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The Threat to Privacy

Privacy, said the late Prof. Clinton Rossiter, "is an unbreakable wall of dignity... against the entire world." Today, that wall is crumbling. It is being undermined by government snooping and by persistent manipulation through public relations posing as public information. Independence of thought and action is subverted through secret intrusion and subtle indoctrination.

While outright repression always remains the ultimate danger, freedom now faces the more sophisticated threat of electronic surveillance and governmental hucksterism.

"Electronic surveillance," Justice William Brennan Jr. has warned, "destroys all anonymity and all privacy; it makes the government privy to everything...."

The Pentagon has admitted that it has dossiers on 25 million American "personalities." These include persons loosely described as "considered to constitute a threat to security and defense" as well as such public figures as Senator Adlai Stevenson 3d. According to testimony, the data bank, which keeps files on 760,000 organizations and incidents, processes 12,000 requests on an average day. Requests by whom and for what purpose?

Other agencies in the business of keeping tabs on Americans are proliferating. They include the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Congressional committees dealing with "security," the Passport Office and others. An airline has been asked to aid official surveillance by feeding into a computer information on where and in whose company its passengers travel.

Attorneys General, defying the courts, in recent years have stretched their customary privilege of tapping the telephones of potential foreign spies to aim similar surveillance at suspected domestic subversives. Reluctance on the part of Justice Department officials to try to obtain court orders for such purposes — readily granted in any plausible case — is tantamount to admission that these invasions of privacy would be difficult to justify.

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Symbolic of the pernicious trend toward secret incursions into privacy and high-powered manipulation of public attitudes is the Pentagon's deep involvement in both activities. The Defense Department's massive data banks have been exposed in the hearings before the Senate Constitutional Rights Subcommittee; its equally massive propaganda machine was portrayed in the Columbia Broadcasting System's documentary, "The Selling of the Pentagon."

Democratic freedoms are in jeopardy when the military simultaneously arrogates to itself the power to act as watchdog over civilians and, under the cover-all of Public Information, the right to advocate its own views on war and peace. When high-ranking officers — in violation of all military regulations — are allowed to blame domestic dissenters for the failures of American action in Vietnam, the dangers become acute from Army-operated data banks on dissent.

Powerful governmental public relations efforts today try to make war mean "pacification." Opposition to the war thus subtly implies disloyalty. Such manipulations diminish the capacity of individuals to reach political decisions rationally and unafraid.

The Fourth Amendment upholds "the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures...." Modern computer technology and public relations techniques, in the hands of powerful government agencies, are capable of extending such searches and seizures into men's minds. When that happens, privacy and freedom are the victims.

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