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ON PAGE A-1

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STAT

The intriguing tale of a D.M. computer firm and the CIA

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A poster hanging on the wall of Dr. Charles Cleveland's office at GMI Ltd. in Des Moines warns against machines causing harm to humans.

Cleveland, a young Drake University professor and businessman who has developed a sophisticated computer program that purports to dig out the basic attitudes underlying a person's spoken or written words, calls the poster a "daily reminder" of the potential abuses of technology.

That stated concern notwithstanding, last summer Cleveland made contact with a branch of the federal government that was interested in his computer program — the Central Intelligence Agency. The CIA now refuses to discuss what it had in mind.

Cleveland met at least twice with CIA agents about his computer program, which is known as "Quester." The first meeting took place in July with a CIA agent based in Ankeny. The second occurred a few weeks later, this time with a higher-ranking agent in Washington, D. C.

At the meeting in the nation's capital, the CIA requested more information from Cleveland, 33, who is president and principal stockholder of GMI, which until recently was known as Grey Matter, Inc.

But he and the fledgling company's other principals rejected the CIA's overtures, Cleveland said. Those principals include two Drake colleagues — one of whom is Cleveland's wife — and the chairman of the Sociology Department at the University of Minnesota.

There is no evidence that GMI has

done any work for the CIA. Its local clients, for which it made computerized market surveys, include Iowa Power & Light Co., American Federal Savings and Loan Association of Des Moines and the National Pork Producers Council.

Just how far the talks progressed between the small computer firm and the CIA is uncertain. Those familiar with the affair offer varying versions of who first contacted whom and what went on. Some flatly refuse to discuss it. And the CIA is mum, except for a string of "no comments."

Whatever the truth, the matter raises intriguing questions because of Quester's claimed abilities, reports about how the CIA sought to apply them, and the discrepancies among those involved.

Quester, which was developed by and belongs to Cleveland, but which is used by GMI, is described in company literature as a computer program that "measures attitudes of people about organizations, products, services, concepts and situations . . . and in some instances makes predictions about how people will react to a given situation or what needs to happen before they will react in a given way."

One well-placed source said that the CIA wanted to use Quester to analyze wire service stories prepared and distributed by the nation's two largest news agencies, the Associated Press and United Press International. The source, who was among those who heard Cleveland report on his Washington trip, understood that the CIA intended to expand Quester into helping it "construct profiles of the thinking and attitudes of individual journalists."

The CIA often has had journalists in

its bed. Recent revelations about those liaisons led the agency to say it would accept information volunteered by domestic news media personnel but would not put them on its payroll. The CIA refused to accept the same policy for foreign journalists.

Was Quester seen as a method for locating potential CIA informers in the media by analyzing their news stories? Or did the agency foresee other uses for the computer program?

Since its birth in 1947 as a collector and analyzer of data, the Central Intelligence Agency became increasingly dominated by covert operations — involving assassination attempts, mind-control experiments and domestic spying — according to a U. S. Senate study conducted in 1976.

Cleveland commented that because of Quester's nature, "We're in an area where we could be badly used."

However, in two interviews last month, Cleveland declined to discuss the intended purpose for Quester expressed by the CIA representatives he met.

He also contradicted himself on several key points in discussing the matter.

Cleveland said he suggested to the CIA that Quester be used "basically for processing newspaper information coming from other countries."

He indicated that he viewed Quester as a tool to aid the CIA in its legitimate intelligence-gathering function. "Certainly there's nothing negative in helping collect accurate information," the professor said.

Initially, Cleveland said that the CIA agent with whom he met in Washington had voiced doubts about whether the computer program would be worth buying. Since the agency would rather do its analysis "by hand," Cleveland said, there was no reason for further discussions between the CIA and the company.