Identification versus Knowledge

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In my last two columns, I commented on the REAL ID Act and some of the doubts about its usefulness in national security.

The confusion of identification and security comes in part from the normal application of identification and authentication in restricted, known populations such as groups of employees. We are used to assuming – correctly, we hope – that employees have been vetted to some reasonable extent before they are hired. Therefore identifying someone who is on a list of employees and authenticating their identity makes sense: it helps to reduce risk.

But the situation is quite different when we simply label people with _no_ information about their trustworthiness. Being born in the USA (or being a legal resident, for that matter) is no guarantee of safety or sanity; see the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project for some mood-souring details of the world of native-born American terrorists. <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intpro.jsp>

The confusion between identification and knowledge reminds me of an incident that occurred in 1966 when I was a biology student at McGill University. The lab assistant told us that we would have to memorize the Latin names for the formal classification of ten plants. I asked, “What, just the names? Nothing about the plants themselves? No information about their habitat, life cycle, pests or anything? Just names??” Readers will not be surprised to find that I was an arrogant young man when I was 16 – after all, what would you expect, if you’ve read my stuff? Therefore I protested, “That’s ridiculous. Knowing a plant’s name tells us nothing more than how to point to it if someone else knows the name. Identifying a plant is not equivalent to knowing about its biology.” I should point out that I had been learning Latin names of plants and animals since I was a child – as part of what I liked to know about them. But when the quiz came around I crossed my arms and said loudly, “I refuse to participate in this farce.” I got zero, but I stand by my position even more than 40 years later. And not by the way, when students criticize my exam questions, I give them extra points if their objections and suggestions are well founded!

But back to security: I greatly fear that the emphasis on identifying people when they travel – by air, mind you, not by bus or even by some trains – is more a matter of political theater than a significant contribution to the security of travelers or to national security. Insisting on identification papers for air travelers has the same purpose and about the same value as asking all air travelers to remove their shoes in the security inspection: it makes people who don’t know much about security feel that The Nation is In Safe Hands but it does not have much to do with improving security. And thank goodness that idiot Richard Reid didn’t put explosives in his underpants.<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1731568.stm>

If you are interested in reading more of my analysis of travel safety, please see the essay “Airport Safety.” <http://www.mekabay.com/opinion/airport_safety.pdf> or <http://www.mekabay.com/opinion/airport_safety.htm>.
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