

Government challenges firms to build better batteries

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Enlarge SkyBuilt Power

A photo composite from SkyBuilt Power shows a mobile power station with solar arrays. The Iraq war began a push to develop energy sources that are light and portable.

By **Peter Eisler, USA TODAY**

WASHINGTON — The nation's spies and soldiers need new batteries — smaller, longer-lived batteries — and the government is investing tens of millions of dollars in companies that are trying to create them.

Today's intelligence and military missions rely more and more on high-tech gadgetry, such as remote communications and surveillance systems. As a result, the government's investments in companies that develop batteries and other portable, long-duration power sources have skyrocketed.

Much of the bankrolling is being done through companies set up by the government to invest in businesses that are developing technology with national security applications.

In-Q-Tel, a CIA-funded investment firm, is putting money into 18 companies that are developing batteries, solar cells and other energy-related technologies with intelligence uses. Those investments, typically ranging up to \$3 million per company, mark a big increase in In-Q-Tel's "power" portfolio, which

included just two companies in 2002.

The Army has shown similar interest, investing more than \$60 million since 2003 in OnPoint Technologies, a venture capital firm that it set up to invest almost exclusively in companies that develop power- and energy-related technology with military applications.

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"There is a saying that when the battery dies, the operation dies," says Robert Wallace, former director of the CIA's Office of Technical Service and author of *Spycraft: The Secret History of the CIA's Spytechs from Communism to Al-Qaeda*. "If you're using more (electronic) devices ... you've got to have power, whether it comes from batteries, the sun, nuclear or something else."

Many of the specific uses for better batteries and other power sources are classified: The CIA, for example, declined to comment on its interest. But public records show that applications range from power sources for military gear, such as communications, navigation and computer equipment carried by soldiers, to remote transmitters and cameras used in gathering intelligence.

As technology has advanced to make computers, phones and other electronics smaller and more capable, "the power requirements for those devices were sometimes an afterthought," says Jason Rottenberg, OnPoint's managing director. "But all that has changed."

Since the start of the Iraq war in 2003, there has been a greater push to develop batteries, solar cells and other energy sources that are light, portable and able to supply power for long periods in remote areas, Rottenberg adds. "The problems associated with power and energy become more acute when you have people on the battlefield."

It's not the first time that national security interests have spurred advances in power sources — and the benefits often filter down to the public. During the Cold War, the CIA helped drive development of lithium-iodine batteries for listening devices and other electronics. The agency later shared the technology with the medical community for use in early pacemakers.

Today, lithium-iodine batteries are used widely in consumer electronics, and the next generation of power supplies may well be born from the development work now being funded by the intelligence and military communities.

"Technology transfer is very important to us," says In-Q-Tel Vice President Donald Tighe, who notes that many products developed with In-Q-Tel's backing end up on the commercial market. "Ultimately, we help these companies enhance their commercial offerings."

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