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Office of the Vice President
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ROUNDTABLE ON PRIVACY AND INFORMATION
VICE PRESIDENT'S CONFERENCE ROOM
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As Chairman of the Domestic Council Committee on the Right of Privacy, I am delighted to welcome all of you to this roundtable discussion on the privacy issue.

I got my job as Chairman of this Committee by virtue of my office as Vice President. I certainly did not get it out of any special claim to privacy, since I don't have any privacy left after those four months of confirmation hearings.

Nevertheless, I am delighted with this responsibility because I regard the right of individual privacy as fundamental to the American vision of freedom. And I am pleased that we have gathered such a distinguished group of panelists to probe this vital concern. I thank all of you for giving us your valuable time by agreeing to take part.

What you will be seeking throughout your deliberations above all, is a sense of balance. We need an intelligent balance of: the people's right to know, the government's need to know, considerations of national security, and the citizens' right to privacy.

In a simpler age, this was no great problem. When government's role was limited largely to enforcing the laws, building roads and canals and collecting a few relatively simple taxes, there was no great need for obtaining data on the private lives of individuals. Today, the situation is far different.

When government began to provide benefits for the poor, for the unemployed, for the needy student; then government needed to have personal information about these people in order to make correct judgments. When government provides grants to colleges or loans to businesses, it has to know something about these schools and something about these firms.

Of course, we deplore any illegal intrusion into people's private lives by any agents of government -- including the Congress. Just last Monday, Senator Robert Griffin spoke on this subject on the floor of the Senate. The Senator pointed out that information on the Middle East settlement, given to a Senate Committee by the President under an injunction of secrecy, had been made public by the Committee, in violation of the Senate's own rules. And Senator Griffin rightfully asked what kind of a precedent this action could set for our future relations: "If the President cannot assume and expect that the Senate will observe and abide by its own rules."

Another issue at stake in the collection of information involves the very safety of our leaders. When attempts are made on the lives of our leaders -- which has happened lately -- we then can appreciate the value of legitimately collected information on potentially dangerous individuals.

Today, the problem of using information while protecting personal privacy has been compounded by the revolution in communications. Automation, computers and telecommunications have made it possible to communicate massive amounts of data almost instantaneously. And since our decisions are only as good as the information that goes into them, this development is a boon to government, to industry, to science, to the university.

At the same time, the ability to speed information on individuals from computer bank to computer bank gives rise to a certain amount of apprehension. Our rightful concerns are with information that is put to the wrong use, information that is put in the wrong hands, information which individuals are unaware that the government has collected on them, and these concerns apply to the proper conduct of our international relations as well as to the rights of individuals.

At present, no less than 10 different national commissions and 2 congressional committees are looking into various pieces of this problem of privacy.

We regard this roundtable discussion as a promising first step toward the formulation of a conceptually sound, comprehensive policy governing the collection of information and the right of privacy. I am delighted that you will be examining these hard questions. And I look forward to your briefing at the end of the discussion.

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