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Subject: OMB use of cost benefit to measure value of liberty and privacy

RE: OMB use of cost benefit to measure value of liberty and privacy

Concerning the economic costs of restrictions on American civil liberties:

My understanding is that studies repeatedly find a positive correlation between the strength of a nation's economy and the openness of a society. The Total Information Awareness Office, Patriot Act and Patriot Act II clearly represent a closing of American society. Citizens are less likely to engage in economic activities when they know the government will monitor their every transaction. If citizens know the government will monitor any purchases or trades processed electronically to build a profile about them, citizens will become more and more hesitant to spend, invest and exchange.

Secondly, dissent and plurality of public opinion power many economic markets in the United States. Organizing alternative schools of political thought is not only a civic activity, but an economic activity as well. Publications from The Nation to The American Conservative and a high percentage of thriving websites succeed because they publish dissenting views and alternatives to government opinion. Politically-oriented commercial merchandise from buttons to bumper stickers, radio talk shows and commercial music also depend in no small part on vibrant political debate without government restriction. The rollback of freedoms of political expression, broad and vague definitions of what constitutes terrorism and the heightened security state outlined in the Patriot Act and other recent legislation all act to discourage and in some cases abolish dissent (for example, is the Earth First! Journal now a terrorist publication?) This could lead to the reduction of alternative outlets of political opinion and the shriveling of many markets dependent on plurality of political thought.

Of course, US courts routinely set monetary equivalents (in the form of compensation) for civil rights and civic values, and such equivalents should also be considered by the U.S. government when planning to diminish the freedoms of American citizens. What is the compensatory value of privacy? Of freedom of expression and the right to dissent? Is it possible to compensate Americans for these losses, and should the government be expected to compensate citizens for infringing on their civil liberties?

Thank You,
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