Guest Column/Richard Cowan

Military influence increasing

Last term, the question of military research funding on campus was the subject of considerable administrative debate, with a special focus on the Strategic Defense Initiative. Yet the reaction of some students to the exploration of political debate on research programs (a topic not in the development stage is one of confusion. "Why bother?" some say. The answer is that in the USA all of this is a serious topic. This semester, the MIT Science Action Coordinating Committee is going beyond last term's focus on "Star Wars" to examine the militarization of MIT. Here's why.

- There are major changes taking place. A primary reason for the volatility of the military research issue is the speed with which the national research situation is changing. In the 1970s the percentage of federal-funded research and development devoted to military programs was about one-third. Since 1979, the percentage has been steadily increasing, now being between 50 percent. That already large fraction has been steadily increasing since 1979, reaching 67 percent in 1985 and 72 percent in 1986, according to Technology Review.

- MIT students are especially affected. Many MIT graduates go directly into research jobs. Therefore, the fraction of research devoted to military programs determines to a large degree the fraction of science and engineering graduates going into the military industry. Furthermore, professors and students doing research projects on UROs are directly affected by shifts in funding patterns.

- Many students don't know the extent to which their field is dominated by the military. If you wonder, ask them. The glossy brochures of military contractors who usually fail to explain what those companies are really doing. In the MIT placement office, there is a copy of a pamphlet "Are you considering a career in the defense industry?" prepared by High Technology Professionals for Peace, which raises many important issues - like what happens when you get a security clearance.

- Finally, SACC is compiling information on MIT's own military research - a topic rarely discussed even in classes that deal with arms issues. A guidebook with this information should be useful to students who want to choose UROPs and thesis advisors, and could be provided to hall tutors, faculty advisors, and class councils. Given the number of students affected, this is not just a "N invent" issue - even the right wing should be interested in telling students the truth about what they are getting into.

Putting aside for the moment the question of whether defense spending really is intended for "defense," it is clear that the domination of federal research by the military will not only have profound effects on society, but also limit the opportunities for students to enter productive and rewarding careers in other areas. The best I can do is to recommend that you learn more about the issue. A survey by MIT last spring revealed that students feel they are not being told enough about the military aspects of the technology they study. Fortunately, professors can understand why. The description of Draper Laboratory doesn't even mention "military," "national defense," or "Draper's main mission: missile guidance for nuclear weapons. Classification barriers and a pattern of institutional self-censorship prevent professors from bringing up the issue. Fortunately, professors do usually know the extent to which their field is dominated by the military. If you wonder, ask them.