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Papers please

by BRIAN LOCKHART

We've all seen the old World War II movies, where an SS officer approaches someone trying to board a train, or has simply been stopped at a checkpoint.

?Papers,? states the SS officer.

Your papers had better be in order, or the rest of your day would be ruined.

It was a time in Germany when everyone was a suspect. You could easily end up in a concentration camp for not proving your loyalty or birthright.

It's a scary thought to think you can be stopped arbitrarily in the streets and have someone demand you prove who you are, and that you belong there.

When I was younger, friends and I went to a series of concerts in Niagara Falls, New York. They had a newly built convention centre and started bringing top-name bands of the era there to perform.

It was a fairly large venue that seated around 10,000 people.

On the night of the concert, we would simply walk across the Rainbow Bridge to cross an international border. The convention centre was easily within walking distance.

When we arrived on the American side of the bridge, the customs person would ask what we were up to.

They didn't ask for ID or proof of citizenship. Usually, they would just ask to see our tickets.

Yup, Bachman Turner Overdrive appeared at the convention centre that night.

?Have fun guys.?

We crossed an international border with no problem at all.

We were 16 years old. We didn't pose a threat. Obviously, we were returning home after the concert.

There was no need for extensive questioning, a demand for a passport, or the spies at Homeland Security, which didn't even exist at the time, to order us into a room for interrogation.

It was a border between two friendly countries that enjoyed over 150 years of peaceful coexistence, did not have armed guards on patrol with snarling attack dogs, and had no naval ships patrolling the waterways along the border.

Of course, most nations want to protect their borders to stop criminals and undesirables from entering. That only makes sense.

However, you can go too far when it comes to protectionism.

After 9/11, the US started operating interior checkpoints on interstates and secondary highways. There are 33 permanent checkpoints in four states and 38 tactical checkpoints that do not have a permanent location.

According to the federal rules, no documentation is required for US citizens. What does this mean?

It means officers are determining if you are in the country legally by a snap judgment. If you ?sound' and ?look' American, you're good to go.

What if you're an American citizen who was born elsewhere and still have a trace of an accent? Papers please.

If you are a tourist, you need proper documentation. I guess that means a passport, to prove you crossed the border legally.

I saw a YouTube video of a Canadian tourist who was stopped at a checkpoint in Texas. When she said she was Canadian, the officer demanded to see her visa.

The woman informed the officer that Canadians don't require a visa to visit the US. He had to call a supervisor to verify this.

What a scary thought, that a border patrol agent didn't know this.

I've also seen videos of Canadians being stopped by police in the state of Georgia, only to be told they violated the law because to drive in Georgia you need a State of Georgia driver's license.

In this case, the driver had to explain international law to the cop and explain most countries have agreements that a driver's license is valid on an international level.

Now the US is starting a program where all foreign nations who plan to stay in the US for 30 days or longer will be required to apply for registration and fingerprinting. Although, it has just been announced that Canadians will be exempt from the fingerprinting rule.

Fingerprinting is used by police agencies around the world to identify criminals. By being forced to provide fingerprints simply for travelling, the state is turning you into a suspect just by existing.

The new order gives police the option of stopping anyone who appears not to be an American.

If I grew up speaking French in Quebec, I would feel pretty nervous about crossing that border.

Securing your border is one thing ? demanding papers and documents at will may just be the start of a new era of the state spying on its own citizens.