

the agents of publicity triggered fresh conflicts: between journalist and quarry, photographer and subject, surveillor and surveilled. The struggle could be more internal too. Citizens' interest in knowing as well as their desire to remain unknown—or to be known only on their own terms—ensured that privacy would not relinquish its new prominence in American public culture.

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Documents of Identity

Every law-abiding citizen today has his vest pockets crammed with credentials. . . . Practically all of these items stress the fact that I am me and nobody else; without them, I would officially cease to exist.

—WEARE HOLBROOK,
"Unmistaken Identity," *Atlanta Constitution*, 1942

By the time the stock market crashed in 1929, Americans were familiar with virtual invasions, whether from cameras, the press, or the newly ubiquitous telephone. "Tied together by a net-work of telephone wires," mused one commentator, private homes were "in many ways different institutions from the isolated places they were when Anglo-Saxon doctrine was forming on a man's right to privacy and safety in his own residence."¹ Just a year earlier, the telephone had been at issue in the most important privacy case to reach the Supreme Court before the 1960s. The government's secret wiretapping of private individuals' telephone communications, in this instance to ensnare a multimillion dollar bootlegging ring, was deemed constitutional. Justice Louis Brandeis—architect of the 1890 "right to privacy" and now sitting on the court—issued an eloquent dissent. "Subtler and more far-reaching means of invading privacy," he warned, "have become available to the government."²

Brandeis's shifting attention from the intrusions of the press to the invasions of the central state was indicative of the way U.S. privacy discussions were trending in the early twentieth century. The decades marked by the Great Depression and World War II in particular launched renewed debates about the known citizen. This time it was not the brash media—the photographers and journalists who had done so much to spur early calls for a right to privacy—that were centrally at issue. Rather, public attention

fixed on the government, and particularly its new, or at least newly visible, methods of tracking citizens. In these years, novel methods of administering social welfare altered Americans' sense of when and to what end they could be legitimately known to their state.

Techniques for monitoring the U.S. population did not suddenly materialize in the 1930s. But they had been cordoned off in public consciousness, associated as they were with the marginal and the troublesome: the anarchists, aliens, and "Reds" who had been closely watched, if not jailed and deported, during World War I and its aftermath, as well as the criminal and diseased, who came under the tighter supervision of urban police forces and public health authorities in the same years. In the New Deal era it would become evident that the eyes of the government were no longer trained only on threats to the public order, or on those who had attracted the notice of the Bureau of Investigation. In a striking reversal, state programs in this era sought to track the affairs of relatively privileged citizens. Indeed, being known to the government would become increasingly constitutive of citizenship itself: a necessary exchange for steady employment, increased economic security, and free movement across borders.

Administrative tracking entered all citizens' lives in unfamiliar ways and to novel ends during the first three decades of the twentieth century.³ Life without a paper trail would still be possible, but it was becoming rarer as state and local officials flexed their muscles and private agencies increasingly relied on identifying records. Whether through an application for a birth certificate, a driver's license, or a passport, a broad swath of the citizenry would be drawn into the swelling bureaucratic apparatus of U.S. society. By 1925 it was possible for a Chicago man to editorialize about "the terrible invasion of privacy" effected by the piling up of automobile licenses, mortgage and tax records, and marriage and death certificates, each an index to matters an individual might rather keep out of public view. Yet, making reference to the largest credit reporting agencies of the day, he recognized the dilemma. To "burn up all the Duns and Bradstreets, abolish all credit departments, destroy all directories and prohibit hotel registers, keep no more records" would allow Americans to have privacy—"but not much else."⁴ As this writer suggested, the state was not the only author of the documentary impulse. Life insurance and credit agencies were just two of the powerful entities driving the creation of what we would now call "personally identifying information."⁵ The public and private sectors would be co-conspirators in this "terrible invasion."

An administrative state and society preceded the New Deal.⁶ Yet the decade of the 1930s was "the moment when bureaucratic structures and techniques first became dramatically visible in many ordinary people's lives."⁷ The change was most obvious in the scope of the federal government, which ballooned during the Depression crisis and then again even more dramatically during World War II, when the scale of its activity came to dwarf "the New Deal programs that had seemed gargantuan only a few years earlier."⁸ The state had been a locus for fears of centralized authority since the first days of the American republic.⁹ But the state understood as bureaucracy, apart from the once-a-decade administration of the U.S. Census, was a product of this era.

As federal agencies loomed larger in Americans' lives, they became a focal point for reflecting on individual privacy. Citizens in a mediated age had become increasingly conscious of their public images. In an administered one, they increasingly understood that their personal details—their age, address, or employment history—once compiled, made them intelligible to the society's authorities. How much information about its own citizens ought a government possess? And what would it mean to be known by its offices and bureaucrats? The state's new tracking projects would prompt sharp questions from across the political spectrum. Yet we must not read backward from an anxious contemporary stance toward identity documents and assume that the government's access to "private" information was something that Americans only and always resisted. Allowing the state into one's personal affairs was a less troubling—and perhaps even a welcome—proposition in an era when new benefits flowed to visible citizens.

Visible Citizens

Questions about how thoroughly the state ought to know its own people became less theoretical with the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935, signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the midst of the worst economic crisis in U.S. history.¹⁰ Intended to provide benefits for the elderly, dependent, and unemployed through a payroll tax, it pledged—in a word—"security" for millions of Americans.¹¹ Social Security was politically controversial when proposed and underwent significant modification and compromise before being enacted.¹² Yet the program it established garnered a great deal of popular support, a sign perhaps that citizens agreed with one of its leading assumptions about material existence in the twentieth century:

that "life is safer, but living less secure," as a 1937 Social Security pamphlet phrased it.¹³

A vast scholarly literature examines the impulses behind, the architects of, and the ideological assumptions built into Social Security and other institutions of the New Deal state. Not surprisingly, most of the debates about the implementation of Social Security have involved the particulars of the legislation and its impact: how the program was circumscribed by the model of private "earned" pensions, how it shifted the relationship between the state and the economy, how it determined benefits and for whom, and how effectively it shrank the rates of poverty among the elderly.¹⁴

Less considered have been the byproducts of the new bureaucracy, particularly the government's assigning of specific identifying numbers to private citizens. What did this intersection of numbering and state-building mean for Americans of this era? Clues can be found in the program's rollout, as viewed both by the agency officials most involved in communicating its workings to the public and by the citizens newly in Social Security's embrace. The nine-digit number we now take for granted was the product of intensive debate and discussion by policy makers, bringing to light the political realities and cultural sensitivities that accompanied the task of knowing citizens. Likewise, Americans' encounters with this new system of documentation reveal how their relationship to their own "private" information—the basic facts that described and placed them—was being transformed in a knowing society.

What was clear, through the efforts of both public and private agencies, was that modern Americans were becoming deeply enmeshed in webs of bureaucratic verification. A columnist for an Atlanta newspaper wryly testified in 1942 that "every law-abiding citizen today has his vest pockets . . . crammed with credentials," including "a draft registration card, a social security card, a driver's license, a hospitalization card, an insurance card, a gasoline ration book, a sugar ration book, a finger-print identification card, a shopper's credit card," and so on. "Practically all of these items stress the fact that I am me and nobody else; without them, I would officially cease to exist," he quipped. "Merely keeping them handy is a career in itself, and the fear of losing them is always in the back of my mind."¹⁵

For this commentator, Social Security cards were just one piece of a "thoroughly classified, documented, and cross-indexed" modern existence.¹⁶ Yet these cards warrant special attention for the fashion in which the numbers imprinted on them bound personal data to social entitle-

ments. The state enumeration of citizens, and the potential tracking it permitted, did not escape public notice. Quite apart from discussions of Social Security's substantive merits, this feature of its operation engendered strong criticism from a strange set of bedfellows: the Republican opposition, as well as African Americans, labor unions, working women, and religious groups. Yet in years of depression and war, apprehension about Social Security numbers and what they enabled the state to know competed with another view, in which the nine digits were broadcast—even cherished—as proof of membership in a newly generous polity. Social Security made the rewards of identification manifest, enlisting Americans in their own bureaucratic visibility.

During the New Deal, state monitoring would come wrapped in the semblance not of social order but of social benefit—indeed, social *security*. A landmark piece of legislation, still considered the most important social welfare program in the United States, the Social Security Act ushered in old-age and unemployment benefits for a large segment of the population. It also marked the U.S. government's first widespread use of personal information to identify and administer specific individuals, in the form of the Social Security number (SSN). The SSN was an essential mechanism of the ambitious new program, which as reformer and social scientist Sophonisba P. Breckinridge put it in 1935, "contemplates the participation in all of our lives of the federal, state, and local governments and puts, for the first time, a degree of validity into the expression 'American standard of life.'"¹⁷

"Standard" here referred to a minimum threshold for subsistence, but it implied a kind of standardization common to large-scale administrative projects. Unprecedented though it was in scope, Social Security was in step with a set of documentation practices well advanced by the early decades of the twentieth century.¹⁸ Its planners drew from other nations' experiments with administering citizens' identities, particularly those of France, Britain, and Brazil. "Seeing like a state," in James C. Scott's influential formulation, hinged on making citizens "legible" and thereby amenable to the designs of officials and planners.¹⁹ The expansion of "paper identities" was intertwined with a specific mode of governance able to register and recognize specific persons.²⁰

For the whole arc of that story, we would need to turn back several centuries. The most ambitious projects of modern industrial societies—state-building, militarization, economic mobilization—have been

accompanied, indeed made possible, by regimes of documentation and the associated work of quantification and mapping.²¹ These were the tools that enabled polities to be governed over time and distance, even if those tools never worked as efficiently or unerringly as advertised.²² State practices that allowed populations to be known ranged from the standardizing of surnames to the creation of vital statistics to the registration of aliens.²³ The project of affixing specific identities to particular bodies has been evocatively described as the “memory of the state.”²⁴ As this enterprise grew, official paper documents could in some settings become truer than the word or even body of the person to whom they referred.²⁵

Even before the nineteenth century the tasks of conscription and border control had led European states to develop identity documents. But into the twentieth century the American federal state did not “know” its citizens in this way, its data-collecting capacities lagging woefully behind its industrialized peers. The “Missing Soldiers Office” created by Clara Barton after the Civil War illustrated the problem, drawing 68,182 letters from family members and friends in pursuit of men who had disappeared in the course of battle. Writes historian Drew Faust, “hundreds of thousands of men—more than 40 percent of deceased Yankees and a far greater proportion of Confederates—perished without names,” designated only as “unknown.”²⁶ A half century later, the 1917 Selective Service Act revealed that modern war making would remain hampered by the nation’s lax identification practices. Its requirement that all men ages 21 to 31 register for the draft begged the question: How would a man—or the authorities, for that matter—supply definitive proof of his age? In the end, plenty of men managed to evade both the eyes of the state and the burden of enlistment. This was especially true in rural areas and the South, which were only gradually joining the regime of “paper identities.” During World War I, writes historian Michael Kazin, “three out of four southerners still lived on the land, and millions of them had neither a birth certificate, a bank account, nor a marriage license—and they had never paid either income or poll taxes.” Black southerners and those living on Indian reservations were especially difficult to pin down for the purposes of conscription.²⁷

