Show Me the Money. Know Your Passenger.

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"Show me the money." That famous movie line, spoken by an actor who won an Academy Award, helps explain why politicians are racing to establish control over financial, medical, travel, and all other types of American citizens' personal and public records.

Vice President Al Gore declared in a commencement address at New York University in May 1998 that "privacy is a basic American value -- in the Information Age, and in every age. And it must be protected." He added, "You should have the right to choose whether your personal information is disclosed; you should have the right to know how, when, and how much of that information is being used; and you should have the right to see it yourself."

That sounded like Gore was promising to defend our right both to access and to withhold disclosure of our personal information. But talk is cheap, especially for Gore (unless it is at political fundraisers), and special interests that profit from building "profiles" of personal data soon discovered that Al Gore is their ally.

While the Clinton Administration is loudly protesting alleged profiling practices of New Jersey state troopers, Gore chaired the White House Commission that recommended a computerized system to profile airline travelers called CAPS (Computer-Assisted Passenger Screening). Using "terrorists" as an excuse, this appears to be another scheme for more government monitoring of law-abiding citizens.

Last week, the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) incorporated this latest invasion of our privacy into a proposed regulation that effectively gives the government unlimited access to everyone's personal travel records. This opens up great potential for abuse.

The FAA gave $3.1 million to Northwest Airlines to create the software for CAPS based on a secret algorithm, plus $7.8 million to other airlines to assist in deploying it. The 40-page regulation includes both a requirement that CAPS data be provided to the government and instructions to airline employees to

deny that CAPS is connected to any law enforcement database.

The airlines welcome this Know Your Passenger regulation because the profiling of nosy information about Americans' travels is so valuable for their marketing activities. It's commercially useful, just as Know Your Customer (the FDIC regulation that last month was buried under 300,000 negative comments) would have been so profitable to the banks.

Being a friend of the airlines' is also highly useful to Al Gore because he's constantly on the campaign cash-raising trail. Aviation interests are large political donors, giving more than $43 million in contributions to Congressional candidates over the last 12 years.

A few Republicans are also playing the game of writing new laws and regulations for the benefit of special interests making political donations. They are backing a Clinton-supported bill designed to encourage the databasing of all kinds of personal data, entitled the "Collections of Information Antipiracy Act," H.R. 354.

Scheduled for immediate mark-up by the House Subcommittee on Intellectual Property, H.R. 354 is so dangerous to our liberties that 128 prominent corporations and organizations, including such diverse groups as Harvard University and the United States Catholic Conference, have signed a letter opposing it. But political cash is more persuasive with some Congressmen than good arguments.

At the same time that Chairman Coble is pushing for early passage of H.R. 354, he is writing to the very special interests that will profit from this bill, requesting contributions of $1,000 or $1,500 per person. His personal letters remind recipients that he is chairman of the Intellectual Property Subcommittee.

A May 6 Coble fundraising invitation, designed like a New York City Playbill, is entitled "PLAYHILL . . . Live on Broadway . . . My Dinner With Howard." Capitol Hill has indeed become the "PLAYHILL" for those promoting the agenda of narrow special interests.

The May 7 Coble invitation is for a "Wall Street Reception" in the Luncheon Club at the New York Stock Exchange. The stock exchanges stand to make millions of dollars from H.R. 354 because it will allow them to convert real-time stock quotes into privately-controlled "collections of information," and get the government to criminally prosecute anyone who uses the quotes without paying exorbitant fees.

As Senator John McCain says, "This kind of information is fact, and facts should not be proprietary." But proprietary, or special-interest, control is why corporations are willing to provide campaign cash to politicians who write helpful laws and regulations.

Will H.R. 354 grant ownership over facts for other special interests that are now pouring in their campaign contributions? Will a life-saving list of dangerous drug interactions be owned and sold by special interests?

Will H.R. 354 turn facts that the taxpayers pay for, such as research data, into the private property of political cronies? H.R. 354 may even require taxpayers to pay twice for the same facts: first when we commission the research, and again when we are required to buy the results of the research due to H.R. 354-created rights.

"Show me the money" and then we can all learn who is benefiting from these profiling and database-building laws and regulations. The public will lose if "PLAYHILL" continues its run in Washington.