

When Your Last Name Can Be a Liability (Cont'd)

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Body

In his April 14 letter "When **Your Last Name Can** Be a **Liability**" responding to my April 2 op-ed article "Honest Mistake? No, Discrimination," Robert Charles Hill mischaracterized the opposition of the National Council of La Raza to a national verification system. As we testified before the Commission on Immigration Reform, on which Mr. Hill serves, as well as before the Congress, we oppose establishment of such a system because it will not alleviate -- and indeed will exacerbate -- the kind of discrimination that I experienced at the White House and that thousands more experience at the hands of employers every year.

When computerized verification systems were first proposed, La Raza demonstrated through an exhaustively documented report that they are likely to be misused by employers and abused in other contexts. Despite the commission's insistence that such a system could be limited to the employment context, it is already in use in the workplace, in the delivery of social services and as a method of verifying voter records in California, all of this notwithstanding the fact that the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which runs the database, has a dismal record when it comes to keeping accurate information. We understand that private business, states, counties and cities also are clamoring for access to the database for purposes never contemplated by the commission. Hispanic Americans are the inevitable targets and victims of such efforts.

Mr. Hill is right that the best way to avoid discrimination is to treat everyone the same. Indeed the 1986 immigration law, which requires that employers verify all of their workers, also requires that employers treat all employees the same. But practice frequently falls short of theoretical goals, and some employers are not abiding by this requirement of the law. More than a dozen studies, including one conducted by the General Accounting Office, have confirmed that employers single out citizens and legal residents with **last names** like mine because they suspect us of being immigrants -- exactly the behavior I experienced when seeking to attend a briefing at the White House **last** month.

When the commission recommended the creation of a nationwide computerized verification system, it naively assumed that such a policy would contain strong civil rights protections. The pilot projects enacted by Congress **last** year contain nothing of the kind; indeed the law dramatically weakened the civil rights protections enacted in 1986. Even if adequate protections had been included in the legislation, the existence of such protections under the 1986 law did little to prevent or remedy the widespread discrimination that resulted. Moreover, none of these protections applies to non-employment uses of these databases.

Finally, I must correct Mr. Hill's characterization of La Raza as an "immigrant rights" group. We are a national Hispanic civil rights organization representing a population two-thirds of whom are U.S. citizens. His mischaracterization says a lot about his perspective: He is making the same mistake that is made by those who misuse verification procedures; he assumes that we are all immigrants. In theory, Mr. Hill surely understands that not all Latinos are immigrants; my point is that in practice his own words and actions do not necessarily reflect such an understanding.

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