The early twentieth century saw a number of attempts to remedy this situation by extending documentation practices to the population at large. Only some of them succeeded. Birth registration, for instance, was established as a nearly universal practice by the 1930s, although not without considerable effort on the part of labor and health reformers during the

prior two decades.²⁸ Births had been recorded in a variety of ways up until this point, etched in family Bibles or on baptismal certificates, or captured on insurance policies. As birth certificates became standard proof of one’s age and citizenship status, observes historian Shane Landrum, moments that had once been rites of passage—naming, schooling, employment, military service, and marriage—were also now “moments of governmentality” when individuals “built or confirmed an identity relationship to the state.”²⁹ An individual’s very existence was becoming a matter of public record.³⁰ A notice of the New York City Department of Health made this quite clear in 1930, as part of its push to increase the prompt reporting of births. It cited the “various hardships” that would befall those without proper documentation, since a birth certificate or its legal equivalent was required “to enter school, make a contract, hold office or marry; to obtain inheritances, insurance, compensation or pensions, and to obtain a passport.”³¹

Even so, systematizing births—and thus, age—was a patchy process. During World War II, the citizenship requirement for working in defense industries uncovered the fact that a full one-third of Americans of working age had no proof of birth, with rural African Americans and southwestern Spanish speakers the most poorly documented.³² Social Security, as an age-pegged entitlement program, would run up against the same problem. Old-age insurance benefits were to take effect the day a worker turned 65. And yet few reaching that age in the 1930s or 1940s could lay claim to official documentation. The agency had no other option but to accept alternative forms of proof: Bibles, baptism or census records, military discharge forms, and sometimes affidavits of witnesses. One poignant irony of the story of expanding economic citizenship came in the fact that for some African Americans, proof of age—and Social Security benefits—flowed only from the paperwork of enslavement: ownership records or court notices of sales.³³

Unlike the system of certifying births that slowly but surely took hold across the first decades of the twentieth century, the universal fingerprinting campaigns of the Progressive era failed.³⁴ The technique’s stubborn association with criminality was to blame. While early birth certificate holders were often white and middle class, those with their prints on record were much more likely to be poor, foreign, or nonwhite.³⁵ Fingerprinting’s unsavory reputation complicated efforts, still afoot in the 1930s, to make the practice mandatory.³⁶ The California chapter of the American Legion, for

one, was enthused about the possibility of a sure-fire method for identifying individuals and supported legislation to this end. Partisans were certain that "save for the fact that few finger prints, other than those of criminals, are taken now, there would be and could be no real feeling against the plan." Once the practice was regularized, it was thought, the stigma would simply fade away. (Indeed, in support, this writer noted that "not only the carrying of identification papers, but registration at a police office of every newcomer to any community, is required in various parts of Europe, and universally accepted without complaint."³⁷) The Department of Justice was similarly confident that universal fingerprinting would come to pass.³⁸ But methods of documentation, it turned out, could be tainted by proxy if too closely identified with suspect populations.

Not surprisingly, fissures of class, race, and nationality run through the history of identity practices. In a nation in which the original "undocumented" were white middle- and upper-class citizens, to be known to the authorities was at the turn of the century a badge of deficiency. The introduction of passports, not used in the United States until World War I, challenged this understanding.³⁹ Border entry had before this typically been a matter not of documents, writes the scholar Craig Robertson, but of "bodies and personal appearances." On these grounds, immigration officials turned away Chinese laborers, as well as "idiots," "lunatics," convicts, prostitutes, polygamists, those suffering from contagious disease, and others likely to become "public charges"—each of these categories suffused by class and racial hostility.⁴⁰ Well-heeled citizens' resistance to the new passport requirements was in part opposition to the fact that state agencies were treating respectable Americans "as objects of inquiry," akin to criminals or the insane.⁴¹ It was a rude shock that traditional ways of proving one's identity were suddenly no longer sufficient to ensure passage across national borders or reentry to the United States. Such individuals believed that their word or reputation, and not official papers, ought to certify their identity.

Likewise, "mass registration" existed in the United States before the 1930s—notably, in the case of German enemy aliens during World War I.⁴² It was a different matter to extend such practices to upstanding citizens and patriots. Federal attempts to track that segment of the population would require a level of subtlety and persuasion—of careful consideration—that had not accompanied earlier efforts to identify anarchists, agitators, foreigners, strikers, and criminals. The privacy concerns and claims of these more privileged subjects would have to be reckoned with.

This history of documentation and all the associations it called up thus made the question of enlisting Americans in a "universal" program like Social Security both familiar and fraught. For citizens who had not yet felt the scrutiny of the state, legislation that asked Americans to "register" with the government appeared a radical departure. Social Security's success would therefore require more than a monumental effort of bureaucratic coordination. It would turn on an intellectual transformation. Identification techniques would have to be reimagined as a path to social benefits and not simply a means of social control. In a political culture pledged to individual freedom and autonomy, state monitoring would itself need to be normalized, a route to privilege rather than privation. Whereas criminals had once been the primary targets of the state's gaze, Social Security would by design bring under scrutiny the most normative of Americans: white, male, able-bodied workers. This pivot in whom the government would document helps explain why one of the most remarked-on features of Social Security in the mid-1930s was the number itself.

Given its exclusion of certain classes of workers—agricultural laborers and domestics, and thus African Americans most prominently—Social Security was not in 1936 a truly national system covering all citizens or residents. Initially, only those in commercial and industrial employment, roughly 60 percent of the paid workforce, were encompassed by the program.⁴³ Nevertheless, the legislation's reach was unparalleled. Importantly, Social Security also differed in kind from most prior state ventures that had gathered facts about the population as a whole. The U.S. Census Bureau and the collectors of vital statistics—although charged with aggregating reams of personal information—made no decisions pegged to *particular* individuals' data. In contrast, the Social Security system was designed to do just that: keep tabs on specific workers' contributions over their lifetimes, and even beyond, in order to pay out appropriate benefits. Its task, pronounced a pair of advisors to the Social Security Board, was "of a magnitude never before equaled in any Government or private undertaking, even including the United States Census, the World War draft, or the payment of the veterans' bonus."⁴⁴

The new agency could however trade on earlier experiences of tallying the people, not only the periodic enumeration of the population, stretching back all the way to 1790, but also the introduction of the 1913 income tax and more episodic efforts such as military mobilization.⁴⁵ The U.S. government had faced the problem of registering some ten

million World War I draftees in 1917—a task it undertook in a single twelve-hour day in June. Reports of the “vast” and “decentralized civilian machinery” that made the draft possible hinted at the new scope of information gathering that accompanied it.⁴⁶ The registration process involved a twelve-point questionnaire and a signed and stamped registration card that “the young man should carry with him always.” An eight-page questionnaire “giving all details of his life” would be his next step after registering.⁴⁷

Social Security presented a still larger and more complex undertaking. It was estimated in 1935 that 26 million workers would need to set up Social Security accounts, with 2.5 million new accounts added annually; 3.5 million employers would also be enrolled in the system.⁴⁸ The overarching problem for the brand new Social Security Board (SSB) was how, in very short order, to enlist those multitudes of workers and employers into the program, as well as those joining the workforce in subsequent years—and then to keep them in its sights for decades to come. Not only did millions of workers need to be enrolled so that taxes paid on their earnings could begin accumulating. But because benefits would be calculated based on each employee’s “lifetime working record,” a correct accounting was required so that years into the future each employee “would receive his due under the law.”⁴⁹ Faced with this staggering proposition, the SSB called in consultants of various stripes, from private actuaries to state workers’ compensation administrators to international experts in pensions and social insurance.⁵⁰ Those consultants agreed that a careful tracking system of those paying into the program, one that could link each Social Security contribution to just one person, would be essential. For the new program to work, its beneficiaries—masses of Americans who had not been under the state’s gaze before—would need to be made precisely and continuously visible.

Numbering the People

But how to keep track? This was, in 1935, a loaded question. Two of the Social Security Board’s technical advisors were emphatic that using the most familiar way to identify people—individual names—“would result in endless perplexities.” Driving home the point, they projected that Title II of the Social Security Act—which covered only those workers who died or reached age 65 in the period between 1937 and 1942 (when the first monthly benefits were to be paid out)—would cover 294,000 Smiths, 227,000 Johnsons, and 165,000 Browns.⁵¹ Other methods for keeping tabs—stamp books

as were used in Britain, for example, or photographs (too burdensome for the worker and too difficult to keep up to date)—were discussed and discarded in turn.⁵²

Some participants in this discussion were certain that there was an identification technique far better than names or anything else on offer: fingerprints. Fingerprinting had the alleged virtues of “permanency, positiveness, and simplicity” and was already in use by a number of federal agencies, including the War and Navy departments, the Veterans Administration, and even the Post Office (for Postal Savings depositors) and some maternity hospitals.⁵³ A superior method of identification, fingerprinting was, however, not a viable option. “Unfortunately, the method has for so long been associated with the tracing of criminals that there seemed little likelihood of the American people’s accepting it as an aid in social security identification,” lamented the same advisors to the SSB who had cautioned against using names.⁵⁴ Another key consultant to the Social Security Board, the French Pierre Tixier, came regretfully to the same conclusion. He acknowledged that “the use of finger prints,” which had been employed in Brazil for similar purposes, “would doubtless be unpopular with American workers, who would oppose it because of the connotations attaching to it from police usage.”⁵⁵ In a 1942 report, the SSB would confirm that fingerprinting had been “fully explored and carefully considered,” but scuttled for these reasons.⁵⁶

This is where unique account numbers came in. Tixier insisted that, for precision’s sake, “numbered registration” of the insured was absolutely essential, since it would create an unambiguous match between a particular worker’s earned wages and his account.⁵⁷ The decision to number may in fact have been a foregone conclusion. Yet Social Security’s planners were deeply anxious about numbering—or, rather, were convinced that the American public would be. Although supporters and opponents of the New Deal agreed on little, here was a rare point of alignment. State identification numbers summoned the prospect of regimentation and dehumanization: of authoritarian governments that knew their citizens all too well. As one of Social Security’s detractors, a director of the Chase National Bank of New York, put it, “our wage-earning citizens . . . may well resent a system of surveillance in which every individual among them is kept under the eye of the Federal Government.” He declared, “Our people have been accustomed to privacy and freedom of movement.”⁵⁸

