

Charles McCabe

Himself

Privacy

“WELL, I NEVER,” said I to myself when I heard Mr. Nixon sounding off in his annual message to Congress about MY “right to privacy.”

(Mr. Nixon was sounding off in his latest oratorical mode, which sounds like he’s chewing a bone while talking. Or maybe he has taken up Demosthenes’ old trick of chewing pebbles to increase his lung power.)

Even though Mr. Nixon on the subject of MY privacy and that of other American citizens except Mr. Nixon sounded a bit odd, it nevertheless was welcome. Privacy is something which practically nobody believes should exist, except maybe the person directly involved. Credit agencies, insurance companies, and law enforcement computer banks, not to speak of draft board and Army and Navy records, have made the essential and often discreditable facts of everyone’s life an obscenely open book.



“The time has come,” Mr. Nixon declared, “for a major initiative to define the nature and extent of the basic rights of privacy.” The President reported in his written message that he had ordered a cabinet-level study to find “the balance that must be struck between legitimate needs for information and the right of privacy.” This review, he added, would include recommendations for “appropriate legislation” to protect those balances.

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ALL OUR loving government needs right now to get a pretty fair lifetime profile of one’s many perfidies and sparing virtues is a social security number and a bank of government computers.

Take the case made up by some governmental researchers into privacy. This hypothetical case history involves “a man who files for conscientious objector status under the Selective Service System but is nevertheless sent to Vietnam where he acquires a drug habit and is dishonorably discharged. Back home he is successfully treated at a Veterans Administration hospital and eventually marries a government nurse.

“The two adopt a child who was born to migrant farm worker parents and the family settles in a home mortgaged by the Federal Housing Administration.”

As one of the government researchers put it, “You could get enough stuff on those people from government computers to write ‘War and Peace.’”

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THE GOVERNMENT even has its eyes on kids. There are several states, including California, which are deep into “pre-delinquency” programs funded by the federal government. These programs develop files from information furnished by school teachers and other officials on children who might make trouble for society in the future. A teacher doesn’t like your kid, he may be in the computer as a potential criminal for the rest of his life.

It is this sort of information, and the files of the real and alleged criminal acts of Americans, that constitute the great danger to privacy. One government agency has a file on people “suspected of organized crime activity.” Any information given by a person who takes part in a federally funded junkie program may subsequently be used for “program management,” whatever that is. The subject’s real name is not used, but he can be identified by his mother’s maiden name, which is used.

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WHAT IS LOST in all this busybodyness is the old notion that it is possible to pay your debt to society, to wipe your slate clean by accepting your punishment like a man.

The new idea is that every man’s dereliction, even in the matter of unpaid traffic tickets, is to be forever the business of the public, meaning the cops of various persuasion. This is the truly rotten part of the new view of privacy. Whether anyone has a right to privacy is unclear. Certainly we may all be protected from intrusion into our private lives by the law, by bill collectors, by anybody.