Over the past 15 years, nearly 20 million individuals applied for federal jobs that called for employee background checks. As part of its attempts to hire the right people, the government collected data that included Social Security numbers, residency and educational history, employment history, information about immediate family and other personal and business acquaintances, details about health and financial history — even fingerprints.

Some of these individuals never even got the position they were seeking; others did, but have since moved on to other pastures. Still others are still working for the government in a wide variety of jobs, including in the nation’s armed forces.

Late last week they learned that they now have something in common that presumably sent shudders up many spines: All that personal information has been accessed by unknown hackers.

All in all, data on some 19.7 million individuals who applied for a background investigation was stolen, as well as that of 1.8 million non-applicants — mostly spouses of those who did.

For the millions affected, it is a frightening situation: Someone, somewhere in the world — very possibly residing in communist China — knows everything about you he needs to steal your identity. He doesn’t merely know your name, address, social security number, and the first name of your spouse. He knows where you went to school, every job you ever had, who your friends are, and may even have your fingerprints on hand to use as he sees fit.

The political ramifications of the latest revelations were apparent on Friday. Only a day after insisting that she had no intention to do so, the head of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) came to the White House to formally inform President Obama that she was resigning. To no one’s surprise, the president accepted her resignation without a battle.

As the government scrambles to prevent further breaches and provide identity theft protection for those already affected, this latest fiasco is only the most recent reminder that the incredibly rapid advances in technology also come with mammoth drawbacks.

In the age of typewritten pages and filing cabinets, it would have been essentially impossible for the personal information of 21.5 million people to be stolen. Now, all it takes is a few strokes of a keyboard half a world away by some geek with a criminal mind, and all that information is his for the asking.

The seriousness of this risk posed by hackers must not be underestimated. It isn’t only the personal information and the nightmare of identity theft that is so worrisome but the fact that with so much of our lives dominated by technology, hackers could theoretically cause incomprehensible havoc. Experts have warned that hackers may try to shut down power grids, causing entire regions to lose electricity; or interfere with the computers of air traffic controllers, bringing all airplane travel to a halt.

With an ever-increasing percentage of drivers relying on advanced GPS-based services to give them turn-by-turn directions, hackers now have the possibility to send millions in the wrong direction and create massive traffic jams that could strand motorists for much of the day.

While the dangers posed by hackers are obvious and clear-cut, other effects of technology are much less noticeable. What we often don’t realize is that in our blind reliance on high-tech devices, we are using our minds less and less — to an almost frightening extent.

For generations, people working in a host of fields collected pertinent information — various facts and figures — and sought to retain them in their minds for use at the appropriate time. Now, more and more, we aren’t even trying to remember them; instead, we simply look up the same facts each time on the computer.

With the advent of spell-check on every computer, a key incentive to know how to spell correctly has vanished, and even those who once had this skill are beginning to forget how to write on their own. The average person once remembered a long list of telephone numbers; now, without the contact list in his cell phone, he has no way to call some of the most important people in his life.

Technology, with all the challenges it presents, is here to stay. But it is incumbent on us to face the new reality it has brought us with honesty and fortitude.