On this score, the SSB was quite sensitive. Regarding enrollment in the program, its chairman stressed "the importance of presenting it to the public in the right manner."⁵⁹ Keen sensitivity to the semantics at issue was evident in instructions from the Field Organization Committee, which counseled the staff to avoid "the implications of the word REGISTRATION" and instead "adhere closely to the word ENUMERATION" when setting up accounts. (Indeed, the committee urged that "steps be taken" to ensure that this terminology was not just "preferred" but required.) This was, it seems, an attempt to assimilate the new practice to the long-standing one of census taking. Additionally, the Board was urged to "do everything possible, particularly in memorandums, conferences, press releases, and public addresses, to carefully impress upon the public that the assignment of the number is made to the *account* and *not* to the person" so as to minimize the "charge of regimentation." It insisted in emphatic memos (and many capital letters) that "the number is directly related to the ACCOUNT and is not a means of 'mechanizing' or 'regimenting' the individual."⁶⁰

Partisan politics soon proved that the SSB's anxieties were well founded. Republicans mounted plenty of criticisms of the new act, from its methods of financing to its federal management, not to mention the payroll tax itself, routinely described as a form of "theft." But Social Security's opponents also played up the dangers of state invasion into—and control of—citizens' private lives that would come from assigning them identification numbers. It was an issue tailor-made for partisan combat, and Republican operatives did not squander the opportunity. Posters and leaflets circulated by the Republican National Committee (RNC) prominently announced that workers would not only be "forced to register" for a program of "mandatory pay cuts"; they would also be required to hand over to the state a stash of highly sensitive private information.⁶¹

This was the point of a colorful political stunt engineered by the publisher William Randolph Hearst and RNC chairman, John D. M. Hamilton, on the eve of the 1936 presidential election. In what the SSB billed as a "forgery," the RNC circulated to newspapers a supposed "reproduction" of the official Social Security enrollment form, which included questions as to whether the worker had ever divorced; his church and union affiliations; his "general health," "physical defects," and property holdings; his reasons for leaving a former position; whether he was a naturalized citizen; and the like.⁶² As one Hearst organ explained, "Your personal life will be laid bare," "your life will be an open book," and "you are to be

regimented—catalogued—put on file." It added, for good measure, "This is what the Roosevelt Administration did not intend to have you know until AFTER the election." The same article imagined a dialogue between an ordinary worker and a lawyer, in which the former discovers in amazement, "Why, the government wants to know everything about me!" He then muses, "Supposing I got a new job. Would my new boss be able to get all these facts about me?" The lawyer replies, "When your employer assembles the records, he could read them if he wanted to, I suppose." The worker's further queries about the fate of these personal details were met with similarly unsettling answers.⁶³

This campaign was, of course, meant to stir up fears of heavy-handed government intrusion—and to expose "prying into intimate secrets of the worker's life" and "the private lives of American working men and women" as the true intent of the New Deal legislation. Under the headline "Social Security Application Blank Bares Personal Record to Bureau Official," a purported facsimile of the form indicated, via ominous black arrows, the "regimented information required, together with space for number by which workers henceforth will be listed."⁶⁴ This was not the only misrepresentation of the account form in circulation. A trade magazine printed an illustration of a Social Security card application that revealed "a series of detailed questions of a very personal character, together with fingerprint reproductions." In very small type the caption noted, "Possible registration form."⁶⁵

As the references to fingerprinting suggested, detailed questionnaires probing for personal information about a worker's health, history, family, and politics were only part of the problem. The threat of a national identification system was the other. As a Boston tabloid put it, "The New Deal's so-called Social Security program gives you a number . . . [and] a RECORD in the files at Washington. It will be as complete as any convict's or prisoner's."⁶⁶ In this view, visibility to the government automatically led to constrictions of personal freedom, making a prisoner of a private citizen. Indeed, "if the Roosevelt administration is returned to power, we shall see two groups of citizens in this nation," thundered the RNC chair Hamilton at a political rally in Boston: "those who are numbered and those who are not numbered." The former were the unlucky "27 million men and women who will be forced to report to a politically appointed clerk, every change of their residence, every change in their wages, every change of their employment." For at least some in the crowd of 20,000 at the Boston Garden

who responded with "repeated waves of applause" to Hamilton's "vigorous blows at the administration," this was the road to despotism. For the RNC chair it was also the road to Europe, where "people carry police cards and are subject to police surveillance." Thus far, "American citizens have not been subject to these indignities and no administration ever has dared to suggest that they should be," he railed. "But just that kind of surveillance is a part of the Roosevelt administration."⁶⁷

The politician was not specific in his reference, but knowledge of the Nazi registration laws requiring proof of ancestry and political loyalty, instituted in 1933, surely abetted the Republican case.⁶⁸ As Americans learned of developments afoot in Hitler's Germany, the association of Social Security with other techniques of state coercion presented a potential public relations quagmire.⁶⁹ In this light, the most inflammatory Republican charge of all was that citizens would soon be compelled to wear "dog-tags" proclaiming their state-issued Social Security number. Hamilton announced in his stump speech that the New Deal administration had already sought bids for the machines that would manufacture them, and he brandished a purported specimen of the new stainless steel dog tags, "similar to those worn in the World War."⁷⁰ The Republican National Committee made the dog tag a central exhibit in its opposition to Social Security, supplying to reporters a photograph of the offending item, pictured on a chain around a young man's neck. The Hearst papers ran with the story and photograph, the *New York American* declaring that the tag would be required "for the privilege of suffering a pay cut under the Social Security Act."⁷¹ The *Boston American*, which also printed the photo, clinched its case against Social Security by quoting the sentiments of a bartender in East Boston: "In the army you were in for a good reason. . . . But with this thing, we're all drafted, and there's no war."⁷² Dog tags "have been prepared and submitted to the social security board for its approval," warned the *Boston Herald*. "Will fingerprinting be next?"⁷³

The Social Security Board was quick to respond to this organized effort to ratchet up fears of state omniscience.⁷⁴ Acting chairman Arthur Altmeyer called out the "authors of this canard," stating that there was not the "slightest particle of truth" in statements about the Social Security Board soliciting data about "items of an intimate personal nature." The Board had no need for such information, no intention of seeking it, and "no legal authority to do so."⁷⁵ A spokeswoman further charged the RNC with "deliberate falsehood" and a "hostile campaign to confuse, deceive,

and scare the people of this country by threats, coercion and by misleading statements," not only in the press but also on pay envelopes and posters tacked up in factories. She described information about marital status and union ties as "matters private in their nature and of no legitimate concern to the Federal Government," adding that "no such questions would be asked now or at any time in the future." Only a few simple questions, such as name, age, and address, would be required to apply for an account. Further, the Board emphatically did not "intend nor had it ever intended to issue identification disks to American workers."⁷⁶

In fact, the SSB had contemplated issuing metal nameplates or "identification tokens" rather than a Social Security card made of paper. These would have resembled the metal cards that some department stores issued for keeping track of customer credit and that the Agricultural Adjustment Administration had adopted as recently as 1934 for identifying farmers participating in an acreage reduction program.⁷⁷ The experts at the Bureau of Standards were in agreement that metal, whether in the form of a plate, token, or disc, was "the only product which will serve our purpose."⁷⁸ Moreover, several key Social Security officials were "inclined to discount the argument that the metal token smacked of regimentation or a fingerprint system," given that many workplaces already used similar metal discs for identification.⁷⁹

Yet the Board's eventual decision to issue a paper card rather than risk the negative connotation of a metal token and its whiff of regimentation (despite the fact that the metal plates would have been more durable, error proof, and cost efficient in the long term), suggests that the RNC's critique hit its mark.⁸⁰ Looking back from 1941, the Board acknowledged that metal plates "had a connotation of 'dog tag' and might also appear more definitely as 'regimentation'" and that this was likely a factor in the decision not to approve them.⁸¹ Fifty years later, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan affirmed that the agency "remained traumatized" by charges of regimentation all the way into the 1990s. He pinned the simple pasteboard design of the Social Security card—in his view, laughably easy to counterfeit—to that moment in 1935 when "opponents of Social Security, and of President Roosevelt, charged that the administration was creating an identity card, the sort recently introduced in Nazi Germany."⁸² To counter charges of regimentation, the Board in 1936, and in its retelling of Social Security's origins, insisted, somewhat disingenuously, on the "purely voluntary" nature of applying for an SSN.⁸³ Citizens were not

registered by the state; they were merely assigned account numbers upon applying for them. Social Security's planners offered reassuring precedents for what evidently required careful justification. Account numbers, they urged, were "not a new departure," given that "similar methods of identifying records have been used by savings banks and insurance companies for more than a hundred years."⁸⁴ The state was simply borrowing time-honored methods from the private sector.⁸⁵ In fact, the Social Security account card was not unlike the department store credit cards many Americans had begun to use.⁸⁶ Moreover, the numbers on that card—it was stressed—were *not* for identification. The SSN identified only a particular record or wage account; the Social Security card in turn indicated the person whose record was identified by the number. Hence, the card itself "was not meant to identify the bearer."⁸⁷ This tortured logic may have baffled account holders, but its intent was crystal clear. The point was to dissolve the link between identification documents and state monitoring, to reassure Americans that the person was not a number and that being known to the state would not reduce him or her to one.

It is difficult to know for certain if the Social Security Board was correct in its estimation of the American public's deep resistance to being numbered. But, plainly, the agency's planners felt constrained by the public culture in which the new program was taking root. Each decision the SSB made was carefully weighed not just for its administrative implications but also for its political ones. Ongoing debates about how best to track Social Security's beneficiaries, vigilant attention to questions of public relations, and strenuous avoidance of fingerprinting or anything that resembled "registration" all point to a bureaucracy focused on exerting the lightest touch possible.⁸⁸

After "months of careful study," the Social Security Board finally settled on the combination of an account number and individual signature on a simple paper card as its preferred method for enrolling workers. "This, it was decided, was the only procedure which would be adequate and yet satisfactory to a public which has always been fearful of anything that might suggest the loss of some personal freedom through formal records of identities."⁸⁹ The signature, we might guess, was yet another concession to public sensitivities: a mark of individuality in the worker's own hand that would accompany the now-familiar nine-digit chain. But it was the digits that would affix to their holder through thick and through thin. This was the number, the Social Security Board proclaimed, that would

"in the normal course of events, serve [the worker] throughout his entire working life, and will be used in mailing him benefit checks until his death."⁹⁰ Its legal basis was written into Title VIII of the Social Security Act, which stated simply that "an identifying number will be assigned to each employer and to each employee."⁹¹ With this final step, the SSN was born.

The Early Days of Tracking

The Social Security Board in 1936 thus found itself on the leading edge of debates over the modern "information state."⁹² Even as the Board attempted to ease Americans' worries about being numbered, it grappled with its newfound ability to track them. Workers had their own hesitations about the numbering project. These were rooted in the collection and maintenance of what even the agency described as "considerable personal and confidential information."⁹³ As such, SSNs raised in early form the dilemmas of a society organized around stored data.

