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U.S. Uses 8,000 Record Systems

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The Army has files listing persons who received World War I decorations and those who kept enemy firearms as World War II trophies.

The Department of Health, Education and Welfare has files showing Kentucky toll booth operators' "behavioral performance" and the names of the nation's licensed dental hygienists.

The Air Force has files listing reservists assigned tool kits and personnel "working in areas that require surveillance by the base occupational vision team."

The Treasury Department has files on former employees who received travel vouchers and on residents of the Peoples Republic of China whose financial assets in this country are legally frozen.

These and 8,000 more record systems that the federal government uses to keep track of people for various reasons recently have been listed in the Federal Register, an unprecedented undertaking that has filled more than 3,100 pages of small type.

Most of the record systems are mundane, important to a few people but generally meaningless to the public. An example is the

file of Small Business Administration employees in Houston who are notaries public.

Some of the systems, such as the Navy's file of killed and wounded, are important to the public. Others, such as the Export-Import Bank's file of employee applications for garage space, are not.

Hundreds of bureaucrats have labored for months so that every federal agency could report all its files on individuals, as required by the Privacy Act enacted by Congress last year that will take effect Sept. 27.

The law will enable people in most instances to learn what, if any, federal agency files are kept on them, to challenge their accuracy and to prevent distribution of the information to others for noncompatible uses.

When former Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.) tried to find out last year how many files exist, the federal agencies estimated that together they had 858 different record systems, though most officials acknowledge then that they really had no idea how many systems their agencies kept.

With the count still underway, the National Archives and Records Service's Office of the Federal Register, which is printing the mas-

sive tabulation, has published nearly 10 times as many record systems kept by about 75 federal agencies.

The Privacy Act required that all federal systems of records on individuals be reported by Aug. 27, but now, two weeks later, the Federal Register, a compendium of federal agency activities, continues to list new sets of files.

A National Archives spokeswoman said that 85 to 95 per cent of the federal systems have been reported. However, an official of the Office of Management and Budget, which is coordinating the government-wide compilation, said last week, "I personally think around half of it has been published, but I don't know, I really don't know."

Archives officials estimate that the complete outputting will fill the equivalent of 2½ thick telephone books, all of which under the law must be reprinted this fall in one set.

Under the law even the FBI, the central intelligence agency and the Watergate special prosecutor's office have had to list their record systems and accompanying regulations. But sensitive investigatory records of these and other agencies are exempted from the disclosure requirement.

The Federal Register's description of each system tells what its purpose is supposed to be, where it is located, how long information is retained, which employees have access to it and how a citizen can ask to review his own file but no one else's.

Some agencies have even listed office telephone directories among their record systems. Generally, however, agencies have tended to consolidate systems under a single definition to reduce the number that have had to be reported.

Thus, the total of about 8,000 systems reported so far is not particularly meaningful because one agency, for example, may have separately listed the personnel records of each of its regions, while another agency may have reported all of its personnel records as one system.

This summer there was a great deal of grumbling among the hundreds of federal employees detailed to tabulate the nearly endless lists of filing systems. Now, however, an OMB official said that under the law there was no way to reduce required compilation of record systems, "not knowing what was out there."

Federal officials have no idea how many people will be asking to see their files

come Sept. 27. Some agencies nervously expect to be sieged with requests while others confidently hope to be ignored.

Some of the bureaucrats involved feel the exercise will encourage agencies to trim their files, discourage officials from keeping duplicates of everything and generally help reduce the 92 billion pages of records the federal government maintains.

However, skeptics predict that while the Privacy Act may prompt some agencies to toss out useless files, it will cause others to keep files longer and to start new records on who wants to see the old files, thus causing a net increase in government paper being preserved for posterity.