

Building con-census

Census data, though it may seem irrelevant, could be useful



In 1932, the United States government began an experiment in Macon County, Alabama. For four decades, African-American men with syphilis were studied but not treated. Our government spent forty years compiling information on untreated syphilis. In the end, the victims were given a pathetic sum of money and an apology from a president that wasn't even alive when the study began.

Government abuse of citizens has existed since governments themselves were created. We should not be surprised when American citizens feel they cannot trust their government.

A new debate has emerged over the age-old question of whether or

not we should trust our bureaucrats and politicians, and this time it has sprung up because of the 2000 U.S. census.

All Americans are required by law to complete a census questionnaire, and one in six American households is required to fill out the now infamous long form. The long form consists of 53 topics ranging from family income and assets to the number of bedrooms in a home and indoor plumbing.

After publicly announcing that Americans should not answer questions they feel uncomfortable with, Nebraska's esteemed Sen. Chuck Hagel last week announced he would introduce a bill that would make answering many questions optional.

Hagel says the questions "go too far." He says, "More information, more government." As much as it pains me to disagree with him in this instance, I must. This is a more complex issue than Hagel's call for smaller government implies.

Why Leave it Blank?
Hagel says people have called

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his office complaining about having to answer questions in reference to their income and assets.

This is an unreasonable complaint.

The problem with this complaint is the Internal Revenue Service already has this information. Unless people are worried about remembering the fiction they may have spun earlier, I don't see how this should keep one from answering the census.

I don't hear people complaining about filling out their tax forms due to privacy concerns. Don't get me wrong; people cry about taxes too, but not because of privacy. Do we believe this information is less accessible than the census data?

The Big Brother argument does have some validity. How do we know that the CIA doesn't tip-toe over to the files on which the census information resides? The government could have a huge, covert database with all of our vital information.

Somebody call ADT; I think I need a home security system. It's a little late to start trying to

fight large databases. If you have a friend, or enemy, with a professional occupation, try looking up their license on the Web. It's easy. You may even want to take a look at the University of Nebraska's student and faculty directories while you're at it.

Why Fill it Out?

The obvious reason to fill out the census is it's the law. Refusing to answer the census can result in a \$100 fine. The fine for providing false information is \$500.

This census has tried its hardest to court the minority members of our society who are historically underreported. This, of course, helps these people receive public funds they need and deserve.

In addition to public funds, seats in the U.S. Congress are apportioned by the census numbers.

Census information on an individual is also held confidential for 72 years. So, presumably, we would be dead before anyone other than the census bureau could attach our information to our name. The raw numbers are made public, but are

not attached to the names.

The census bureau is also forbidden by law to share the information with any other government agency. For example, if you are an illegal immigrant, the census bureau can't tell the Immigration and Naturalization Service. This is done to encourage people to answer correctly.

The floodgates have already been opened. The information age is upon us. So, you may ask, why do we need a census if all this information is already out there?

ALL information is not available, of course. And demographics are constantly shifting. Many people other than the government, like sociologists for example, use the census to conduct social research and evaluate existing programs.

Can information be misused? Of course. But the benefits of the census outweigh the risks. It's better to have the government in possession of the best data on our bathrooms and plumbing possible. You never know when they are going to need it.

Substance over symbolism

Flag burning amendment defeat a sensible decision



"If our democracy is to flourish, it must have criticism. If our government is to function, it must have dissent. Only totalitarian governments insist upon conformity, and they do so at their peril."

—Henry Steele Commager, 1947

Last Wednesday the U.S. Senate rejected, for the third time in five years, a proposed Constitutional amendment to prohibit desecration of the American flag. Senator Bob Kerrey led the opposition, supported with statements from national heroes and fellow veterans, such as Gen. Colin Powell and former Sen. John Glenn.

Of course, the amendment supporters will not go away quietly. The Citizens Flag Alliance and other groups will use these votes to punish those senators who opposed the ban, and veterans groups will probably push for the measure to be introduced again next year.

In doing so, they will elevate a symbol of freedom over the very substance of freedom.

Supporters of the ban believe the flag is a sacred symbol of what veterans fought and died for.

"Too many have died defending the flag for us to allow it to be used in any way that does not honor their sacrifice," said Sen. Chuck Hagel. (Omaha World Herald, 3/30/00)

This is incorrect. Men and women who fought and died in conflicts around the globe didn't do it for a cheap piece of cloth with some silly stripes and stars. They may have done it out of duty, loyalty or fear. Or they may have done it for what that cloth represented to them: freedom.

A constitutional prohibition on flag burning would protect the cloth and destroy what it represents.

Burning the flag is such an offensive act to most people that the person doing it has a reason; he or she is usually dissatisfied with government policy in some area, whether it is taxes, foreign intervention or human rights. The very fact that the act is offensive draws attention to the message.

Although burning the flag usually backfires, it may transmit the message that something is so terribly wrong with the country that people need to wake up and pay attention.

In his famous essay "On Liberty," John Stuart Mill discusses why tolerating unpopular opinions is so important for society.

The first one, of course, is that the reviled opinion may actually be the correct one. The only way to know is to evaluate it fairly. Even if it is incorrect, it will create a better understanding of why the truth actually is the truth.