Alert to potential criticism, the Board had determined that the "minimum necessary" information was to be requested of the worker in order to set up a Social Security account. Only the individual's name, address, date and place of birth, sex, "color," parents' names, and name and address of employer were ultimately deemed "essential for either identification or the actuarial studies required of the Board."⁹⁴ Internal Social Security memos hint at "some discussion as to the advisability of determining the race" of the worker on the form. But the inclusion of a racial category—for "identification" as well as "actuarial need"—was not surprising in the 1930s, given the routine use of racial designations in job advertisements, as well as in insurance schemes and mortality tables.⁹⁵ Still, this was a considerably less capacious list than the Republican National Committee had manufactured in its campaign against Social Security during the 1936 election season. Stung by the charges, the Board was at pains to explain that the official application questions were "in sharp contrast with those which were forecast in the heat of the political campaign" and were designed only to identify the employee.⁹⁶ (The queries were also, it was noted, less confidential in nature than those asked by census takers.⁹⁷)

Nevertheless, the agency was aware that "a great many employees were naturally very anxious to know how the information on the employee's application was to be used." The Board reported receiving "numerous inquiries . . . as to the publicity to be given information furnished for the



2.1. Big data, circa 1936: Social Security was the heftiest venture of its kind, the agency describing itself as “the largest bookkeeping operation in the world.”

administration of the program.”⁹⁸ There was, first, skittishness on the part of particular populations about registering for an account number. A handful objected on the “ground of conscientious or religious scruples.”⁹⁹ African American leaders, in more concerted fashion, protested the application form, incensed by its inclusion of a racial designation. “The element of color was inserted for one reason and for only one reason,” charged an editorial in the *Pittsburgh Courier*: “to more easily discriminate against Negroes.” The Social Security card would become as a consequence “just one more instrument for penalizing a minority group.”¹⁰⁰ Another critic charged that the government had “no business” setting up “an official caste system.” He predicted that the “check mark after the word ‘Negro’ will dog our lives for decades to come.”¹⁰¹ The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People vigorously but unsuccessfully challenged the SSB on this point, convinced that such information would “inevitably be used in various ways, both obvious and

subtle, to practice discrimination based on race.”¹⁰² Being tagged bureaucratically by one’s race, these writers understood, was to be made more visible and thus more vulnerable in a society still structured along caste lines.

A desire to keep aspects of identity private—whether one’s age, marital status, religion, ethnicity, or employment history—was apparent in others’ reactions to the prospect of being “registered” by Social Security. Workers had often kept these sorts of personal details carefully shielded from their bosses and managers, and so it is not surprising that giving up such information on official forms raised alarms. Yet this concern was not rooted in fears of a looming police state. It was soon clear that many Americans worried less about government prying than what employers might do with their newly divulged personal information.

The problem arose as soon as enrollment began. In order to obtain an SSN, workers were to fill out an application blank and return it to the Post Office—which was spearheading the initial enumeration effort—either directly or through their union or workplace. Almost immediately, the Board began handling questions about employer coercion. Numerous workers complained of having been instructed to return their forms via their employer or else be fired. As the SSB noted, women and Jews were especially reluctant to do so—the former “because they have falsified their age to their employers or because they are married women representing to be single in order to retain their positions”; the latter because “they are jews [*sic*] who have changed their names because the organization for which they work is anti-semitic.”¹⁰³

Here the Board simply acknowledged well-known facts. Religious minorities occupied a precarious place in American society in the 1930s. One 1934 study documented still-high levels of discrimination against Jews in employment and housing, and against Catholics in political and civic affairs.¹⁰⁴ Arthur Altmeyer, the second and long-serving chairman of the Social Security Board, later recalled an “ugly situation” that faced the Board itself, when it was criticized by the House Ways and Means Committee for appointing “too damned many New York Jews” (a complaint that made it all the way to FDR).¹⁰⁵ Divulging personal information about one’s religion or ethnicity via a telling surname on an official form would have been especially worrisome for Americans already at risk for discrimination. Of particular concern was the chance that these details would make their way back to employers.

On their part, hundreds of working women reportedly called the Social Security Board to ask whether their bosses would be alerted to their age or marital status, information women often falsified in order to get or keep a job.¹⁰⁶ Married women workers, often blamed for taking jobs that were rightfully men's, were greeted with hostility during the Depression if they were not fired outright.¹⁰⁷ Registering one's date of birth was also quite nettlesome for female employees.¹⁰⁸ Employers favored young, single women because they were inexpensive to hire and judged least likely to quit to start a family. And so, on both counts, women workers were inclined to lie.

Given these circumstances, an anonymous letter to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, signed by "The 'Fibbers,'" fretted over the dilemmas the government forms were causing. The writers asked whether Social Security applications must be handed over to employers or could be sent to the agency directly, and whether discrepancies between what was reported to Social Security and what had been furnished to the company would be discovered. They explained, "For instance, we have given our ages as 30, whereas we are really in the neighborhood of 38. If we put down 30, and when we really arrive at the age of 65, can we claim our pension if we show our birth certificates and explain then that had we given our correct ages we could have been out of a job, as nowadays work is for the young only?" What these writers worried about was not the lie but the eventual squaring of accounts. "Will the government check up with our employers as to our ages?" they wondered. "There are a number of us who are in a bad predicament; if we give our correct ages we may lose our jobs, and if we put down the ages which we have given to our employers we may have to wait a number of years before we really get our pension."¹⁰⁹

Confirming the regularity of this particular sort of misrepresentation, a journalist observed that even if women had "lied about their age to their employes [*sic*], their sweethearts, or even their husbands . . . the truth is recorded on the oblong papers in the custody of the Social Security Board." Female workers, he joked, "may have deceived everybody else, but they came through truthfully for Uncle Sam."¹¹⁰ It was no joking matter, of course, to vulnerable employees. Truth did indeed have consequences for Jewish and female workers, who faced serious penalties if the accurate and yet potentially damning information they reported to the government was uncovered by an employer. The peril of registration for them was not state

overreach or even mismanagement, but the very honesty of their Social Security record.

Labor union members harbored a similar fear about the new SSN: that information about a worker's previous position, along with a clue to his union affiliation, might now be available to a prospective boss.¹¹¹ That is, an individual's employment history, once recorded and filed away, could come back to haunt him. Union members' distrust of bosses and managers had been well earned. The long history of using Pinkertons and labor spies for union busting made certain of that. Handing over one's details recalled other practices for prying into employees' political sympathies, long-standing by the 1930s.¹¹² Noting that the strongest "adverse criticism" of documentation came from "labor sources," the Social Security Board designed the enrollment process in such a way that workers would not have to share personal information with their employers.¹¹³ Strikingly, the agency offered assistance in bypassing intrusive bosses. The SSB made it known that "cards need not be returned through the employer"; workers could instead mail or hand forms to the post office directly or via their labor union. The agency even suggested that incorrect information supplied to an employer might be corrected later, on a separate application form, so that the workplace and Social Security might have different "facts" on file about particular employees.¹¹⁴

When it came to their bosses, African American, Jewish, female, and unionized workers alike had no trouble grasping the dark side of legibility. This swirl of concerns about how Social Security data were to be used and accessed prompted the SSB to act. Official press releases, one the day before the first applications for SSNs were distributed, and another the following month, underlined the agency's assurances that workers' personal information would be carefully protected. The details on the application form, the Board declared, would only be retrievable by government employees connected to Social Security. In June 1937, the agency's first regulation—Regulation No. 1—formalized its pledge of confidentiality for information collected and maintained.¹¹⁵ Even so, the new administrative system threatened to unravel tried-and-true practices by which workers both kept certain kinds of information private and kept their jobs.

The launch of Social Security made evident that they were right to worry. Many employers had fought the New Deal legislation. They were nevertheless tantalized by the new cache of information on their workers

that the program promised to generate and sought to use it for their own purposes. It soon came to light, on the heels of the act's passage, that opportunistic companies were circulating their own official-looking forms demanding data from their employees—including the worker's nationality, years of residence in the United States, religious background, educational level, home ownership, number of dependents, relatives employed in the same plant, and political and trade union affiliations. In one early such example, from December 1935—nearly a year before the actual enumeration for Social Security began—the Ferris Tire and Rubber Company disseminated a questionnaire inquiring, among other details, about the worker's age and labor union membership, "for government purposes only."¹¹⁶ A New Jersey firm created a spurious "Form C-53-A," titled "Social Security Record System: Employee History Record," intended to glean similar sorts of data. Another company produced a form titled "United States Federal Social Security Act—Compulsory Information from All Employes [sic]." Still another informed workers that personal information (of a sort never entertained by the New Deal agency) was required "to make you eligible for social security benefits."¹¹⁷

Clearly, some employers used the prospect of federal information gathering as a foot in the door for their own more probing inquiries. A Social Security spokeswoman put the number of incidents in which firms fished for data on their workers "under the pretext that such information was demanded by the Federal Government" in the hundreds.¹¹⁸ The ruse was common enough to provoke an official rebuke. A press release in February 1937 firmly warned employers against the practice of distributing "unauthorized questionnaires which appeared to be required by the Social Security Board and which were intended to disclose employees' union affiliations, religion, or personal affairs."¹¹⁹ That so many businesses masqueraded as the state in order to more closely surveil their employees inverts our expectations about whom Americans worried about most as invaders of their privacy in the 1930s. Contemporary debates—real or fabricated—centering on "state regimentation" sidestepped the extensive prying into citizens' affairs from the private sector. As far as many workers were concerned, the Republican National Committee had targeted the wrong culprit.

Certainly the government's new role as data collector raised some concerns, particularly the fact that it would, under the auspices of Social Security, possess files on millions of Americans, with more to be added every

year. An anonymous query from "T. C." to the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in 1940—"Can the internal revenue bureau or some other government office get any information about my social security account?"—suggested as much.¹²⁰ Warnings about what the state might do with its knowledge about citizens had been a centerpiece of the Republican "dog tag" campaign. Yet what surfaces much more clearly in existing sources than worries about state tracking is both the reality of corporate surveillance and workers' recognition of such.¹²¹ If it now seems remarkable how readily Americans entrusted sensitive personal information to the federal government, it is because private employers—not public agencies—were the chief source of their apprehension.

Who could gain access to the rich storehouse of information lodged in rows of double-decker file cabinets at Social Security's headquarters, the Candler Building in Baltimore, was one concern. Another centered on the nine-digit identifier itself and the possibility it presented for keeping tabs on specific individuals. Here once again labor unions were most vocal, arguing that this kind of tracking would naturally follow from the SSN. As the SSB knew from conferences with state administrators of unemployment insurance even before Social Security was launched, "a good deal of fear was evidenced . . . that the identification token given to the employee would be used for black-listing by the employer."¹²² Once the program was up and running, unions fully expected that employers would use the new numbers to keep track of and punish "troublesome" workers. United Automobile Worker members, for instance, were given "reason to suspect that there was a certain black list which had been established, because of their participation in strike activities." This was because "when they went to get a job they discovered that their Social Security number had been listed."¹²³ As labor unions perceived, the state may have assigned the numbers, but many others would see the advantages of an identifiable citizenry.

