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Threat to Our Privacy

IF YOU WONDER what has happened to our citizens' privacy, listen to a summary I have just completed. Incredible? One would have thought so. Impossible? One would have hoped so. Unfortunately, it is the squalid truth. Here are the ugly facts:

More than 2600 computers are now working away — clank, clank, clank — in Washington. They have a full-time potential of supplying a stack of records 2000 miles high every year. About 250,000 — yes 250,000 — government employes are chiefly involved with filing the paper into cabinets.

THESE CABINETS cover 25 million cubic feet of floor space. That's more than 12 times the entire rentable floor space in the vast 162-story Empire State Building — only for the filing cabinets. The executive branch alone has two million.

Yet the government is now installing additional data-processing computers at the astounding rate of 500 a year — with an emphasis on piling up information about our citizens.

Nearly 80 million of us taxpaying peasants filed returns with the Internal Revenue Service this year. The declarations started out to be inviolate. Today, largely unknown to the 80 million, that essential privacy is a mere charade.

Twenty-three Federal agencies now have direct access to our citizens' income tax returns for an official total of 109 reasons.

With the 109 reasons available to the 23

agencies, what an outrageous opening for scattered bureaucratic insiders. And what an opportunity for crooks, pressure boys, spite artists, political opponents of men in public life, and business rivals.

The Civil Service Commission, on inquiry, replies that, yes, it now does compile "lead information relating to possible questions" that might come up about countless people. So does the Post Office Department. So does the Department of the Interior. Even the Interstate Commerce Commission gets into the act.

The Pentagon admits it has dossiers on 20 million Americans outside the armed forces.

The Justice Department lists 13,200 names of persons known to have urged violence. And there are, of course, the vital files of its investigative agency, the FBI.

The Secret Service has its own colossal file.

The Central Intelligence Agency's personal information files are top secret — and tremendous. The CIA has jurisdiction only abroad, not in the United States. Nevertheless, the CIA maintains secret offices in a score of U.S. cities.

BIG BROTHER'S intrusion into our American life is not planned in the sense of a sinister design. Actually, it's a drift, as a spreading cancer is a drift. And behind the scenes today's electronic technological advances are spreading the drift on a scale that should frighten our public out of its boots.