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Computing

HAL 90210

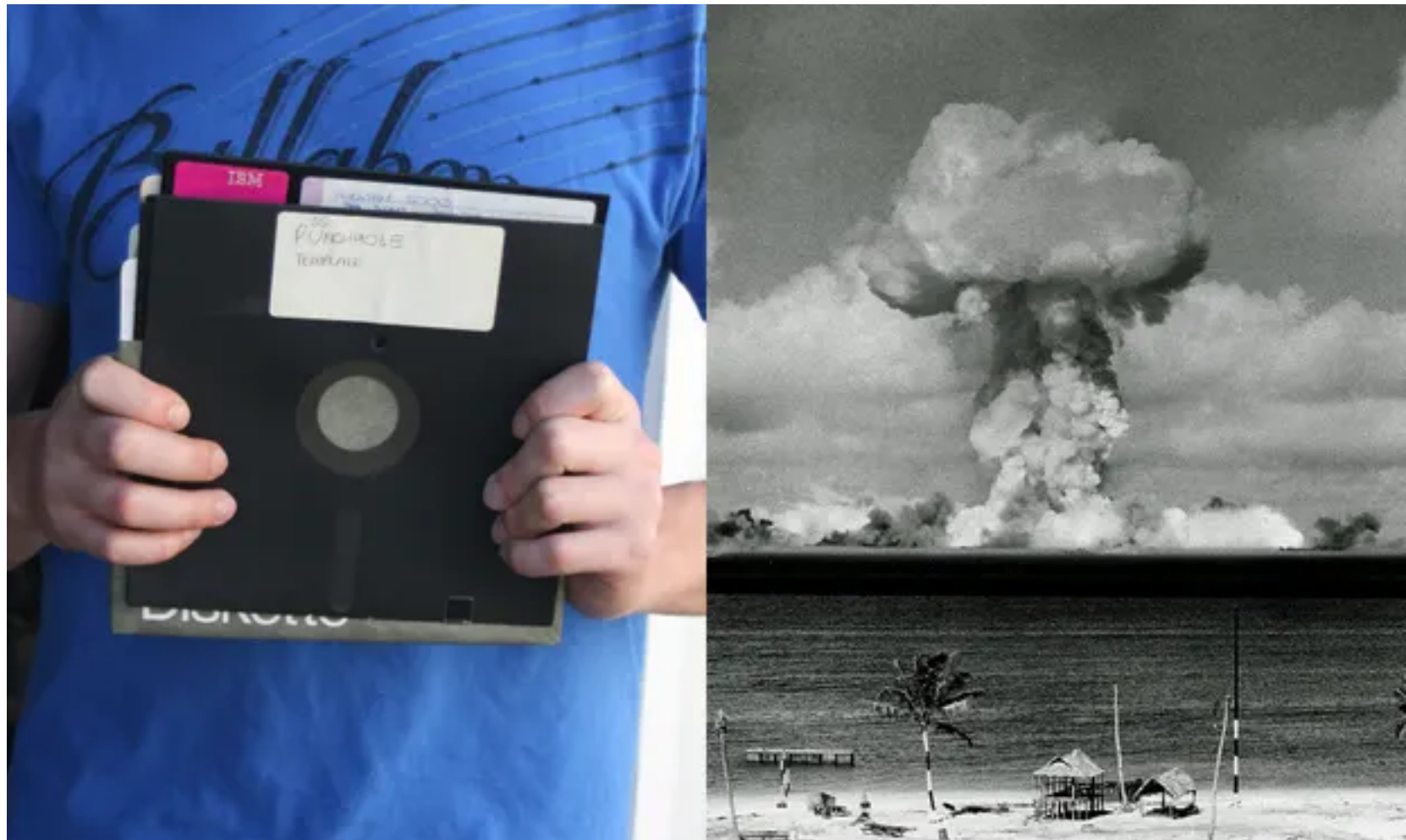
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US nuclear arsenal controlled by 1970s computers with 8in floppy disks

Government Accountability Office report details ‘museum-ready’ machines controlling nuclear force messaging system that are ‘obsolete’



▲ Computers that need 8in floppy disks as large as your head are still required to communicate with US nuclear forces. Composite: Richard Masoner/Joint Task Force One/Flickr/AP

The US military’s nuclear arsenal is controlled by computers built in the 1970s that still use 8in floppy disks.

A report into the state of the US government, released by congressional investigators, has revealed that the country is spending around \$60bn (£40.8bn) to maintain museum-ready computers, which many do not even know how to operate any more, as their creators retire.

The Defense Department’s Strategic Automated Command and Control System (DDSACCS), which is used to send and receive emergency action messages to US nuclear forces, runs on a 1970s IBM computing platform. It still uses 8in floppy disks to store data.

We’re not even talking the more modern 3.5in floppy disk that millennials might only know as the save icon. We’re talking the OG 8in floppy, which was a large floppy square with a magnetic disk inside it. They became commercially available in 1971, but were replaced by the 5¼in floppy in 1976, and by the more familiar hard plastic 3.5in floppy in 1982.

Shockingly, the US Government Accountability Office said: “Replacement parts for the system are difficult to find because they are now obsolete.”

The Pentagon said it was instigating a full replacement of the ancient machines and while the entire upgrade will take longer, the crucial floppy disks should be gone by the end of next year.

Given that magnetic media has a finite shelf life, and that disks and the drives needed to read and write to them are older than some of the operators of the machinery, the floppy revelation makes you wonder whether the US could even launch a nuclear attack if required. An “error, data corrupted” message could be literally life or death.

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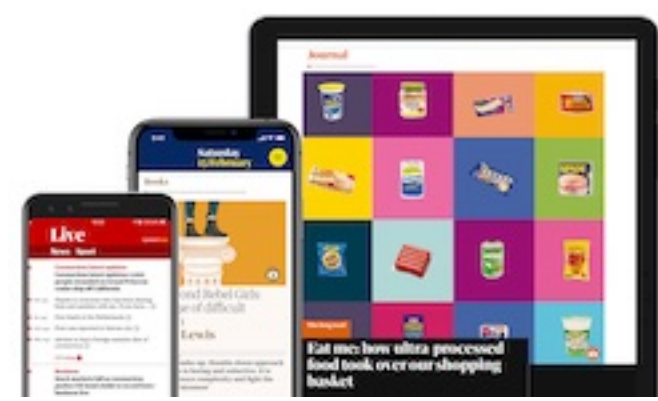
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