Many indeed sought to make use of the SSN's convenience as a tracking mechanism. Even as Social Security pledged to protect the personal information in its charge, it was besieged by requests for its records. SSNs may not have been intended as a means of identification, but they were certainly treated that way, right from the beginning. Individuals tried to put the new numbers to work for a variety of purposes, often to hunt down acquaintances who had moved or disappeared without a trace. The Board reported that "immediately following the registration . . . a considerable volume of 'domestic relations' inquiries began to be received . . . pleas for

help in locating missing husbands, wives, relatives, or friends."¹²⁴ Such pleas echoed those of universal fingerprinting advocates who argued for a national registry through which individuals could easily be identified. For those who had lost track of a family member or friend, the value of the state's newly systematic records was clear. Their queries reveal the "demand side" for better, more detailed information about individual citizens, which was never the government's alone. In April 1937, the *Washington Evening Star* confirmed that "Social Security Board offices all over the country are flooded each day with requests for confidential information contained in the cards filed away in Baltimore. Wives seeking their husbands, mothers looking for lost children, sons who strayed away, war veterans in search of former buddies, all these—and others—bombard the Social Security Board."¹²⁵ The Board refused such requests, although for a short while it adopted a policy of forwarding inquiries to the individual concerned, "where the public interest would be served by so doing."¹²⁶

Direct appeals to the agency thereby foreclosed, citizens still made use of the SSN's potential for locating individual account holders. This was evident, for example, in newspaper notices like the one that appeared in connection with an employee of "Mad Cody Fleming Shows" of Columbus, California. It read, "Carnival Owners Attention: I want to know the location of JAMES HARRISON SHORT, Social Security Number 210-01-0443. He is a ride man, driving 1937 green Oldsmobile sedan. Information will be held strictly confidential."¹²⁷ SSNs featured regularly in the missing person sections of newspapers as well. A Georgia man hoped in January 1940 to track down his wife, "missing since last August," by broadcasting her SSN to the *Atlanta Constitution's* readership.¹²⁸ A similar ad appeared in the *Baltimore Afro-American* the same year, seeking a Mr. and Mrs. Webb and disclosing, among other identifying details (the college he attended, her occupation and hobbies), the man's SSN.¹²⁹ The *Pittsburgh Courier*, which ran a regular column on missing persons, included a notice in 1950 seeking Nathaniel Edward Taylor, who had not been seen since 1945. Even before noting his hair color, height, or personal history, the advertisement's author—the man's mother—listed Taylor's Social Security number.¹³⁰ (A 1940 report of a robber revealed by carelessly leaving his Social Security card at the scene of the crime attests to other uses of the SSN not contemplated by its creators.¹³¹)

These sporadic efforts, in which individuals grasped hopefully at a number that might put them on the trail of a physical person, were

different in scale from the uses of the SSN envisioned by powerful interests, whether in public administration or private industry. Social Security did not at first permit any nonagency uses of the numbers assigned to those workers paying into and collecting benefits from its old-age and unemployment programs. Slowly but surely, however, it moved in this direction.¹³² FDR furthered this process via a 1943 Executive Order encouraging the use of SSNs in federal agency record keeping. The order endorsed "a single, unduplicated numerical identification system of accounts" in the interest of "economic and orderly administration."¹³³ In the post-New Deal era, SSNs would evolve without much comment from a "single-use" identifier into one useful to a profusion of agencies in both the public and private sector.¹³⁴

One of the chief tasks of the Social Security Board (and after 1946, the Social Security Administration) was contending with how to respond to a stream of requests for the numbers and the data they indexed beyond their original purpose. Social Security did not here play the part of an overstepping bureaucracy, interested in expanding its reach and power. Instead, its directors—committed to preserving trust in the agency's promises of confidentiality—fought hard to maintain the SSN as an identifier of retirement accounts alone. It was other parties who glimpsed in Social Security's trove of information a convenient way to better know or trail citizens, for purposes ranging from military duty to family support to law enforcement.

Thick internal files speak to the pressures on Social Security to allow others into its records. As early as March 1937, a New York City bank trying to locate a depositor and a Minneapolis immigration inspector working on a deportation case were knocking on the agency's doors.¹³⁵ So were police officers attempting to identify injured motorists and other accident victims.¹³⁶ The FBI, the Attorney General, the Veterans Administration, and the Comptroller General were right on their heels. The FBI's J. Edgar Hoover, for instance, requested a search of Social Security records in 1937 "to determine if a certain individual, under his true name or under any of his known aliases, is registered with the Board."¹³⁷ The Veterans Administration wished to scour the same records to establish "the death of a veteran who has disappeared and has been unheard of for a period of seven years."¹³⁸ In each of these early instances the SSB rebuffed the request to open up material in its files.¹³⁹ The Board in 1937 "object[ed] strenuously to making the Old-Age Benefits records available to the Department of

Justice or any other similar agency."¹⁴⁰ As a Washington reporter explained, "officials of the board believe the giving out of one single fact would destroy the effect of the entire set-up. . . . No power on earth can pry from the Social Security Board any information whatsoever about any one individual, man or woman, registered in the list of those entitled to unemployment and old-age benefits."¹⁴¹

Yet in 1943, when the Board sat down to establish a policy on releasing confidential information to other government agencies when it was requested "in connection with the prosecution of the war," the issue was trickier. One thorny case concerned whether the Department of Justice could examine Social Security's wage records to ascertain whether a Connecticut man was falsely claiming his father as a dependent in order to sit out the war. Those weighing the pros and cons fretted over the propriety of releasing the data from one individual's Social Security record (the father's) in order to investigate another's status (the son's) under the Selective Service Act. They were equally concerned that complying with the request would be tantamount to "divulg[ing] publicly the fact that the Social Security Board does make available data as to any worker's earning accounts under certain circumstances." Social Security regional representatives and field office managers were uniformly against disclosure. On the other hand, the Board recognized the merits of releasing data relevant to special wartime circumstances—well aware that, by refusing to divulge the information, Social Security could be "depicted as protecting . . . a potential draft evader." The agency finally relented, even as its directors recommended against the precedent.¹⁴² Just a few weeks later, perhaps realizing the futility of fending off similar entreaties, the Board affirmed "a temporary and partial relaxation of standards" in order to assist the government "in prosecuting the war effort."¹⁴³

The Board would get plenty of practice fielding such inquiries in the coming months and years. The requests illustrate the dearth of existing resources for locating specific persons in the United States in the early 1940s, given the fact of a large, mobile, and still lightly tracked population. They reveal as well the appetite that Social Security records had whetted in other corners of the federal government. As Arthur Altmeyer would later recall, "nearly every Attorney General, at the urging of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, requested access to this information."¹⁴⁴

Many of the early requests for individual records had a direct connection to military matters. What if an SSN could help pinpoint a missing

person, a draft evader, an army deserter, or a soldier presumed dead?¹⁴⁵ The number was often the best, and sometimes the only, way to know where an individual lived, if he was drawing a paycheck, or whether he was alive at all.¹⁴⁶ The Board made clear that its compliance with such queries would end with the cessation of hostilities.¹⁴⁷ But as the war years slid into the tense postwar era, as the Korean War erupted in 1950, and as a new national emergency was proclaimed, petitions for data related to national security only increased. The Board was called on to assess the costs and benefits of opening its files to outside interests, all of whom argued that their rationales were so compelling as to supersede promises of confidentiality. Should Social Security always turn over its records "in cases relating to the act of sabotage or espionage inimical to the national security"?¹⁴⁸ Ought the Attorney General be privy to "available information as to the identity and location of aliens in the United States"?¹⁴⁹ Or the FBI to the wage reports of Communist Party members?¹⁵⁰ What if Social Security information could help break up a ring smuggling Chinese into the United States or other organized criminal activity such as payroll fraud, racketeering, or extortion?¹⁵¹ What if, as J. Edgar Hoover framed the question, the SSN could be put to the service of facing down the "unparalleled threat from international communism"?¹⁵²

A set of other queries, which multiplied across the 1940s and 1950s, spoke instead to the peacetime value of data in Social Security's files. Requests flowed in for the purpose of tracking disability and vocational rehabilitation, child support, communicable diseases, Nazi war criminals, foreign birth or illegal alien status, and prison escapees.¹⁵³ What if SSN-linked information could be used to determine a violator of tax laws or even a fraudulent Social Security benefits claimant?¹⁵⁴ Could the agency reasonably divulge confidential information about an account holder's earnings, address, or disability to another party in the event of his or her insanity, amnesia, or death?¹⁵⁵ What about records that allowed law enforcement officers to track down deserting husbands or delinquent parents of children in receipt of assistance payments?¹⁵⁶

The Board's answer was often a firm "no." But increasingly as the years passed, such queries were greeted with grudging compliance.¹⁵⁷ This was despite the agency's repeated acknowledgment that its pledge of confidentiality was at the very core of both its public reputation and administrative effectiveness. "A general relaxation of the policy," worried a 1954 memo, "might be considered as a breach of trust" with a "resultant loss of

goodwill toward the program.” “Relaxation” could engender resentment from account holders who considered their wage data to be their business, shared with the state only in order that they might draw benefits. Moreover, breaches of confidentiality, if made public, could imperil the records themselves, leading people to “apply for new numbers under fictitious names” and others to “give misleading information because of the possibility that correct information might some day be used against them.”¹⁵⁸ In this way, any extension of the SSN’s uses might sap its integrity. But the web of data that had been spun out of an initial thread—the decision to assign nine-digit identifying numbers to workers in 1936—was too valuable and alluring for other interested parties to resist.

Arguably, the stage was set for a backlash. Vast stores of sensitive data and the sharing of confidential files—not to mention a steady stream of reports of stolen numbers, an early form of identity theft—carried risks for Social Security account holders almost from the beginning.¹⁵⁹ Yet for the first three decades of the program’s existence, save the flurry of questions sparked by the initial enumeration campaign, there would be little public discussion of those risks. Nor was much attention paid to the weaving of SSNs through the society’s record-keeping organizations. Workers took great care to prevent employers from discovering private information. By contrast, one finds few references to account holders shielding their unique number from others’ eyes.¹⁶⁰ Throughout the 1940s, for example, specific individuals’ SSNs were routinely printed in the newspaper without raising any hackles.¹⁶¹ Radio stations in the 1950s commonly employed listeners’ SSNs to boost their ratings, announcing strings of numbers on the air and offering cash prizes to the matching holders. One enterprising man in Tulsa, Oklahoma, even formed a short-term business to listen for his clients’ SSNs on the radio while they went about their day.¹⁶² Other promotions used Social Security numbers to dole out door prizes, or invited employers to send in their employees’ numbers as entries for drawings. Testifying to the regularity of this gimmick, Social Security officials considered the possibility of “legislation which would prohibit the use of social security account numbers for contests and other promotional purposes” in 1959.¹⁶³

It is possible that a lack of concern over the proliferating uses of SSNs was the result of public ignorance, whether about the numbers’ spread or the risks of visibility. But it seems equally likely to have stemmed from the high degree of trust in the state’s administration of individuals’ information. It spoke to a confidence that the state, unlike some employers, would

in fact only use that information to a worker’s own benefit. Added to this perhaps was the sense that a Social Security account was more a collaboration between citizen and state than an imposition from on high; as Arthur Altmeyer put it, the program depended on “the closest co-operation and understanding between Government officials charged with [its] administration and with the workers and employers of this country who are so vitally affected.”¹⁶⁴ Either way, we are left with the curious case of a bureaucracy seemingly more agitated about the potential disclosure of its records than were the subjects of those records themselves.

