

Not for Identification Purposes

National identity numbers don't belong in an open society

by Richard Sobel

THE FOUNDING FATHERS CREATED a system of decentralized government, including separate federal branches and local representation, because they understood that centralized power was a threat to a free society; when knowledge is power, centralized information becomes concentrated power.

Because the purpose of universal identification numbers is to keep track of large numbers of people in a central databank, any national identity number—such as that proposed by President Clinton in July—are inherently suspect in a free society. No matter how beneficent the supposed purpose of the numbers (such as lower health care costs in Clinton's proposal), they centralize and categorize people in a manner that invites unwanted and dangerous outcomes.

Take, for example, the proliferating uses of Social Security numbers, which were originally "not for identification purposes" but for designating Social Security accounts. Consider, too, that legally confidential Census information was used to round up Japanese Americans at the start of World War II, showing that in times of social panic, even the most tightly drawn restrictions will be violated. Current privacy legislation fails to restrict data collected for a single purpose from being appropriated for many others. National identity numbers inevitably lead to privacy problems; problems which might be avoided if there were ironclad legislative restrictions on the use of such numbers, including full due process rights and high felony penalties for privacy invasions.

It is the nature of bureaucratic institutions to track, record, identify and control individuals for the collective good. But rendering an individual as a number is inherently impersonal, and depersonalization is a tool of an authoritarian state. The numbers inevitably lead to government use of databases for social and political control, to the ultimate detriment of the public good.

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