

'Right to Privacy' Bill Backed at a Senate Hearing

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 18—A group of Congressmen and data-processing experts called today for rigid laws to protect Americans from the collection and storage by the Federal Government of billions of pieces of personal information about them.

Such legislation was backed at a Senate hearing by Representatives Edward I. Koch, Democrat of Manhattan, and Barry Goldwater Jr., Republican of California, who are co-sponsors of a "right to privacy" bill, former Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson, and Prof. Alan F. Westin of Columbia, an expert in the field of privacy and data collection.

Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., chairman of the Senate Government Operations Committee, presiding at the hearing, noted, "When I came to the Senate in 1954, computers were practically unheard of and information about individuals was

stored, it at all, on paper in filing cabinets."

Yet a survey on Federal data banks by the Senate Judiciary Committee, he said, discovered 858 Federal data banks operated by 54 executive branch agencies that contained over a billion pieces of personnel information about Americans, most stored in computers.

"I suspect there are many more we haven't found," Senator Ervin said.

Among the main findings of the survey, he said, were the following:

¶At least 29 Federal data banks are concerned primarily with maintaining derogatory information such as agency blacklists and intelligence and civil disturbance files. These are maintained by the Departments of Agriculture, Justice, Defense, Treasury and Housing and Urban Development, as well as the Small Business Administration and the General Services Administration.

¶Only 10 per cent of the 858 data banks have been specifically authorized by law.

¶More than 40 per cent of the

banks do not tell individuals that records are being kept on them, while only 30 per cent specifically notify the individuals. The existence of others revealed only by press release.

¶Half the data banks do not allow the individuals in whom data are being collected either to review or correct the files.

¶Both the Internal Revenue Service and the Selective Service System distribute information to other branches of government "despite pledges of confidentiality."

No Private Restrictions

More than half the banks regularly share their information with other agencies.

¶About 40 per cent of the banks use informants as sources of information about specific individuals.

¶The security of many banks is minimal, many using only locks on doors while few employ devices to prevent electronic tapping into the system.

In speaking for his bill, Representative Koch said, "The right to privacy remains threatened as long as there are no effective legal constraints on

the understandable but dangerous appetite of public servants who have forgotten whom they serve."

Mr. Richardson said such legislation should be confined to governmental data banks because "the Federal Government would be taking on an enormous administrative chore to try to regulate all private record-keeping."

Without laws constraining Federal data collection, Mr. Westin foresaw a time 10 years from now when the White House would have "a computer in Camp David" containing the names of "500,000 political opponents to be systematically harried by federal discretionary authority; a possible-leakers file of several hundred members of the Administration suspected of leaking news to the media in ways that conflicted with the Administration's own news-leak policies; a 'disloyalty file' of 250,000 persons whose radical activities made them 'suspect,' and a special 'press file' of those reporters, editors, and commentators whose output was considered biased."