As Mill said, "Mankind ought to have a rational assurance that all objections have been satisfactorily answered; and how are they to be answered if that which requires to be answered is not spoken?"

Even when mostly false, unpopular opinions may also contain an element of truth. In Mill's words, "Heretical opinions... are generally some of these suppressed and neglected truths, bursting the bonds which kept them down..."

Much like our legal system is based on an adversary process, the only way to find these "suppressed and neglected" truths is to allow them to enter the marketplace of ideas and clash with current conceptions.

In a practical sense, a ban on flag burning is unnecessary. The actual act is rather rare, much more so than all the attention it

receives from legislators.

It seems grossly unjust to incarcerate someone for it, and the persons who are most likely to burn the flag have probably been arrested in previous protests for loitering, breach of peace or disorderly conduct. An additional charge will be no deterrent.

This is not a question of patriotism. If America has any patriots, they are Sen. Kerrey (who lost a leg in Vietnam) and Gen. Colin Powell, both of whom oppose the ban.

Supporters believe the ban will restore respect for the country. When a country has to force its citizens to respect it through criminal sanctions, it has deteriorated past the point of salvation.

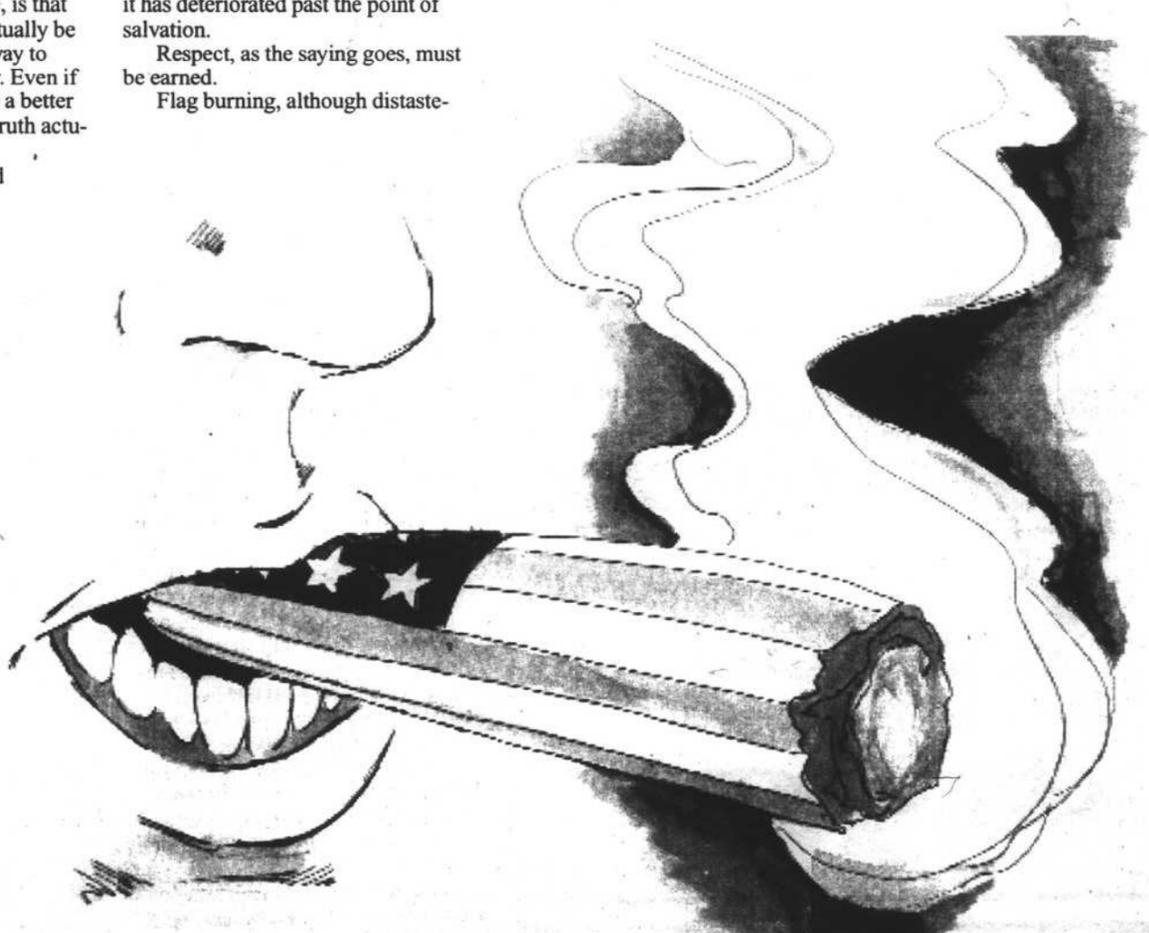
Respect, as the saying goes, must be earned.

Flag burning, although distaste-

In effect, burning the flag transmits the message that something is so terribly wrong with the country that people need to wake up and pay attention.

ful, should not be illegal. Justice Brennan, in one of his last great civil rights opinions on the Supreme Court, said it best: "We do not consecrate the flag by punishing its desecration, for in so doing we dilute the freedom that this cherished emblem represents."

Although I'm increasingly aware of all the evils done in its name, the flag to me is still a symbol of freedom. I would never burn it. That is, unless it became illegal to do so. For then I would truly know that all it stood for had become a lie.



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