

Why A National ID is a Bad Idea
Richard Sobel , October 25, 2001

For reasons of both American democracy and practicality, a national identity card is a very bad idea. A national ID is alien to a country based on freedom and reverses the proper relationship of citizens and state. Here the government derives its powers from the consent of the governed, its people, but under a national ID system, the government creates--and denies--identities. Advocacy of the supposed benefits of high-tech IDs cannot diminish such cards' fundamental flaws and practical failings.

There is no basis for a national ID system in a nation whose Constitutional preamble promises to "secure the Blessing of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity." Requirements for a national ID violate principles like the Fourth Amendment protection that people be left alone unless there are particular reasons to search or detain someone. Requests for identification without individual cause diminish the protections owed Americans for security in their persons and papers. No matter how stringent the standards for checking national IDs, their uses will expand. Extending ID requirements from airports to train stations to public buildings increases their likely uses for surveillance and stopping people walking in neighborhoods. Both public opinion and court decisions oppose this.

Because it is federalized, a national ID system presents many more dangers than a series of state drivers licenses. To have a national identity card, there must be a national identity number for enumeration from birth to death. There must also be one national databank that will likely contain information from criminal records to government benefits. Such data dossiers will provide detailed composites on each individual even though they will never be fully accurate or secure. Once in place, such a system would be almost impossible to dismantle.

Moreover, like the 1930s promise that the Social Security number would be used only for pension (and not identification) purposes, a national identity databank would soon be compromised by the demands by other government agencies for access. Similarly, promises that a national ID would "only" be required to get a job or fly would be broken as uses expanded. Arbitrary decisions, errors, or card loss could deny jobs or freedom.

A national identity card won't solve problems like terrorism or illegal immigration. Previously unknown terrorists can get false IDs or travel on foreign passports that don't tie into a U.S. databank; some employers won't check IDs, because undocumented workers can be more easily exploited. Rather than spending vast billions trying to find a few terrorists or illegals by requiring all 280 million Americans to carry and repeatedly show ID cards, law enforcement should target its resources to find the few perpetrators. The Soviet Union's and South Africa's internal passport systems didn't prevent terrorism or illegal immigration. Israel's ID system hasn't stopped terror there either. Developing better foreign policy and international coalitions that destroy the bases for terrorist protects better against terrorism.

Nor will requirements for a national ID make air travel safer than nonintrusive solutions. Once passengers and their bags are properly screened, presenting IDs even multiple times doesn't

add to real security, yet the practice risks making drivers licenses travel permits. Matching checked baggage to passengers and x-raying each bag would be a better strategy for increasing air safety. Reinforced cockpit doors, air marshals, retrained crews, and an aroused public can protect against hijackers without treating all constitutionally protected citizens as suspects.

Terrorism is only the most recent justification for a national identity card. Each proposed system would be of little practical value yet magnify the power of government agencies and officials. Suggestions that a national ID would be voluntary or that only terrorists' fingerprints or digitized faces would be kept in a travel databank conflict with the imperatives that the card become mandatory and information gathered be used most efficiently. Any ad hoc ID requirements should be kept temporary, with clear sunset dates.

That other countries have national IDs doesn't reflect on America. Other democracies developed from autocratic governments that granted rights. Our nation was created by citizens whose constitution enumerates government powers. When problems like crime arise in a free country, public officials need to address them without destroying rights. Interestingly, the Bush administration, many of whose supporters consider a national ID an anathema, isn't pressing this proposal. The Blair administration is backing away from such a proposal for Britain.

In short, a national identity card is foreign to our basic freedoms and unable to solve problems better addressed in constitutionally sound and effective policies. The bad idea of a national identity card is one that prudent citizens and leaders both should stringently reject.