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For the Record

From a statement by Prof. Alan P. Westin of Columbia University during recent Senate hearings on privacy and government information systems.

Imagine what Watergate might have been if its adventures had taken place not in 1972, when automation was still in such a relatively early stage, but in 1980 or in 1984, when far more federal, state and local governmental files would have been automated...

By 1980 or 1984, of course, the White House would have had a full complement of systems experts and computer information specialists. Instead of a basement room with tape recorders, the White House would have had video display terminals linked to a computer in Camp David that would have really held some "enemies files" — such as 500 000 political opponents to be systematically harried by federal discretionary authority; a possible-leakers file of several hundred members of the administration suspected of leaking news to the media in ways that conflicted with the administration's own news-leak policies; a "disloyalty file" of 250,000 persons whose radical activities made them "suspect"; and a special "press file" of those reporters, editors and commentators whose output was considered biased...

In short, the lessons of Watergate are that we cannot allow secret files to be built in the name of national security that can be used easily to harass political opponents, dissident groups, and the press; that we must remember that any federal instrument we create to protect privacy has the potential in it to betray privacy rights and must therefore be tightly circumscribed; and that the single safest way to protect privacy is to see that much personal information about Americans does not get recorded or preserved at all in organizational files...