

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 9, 1975

Office of the Vice President  
(Washington, D. C.)

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BRIEFING ON  
ROUNDTABLE ON PRIVACY AND INFORMATION  
VICE PRESIDENT'S CONFERENCE ROOM  
OEOB, ROOM 263  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

(AT 6:15 P.M. EDT)

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I feel very badly that the principals who have been here and testified, or at least not testified but were discussing -- some of them have dispersed; some are still here -- so maybe we can get the benefit of their discussions. But there has been a two-day discussion going on on the whole question of privacy versus the public's right and need to know and how they can be reconciled to protect the dignity and the rights of individuals and at the same time provide -- well, I made some notes on one point.

One point that was made was that the dissatisfaction of the American people with government is partly due to this whole question of loss of privacy.

The restoration of confidence in government could well be partly restored by the development of policies which give greater protection to the privacy of individuals.

Based on sort of the basic concept that an individual's privacy is really a sovereign right or an inherent right and that some of that has to be given up to government for government's own needs -- the Census Bureau, for instance -- and at times the individual gives up voluntarily some of his privacy in order to gain certain advantages, whether they are benefits offered by government or whether they are benefits in connection with a credit card or something else, but that the information given should be held and restricted to the purpose for which it was made available and not used beyond that.

There were many different points that were expressed, extremely interesting and maybe Mr. Rodgers would like to summarize, if he wants, any part of it. He has been here the full two days. I have been here yesterday and today, but only part of the time. So everything has been recorded and we will use it as a base for the planning and thinking of this Privacy Commission and its program.

MR. RODGERS: Thank you, sir.

As the Vice President indicated, there were a number of persons here during the last couple of days that had expertise in the privacy area and related information management, information technology questions. They were here to discuss such things as privacy and what its larger implications are and what it means, both philosophically and in a policy sense.

There was a very rich dialogue which will be very valuable to not only segments of the government and society

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which are interested in privacy, but those which are interested in information generally, and how that might enrich our life.

There was finally decided after two days of discussion that rather than try to arrive at one common set of answers to the very difficult problems that people would individually state their viewpoints to the members of the committee.

They did arrive at sort of the following notion of where that discussion might start. I can believe that if you would be interested, we might type it up later for you. Unfortunately, I don't have it except in the raw form right now; that was, that government has the responsibility to attempt to anticipate problems which will confront society in the short and long term, even though the role of government with respect to those problems cannot always be determined at the outset.

Secondly, that the participants thought that we could possibly anticipate issues involving information, its use and importance to society and that those would be of increasing importance.

Some participants viewed privacy as a set of broader and difficult policy problems and information, who shall have it; and others saw privacy as the central part of the problem.

We heard from each of them and their different perspectives. Finally, they did indicate that they thought there was a need for high level and broad base intention to the phenomenon of the increasing importance of the information in this society, social and political issues which it raised.

They indicated that they thought that that called for government to serve, government and the private sector, the privilege to serve as the catalyst to begin to define problems, as opposed to policy alternatives.

That was essentially, at least, the starting point of the discussion this afternoon.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I thought that Dr. Jones, Mary Jones, made a very interesting point which was the other side of this coin, that the amount of information that the government gathers which is pertinent to individuals, institutions throughout this country, is tremendous and that the government has got a responsibility to make this information available to people, that it is becoming more and more difficult for people to get information as the volume of information grows; more and more difficult to get that information which is an asset to them in liv affecting them directly or in their institutional activities.

This is a very interesting and difficult part of the problem, of how to disseminate the information, how to make it available.

I will be glad to answer any questions.

QUESTION: Are you talking about any uses in this area? I suppose that is the reason for getting these people together?

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THE VICE PRESIDENT: No, this Commission has been ongoing. I don't know when it was originally created. It was here when I got here; 1974. The Vice President was chairman of it. So I landed here in the middle of it.

The reason for this discussion today was to try to chart a course for the Commission for its future work and to get the thinking of these various experts who have been dealing with this problem from legal and scientific, technological, philosophical points of view.

Out of this we will try to develop the courses of action, the courses of consideration, whether it is legislative or otherwise. There were no specific discussions of abuse as such, but it was really more philosophical, individuals making available the information for some purpose and then having that information get into a data bank, and then be used by others and spread around, and then the effect that that had, particularly if it was information that was adverse, the effect that had on their chance to get a job or to get credit or to get something else, which is one of the big concerns.

