

Defense of Privacy

"A system that fails to respect its citizens' right to privacy, fails to respect the citizens themselves." This is how President Nixon defined the issue of individual privacy in a recent radio address to the nation, and not even the most scrupulous civil libertarian could ask for a more succinct statement of a crucial but battered principle.

The President cannot hope to gain credibility for his proposed crusade, however, unless he is ready to face up to the need for full exposure of the problem at the center of the governmental system, beginning with examination of electronic surveillance ordered or condoned by the White House, the Justice Department, the Department of Defense, the Treasury and other agencies.

The panel which, in the President's words, is expected to forge a "personal shield for every American" will be composed largely of the heads of departments, many of which bear much of the blame for past infringements on citizens' privacy. It was the President himself who authorized the tapping of the telephones not only of his close associates but of his own brother. It was during Mr. Nixon's Administration that the Justice Department went to court to fight for an extension of the Government's wire-tapping license under the claim of "inherent" Presidential powers. Mr. Nixon engaged in amassing secret recording operations in the White House itself.

To tame the new computer technology and to extend Constitutional safeguards which were written to check the power of men rather than the super-power of machines is a matter of high priority, as Mr. Nixon has urged. But to single out computer banks could easily divert public attention from the totality of privacy's defense. There is no safe way of undergirding the Bill of Rights except by giving it once again supremacy over ill-defined Presidential and governmental powers and over vague and ubiquitous claims of national security.