

Scaremongering: *To Prevent Illegal Immigrant Screening*

by John L. Martin

Our world is changing. Whether for good or for bad depends on your perspective. We less often leave our doors unlocked. We must buckle up. We get scanned by metal detectors when we fly and go into public buildings. We have to identify our dependents on our income tax forms with their Social Security number (SSN). We no longer can drive in front of the White House. Some of the changes, like security screening, we recognize as intrusive but necessary for our own protection. That's similar to the change we now are asked to accept in incorporating our SSN into our driver's license to restore its integrity as an identity document.

Yet, as with all changes, there are persons opposed who argue that our freedoms are being infringed. On this SSN-driver's license issue the opponents of change include such disparate groups as the ACLU on the political left and the Freedom Forum on the right. The issue has been cast as a battle to prevent big government from developing a computerized database on each and everyone of us. But, that is disinformation.

According to Congressman Lamar Smith (R-TX), Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims, "There are people with genuine concerns about privacy, but there are also others who have engaged in fear-mongering. Given the facts, the vast majority of Americans can distinguish the genuine concerns from the distortions and recognize that fraudulent IDs pose a real threat to them and must be addressed in a reasonable way."

Few commentators have given serious attention to the issue. Media analysis of the debate has not dug much deeper than identifying the impetus for the SSN-driver's license match-up as coming from immigration restrictionist forces. In fact the issue has nothing to do

with legal immigration, but it does concern adoption of a better control against illegal immigration.

Opponents of the change, spearheaded by the ACLU, have been swift to characterize the issue as the adoption of a "national ID document." As Rep. Smith states, this is patent scaremongering. What in fact is proposed is not a federally-issued document, but rather a decentralized state-maintained database intended to assure the integrity of the state-issued driver's license. It would not have any new documentary purpose beyond those already attached to the driver's license. However, because driver's licenses have become a common identification document for verifying that newly hired aliens are legally entitled to work, counterfeit document rings have proliferated to sell fake licenses. That is what has made essential the adoption of a measure to restore the integrity of the state-issued license as an identity document.

The mass media should remind their readers that the government already has files set up on us and has maintained them for decades without reason for concern. Our SSNs are assigned now at birth, and information on our work history including our earnings is collected by the Social Security Administration (SSA) throughout our life. Separate files are opened by the government on us when we begin earning taxable income. Of course, nobody welcomes the files maintained by the IRS, but we accept them as legitimate, and we hope that the SSA is maintaining our retirement account accurately. If big government were seeking a means to infringe on our personal freedom, it already has that capability. We should keep that in mind when we consider the SSN-driver's license change.

In writing about this issue, the press also ought to remind readers of the magnitude of the illegal alien problem that has given rise to the need for greater driver's license security. The government's last estimate of the "resident" illegal aliens is that they numbered five million in 1996 and that their number was growing by about 275,000 per year. These numbers are understated because they ignore all the aliens who enter the country

John L. Martin is special projects director at FAIR, the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

illegally for seasonal work and return abroad later in the year and the aliens who live across the border but work illegally in the United States. The numbers also significantly understate resident illegal alien populations that shy away from census takers. As an example, some experts say there are tens of thousands of illegal Chinese entrants each year, rather than the thousands estimated by the INS. The recent bust of alien smuggling rings bringing in Indians through Cuba and Chinese through an Indian reservation on the U.S.-Canadian border buttresses this assessment.

Increasingly, since adoption of the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986, fake driver's licenses have become one of the primary forms of identification purchased by illegal aliens to show to a new employer as "proof" of their work eligibility — along with a fake social security card. Illegal aliens quickly found that they could still get jobs by purchasing phony documents. And employers learned that the INS did not expect them to recognize fake documents.

Illegal aliens include both persons who sneak into the country and those who enter legally and then abuse their visa status by staying and taking jobs. The INS estimates the ratio at about two legal entrants (visa-overstayers) for every three border violators. Some argue that the way to stop illegal aliens is to create greater border security. This ignores the two-fifths of illegal aliens who do not enter that way. They can only be deterred by removing the job magnet and by the threat of detection and deportation. The former is the more realistic objective. In any case, the job of controlling the border will be unnecessarily complicated as long as there is a strong lure of jobs available for successful border violators. Clearly, effective worksite control based on secure and verifiable documents is the key to successful deterrence. The secure driver's license linked to the SSN will not end the illegal alien problem, but it will help to bring it under control. Some states have recognized and faced up to the burden of illegal aliens on their society. California is the best-known example. There, the driver's license has included screening to exclude illegal aliens for several years. Several states already use the SSN as part of the driver's license data, and others offer that as an option. Most states already collect the SSN as part of the

license application process. So, what is the impending change?

The issue is not as it is characterized by opponents of the change. They say that the federal government will require the states to put the SSN on the driver's license. Then they warn, anyone will be able to obtain your SSN and access your credit and medical records and anything else you would like to keep private.

This scare tactic has aroused a firestorm of protests from groups around the country despite the fact that no evidence has surfaced that abuse is a problem in states that already include the SSN on the driver's license. Under the proposed system, the SSN is not even required to be included on the license. It can be left in the files.

Although the proliferation of fake SSNs makes it appropriate that the number be verified with the SSA.

While many of the organizations and persons who have been roused in opposition to the SSN-driver's license proposal may not fully understand the issues, the same innocence cannot be imputed to the ACLU. It seems clear that the ACLU is doing its best to fuel the passions of uninformed people who are fearful of government intrusion as well as their usually well-informed base of civil libertarians. Because of the ACLU's long-standing opposition to any measures designed to improve government control against illegal aliens, one must wonder if that is not the underlying reason for their position. If better driver's license security will really help prevent illegal aliens from getting jobs in the United States and there is no incremental control that the government will gain over our day-to-day existence, then it seems obvious that the SSN-driver's license system is another of the changes in our every-day life that we are unlikely to welcome — like airport screening or wearing seat belts — but which most people will accept. And, if the resulting system achieves its intended purpose of reducing illegal aliens in our society, we are even likely to look back from the next century and point to the change as a welcome development.

A cautionary note must be sounded, however. As we make counterfeit documents more recognizable and, therefore, less usable, there will be a greater effort to furnish illegal aliens with identities of U.S. citizens. This

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means that we will want to take greater care over the collection and issuance of our identity documents. When a person dies, we will want the vital records authority and the SSA to know that so that an application for a new birth certificate for the deceased will not be honored.

It is a sad commentary on the times we are living that we should have to think about such things, but it is a by-product of our material well-being, our

communications revolution, and the technological age we have created for ourselves. Few would want to turn the clock backwards. But, as we move into an uncharted future, we must remain vigilant that we have not opened the doors for the dismantling of the lifestyle we have created. And that means the adoption of prudent security measures such as the SSN-driver's license system