Historian James Sparrow describes the 1940s as a rare era in the United States “in which the basic goals of the government were widely accepted as valid and necessary.” He adds that, “unlike earlier periods of dramatic government expansion, the basic legitimacy of the federal government’s efforts in World War II were not successfully challenged within the political mainstream.”¹⁶⁵ Americans were willing to live with a more intrusive—a more knowing—government in large part because of the entitlements it brought. Social Security numbers, a kind of legibility with benefits, were a key early instance of this bargain struck between citizens and the state. In a period marked by economic crisis and war, the nation’s claims over the citizenry kept privacy fears in check or at least out of the limelight, much as Franklin Roosevelt’s wheelchair was kept out of view in press conferences and photographs. The state’s new powers to know could both alarm and reassure. Many citizens in the 1930s and 1940s, it seems, were willing to take a chance on the latter.

Our SSNs, Ourselves

Even if Americans temperamentally resisted “regimentation,” as so many assumed, Social Security’s enumeration effort came off with remarkable speed and efficiency. On December 22, 1936, a mere twenty-eight days after the initial distribution of enrollment forms, the Post Office Department reported “the receipt of 22,129,617 completed applications of an expected total of 26,000,000 applicants.”¹⁶⁶ Social Security trumpeted the “smooth registration” of all these millions of workers, which, it claimed, had wiped away the objections of those “who doubted its successful accomplishment.”¹⁶⁷

Americans’ alacrity in filling out the government forms was impressive. But the nature of their compliance with the project of creating a visible citizenry is difficult to assess. Billed as a voluntary venture, albeit one with

a round-the-clock public relations apparatus, applying for a Social Security number was a complex political act. It was motivated by a compound of interest, obedience, and coercion, this last clarified by a 1936 Treasury regulation making the SSN mandatory for all covered employees, meaning that a worker would not earn credit for paycheck contributions without it and that employers were responsible for registering the "delinquent employee."¹⁶⁸ Internal Revenue officials immediately began checking lists of taxpayers against income tax records "to limit efforts to escape taxation under the Security Act" and to reach "persons who have failed to register through ignorance."¹⁶⁹ Laggards were also brought to light. It was reported in the summer of 1937, for instance, that Mayor William B. Hartsfield of Atlanta, up to that point negligent in filing his Social Security application, had finally gotten on board. In this fashion, he "became a number just like all other common American citizens." The article that reported this detail also matter-of-factly published his number: 252-12-4939.¹⁷⁰ Before May 1937, when the question was settled by the Supreme Court, mentions of some employers and workers inscribing "under protest" on their registration cards in order "to note a belief that the act might be declared unconstitutional" suggest some citizens' attempt at resistance even while technically complying.¹⁷¹

There was also the important fact that having a number made one's working life easier. Works Progress Administration workers—not initially assigned SSNs because they were on the public payroll—reported by early 1937 being "handicapped in getting private employment for want of a Social Security account number," citing the hassle its absence caused for employers.¹⁷² Others made the same complaint. As the *Washington Post* reported it, "The advantage of a social security number is already being felt in the employment field. If six men are lined up for a job and the first five do not have social security cards, the job probably will go to the last one."¹⁷³ A worker already in possession of an SSN saved the employer from the burden of paperwork; it was also proof that the man had already held down a job. The lack of a number could bring troubles in an "organized society." One critique of this state of affairs, embedded in a story about a jailed youth earnestly trying to "go straight," predicted that the boy's biggest problem would be landing a paid position, given his lack of documentation: "There's a little thing called a Social Security number that's going to pin him down."¹⁷⁴

These concerns about numbering the population were practical: matters of paperwork and convenience. Others were more philosophical. Beginning in 1936, there were critics of the new bureaucratic apparatus and what it seemed to imply about the contracting realm of freedom in modern life. Aware of the SSB's carefully chosen language to refer to enumeration, *Time* magazine explained as the enrollment effort began that "each employe [sic] will be issued a numbered identification card. Not tags (they have no strings) nor discs (they are not round), these cards will bear a triple hyphenated number." Not so reassuringly, it added, "Lest workers feel they are being numbered like convicts, each number is called an 'Account Number.'¹⁷⁵ Fears of regimentation were not a mere phantasm of the Republican National Committee. In one columnist's telling, "the only difference" between a Social Security account holder and "the boys at the federal prison is that he has to buy his own clothes and meals, pay rent and doctor bills."¹⁷⁶

Such complaints were often coupled with nostalgic reflections about a bygone era when "you could get yourself a job, at least, without the necessity of registering with the government and being assigned a 'Social Security' number."¹⁷⁷ Referring to the draft in 1940, the *New York Times* mused that "we are a much more registered and classified people than we were in 1917. Most of us have a social security number."¹⁷⁸ Earlier that year, an editorialist judged the arrival of SSNs a sign that "maybe liberty is shrinking" in the United States. "When father was a boy, he needed neither union card nor social security number to get a job. And when he took his girl riding on a Sunday afternoon, he didn't have to hold a driver's license to navigate the horse and buggy."¹⁷⁹ In the same vein a commencement address at the University of Chicago implored graduates to seek "high adventure" rather than the security planned out for them by "Washington bureaucrats." Envisioning a world in which SSNs were embossed on college diplomas, the speaker made the number the proxy for enfeebling dependence on the state.¹⁸⁰

Others, sometimes humorously and sometimes with more bite, wondered if the advent of state identification numbers meant that Americans had relinquished their individual, private selves. One 1936 cartoon pictured Uncle Sam asking a U.S. citizen, "What did you say your name is?" and the man offering up only his nine-digit number.¹⁸¹ The *Santa Fe New Mexican*, which had supported the Republicans in the 1936 election,

afterward made its political stance clear by identifying the editor and each of its reporters by SSN rather than name in their bylines.¹⁸² In a 1943 letter to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, a man reflected on Republicans' initial opposition to Social Security. Their charge that "your social security number would very soon become your identification and that your name would be of secondary importance" had in his view come to pass. "Today 75 per cent of an employee's employment papers must carry his or her social security number. . . . You will also find a space for it in Uncle Sam's income tax form. Who said it would never become your identification? It is unlike the dog tag only in that it not only goes with you but often precedes you in your travel. Call the sexton and have grave prepared for social security No. _____." ¹⁸³

Yet, some had always hoped for just such a universal identifying mechanism. This was the other side of the debate about regimentation. Its advocates made their case less loudly than those locked in partisan battles over the scope of the state, but they were insistent about the benefits of an easily identified populace. Officials at the Census Bureau in 1936, for example, looked forward to the day that birth and death registrations would be merged with the files in the Social Security system. Others saw in the creation of the new federal agency a step toward the "ultimate acceptance of universal registration."¹⁸⁴ Proponents in Congress drafted a bill calling for universal fingerprinting in 1940, as well as a Citizens Identification Act in 1943.¹⁸⁵ In the immediate postwar years, there were renewed proposals for such a scheme. The Council on Vital Records and Vital Statistics proposed a "fixed identity number" that could link individual records, arguing that the wartime experience had revealed the "growing need for such a number-name for each individual in the United States." Not surprisingly, it turned to the Social Security Administration in hopes of creating such a system.¹⁸⁶ Some military advisors chimed in on the advantages of universal legibility. The assistant secretary of defense, for example, in 1955 proposed that all citizens "have their blood type tattooed on their bodies in anticipation of a military attack."¹⁸⁷

Although none of these plans came to pass, the specter of a national identification system always accompanied the Social Security number, for good or for ill. A reader of the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, viewed the 1947 Vital Records plan for enumeration from birth as collapsing the "last flimsy barrier between our already overorganized life and outright regimentation."¹⁸⁸ For him, Social Security was a key culprit. Posing as an

"old-fashioned individualist," he praised the fact that one could as yet evade Social Security's bookkeepers by remaining outside the program's bounds. After all, "anyone who feels strongly enough about it can divorce himself from it, one way or another," for example by refusing to work in one of the covered occupations. It was still theoretically possible to escape the eye of the state, despite the fact that "nearly everyone, as a potential Selective Service candidate, taxpayer, property owner . . . is on the nation's record books, identified as a resident of a certain State or a certain community." But the writer feared that such "secluded nooks and glades" were vanishing, along with the last vestiges of a "diaphanous bulwark of privacy." For the United States to issue every baby a number—an "innocent, disarming bit of systemization"—was a "bureaucrat's dream." It was to assume godlike powers. And it was, inevitably, to invite more intrusion. "What real true-blue bureaucrat" could possibly resist the temptation to observe, track, and judge a numbered populace?¹⁸⁹ For such observers, SSNs conjured up an overweening identification project, the slippery slope to an all-knowing state.

There were still other ways to look at these numbers, however: less as a grand organizing system or an existential threat than as a personal possession or a claim on national membership. To focus solely on the problems—or even the ambitions—that Social Security numbers summoned up for politicians and planners would be to miss the more mundane but also more surprising ways that they traveled through American culture. What is clear is that the new digits garnered plenty of publicity in their early years. Both their novelty and their instrumental value made them objects of considerable interest. On the eve of the election in 1936 that would decide Social Security's fate, a Colorado editorial reflected, "What's your number?" may easily become the form of greeting among El Paso county residents after the election Tuesday, the same as it may become the greeting among 26,000,000 million [sic] Americans." Its author paused to underscore this still-unfamiliar fact: "In short, men and women will be numbered in the United States."¹⁹⁰ For many newly numbered citizens, as for this writer, the SSN was first and foremost a curiosity. It was a piece of information that was somehow theirs but also the government's, and which identified them to the Social Security Board but perhaps to others as well.

