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**OPINION**

From the May 21, 2004 print edition  
 Letter to the editor

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**Stand up to the BSA**

If you ever wanted to retaliate against your ex-boss, the BSA wants you. Or so says a new radio campaign that hit Dallas airwaves recently.

The battle centers on an organization known as the Business Software Alliance (BSA). Despite the impression its acronym tries to make, the BSA, unlike the FBI or CIA, has no law enforcement or government affiliation. It is for-profit "muscle" used by major software companies such as Microsoft and many others to act as a private software police force.

The BSA regularly targets one city at a time with strong-arm tactics. They send an official-looking letter, which reads like an ultimatum, to various tech companies in the target city. The purpose is to trick honest companies into voluntarily submitting to a software audit. Frequently, the ruse works.

The poor company, panic-stricken over a full BSA "investigation," self-reports that it cannot find the documentation for all of its software licenses and ends up paying huge sums to the BSA.

In fact, the Association of Chartered Certified Accounts in the United Kingdom described the mailing as "heavy-handed" and "questionable."

This assault is not just questionable. It is also very profitable. According to the BSA, more than \$75 million in such "fines" have been collected over the last decade. The city-wide BSA mailing is typically followed by a persistent radio campaign stating that the BSA has "declared war" on the city and warning companies to submit to a voluntary inspection.

In the same commercial, the BSA seems to coax disgruntled, ex-employees to retaliate against their hated ex-boss by reporting them for software license violations -- which (incredibly) could be all it takes for the BSA to obtain a police escort and search warrant.

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After a company is "audited," the BSA assesses a "fine" of up to several hundred thousand dollars. The curious part is that most companies are so scared and bewildered by the whole BSA spectacle that they gladly pay without a word of protest.

Unfortunately, the BSA often dupes honest law enforcement officers into seeking a warrant. Because BSA officials wear suits and ties and use official-sounding terms, they invariably impress local police enough to get them scrambling. Even when presented with the most flimsy pretext of evidence, the poor law enforcement officer is so overwhelmed by the BSA suits that he feels compelled to go along with the charade.

It's time for Dallas companies, and Dallas law enforcement, to stand up to the BSA.

*Cyrus Peikari, M.D., Dallas*

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