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The Instant Dossier

Pat
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"For Social Security and tax purposes—not for identification."

If you haven't noticed that message across the bottom of your Social Security card, no matter. It doesn't mean much. And there is a good chance it will mean even less in the near future.

The Social Security card is well on its way to becoming the universal, mandatory item of identification: for police departments, motor vehicles department, the military, creditors.

It was concern over the increasing use of the Social Security card for identification—no matter what it says across the bottom of the card—that led to the inclusion of this prohibition in the federal Privacy Act of 1974:

"It shall be unlawful for an Federal, State or local government agency to deny to any individual any right, benefit, or privilege provided by law because of such individual's refusal to disclose his social security number."

But having yielded up a good bucket of milk, the legislators then proceeded to kick it over by exempting from the proscription "any Federal, State, or local agency maintaining a system of records in existence and operating before January 1, 1975, if such disclosure was required under statute or regulation adopted prior to such date to verify the identity of an individual."

It is this "grandfather clause" that makes it possible for the D.C. Department of Motor Vehicles, for instance, to demand proof of a Social Security number before issuing driver's licenses.

Under terms of the Privacy Act, there was at least protection against additional demands for the Social Security card as ID. Agencies already requiring it could continue doing so, but no new agencies could start the practice.

Whatever protection that affords would be wiped out in the tax bill now before Congress.

"It is the policy of the United States," says Section 205 (C) (i) of that bill, "that any State (or political subdivision thereof) may, in the administration of any law or program within its jurisdiction, utilize the Social Security account numbers issued by the Secretary for the purpose of establishing the identifica-

tion of individuals affected by such law or program, and may require any individual who is or appears to be so affected to furnish . . . (his) Social Security account number."

Whereas the Privacy Act permitted the continued use of Social Security numbers primarily so that government agencies wouldn't have to undergo major overhauls, the proposed tax bill positively encourages the unrestricted use of the numbers as identification.

And what is so bad about the obviously efficient notion of having a single identifying number for each American?

In a way, the question is like asking what is bad about the loss of privacy for people who aren't doing anything they are ashamed of. Protecting pri-

vacancy may have nothing to do with being found out but only with being left alone.

The U.S. Congress, in the findings on which the 1974 Privacy Act is premised, said that:

"The privacy of an individual is directly affected by the collection, maintenance, use, and dissemination of personal information by Federal agencies.

"The increasing use of computers and sophisticated information technology, while essential to the efficient operations of the Government, has greatly magnified the harm to individual privacy that can occur from any collection, maintenance, use or dissemination of personal information.

"The opportunities for an individual to secure employment, insurance, and credit, and his right to due process, and other legal protections are endangered by the misuse of certain information systems. . . ."

The nightmare is of the instant dossier, the fear that some unknown computer operator will be able to put you together from bits and pieces of information—true and false—stored in data banks from the Internal Revenue Service to the local savings and loan.

Obviously, it would be a lot easier to put you together if you existed in every data bank under the same Social Security number.

Apparently, it's easy enough as it is. Two years ago, NBC's Ford Rowan reported on the secret development of an interface message processor (IMP), a device that permits computers using different language systems to "talk to" each other by translating each computer's language into a common IMP language. Once the translation problem is licked, Rowan pointed out:

"Setting up a computer network involving virtually any computer, government or private, is almost as easy as making a telephone call. Computers can be hooked together by phone. Once you know the codes for the computers involved, it's simply a matter of dialing in and getting the information. . . ."

"Computers can be hooked together, your records collected in a matter of minutes, then the system can be disconnected, and there's no evidence left behind of what's happened."

Not having a single identity number might not make it impossible to put together the instant dossier but it would certainly make it more difficult. Which is reason enough to oppose that troublesome provision in the tax bill.

It would seem that those legislators working on the bill could find enough to do by way of honest tax reform without trying to hustle through legislation to reduce us all to numbers in the name of efficiency.