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Offshore company to build database of personal records

By Robert O'Harrow Jr.
 WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON - It began as one of the Bush administration's most ambitious homeland security efforts, a passenger screening program designed to use commercial records, terrorist watch lists and computer software to assess millions of travelers and target those who might pose a threat.

The system has cost almost \$100 million. But it has not been turned on because it sparked protests from lawmakers and civil liberties advocates, who said it intruded too deeply into the lives of ordinary Americans.

The Bush administration put off testing until after the election.

Now the choreographer of that program, a former intelligence official named Ben Bell III, is taking his ideas to a private company offshore, where he and his colleagues plan to use some of the same concepts, technology and contractors to assess people for risk, outside the reach of U.S. regulators, according to documents and interviews.

Bell's new employer, the Bahamas-based Global Information Group Ltd., intends to amass large databases of international records and analyze them in the coming years for corporations, government agencies and other information services.

One of the first customers is information giant LexisNexis Group, one of the main contractors on the government system that was known until recently as the second generation of the Computer Assisted Passenger Pre-screening Program, or CAPPS II. The program is now known as Secure Flight.

The company plans to do such things as assess foreign job candidates for risk, conduct background checks on cargo ship crews or take stock of people who want to open bank accounts in the United States, documents and interviews show.

It will provide something the company calls "terrorist risk identity assessment," a company document shows.

Bell and his business associates said they are trying to fill wide gaps in existing commercial databases that enable criminals and terrorists to roam the globe, sometimes under false identities.

Company founder Donald Thibeau, a former LexisNexis executive, said he formed Global Information in the island nation to take advantage of regulations there that he thinks will make it easier to collect data than in the United States, which has a

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hodgepodge of information and privacy laws that he said would making doing business far more costly.

Legal and privacy specialists said the company raises troubling new questions about the ability of computers, in both the government and private sectors, to collect and analyze personal information for homeland security.

These critics said Global's initiative echoes the aims of the troubled government passenger-screening system, as well as another controversial program at the Defense Department that was shut down by Congress called Total Information Awareness.

The effort comes at a sensitive time in the debate about the use of personal information for screening and profiling, as law enforcement and intelligence authorities embrace commercial databases and other technology like never before to fight the war on terrorism.

Commercial information services in the United States have billions of records about Americans, but far fewer about people living abroad. Bell and Thibeau argue their services will eventually make the United States and other countries safer.

Bell left the government at the end of March as director of the Office of National Risk Assessment, which ran the aviation screening program, and previously served as an intelligence official with the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Global was registered as an international business company in the Bahamas two years ago.

Thibeau also registered an entity in Delaware called Global Information Group. It is part of a broad push by businesses and governments to examine digital personal histories more closely in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Some of these efforts are driven by mandates in the USA Patriot Act that require banks and other companies to be more vigilant -- in some cases, by sending customer information to the government.

The data-analysis efforts are part of initiatives designed to minimize companies' exposure to lawsuits or insurance claims.

Global wants to work as a partner to large information services such as LexisNexis. Thibeau said such companies can run into obstacles trying to gather international data themselves.

The company's work could involve some of the same contractors hired to build the U.S. government's screening system, documents and interviews show.

LexisNexis, for instance, hired Global as a consultant to explore the viability of using the Bahamas as a base for collecting international information, officials said.

A subsidiary of Britain-based Reed Elsevier Group PLC, LexisNexis is known for its databases of legal and news documents.

But it has also taken on major roles in homeland security initiatives. It recently paid \$775 million for Seisint Inc., another information company that created the Matrix computer system used by law enforcement authorities for counterterrorism and criminal investigations.

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