Will Homeland Security Turn Into Homeland Spying?

July 31, 2002

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If Bill Clinton were still in the White House, Republicans would be on the march against Bigger Government and Bigger Spending. Unfortunately, too many prominent Republicans are cottoning up to increased federal control and the increased spending that goes with it.
One of the five components of the Citizen Corps, created by the President in January, is Operation TIPS (Terrorism Information and Prevention System). This is designed to be "a nationwide program to help thousands of American truck drivers, letter carriers, train conductors, ship captains, and utility workers report potential terrorist activity."

Operation TIPS calls on Americans, in their daily course of work activities, to monitor and report "suspicious" activities to a central reporting center. You can bet that all those "suspicious" activities will be entered on a national database available to the prying eyes of federal bureaucrats.

Majority Leader Dick Armey objects; the Homeland legislation his committee just reported out specifically prohibits implementation of Operation TIPS. And the U.S. Postal Service announced that our friendly letter carriers are not going to double as government spies.

When we observe something illegal or potentially dangerous, of course we should sound an alarm, as the airplane passenger did when he saw his seatmate lighting a fuse in his shoe. But common-sense alertness is a far cry from institutionalizing a federal system of informers.

The President's 90-page National Strategy for Homeland Security (NSHS) released on July 16 sets us on the path of morphing driver's licenses into a national ID card, a longtime goal of big-government types who hope that our fears about a repeat of 9/11 give them the opportunity to push this thoroughly un-American idea. Highlighting the diversity of state laws, the NSHS includes a vague requirement to "coordinate suggested minimum standards for state driver's licenses."

Congress actually passed legislation in 1996 requiring driver's licenses to contain a Social Security number that could be read visually or electronically. After the voters found out that this provision would turn driver's licenses into national ID cards, it was repealed in 1999.

The Homeland legislation reported out of Rep. Armey's committee includes this caveat: "Nothing in this Act shall be construed to authorize the development of a national identification system or card."

Instead of trying to take over driver's licenses, which are and should be under state jurisdiction, the federal government should be cleaning up the irresponsible way it issues visas to people from terrorist countries. We do need an identification system for aliens with smart ID cards to assure that they live up to the terms of their entry and go home when their visa time is up.

The Fourth of July murderer at the Los Angeles airport was in the United States because he took advantage of the now-expired 254(i) amnesty loophole (which, unfortunately, President Bush is trying to get Congress to revive), and his wife won legal residence through Ted Kennedy's Visa Diversity Lottery

Law. A good start on Homeland Security would be to deep-six every kind of amnesty and repeal the Diversity Lottery.

Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the Pentagon were surprised to learn that the NSHS calls for a "plan for military support to civil authorities." Military support, such as through the National Guard, is to include "technical support and assistance to law enforcement, assisting in the restoration of law and order, loaning specialized equipment, and assisting in consequence management."

Those dangerous concepts remind us of the use of the military (including tanks) against civilians that resulted in the 1993 incineration of dozens of children at the Branch Davidian home near Waco, Texas. If U.S. troops are to defend us against terrorists, they should be used to prevent suspicious aliens from coming across our borders, not for police work against U.S. citizens.

Gen. Ralph E. Eberhart, the head of Bush's newly established Northern Command for domestic security, said we should review the Posse Comitatus law "if we think it ties our hands." But tying the hands of the military over civilians is what Posse Comitatus is supposed to do.

In 1998 the Clinton Administration proposed a federal regulation called Know Your Customer, which would have turned your friendly local banker into a snoop reporting to the federal database called FinCen any deviation from what the bank decided is your deposits/withdrawal profile. The American people responded with 300,000 angry e-mail criticisms and the regulation was withdrawn.

The Bush Administration's proposed regulations to implement the USA Patriot Act passed last year are even more intrusive. Some people seem to think it's acceptable to profile the bank accounts of law-abiding citizens but not acceptable to profile Middle Eastern Muslim aliens who might hijack an airplane.

Americans must not allow the 9/11 terrorists to turn America into a police state. The job of the Federal Government is to stop suspicious people at the border.