country effectively police all of the hundreds of publications in which technical infor-

mation is printed? Would it want to?

Another problem is that keeping scientific knowledge secret for very long is virtually impossible. No country has a monopoly on brains or resources. It frequently happens that scientists in different countries, who don't even know of each other's existence, arrive at similar findings near the same time.

It can make sense not to broadcast information on especially sensitive matters with a strictly military application, like the H-bomb formula; but even data in so narrow an area as this cannot be indefinitely bottled up. The kind of lid Adm. Inman wants to clamp on scientific information could never spread wide enough or hold tight enough to be effective. It is undignified and inappropriate for him to threaten scientists with a backlash in public opinion. The public understands this situation better than he thinks.