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Pentagon exaggerated Y2K readiness

By M.J. Zuckerman

WASHINGTON - The Pentagon office responsible for safety and
security of U.S. nuclear stockpiles and emergency response in a
nuclear incident acknowledges falsifying readiness reports on the
looming Year 2000 computer problem.

The Defense Special Weapons Agency (DSWA) claimed that three of
five so-called "mission critical" computer systems, essential to
conducting its most primary duties, were fully prepared to face
the computer crisis despite never conducting necessary testing,
according to a recent Defense Department Inspector General's
Report.

The agency also neglected to develop required "contingency plans"
that would take effect if any "mission critical" systems fail.

"We recognize and agree with the findings of the Inspector
Generals report," says Capt. Allan Toole, who was recently
assigned to correct the Year 2000 (Y2K) problems at the DSWA,
which was absorbed into the newly created Defense Threat
Reduction Agency on October 1.

He would not discuss the agency's previous false reporting on
Y2K.

The Oct. 30 Inspector General report predicts that without
corrective action "The Defense Special Weapons Agency, as a part
of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, may be unable to execute
its mission without undue disruption."

Toole predicts the agency's systems will be "100% in compliance
by April" 1999, despite not having established a complete
inventory of the work that remains to be done.

"I have a good feeling about Y2K in this agency," he says.

Y2K is a complex computing problem, causing computers to make
false calculations or fail entirely because the code or
instructions written into those systems are unable to comprehend
dates beyond 1999. Facing increasing pressure from the Joint
Chiefs of Staff, the White House and Capitol Hill to correct the
Y2K problem, "people may get a little hasty or mistakenly" report
something as ready, says Marvin Langston, the Defense Department
official in charge of the computer problem.

"But I think there's very little real mischief going on here," he
says.

Langston says he is confident that "a high level of end-to-end
re-testing" of all system beginning early next year will root out
remaining problems.

But the Pentagon received a D-minus grade this week from the
House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, which has been
issuing Y2K progress grades to federal agencies for the past
year.

"I am deeply concerned by this report," says Rep. Steve Horn,
R-Calif., the committee chairman. "There is zero tolerance for
error when you're dealing with the defense and safety of our
nation."

"Does it come as any surprise to you that the Pentagon on
occasion fudges on the truth?" says Sen. Robert Bennett, R-Utah,
co-chair of a Senate Special Committee on Year 2000. "Look, the
Pentagon has the biggest problem simply because they are the
biggest agency. I know they are working very hard."

The federal government identifies 6,696 "mission critical"
systems, of which 2,581 are in the Defense Department.

As recently as a few weeks ago, Sen. Bennett was fond of noting

that officials of government and industry "all lie to us about
Y2K" when asked to testify about their level of readiness.

But heading into the Thanksgiving weekend he says one of the
things he is thankful for is that "there aren't as many people
lying to us as there used to be."

The newly created Defense Threat Reduction Agency, oversees the
full spectrum of weapons of mass destruction, including testing
and modeling, stockpiling as well as the export or transfer of
high technology. It also works with the FBI, CIA and State
Department to monitor weapons of mass destruction held by U.S.
adversaries.

TO INDEX

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