This point was made that this concern about sort of big brother, the government having all of this information and data banks, was one of the sources of loss of public confidence in government.

QUESTION: To get back to your original point.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Exactly.

So I think the Attorney General, who was here, made the wisest comment when I asked him if he wanted to comment. He said he thought that so much had been said that he wanted to be able to digest it to absorb it before trying to react to it. I think that really was the feeling of everybody, that we heard so many interesting and different points of view here, and to a layman like myself, some of these problems really open up new avenues of thought and perception that I was not fully aware of before.

MR. RODGERS: We hoped that maybe this would begin a dialogue which would begin to focus on some of the policy issues, what some people are calling the information age. I would be glad to stay around and talk to people in greater depth about some of those things.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: If anyone has anymore questions to ask of me, I would be delighted.

QUESTION: During your confirmation hearing, Newsweek had this statement. I would appreciate your reaction to it. "While sociologists probe the poor and measure the middle classes with computerized efficiency, the rich remain largely ignored by social scientists and journalists alike."

Do you have any reaction?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I didn't feel ignored in those four months. I didn't feel there was any area they didn't probe.

What was not brought out in the hearings, there have been 500 FBI agents working for five or six months, discussing with everybody I had ever known during my lifetime, not only in this country but around the world wherever I happened to have been.

So I don't think that in this case there was any neglect. I don't really think that I would agree with the statement as originally stated, leaving myself out, a lot of the information is gathered for statistical purposes for the Census Bureau. They don't neglect anybody. They cover everybody.

The statistics which are available on income, on all of the different economic factors relating to individuals are complete, not just for those in low income groups, but for the entire gamut.

I really don't think anybody is ignored. The question is whether they should be less examined or examined less, perhaps I should say. But I think one of the most interesting points was how can you get this information that is needed for the purpose for which it is essential without having that information then go beyond.

If you talk to your doctor or your lawyer about something, how do you keep that from being used by somebody who is going to ask the doctor about you or the lawyer about you. Of course, we have a tradition there, the doctor-patient relation and the lawyer-client relation and the husband-wife. Those are three traditional areas. When we get beyond that, we don't have a body of law or of tradition which is very clear.

QUESTION: Since I waited an hour, I get to ask a question. Even though it might be slightly philosophical, but it is political; political participation by the average citizen has just fallen off tremendously. People aren't in public to a large extent. So that power gets more and more centralized in Washington, which makes government bigger and looking out for citizens; citizens then who -- part of the reason that grew up because they are so private. They are not participating at all in political life. That has fallen off tremendously.

So in one sense privacy leads to bigness and examination and the computer age and centralization in Washington, which then is going to encroach on privacy. Correct? I would like your opinion. That is the question.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I understand what you are saying. Government in its effort to do for people -- I am talking now Federal Government -- has encroached on the privacy not only of individuals, but of State Government and local government.

One of the favorite concerns are the number of categorical grants which are now 1,007, I think was the last count, and in order to get money from the Federal Government for a program you have got to enrich and improve your program and then you have to live within the Federal regulations set by Congress and by the agency.

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By the time you have done that for 1,000-and-some programs, you are totally -- first you have to increase your staff tremendously to be able to read the regulations just to find out what they are; then to live with them, and then they change them.

So that this growth down here in Washington all based on the desire to be helpful to people has resulted in really dominating their lives in the process of trying to help them.

QUESTION: So there needs to be some kind of decentralization?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think so. I am expressing a personal opinion rather than a decision that was made here. I grew up on the tradition that the government closest to the people was the best government and they had more control over it, which I think is very sound.

The thing you are talking about will be the subject of discussions by the Domestic Council in its review of domestic policy, the policy programs, and in the hearings we are going to have around the country. That has nothing to do with this gathering here, but that is another point that is of very real interest. It is a fascinating field.

What was it one person said, by the year 2000 information would be, what, seven or eightfold what it is today? Didn't somebody give that figure during the course of the discussion?

MR. RODGERS: Particularly depending upon the way in which you define the sectors, a tremendous growth.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It is a rapidity. The question is would we have the capacity to be able to cope with it? Did we have the technological ability to absorb it and even retain it in a usable form?

These are really fascinating subjects. Another point that was made, that this country, we don't produce the goods today that are sold around the world but we do produce the information and the ideas and that we are ahead of the rest of the world in producing ideas as distinct from producing goods, that they can now produce the goods as effectively or more cheaply than we can, but not the ideas that are there. Therefore, this becomes the society of information and ideas.

