

FUTUREtakes

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Balancing Privacy and Security

Synopsis of the February 2003 WFS Washington DC Chapter dinner program presented by Bruce McConnell, president, McConnell International; summarized by Russell Wooten

On February 20, 2003 Mr. Bruce McConnell, president of McConnell International, privileged the Metro Washington Chapter of the World Future Society with a presentation entitled, "Privacy, Security, and Technology. What is the Future?" After the presentation, a lively and spirited discussion took place with almost all in attendance actively participating.

Mr. McConnell stated that there are two main influences on privacy. These influences are technology and security. Privacy was defined in terms of our "right to be left alone" and our "information."

Our privacy, how we want to protect it, and our willingness to give it up are impacted by "who" wants to know about us. Historically, Americans have reacted differently depending on whether the "who" was government, business or individuals. In addition, Americans have traditionally given up a reasonable level of privacy during times of crises.

Mr. McConnell discussed differences in perception at our cultural level. Most Americans feel more at ease trusting private entities and less comfortable trusting the government. Conversely, Europeans tend to trust their governments on matters of privacy and are more fearful of private entities such as credit bureaus and private businesses. Mr. McConnell also indicated that Oriental cultures are more group oriented and that privacy is less of a concern there than it is here or in Europe.

Mr. McConnell believes that technology's effect on privacy is fundamentally neutral. This might imply that we need not worry about diminished levels of privacy as "security technologies" and "infringement/spy technologies" advance. He cautions us that while technology itself might be neutral the "who" that controls that technology is not neutral. The "who" that controls this technology has the ability, power, and means to enhance our security and privacy, or to control it and subsequently to control us.

Mr. McConnell concluded that we should be aware and informed and also get involved in our own privacy issues. Privacy is not a black and white issue and we need to gauge our own comfort levels.