



ARYEH NEIER
ACLU chief's warning

Information Can Be Dangerous

By Keith Power

The methodical, often benign collection of information about individuals is as dangerous to civil liberty as the domestic spying of the Central Intelligence Agency, an American Civil Liberties Union official said here yesterday.

And the record-keeping, he said, creates a separate "nation" of misfits and troublemakers by the very process of labelling, and sometime mislabelling.

Aryeh Neier, executive director of the ACLU an organization that had been fighting for individual rights since 1920, told a luncheon meeting of the Commonwealth Club that the routine gathering of information from school, military, employment and financial sources may appear "less exotic, less sinister" than espionage.

"Nevertheless, the impact is at least as damaging as any domestic information gathering the CIA may have been involved in," he said.

Information readily available to others may identify a citizen as a sexual deviant, a work shirker, a medical problem or a credit risk, he said. In many cases the information may be untrue.

"If you are slandered by a credit bureau it is virtually impossible to do anything about it," he said.

Individuals who are labeled misfits and troublemakers for the protection of society are given little chance to disprove the identification and tend to flock to the big cities where they attack society, he said.

The government's access to the mass of information on its citizens and the denial of information on its own secret workings has turned upside down the fundamental notion of democracy.

Neier, who drew applause several times from the audience, said proposed legislation in the new Congress to protect the privacy of citizens will give the country an opportunity to protect itself.