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Office of the White House Press Secretary

THE WHITE HOUSE

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

The Privacy Act of 1974 took effect on Saturday, September 27, 1975, a date marking a milestone in the protection of individual privacy for every American.

The reason this Act is important became apparent to me when I was Vice President and chairman of the Domestic Council Committee on the Right of Privacy. Last January, I was pleased to sign this bill as President because it represents a major first step in safeguarding individual privacy.

The need for a Privacy Act is manifestly clear: Over the years, Federal agencies have amassed vast amounts of information about virtually every American citizen. As data-collecting technology increased, it made administrative sense to combine much of this information in computerized data systems where it could be retrieved instantly at the push of a button. This fact in itself raised the possibility that information about individuals could be used for purposes outside the constraints of law and without the prior knowledge or consent of the individuals involved.

The worthwhile programs of human assistance for which this individual information is collected are vital to millions of Americans. They cannot be ended. But at the same time, we have a clear responsibility to erect reasonable safeguards to ensure that information collected is used solely for the purposes intended.

The Privacy Act, though experimental, makes a long overdue start to erect these safeguards. It requires Federal agencies to:

-- Allow individuals to examine records pertaining to them and establish procedures for correcting those records;

-- take steps to ensure the accuracy, timeliness and security of records that concern individuals and to limit records-keeping to necessary and lawful purposes.

This Act also provides special safeguards whenever the rights of citizens to free speech and expression are involved.

Before this Act, even the Federal Government did not know what information it kept about individuals. The Act, therefore, required Federal agencies to first inventory their records-keeping systems and identify those which contained information about individuals and to publish a listing of these systems in the Federal Register. That task is now complete.

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The magnitude of Federal records-keeping has been far greater than anyone imagined. There are more than 6,000 Federal record systems containing personal data about them.

Compliance with this Act will involve many people. Every Federal official who either creates, keeps or uses personal data has responsibilities under this Act. I urge every member of the Executive Branch to reexamine the record systems in their custody and determine if all are necessary. Keeping only an essential minimum of these records is the most effective protection we have against further incursions by the Federal Government into the private lives of Americans.

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