

Techwit: Big Brother in a red suit

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Every once in a while you read about the 14-year-old computer geek who hacked into his high school's mainframe and changed his geometry grade from an F to an A. Well, it's gotten worse. The security of Santa Claus' database was recently breached by a cyber intruder called "Bad Boy Toy," who did some serious tampering with Santa's information. Now no one really knows for sure who's naughty or nice.

(<http://>)

Techwit By Jason Ohler

This comes at a bad time for Santa. We used to trust him. But in this age of universal suspicion some are beginning to see him as Big Brother in a red suit whose naughty-or-nice database poses a threat to civil liberties or worse, national security. Under the guise of creating a toy-distribution network he has amassed a database of citizen information so large it makes FBI and CIA citizen files look like card



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catalogs in a small-town library. Now Santa faces pressure from all directions to do everything from making his information available on the Internet to destroying it altogether.

Citizen's rights groups have secretly always wanted him charged with invasion of privacy but have cut him decades of slack. It seems that St. Nick has long been respected by the champions of equal opportunity employment for hiring vertically challenged elves, who might otherwise find their diminutive stature a roadblock to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But the honeymoon's over. Citizen's rights groups now see Santa as a social profiler, stigmatizing innocent citizens with a label of naughty or nice that threatens their constitutional rights. Rumors abound that naughty people will have to register with local governments so that decent citizens know who they're living next to. And being labeled nice isn't much better. While nice guys may get toys, they do come in last.

The federal government, on the other hand, sees Santa's database as a treasure chest of information that should be made available to law enforcement agencies for criminal background checks. The feds also want the criteria for naughty and nice redefined. For example, anyone opposing wetland construction would now be considered naughty. Anyone in favor of it would be nice. The feds at the Department of Education like the black-and-white nature of Santa's system: you get toys, you don't get toys. Sort of like high school exit exams. You pass, you flunk. That's how no child gets left behind.

Parents want Santa's database made available on the Internet. But they also want it password protected so only they can see their kids' information. Too busy for traditional child-rearing duties, today's parents feel they should have a right to any information about their children that could make their job easier. Think of the possibilities. Come home from work, log on to naughty-or-nice.com, and see what your kid's been up to. Not bad.

What do the kids say? A group of minors who didn't receive Christmas presents due to alleged naughtiness are considering a class-action lawsuit claiming wrongful gift withholding. This being America, they assumed they were nice until proven naughty. Urban legend has it that "Bad Boy Toy" is one of these kids, perhaps even their ringleader. The rumor is that one year he didn't get the skateboard he wanted for Christmas and the next year all he got were books. No wonder he's mad.

But all of this is irrelevant. Until the authorities catch "Bad Boy Toy," and the naughty-or-nice database is

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reinstated to its original condition, Santa's information is useless. In the meantime we will continue to question each other's character and patriotism. Like your neighbor over there. I know you thought he was nice. But maybe he's naughtier than you know. In these troubled times, no one's above suspicion. Not even Santa.

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