The Government's Appetite For Nosy Information

by Phyllis Schlafly Mar. 15, 2006

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While the Patriot Act and NSA wiretapping have received enormous attention and criticism from the mainstream media, another federal agency has been quietly gathering far more personal information about Americans than those laws ever can. And this unreported project affects thousands more people.

Our inquisitive federal government has been demanding that selected U.S. residents answer 73 nosy questions. They are threatened with a fine of $5,000 for failure to respond.

When I first heard about this from a reader in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, I thought it might be a joke or an anomaly. But when another in Ishpeming in Michigan's Upper Peninsula received the same questionnaire, I realized something is going on nationwide.

These nosy questionnaires come under the friendly name "American Community Survey." But this is not a Gallup or a Harris poll; the interrogator is Big Brother Government with the power to compel and computerize your responses.

The Constitution authorizes the government to take an "enumeration" every tenth year in order to reapportion the seats in the U.S. House to accord with the "respective numbers" of each state's population. The Constitution thus authorizes a

count of persons; it doesn't authorize the government to find out with whom you share your bed and board.

Beginning only in 1960, the ten-year census-taking significantly changed. The government began sending a long form with many questions to a limited number of persons, randomly selected, and a short form with only six questions to all other U.S. residents.

The government is now jumping the gun on the 2010 census, and without public announcement is already sending out an extremely long form, starting with a few thousand mailings each month to a handful of residents in widely scattered small towns that don't generate national media. Recipients can't find neighbors who received the same mailing, so it's difficult to avoid the impression that the project was planned to avoid publicity and citizen opposition.

The one filling out the new long form is labeled "Person 1." That person is required by law to list the name of every other person in the household, giving his or her birth date, sex, race, marital status, and relationship.

Other persons can be husband, daughter, grandson, in-law, etc. Others can also be "unmarried partner" (defined as a person "who shares a close personal relationship with Person 1") or "roommate (someone sharing the house/apartment but who is not romantically involved with Person 1").

Person 1 must answer 25 questions about his residence and the size of the property. What kind of a home, apartment or condo do you live in, when was it built, when did you move in, are you operating a business in your home, how many rooms and how many bedrooms do you have, what kind of bathroom and kitchen fixtures do you have, and what is the market price of your residence?

The survey asks how much you pay each month for electricity, gas, water, rent, real estate taxes, fire or flood insurance, plus six very specific questions about your first and second monthly mortgage payments. There are questions about your telephone and automobile, and about how many months of the year you and others occupy the residence.

The survey then gets really personal, demanding the answers to 42 questions about you and about every other person who resides in your household. Person 1 is used like a private investigator to extract the information from everybody else, and warned that if anyone doesn't want to answer your nosy questions, you must provide the name and telephone number of such person so Big Brother can follow up.

The information demanded for you and every other person includes very specific questions about what kind of school you and each other one attended and to what grade level, what is each person's "ancestry or ethnic origin" (no matter if your ancestors came here hundreds of years ago), what language you speak at home, how well you speak English, where you lived one year ago, what are specific physical, mental or emotional health conditions, and whether you have given birth during the past year.

More questions demand that you tell the government exactly where you are employed, what transportation you use to get to work, how many people ride in the vehicle with you, how many minutes it takes you to get to work, whether you have been laid off or absent from your job or business, how many weeks you worked during the last year, what kind of a job you have (for-profit company, not-for-profit company, government, self-employed), what kind of business it is, exactly what kind of work you did, what was your last year's wage or salary, and what was your other income from any other source.

The Census Bureau warns: "We may combine your answers with information that you gave to other agencies." (Does that mean IRS? Social Security? New Hires

Directory? Child support enforcement? Criminal databases? Commercial databases?)

The questionnaire promises that it will take only 38 minutes to answer these questions. Of course, that low-ball estimate doesn't include the hours that it takes to collect the required information from so many different sources.