The SSN for this reason was not an incidental aspect of discussions of the new legislation. Many understood it as the entry point to material rewards—and less concrete but equally significant economic rights. The

SSN was best referred to not as an "account number" but as the "employee's benefit account number," advised Arthur Altmeyer, because this "brings home more forcibly the fact that the card is valuable to the employee in establishing his benefit rights."¹⁹¹ The Social Security Board was eager to get the first checks in the hands of recipients in 1937 precisely because doing so would "help considerably in efforts to get all the Nation's workers catalogued by number and into the social security files."¹⁹²

This message about the number's benefits came through especially strongly in the black press. There had been strong criticism of the Social Security Act for its exclusion of many African Americans and of the enrollment process for including a racial designation. Nevertheless, Social Security was described in some quarters as "the hope of the Negro in America" and the most critical of the government programs pertaining to African Americans, given its focus on the "economic security of the masses of this country."¹⁹³ Readers fortunate enough to be covered by the program were regularly reminded of their right to request a statement of wages reported to the government, what to do if they suspected any errors, and, most importantly, how to proceed if they had lost their number.¹⁹⁴ After the expansion of Social Security's scope in 1939, which extended new benefits of life insurance and "family protection," another cascade of news accounts underlined the number's significance to American workers and their dependents.¹⁹⁵

The SSN from this angle was a nine-digit claim on equal personhood, especially for those long excluded from that category. It served as proof of one's membership in the national polity and enabled one to lay claims on the state. Given that not all workers were covered and most black workers were not, the SSN could be prized as a badge of a particularly coveted form of economic citizenship. The *New York Amsterdam News* counseled African American workers: "Do not lose your Social Security number. This number is important. It is important both to you and your government . . . and evidence of your rights under this law."¹⁹⁶ News outlets often focused on the number as the tangible sign of and means to social protection.¹⁹⁷ In this light, the SSN could appear less like an identifier useful to the state and more like an entitlement to be jealously guarded by the holder. Certainly, many working-class Americans saw it this way. In the words of a 1937 essay in *American Labor World*, "probably second in importance only to 'your daily bread,' in the lives of working men and women in New York State is the individual possession of a Social Security Account

number."¹⁹⁸ Never simply a means of tracking citizens, the SSN—by re-mapping the population via exclusions and benefits—helped to produce a specific kind of national citizenship, one that carried substantive privileges. If "seeing like a state" could reduce and simplify, it could also shore up individual rights and dignity.

Working Americans were therefore urged to hold tight to their number and to remember it. Account holders seemed to take this responsibility seriously. Scattered reports suggest that mastering the new system included committing the nine-digit number to memory, so that the bearer would be prepared when asked for it by an employer. This was a discipline that individuals may not have had cause to develop before 1936, except perhaps in the case of a telephone number, a military service number, or automobile license.¹⁹⁹ Reflecting a society in which both identity and benefits were increasingly fastened to numbers, various authorities offered tips for keeping them in order. In an article aimed at veterans, the author asked, "What is your serial or service number, ex-service folks? If you've been out of the service for as much as six months, I'll bet you had a tough time trying to remember that old number you knew so well." He urged servicemen to make a record of it, along with "your disability claim number. . . . And, for luck, your Social Security number. All of these numbers are likely to be needed one of these days. So record them."²⁰⁰ As the North Carolina Employment Security Commission would note by 1941, "Everyone has certainly become familiar with the expression 'my Social Security number is.'"²⁰¹ Some Americans complained about being over-documented. But given the inconvenience and distress that came with being undocumented, memorization or careful recording of one's digits became a new task of citizenship and one undertaken without noticeable resentment.

Social Security numbers' arrival in popular culture provides another window onto the ways the new digits were woven into American life. The number cropped up as early as 1937 in a Nancy Drew mystery, *The Whispering Statue*, in which the young detective applies for a job at a rare book shop in order to do some sleuthing ("Nancy was fearful that [the shop owner] might ask her for a social security number or other type of identification but he said nothing about it and she bubbled eagerly, 'How soon may I start?'"²⁰²). Hollywood heroines paid it tribute: "Well, I still have my social security number," exclaimed one in 1939 when all else seemed lost. As one commentator observed, "The audience smiled in comprehension"—noting

that "in all probability at least one-third of that movie audience" was also in possession of an SSN.²⁰³ Adding glamour to the number were reports in 1939 that actress Bette Davis wore a gold link bracelet bearing hers and in 1940 that film star Lana Turner's "favorite wedding present from husband Artie Shaw is her social security number—in diamonds!"²⁰⁴

A thicker sense of what the new numbers were coming to mean can be glimpsed in the curious commercial bonanza that followed the passage of the Social Security Act. A host of businesses cropped up in the mid- to late 1930s to offer, for a small fee, protection or security for one's SSN. This was not security in the sense we might imagine it today: that is, blocking the number from public view. Rather, it was security in the form of preserving the account number for its holder, given that the official card was made of nothing more than paper, and liable to wear and tear.²⁰⁵ The Republican leadership had whipped up partisan fervor in 1936 by predicting that the Social Security Act would result in state-mandated "dog tags." In the years to follow, such tags would become a reality—but not because the federal government had issued any. Instead, canny entrepreneurs responded to a ready private market for them.

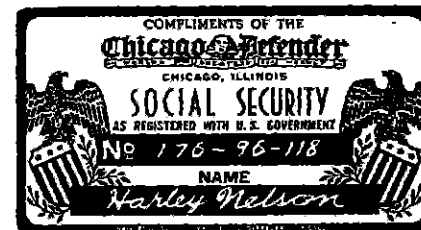
"Is the Card bearing your Permanent Social Security Number torn, smeared, perhaps already Worn Out?—If Not, In Time It Will Be," advertised one such outfit in 1937 in the AFL-CIO's journal, *American Federationist*. The solution was a nickel-silver badge that "would not rust or tarnish."²⁰⁶ The *Chicago Defender* similarly offered to its African American readership a "lifetime" bronze plate, "lasting" as well as "beautiful and serviceable," engraved with the Social Security account holder's number.²⁰⁷ As another *Defender* ad explained, "You know the importance of having your Social Security number handy at all times. You probably are aware that over 50,000 people each month lose trace of their Social Security card either as a result of wearing it out or losing it." Promoted as a form of protection and a gift to its patrons (who were billed only for the cost of shipping and handling), the bronze plate would "not wear out" but serve as an enduring record. Having one's name and SSN stamped "indelibly in the metal" was a kind of insurance for the account holder, who could now avoid being "embarrassed and perhaps hurt financially" by an inability to call up his or her number. The newspaper offered a further service should the etched plate be misplaced: it would keep the individual's SSN on "permanent file" with the engraver.²⁰⁸

FREE! FREE! A LIFETIME GIFT FOR YOU

Protection For Your SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

**A BRONZE PLATE
OF YOUR OWN**

Engraved With
Your Name and
Social Security
Number



It's Handy! Serviceable! Convenient!

This beautiful and serviceable SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER and NAME PLATE illustrated above is convenient in size and made of lasting bronze metal. It can be carried in vest pocket or purse and cannot be misplaced very easily. It is no larger than the government regular card.

ALL YOU DO is clip the coupon appearing below—MAIL OR BRING to The Chicago Defender, with only 10c to cover postage and handling cost, and your plate will be mailed to you direct within the next few days. ADD 5c EXTRA if you wish a genuine leather carrying case.

HURRY! THE SUPPLY IS LIMITED!
MAIL OR BRING THIS COUPON NOW!

SOCIAL SECURITY PLATE COUPON

THE CHICAGO DEFENDER,
3435 Indiana Avenue,
Chicago, Ill.

GENTLEMEN:

Please find inclosed herewith 10c to cover cost of handling and mailing my permanent Social Security bronze plate. Please forward plate to:

PRINT YOUR NAME, ADDRESS AND NUMBER PLAINLY.

Name Check-If
Address Leather
Social Security Number Case Is
Desired

ANOTHER DEFENDER SERVICE

2.2. Some Americans prized their new Social Security number enough to pay for its preservation in bronze; African Americans in particular treated the number as a badge of economic citizenship.

Commercial outfits sought to capitalize on the fact that the account cards, devised after much discussion by the early Social Security Board, were surprisingly flimsy, given their evident significance. The products for sale, by contrast, were invariably fashioned of more durable stuff than paper—"lasting bronze metal" complete with a leather carrying case, in one instance—with the spare nine digits embellished or otherwise dignified.²⁰⁹ As such, these goods restored the proper weight and gravitas to a number that represented an individual's ticket to economic rights, whether unemployment insurance or a guaranteed retirement pension. Something as ephemeral as "security," especially future security, perhaps required this sort of palpable proof.

Social Security-themed tokens provided short-term benefits as well. A cottage industry dangled the allure of extra income from selling such items, playing to the demand for supplemental work during the Depression. The Key Tag Specialty Company of New York City, for example, advertised in 1937 "a complete business for twenty dollars" based on a "new social security number specialty."²¹⁰ The J. P. Routier Company of Rochester similarly offered in 1938 a "lightweight and attractive" chrome-plated identification tag that could be affixed to a key ring after being stamped with one's social security number, auto and operator license numbers, name, and address. The ad urged, "You should have one," but also that the company was seeking independent agents to peddle them.²¹¹ Yet another company in 1939 trumpeted a "rare opportunity for clerks, factory, mill or office workers to earn extra money," namely a 50 percent commission selling "social-security life-time plates and cases." Simply order the necessary kits and accessories for making patriotic red, white, and blue metal plates emblazoned with a worker's name and Social Security number, and the seller could count on earning "\$35 a Week or More at Home. . . . In Spare Time!" (with a "big profit on each sale"). Even during the Depression, the pitch suggested, this was an item that "sells on sight to working people everywhere."²¹² Ads selling a piece of such businesses—in Wichita Falls, Texas, in Lansing, Michigan, and in Baltimore, Maryland—testify to a going market in SSN keepsakes.²¹³ These outfits banked on the notion that, far from rejecting identification numbers, Americans would pay for the privilege of protecting them.

