HIGH TECH'S HIGH STAKES AT THE FBI

A pricey computer upgrade may be hurting fieldwork

By Chitra Ragavan

DENNIS COOK—AP

Director Mueller preparing to testify last week on Capitol Hill

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Ever since he took office nearly five years ago, FBI Director Robert Mueller has struggled to replace his agency's antiquated computer systems. But for Mueller, the experience has been like living the movie *Groundhog Day*. He has found himself back at square one over and over again. Last year, the director reluctantly pulled the plug on a much-ballyhooed $170 million replacement known as Virtual Case File (VCF). Now Mueller is staking his reputation on a new system known as Sentinel, which, by current estimates, will cost nearly $500 million and take four more years to deploy. But the Justice Department's inspector general, Glenn Fine, warned in a recent audit report that a lack of oversight could leave Sentinel with major cost overruns just like VCF's. And at the bureau, tensions are rising as many officials stew over what they view as imprudent across-the-board cost cutting to hide Sentinel's *real* price tag from Congress and spare Mueller further ignominy. "In meetings, the message has been 'Empty your pockets. Give us your loose change,' " one senior official told *U.S. News*.

The formal bureau line is that nothing is amiss. FBI spokesman John Miller says the Sentinel contract has "program management from inside and outside to prevent mismanagement." Miller says Fine's audit report is "very positive, on balance" about Sentinel. When VCF collapsed last year, Mueller announced his decision not to seek additional technology funds until fiscal year 2007. Instead, Mueller got Congress to approve a $97 million "reprogramming" last November including $29 million from the counterterrorism budget. This year, Mueller has asked his divisions to give back a portion of their budgets. Mueller decided we are going to "bite the bullet," one FBI official said. Last week, FBI sources say, managers were told to cough up $30

million to $40 million as part of the second go-around. "It's like a ransom demand," complained one FBI official. "They're saying, 'You'd better come up with the money or it's going to fail, and it will be on *your* head.' "

Savings. Mueller assured his team last year that the 2006 budget cuts would be restricted to administrative costs like conferences and that money for law enforcement operations would be protected. Officially, the FBI says that's still the case. But sources say the cuts have had a cascading effect—that some agents in the field have been told to use their cars judiciously and to curtail the use of informants and covert off-site rentals for undercover operations. Miller says the gas issue is unrelated to Sentinel and that the FBI's budgeting was done prior to the sharp increases in gas prices. He adds that headquarters has given field offices more than $3 million to counter any gas shortfalls.

In his audit report last month, Fine

warned that passing the hat a second time could risk cutting the bureau's "mission critical" operations to the bone. Fine said the FBI has taken "important steps to address its past mistakes with VCF." But Fine said the "potential weaknesses" in cost controls are a "significant project risk." Some executives believe the bureau's computer upgrades could ultimately total a billion dollars—double the projected costs. The FBI's Miller disagrees, saying vigorous oversight will prevent this from happening.

Many agents blame Chief Information Officer Zalmai Azmi for the ongoing tech woes. When Azmi recently won a prestigious Presidential Rank Award, there was considerable unhappiness among the troops. Mueller has strongly backed Azmi, and Miller says Azmi has done a "tremendous job" on Sentinel.

For Mueller, there have been some technological successes. As part of the Trilogy project—of which VCF was the final phase—Mueller gave agents thousands of new computer terminals and had outdated systems and other infrastructure retooled. The bureau has a data warehouse that Miller says can search a billion records in counterterrorism cases. "It's not like we have just been sitting around and waiting," says Miller. But so far Mueller has failed in his quest for the holy grail: state-of-the-art software that will seamlessly connect his agents to one another and allow them to quickly share information.

Many bureau insiders doubt Sentinel will be their savior either. "There's an increase in chatter that's as great or greater than during VCF, that Sentinel is going to fail," says one official. "And everybody knows it but Mueller." FBI spokesman Miller says the pessimism is unwarranted since the contract was just awarded. "It is like saying people believe a building will topple," says Miller, "before workers break ground." ●

With research assistance from Carol S. Hook