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Controversial Terror Research Ongoing

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WASHINGTON -- The government is still financing research to create powerful tools that could mine millions of public and private records for information about terrorists despite an uproar last year over fears it might ensnare innocent Americans.

Congress eliminated a Pentagon office developing the terrorist tracking technology because of the outcry over privacy implications. But some of those projects from retired Adm. John Poindexter's Total Information Awareness effort were transferred to U.S. intelligence offices, congressional, federal and research officials told The Associated Press.

In addition, Congress left undisturbed a separate but similar \$64 million research program run by a little-known office called the Advanced Research and Development Activity (ARDA) that has used some of the same researchers as Poindexter's program.

"The whole congressional action looks like a shell game," said Steve Aftergood of the Federation of American Scientists, which tracks work by U.S. intelligence agencies. "There may be enough of a difference for them to claim TIA was terminated while for all practical purposes the identical work is continuing."

Poindexter's goal was to predict terrorist attacks by looking for telltale patterns of activity in passport applications, visas, work permits, driver's licenses, car rentals, airline ticket purchases and arrests, as well as credit transactions and education, medical and housing records.

But the research created a political uproar because such reviews of millions of transactions could put innocent Americans under suspicion. One of Poindexter's own researchers, David D. Jensen at the University of Massachusetts, has acknowledged that "high numbers of false positives can result."

Disturbed by the privacy implications, Congress last fall closed Poindexter's office, part of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, and barred the agency from continuing nearly all his research. Poindexter quit government, claiming his work was misunderstood.

But the work didn't die.

In killing Poindexter's office, Congress agreed to continue paying to develop highly specialized software to gather foreign intelligence on terrorists.

In a classified section summarized publicly, Congress gave money to the "National Foreign Intelligence Program," without openly identifying which intelligence agency would do the work.

It said the product of the research could only be used overseas or against non-U.S. citizens in this country,

not against Americans on U.S. soil.

Congressional officials declined to say which Poindexter programs were killed and which were transferred, but people with direct knowledge of contracts told AP that the surviving programs included some of 18 data-mining projects known as Evidence Extraction and Link Discovery in Poindexter's research.

Poindexter's office described that research as "technology not only for 'connecting the dots' that enable the U.S. to predict and pre-empt attacks, but also for deciding which dots to connect." It was among the government's most controversial research programs.

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