

Peter VanBuskirk  
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Security vs. Privacy and Freedom

Is it a waste of time to evaluate the “costs” of lost privacy and freedom due to tighter domestic security? Are civil rights groups like the ACLU forcing the government to waste resources by getting too caught up in bureaucratic debates? How many more trade-offs are people willing to make to ensure safety? When do security goals take over common sense?

The White House Office of Management and Budget published a notice last month asking experts from around the country for ideas on how to address questions of this nature. Unfortunately for the experts, these questions are all rather abstract because it is difficult to quantify the “cost” of lost privacy and freedom.

The director of regulatory affairs at the budget office, John Graham, said, “People are willing to accept some burdens, some intrusion on their privacy and some inconvenience, but I want to make sure that people can see these intangible burdens.” He and other officials hope that even if many costs cannot be quantified in dollar terms, the mere effort to identify them systematically could prompt agencies to look for less burdensome alternatives.<sup>1</sup>

Ralph Nader, the consumer advocate and former presidential candidate, said that this approach might expose wrong-headed security regulations: “As long as [the budget office officials] are going to deal with monetary evaluations, I told them they should start asking about the cost of destroying democracy. If the value assigned to civil rights and privacy is zero, the natural thing to do is just wipe them out.” However, he went on to say, “Even without coming to a complete agreement on what we think the cost

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<sup>1</sup>Measuring Lost Freedom vs. Security in Dollars, Edmund L. Andrews, New York Times, 3/11/2003

of freedom is, we would all agree that it is not zero. [Government authorities] are developing dragnet systems of law enforcement that are very inefficient.” The officials in the Office of Management and Budget, he says, are the only ones who can bring [them] down to earth.

Another issue that strikes a bit closer to home is the worry that tighter scrutiny on foreign students could cost American universities tens of thousands of students a year. John Vaughn, executive vice president of the Association of American Universities, remarked, “If we increase the monitoring of foreign students, with overtones of presumptive guilt, and we increase restrictions on foreigners doing research, these things will have an indirect chilling effect.”

Furthermore, with increased tracking of foreign students in the United States with the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (Sevis), universities can expect an increase in competition from Australia, Canada, and Europe. This fate does not bode well for American Universities.

Proposals are currently circulating for tighter rules on immigration, on customs inspections, on preparation against bioterrorist attacks, and on scores of other issues. Hopefully these cost-benefit analyses of security vs. privacy and freedom will help to restrict the power of government authorities. But if civil liberty groups do not stand up for those too caught up in life to stand up for themselves, government agencies writing security policy will not be subjected to appropriate checks and balances. This will cause privacy and freedom in the United States to suffer.