Coming Soon: National ID Cards?

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Driver's licenses will become national ID cards--and Americans will be at greater risk of identity theft--under a new federal law that passed without significant congressional debate, critics charge.

The Real ID Act will require that states verify every license applicant's identity and residency status, and that they store addresses, names, and driving records in a database that every other state can access. It also mandates anticounterfeiting features for the licenses and a "common machine readable technology." In three years, licenses that don't meet the standards won't be accepted as identification for boarding an airplane, opening a bank account, or satisfying any other federally regulated use.

The law's sponsor, Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wisconsin) said that the law "seeks to prevent another 9/11-type terrorist attack by disrupting terrorist travel." Opponents contend that the act is primarily meant to prevent people who illegally immigrate to the United States from getting licenses.

When he introduced the bill at a press conference earlier this year, Sensenbrenner referred to a part of the report from the September 11 Commission that read, "Members of al-Qaida clearly valued freedom of movement as critical to their ability to plan and carry out the attacks prior to September 11th.

He said that his proposed legislation would curtail such movement and would tighten the rules for political asylum. In response to questions from reporters, he also suggested that the law was intended to "get a handle on illegal aliens in the United States."

he controversy surrounding the new law relates to the way it was passed as much as to what it does. Because it passed as an amendment to an emergency spending bill providing funding for American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Real ID Act did not come up for a vote on its own--or for full debate--in Congress.

"This really is a national identification card for the United States of America for the first time in our history," said Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tennessee) in the Senate the day before the spending bill passed. "We have never done this before, and we should not be doing it without a full debate."

Alexander and 11 other senators, evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, sent a letter to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tennessee) last month asking him to block the amendment.

Though Alexander strongly opposed passing the Real ID Act without debate, he said he was "reluctantly" in favor of a national ID in the wake of September 11. Other observers remain deeply concerned by the prospect.

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