

A CONSUMER ADVISER WITH A NEW AGENDA

BY W. JOHN MOORE

Bonnie Guiton's official titles are special adviser to President Bush for consumer affairs, director of the Office of Consumer Affairs and chairman of the White House Consumer Affairs Council. But in her first 15 months on the job, she has become the Bush Administration's privacy czar.

Guiton, a 48-year-old Californian with a doctorate in education from the University of California (Berkeley), has emerged as the Administration's contact on emerging privacy issues, from the selling of consumer-credit records to the use of new telecommunications technologies such as telephone caller identification systems.

More than anything else, her supporters say, Guiton has highlighted privacy issues—for example, by meeting with public-interest groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and working with the National Consumer League in sponsoring a June privacy conference.

Those efforts have earned praise from groups not always enthusiastic about Bush's appointees. "We're thrilled about the work she has done in the privacy area," Janlori Goldman, an ACLU legislative counsel in Washington, said. "We never expected this level of concern and involvement." Goldman added that privacy issues have been ignored by government officials since the 1970s.

Guiton said that her agency has focused on privacy issues as a result of "brainstorming sessions" with her staff and complaints from consumers. One area of concern, Guiton said, is the use—or misuse—of personal information obtained by major credit bureaus. Guiton has supported pending changes to the 1970 Fair Credit Reporting Act, especially a provision allowing consumers to halt the marketing of personal information provided to credit companies.

Another issue Guiton has addressed is telephone caller identification, which allows someone receiving a call to know the caller's number. Guiton has sought a middle ground in this debate. She supports, in principle, the right of a caller to block anyone from identifying the caller's number. But she declined to endorse a Senate bill by Herbert H. Kohl, D-Wis., requiring phone companies to offer the blocking service.

"We've taken the approach that we'd



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like to see a voluntary standard adhered to by industry," said Guiton, who worries that mandatory regulation could slow the development of telecommunications technology. Guiton said that she expects the industry to institute its own standards, particularly if faced with possible federal regulation and new state laws. "I think that consumers benefit much more quickly when industry voluntarily implements standards and procedures that protect them."

In her willingness to discuss issues with consumer groups and her reluctance to support regulation, Guiton may appear to be the consummate Bush Administration official. That approach has its critics.

"I think Bonnie Guiton has raised the issues that need to be addressed in the privacy area but has failed to ensure that adequate protections are developed to protect personal privacy," said Marc Rotenberg, director of the Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility's computing and civil liberties project in Washington.

Privacy may seem an unusual subject for the government's top consumer affairs official to highlight, but Guiton said her change in focus has not lessened her concern about consumer health and safety, the traditional consumers' issues. Among her other top concerns are educational programs to help disadvantaged consumers, particularly new immigrants.

Some consumer advocates complain about Guiton's agenda. A consumer

group official who would not speak for attribution said that Guiton's emphasis on privacy allows her to avoid being trapped in a firefight between Administration officials and consumer groups.

Mark A. Silbergeld, director of Consumers Union of the United States in Washington, said Guiton has done a better job of conveying Administration concerns to the consumer movement than of carrying the movement's concerns back to top officials. Silbergeld also complained that consumer groups have not met with Bush.

Guiton blamed the consumer groups for the lack of a White House meeting. "Some groups want to meet with the President and discuss an open agenda," she said. "But you know you just don't have a nice chitchat with the President. If they simply want a photo-op and open forum, I don't think that will come about in that particular way."

Guiton, who is generally described as ambitious and talented, is one of the highest-ranking black women in the Administration. She held two jobs in the Reagan Administration, including assistant secretary for vocational and adult education at the Education Department.

Guiton, who before joining the Reagan Administration was a corporate executive and college administrator, expects to return to the private sector. "I've thought about everything from owning my own business to joining a corporation to even heading up a nonprofit." ■