Feds, wasting time on Facebook

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In the annals of the Federal Register, the Department of Homeland Security just published a scary new rule. It requires immigrants to hand over "social media handles, aliases, associated identifiable information and search results" as part of the visa-vetting process.

Slated to go into effect Oct. 18, and applying to permanent residents and naturalized citizens as well , this rule is intended to weed out people whose social media activity reveals they are national security threats.

Unfortunately, despite the Trump administration crowing about the importance of "extreme vetting" of newcomers, the new rule will just make immigration a more convoluted process, while doing little to protect Americans from terrorism.

Much of the impetus for searching social media accounts, such as Twitter and Facebook, comes from a myth about the Dec. 2, 2015, terrorist attack in San Bernardino, Calif., in which Pakistani-born Tashfeen Malik and her U.S.-born husband murdered 14 people.

Before coming to America, Malik was rumored to have publicly posted on her social media accounts that she supported violent jihad.

If the government discovered those posts, supporters of the new Homeland Security Department rule argue, many lives could have been saved.

Only that's not what happened. After the rumors started to swirl, then-FBI Director James Comey noted that, "Those communications are direct, private messages . . . we have found no evidence of posting on social media by either of them . . . reflecting their commitment to jihad or to martyrdom."

And no other jihadi terrorists who targeted U.S. soil have publicized their radical intent online prior to an attack , as far as we know. Little wonder why not — it would be supremely stupid.

The "underwear bomber" (Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab) did post jihad-supportive statements in Islamic chat rooms using a pseudonym, but that is not a social media handle. Convicted terrorist Mohamed El Hassan posted, under a pseudonym, at least one YouTube comment supporting a radical preacher.

If wannabe terrorists post online, they use a pseudonym. Accessing immigrants' legitimate social media handle won't expose terrorists-in-waiting.

Introducing more ideological thought crimes into the immigration process will just place more power in the hands of unaccountable bureaucrats and won't improve security.

Comey's comments and the facts about terrorists posting on social media were too late to stop 25 U.S. senators from writing a letter to the Homeland Security Department in 2015 requesting the agency look into screening social media accounts.

But a 2016 pilot program to do exactly that proved so ineffective that Homeland Security determined that an immigration agent would have to manually check each immigrant's social media account.

All of which is why it's highly unlikely this new rule will prove successful from a security standpoint. Indeed, the social-media-vetting program proposed by the Trump administration was tested on a group of refugees who were rejected for national security reasons — and it found zero evidence of ties to terrorist groups or any other threat to national security.

The fact is, normal immigrant vetting is already so thorough that a social media check is unable to increase security. As for refugees, they're already subject to the most intense visa-vetting of any immigrant or visitor category.

Besides, authorities already have access to this information. Prosecutors and attorneys already introduce social media posts as evidence in immigration courts.

Immigration attorney Greg Siskind told me that, "We've heard anecdotally for years about how immigration examiners will look at social media and scour the internet when adjudicating a case, and I've told clients to assume that their online history is being reviewed."

Mining social media posts as evidence for a specific claim is easier and more likely to succeed than fishing expeditions for posts that show an intent to violate national security.

As a broad policy matter across the federal government, the Trump administration has promised to remove two regulations for each new one introduced. However, it has made an exception in the immigration system, where the rules and regulations — each of them costing time and money — keep piling up.

For example, the government increased the length of the green card adjustment-of-status form to 18 pages, up from six, while doubling the length of many other applications.

This new proposed rule, whose rationale is rooted in fake news, will waste many man-hours and delay visa-processing to legitimate immigrants for no apparent gain in security. The Trump administration should scuttle it now.

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