Browse the advertising pages of any number of newspapers or middle-brow journals from the later 1930s or early 1940s and such items appear. Products appearing in *Popular Mechanics* in August 1938 included one's

"Social Security account number engraved and enameled on [a] beautiful brass key ring tag" (the ad continued, "Send 25c coin with security number for sample").²¹⁴ The *Atlanta Constitution* ran an ad for one's "Social Security Record made permanent" on a solid bronze plate, guaranteeing that "Your name and Social Security number" could be "pressed into metal forever" for as little as nine cents.²¹⁵ In 1942, *The Billboard*—the "World's Foremost Amusement Weekly"—similarly advertised for \$1.98 a high-quality black calfskin billfold, with one's name, "lodge emblem," army or navy insignia, and address, as well as one's Social Security number "Engraved in Gold ABSOLUTELY FREE!" (the ad mentions four pockets, "each protected by celluloid to prevent the soiling of your valuable membership and credit cards"). Sweetening the deal was a bonus gift: a "beautiful three-color life-time Identification Plate" that "carries your full name, address and social security or draft number exactly the way you want it." Pitched to consumers during wartime, alongside Hitler pincushions, "victory heat pads," and military banners, the SSN here took on additional connotations of patriotism and civic inclusion—a badge of national belonging to be proudly presented alongside one's service number.²¹⁶

Commodification of the Social Security number was linked to the new problem Americans were faced with after 1936: how to remember one's digits. Inscribing one's SSN on a luggage tag or wallet (if not a frosted bronze plate) was arguably just a mechanism for recalling the number without having to depend on an easily misplaced card or one's own memory. Accounts of Americans recording their Social Security numbers on their dentures attest rather startlingly to this need. An Omaha man, "reporting in for his disabilities pension check" in 1950, simply removed his "upper plate, where he had had the number engraved."²¹⁷ A Minnesota man likewise had his SSN "imprinted on his lower denture . . . so he will always have it handy."²¹⁸ The difficulties that many Americans had experienced producing proof of age in connection with the World War I draft—or even in their application for a Social Security account—may explain why these individuals were so eager to have their SSN close at hand. In an age increasingly reliant on documentation, having immediate access to proof of one's identity or eligibility to work may have been a source of comfort if also a subtle marker of coercion.²¹⁹

But other products and rhetorical uses of the SSN argue for more expansive meanings. What to make, for example, of women's fashion billed as the height of "Social Security Style"? A 1942 piece that ran in the *Los*

Angeles Times described a jersey shirtwaist dress, "suitable for the career woman," in exactly this way. It opened with this text: "Are you supporting yourself? Do you have locked in your purse a social security number? Do you spend your daytime hours in an office?" If so, "you're in the market for today's career woman dress . . . designed especially for the business woman."²²⁰ As scholars of gender and the welfare state have documented, much New Deal legislation presumed a masculine labor force, with women as dependent or at best irregular workers.²²¹ In this light, possessing a Social Security number was a proxy for female economic independence. Already in 1937, women of means could purchase a "tiny gold wafer, to wear on your charm-bracelet," embossed with their Social Security number. This product was advertised as "a new species of identification-disk" that would mark the wearer as an "honest working-girl," as well as settle "all questions about where—and what—that number is."²²² If, fearing political fallout, the Social Security Board had shied away from issuing such disks, department stores would not. Merchandisers, employing a familiar rhetoric of self-fashioning to sell customers goods, clearly understood the SSN as a signifier with resonance for the modern working woman.

And what of "the latest in Rings," advertised in 1938 for \$3.95? This was a sterling silver ring, engraved with the wearer's Social Security number and embedded with his or her birthstone. "The S. A. Meyer Company offers them first . . . on easy terms with weeks to pay." Perhaps such jewelry was intended to help people remember their numbers. It seems more likely, however, that "a really *personalized* ring for men and women," as the manufacturer put it, held a different appeal, identifying its wearer willingly and even proudly.²²³ In ways difficult to perceive now, a number could individualize, signifying the uniqueness of its bearer. Rings and other items "personalized" by an SSN suggest that some Americans were taking intimate ownership of what in another guise was a bureaucratic tag.

Most striking of all, however, were those who sought a more permanent bond to their nine-digit number by inking it on their bodies. Scholars of tattoos note that they have "long been a way to mark one's membership in a group" and to "signal belonging."²²⁴ Dorothea Lange's iconic 1939 photograph of an unemployed lumber worker in Oregon, a Social Security account number imprinted on his bicep, prompts a question: Could a tattoo express a vital stake in the welfare state, a claim on what were still only

The latest in Rings and the S. A. Meyer Company offers them first . . . on easy terms with weeks to pay.

A REALLY *Personalized* RING FOR MEN AND WOMEN

SOCIAL SECURITY
STERLING SILVER
Birthstone Ring

CHOICE OF LADY'S OR MAN'S RING
• YOUR OWN SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER
• YOUR OWN BIRTHSTONE
• **EVERYTHING INCLUDED**

It's a safe way to keep your Social Security number always at hand. New, massive and very attractively designed of Sterling Silver, you'll be more than proud of this ring. With YOUR OWN BIRTHSTONE and YOUR OWN SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER combined, all go to make it a personal and practical piece of jewelry.

3.95
EASY TERMS

S. A. Meyer Co.
64 W. CHESTNUT ST.
WASHINGTON, PA.
The House of Perfection Blue White Diamonds

**OPEN AN ACCOUNT
NO RED TAPE!**

23. Jewelry "personalized" with one's Social Security number suggests the ways Americans made the number their own.

future "earned benefits"—and perhaps the bureaucratic project of visible citizenship itself?²²⁵

Whether because they affirmed inclusion in a munificent nation or simply the pressing need to recall those nine digits, Social Security numbers appeared on American bodies in this era more often than we might expect. SSNs were in fact widely thought to be behind the uptick in

business for tattoo parlors in the 1930s, the *New York Times* declaring that, in the wake of the Social Security Act, "entire new industries" in card frames but also tattooing had been created.²²⁶ "Sailors, stevedores and sideshow freaks no longer have a corner on the tattoo market," announced the *Washington Post*: "social security numbers have changed all that."²²⁷ An observer at the *Nation's Business* agreed that tattooing was experiencing "a boom," in part because it was "quite the fashion for the safe carrying of your Social Security number."²²⁸ A practitioner confided on a radio show that he was getting "a lot of calls . . . from customers who want to have their serial numbers stenciled on their chests."²²⁹ Confirming reports came from both coasts. Mildred Hull, a former burlesque dancer turned tattoo artist who set up shop in New York in the 1920s, found that although her business lagged during the Depression, it "picked up again in the late 30s thanks to FDR." She credited the president with supplying her "10 customers a day."²³⁰ Two tattoo artists working in Portland, Oregon, in the early 1940s likewise reported that their business had "practically doubled since the issue of Social Security numbers."²³¹ Capitalizing on the trend, one proprietor advertised his wares with a simple, hand-lettered directive: "Don't Forget Your Number. Have it Tattooed on Now."²³²

Accounts that circulated in the second half of the 1930s and early 1940s clearly indicate that the practice of tattooing SSNs—if by no means common—was not unknown. *The Atlanta Constitution* reported in 1939, for instance, that a receptionist in a public employment office was startled to have a "neatly dressed" job seeker of about 30 years old begin to strip off his shirt when asked for his Social Security number. "Already reddening profusely, the startled Miss Bledsoe tried to head him off," but the man replied, "My social security number is tattooed on my back. I was afraid I'd lose it."²³³ A "husky applicant for a job" in La Porte, Indiana, responded similarly to a request for his number at a state employment office, "peeling back his jacket and shirt, baring a number tattooed on his chest."²³⁴ *Popular Science* reported on a New York man who, fearing he would misplace or forget "the number assigned to him by the Government," went ahead and "had the numerals tattooed on his forearm." As the writer noted, "Now, when he reaches the pension age of sixty-five, he can produce his number merely by rolling up his sleeve."²³⁵ A similarly tattooed man, the chief engineer at a Memphis theater, wasn't "taking any chances on losing his social security number."²³⁶ A like-minded Broadway showgirl was photographed in the process of having her number imprinted on her knee.²³⁷

Other, more mute, evidence comes from instances of individuals easily identified after their death because of an inked SSN: a Lake Worth, Florida, musician, for example, who fell or jumped to his death in the summer of 1943; and a Washington, DC, man, whose heavily tattooed body bore the name "Agnes" on his left arm and the number 579-09-3713 on his left leg.²³⁸

Treated as quirky rather than offensive, such reports of identification numbers printed on the body suggest a sensibility not yet shaped by images of concentration camp victims or other totalitarian visions.²³⁹ They signal, instead, a society coming to terms with the need for, or at least the fact of, documented identities. And they reveal in some Americans a surprising willingness to be numbered and stamped, to be made visible to the administrative state. SSNs undoubtedly meant different things to different bearers of those digits. And surely many citizens thought little about them, if at all. As Social Security numbers became yet another new bureaucratic requirement in the 1930s and 1940s, they were likely most typically regarded as a necessary feature of modern life, the price of admission for a guaranteed check in retirement.²⁴⁰ But when emblazoned on a chrome plate, a pocket token, a watch, a ring, or a bicep, the SSN signified something more: not merely an identity document but a positive identification with one's status as a known citizen.

The SSN, although just a number, could be much more than that. It could stand in for the Social Security program, the nation that had enacted it, or a particular individual's affinity with either. It is impossible to know how many Americans engraved or displayed their own numbers, but it is clear that numbering—and legibility to the government—could have its rewards. As a Census Bureau official noted in 1940, "Each step we take toward the goal of social and economic security for everyone makes more precious each individual's proof of his rights to such benefits."²⁴¹ For citizens of the twenty-first century, who often think first of the SSN as a risk to their privacy, to imagine a Social Security number as a "precious" proof of rights requires some rejiggering of assumptions. Looking back to the social and political circumstances of the 1930s and 1940s, we realize that the embrace of one's bureaucratic ID expressed an anxiety now difficult to summon up: the fear, in an age of increased social provision, of being *unidentifiable*. Being a known citizen in that era raised alarms about the tentacles of the state reaching more deeply into the personal affairs of

the populace. But being an unknown one could provoke even greater concern.

Thus did a piece of data that Americans now treat as one of the most private facts about themselves start out as a visible and tangible part of public culture. The proud claiming of a Social Security number, a mechanism of the expanding welfare state, reveals how intelligibility to the government, and bureaucratic tracking itself, could be regarded as a beneficent technology of citizenship. In years of crisis and war, questions of individual privacy could perhaps take a back seat to the urgent projects of economic security and national solidarity. As they encountered a still more knowing state in the postwar era, however, citizens' assessment of the state of their personal data—and of the Social Security number itself—would shift. Only then would an item that many Americans had once literally burnished and broadcast become something they carefully concealed.

3

The Porous Psyche

Brain watching . . . has made your mind, inner thoughts, political opinions, frustrations (including the sexual), aspirations—what we commonly call *personality*—the raw material of a humming, seemingly insatiable American industry.

—MARTIN GROSS, *The Brain Watchers*, 1962

In 1958, with Joseph McCarthy's red-baiting a fresh memory, the political journalist and former Communist sympathizer Richard Rovere reflected on the state of his fellow citizens' privacy. In a wide-ranging essay for the *American Scholar*, Rovere called attention to wiretapping, bugging, and uses of state power that accompanied an age of heightened national security. But he also cataloged a surprisingly varied and seemingly more trivial set of intrusions to which Americans were subject: television cameras that tracked shoppers in grocery stores; on-the-job inquiries into employees' drinking habits; the prying of behavioral scientists but also of neighbors; the work of professional social workers as well as volunteer organizations; even the sights and sounds of passersby. Invoking Louis Brandeis, both his 1890 essay and his dissent in the 1928 wiretapping case, Rovere called the "right to be let alone" unique in that "it can be denied us by the powerless as well as by the powerful—by a teen-ager with a portable radio as well as by a servant of the law armed with a subpoena."

Rovere reflected that the latter, official kind of privacy violation might well be reined in by legislation or public policy. But the other sort was more nettlesome, tied as it was to "the growing size and complexity of our society" and involving rights of speech, press, and inquiry. Even if legal abuses—easy to conjure up in 1958—were curbed, it would leave "all those invasions that are the work not of the police power, but of other public authorities and of a multitude of private ones." What exactly was the nature