Yes, sir?

QUESTION: Mr. Vice President, how would the function of the Domestic Council differ from the function of the Privacy Commission?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: This Privacy Commission is a Commission of the Domestic Council. It is a committee. Excuse me, Committee of the Domestic Council. So this is a creature

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of the Domestic Council and the people who are here sitting on this side of the table, including the head of the Civil Service Commission and the Attorney General, and others are members of the committee. Those who were sitting where you are were the people who had been invited to attend. You have a list, I understand, of who they are and their background.

QUESTION: How were they chosen? The people on this side? They are obviously experts.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Mr. Rodgers, I think, if I am correct, put the list together and I wrote and asked them to invite them to come.

MR. RODGERS: It is a random mix of people from a variety of different fields. It is no sense that it would be necessarily the last word.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Nor the last conference.

QUESTION: Is this the first time you were here?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I was here yesterday morning. This first meeting?

QUESTION: Yes.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: This is the first conference I have attended of this group. I have been briefed by the previous staff members as to what had been done before, and then was briefed as to what they had in mind as a possible program, but in order to get a better perspective as the new Chairman -- Mr. Rodgers as Director -- we thought maybe we would have this conference to try to give us a broader background for approaching the problem. I think it was very useful. I am very grateful to the people who came.

QUESTION: What would be the next logical step in this process?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It is going to be addressed at digesting what was said for the last two days and trying to pull that together to see what comes out of that -- I think what Mr. Rodgers has mentioned here, that this is a pretty good broad-broad summary of the approach, but I think we have to take areas.

I have tried, just as the Attorney General said, to absorb what was said today because these were the summaries given by the individuals after two days of discussion. Each member of the panel gave a summary as he or she saw what had happened.

QUESTION: Have you made connections between your work with the CIA and the privacy people?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: The CIA, FBI -- you get into this whole question of the protection against assassination attempts against the President. How do you protect the President? These get to be very interesting questions.

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Certainly nobody would want to interfere with somebody's privacy, but if the individual or the group is plotting to shoot the President, somebody has got a responsibility to be aware of that to protect the President. So you run again into conflicts. Everybody agrees that it is a value judgment balance that has to be created in all of these things.

QUESTION: Between security on the one hand --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Security or other needs for information; whether you want to get a credit card or whether you want to get -- one gentleman was talking about the problem of buying computer machines that were way behind on paying Veterans for their education under the Veterans Education Law, but there are so many Veterans now and so much demand, and then the Congress won't give them computers because the Congress says that is putting information into computers about individuals. They haven't got the staff to do it by hand.

So the Veterans are not getting the payments because they can't do it by hand. The checks are written now, today, in most institutions by machine, by computer machine.

These are the interesting conflicts and value judgments have to be made to balance them out. Maybe the Veterans get upset enough if they don't get their checks they will go to Congress and say we would rather put our names in the computer machine and get our check than not to get to college.

QUESTION: It would seem to me, I think this is what he was getting at, that there is a certain amount of redundancy between the Privacy Committee and the Privacy Protection Study Commission.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: What do you mean by the word redundancy?

QUESTION: They would be studying the same kind of issue. Are you familiar with the work of the Study Commission set up by the --

MR. RODGERS: The Privacy Commission.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: This group?

MR. RODGERS: No, the Legislative Commission that the Congress set up in the Privacy Act to look at some of those public sector questions which are being dealt with.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Has that been formed?

MR. RODGERS: Yes.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Does it have a congressional committee?

MR. RODGERS: It has congressional members on it. I think those are some of the various distinctions that exist. It has limited study authority for a couple of years. It has been part of the legislative body.

QUESTION: How would it function?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I am delighted to have them take over if they are ready. I have a lot of other things to do. There is no sense of competition as far as I am concerned. I am glad you mentioned it.

MR. RODGERS: We have been cooperating and helping them set up and doing a variety of different things and looking into the various areas.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I think there are a great many groups looking into this problem and I inherited it. I am trying to approach it properly in an intelligent manner, but I stand ready to turn it over to anybody else who wants to volunteer.

MR. RODGERS: When we have a number of governmental groups and then the question of what Domestic Council policy you want does come up at that point.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: If you will excuse me, and if there are any further questions, if you will ask Mr. Rodgers, he knows more at this point than I do.

END (AT 6:40 P.M. EDT)