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Do We Need a National ID Card?

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Are you in favor of a national identity card? Even though many Americans are against the idea of a national identity card, it is coming. In fact, in many ways, it is already here. Every American citizen and every foreign worker in America is required to have a Social Security card. Your Social Security card is only supposed to be used to gain employment and receive Society Security benefits, but try applying for credit without giving your Social Security number -- and most often you will be turned down.

You cannot board an airliner or certain trains, cash a check, go to a hospital, obtain a hotel room or even enter some office buildings without showing a photo ID. You cannot travel to foreign countries without a passport. Yes, we have no national ID card but, instead, we are required to have many ID cards just to engage in the normal activities of life.

We are torn on the issue of a national ID because we do not want big brother government to monitor us (we all know the potential horrors from the Gestapo and sci-fi movies).

On the other hand, we understand the legitimate needs of many purveyors of public and private services to know who we are. We also worry about the theft of our identity. We want to be able to provide our medical history to those who need it to help us in a medical emergency, but we don't want those who might abuse or embarrass us with that knowledge to have the information.

In the current world, we are required to know and give more passwords than most of us can remember to access our bank and credit card accounts, frequent flyer accounts, e-mail and Internet providers, and other information service accounts.

If the question posed at the beginning of this commentary was: "Would you be in favor of a card that could prove your ID while at the same time protect you from giving information about yourself (including medical and financial information) that you do not wish to provide?" I am sure that more people would give a yes response.

The fact is we do not need nor should we have a government issued national ID card. What we need is for the government to specify for what purposes and when it positively must know our identity, and what constitutes acceptable proof. Private organizations, such as airlines, banks and merchants already do the same thing. Then the private sector will develop the most user-privacy-friendly and cost-effective devices. Tiny computer chips containing all of the necessary biometric information coupled with nearly unbreakable encryption have already been developed. Consumers will be able to

choose what information they wish to have stored in such devices, and who is allowed to have access to what. The chips can be placed in "smart cards," cell phones and PDAs, or even implanted in the body.

In my ideal world, the government would know with certainty who has voted (but not their vote), who is coming into the country, to whom it is making payments and from whom it is receiving taxes. I would like to be able to prove my identity to government agencies, airlines, banks, etc., and have access to all my password accounts and computers, and deliver such additional information about myself to those I choose to (such as my medical history to a hospital in case of an emergency), while protecting all my information from those with whom I choose not to share it.

In addition, I do not want to have to carry more than one device with me (such as a card or PDA), nor do I want to have to remember any passwords.

Fortunately, the current technology will indeed allow all of the above (my thumbprint could give me access to my PDA with all of the passwords, etc.).

The Government Passport Agency is in the process of developing new passports to prevent counterfeiting and to give more secure ID. In reality, it is not necessary for us to have passports. What is necessary is for the government to know whether or not I am a U.S. citizen when I am entering the country, and whether or not I should be detained because of some criminal act. If I provide the government with a high quality ID, including proof of citizenship, they should instantaneously be able to determine if I am on a wanted list (including my foreign travel history). The idea of having passports stamped is not only obsolete and useless, but just plain silly. (Obviously, foreign governments would also have to agree to do away with the existing passport system, to get the full advantages of the new private ID systems.)

Again, we do not need a government issued ID. Those who require information about us (including government agencies) should merely specify what information they need and what forms are acceptable. Private companies can then compete to give us the most secure, cost-effective, user-friendly personal information and protection ID devices and systems.

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