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U.S. to Try to Bar Aliens From Supercomputers

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STAT

The Defense Department said yesterday that it would try to keep Soviet-bloc students and scholars from virtually all the supercomputers in the United States, including four major centers now being set up at universities by the National Science Foundation.

Officials of the Defense Department said the move, supported by several intelligence agencies, was intended to assure that the Soviet military did not make use of the American machines for weapons design or code-breaking. The superfast computers are among the equipment most sought by the Soviet bloc, and officials say they assume many of the foreigners involved in academic exchanges are spies.

The move has prompted protests from officials at three of the universities involved in the science foundation's project on the ground that the restrictions could violate academic freedom. In the past two weeks those three, Cornell University, Princeton University and the University of Illinois, have each refused to endorse a provision in their Government contracts that would restrict the access of some foreign nationals to the facilities.

Directive Is Being Drafted

But Government officials said yesterday that the universities might have to yield if President Reagan signed a national security directive now being drafted by a group of officials of the Defense Department, the State Department and the National Security Agency, among other agencies.

Dr. Stephen D. Bryen, a deputy assistant secretary of defense, said in a telephone interview yesterday that any Soviet access to such machines would pose a "serious threat" to the United States. Dr. Bryen, who directs the Pentagon's efforts to regulate the flow of strategically important high-technology products, added, "If you are not willing to sell the computers but give them access to the machines on your own soil, you have lost the whole export-control battle in one swoop."

Supercomputers, which cost more than $10 million each, are the most advanced computer systems currently manufactured, and there are fewer than 150 of them installed around the world. Because of their tremendous processing speed, they can solve in a day complex mathematical problems that take the largest conventional computers months or years.

Experts generally agree that the Soviet Union has no supercomputers. Until recently, neither have most academic or industrial researchers.

A $200 Million Project

But late in February, the National Science Foundation said it would spend $200 million to create supercomputer centers to help academics solve a wide range of basic research problems. Under the rules of the Federal grant, the universities awarded the centers would control access to the machines, which are not intended for any classified Government work.

Allen J. Sinisgalli, director of research and project administration at Princeton, said officials there "were very, very surprised" by the actual contract. The document, he said, stipulated that the consortium of universities running the Princeton center would deny access to foreign nationals from the Soviet bloc, China or other countries that fell under the high-technology export control laws.

"We feel it is a tremendous infringement on academic freedom," said Mr. Sinisgalli, who negotiated for the consortium, which includes the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania and Rutgers, among others.

"Foreign scholars are in the country for legitimate purposes," Mr. Sinisgalli said. "To restrict them would be to deny their rights. And for the first time, we are seeing the Government try to impose controls on a facility where there is absolutely no classified work going on."

In the end, Mr. Sinisgalli said, compromise language was reached acknowleging that a "national policy" on access to supercomputers was being drafted and that the center would abide by that policy. But officials at Princeton and Cornell said yesterday that if the national policy infringed on academic freedom they might have to withdraw from the project.

Among the four universities directing the computer centers, only the University of California at San Diego accepted the wording suggested to the science foundation by the Defense Department, according to foundation officials. Administrators at the university could not be reached for comment yesterday, but National Science Foundation officials said the San Diego contract was negotiated by a private company that will operate the facility for the university.