NO ONE IS SAFE

BY ALAN BERMAN

“The nation needs to create an environment that will foster the open exchange of information and subject matter expertise to combat the damaging acts of cyber terrorism.”

It is hard not to be aware of the threat of cyber terrorism. Media in all of its forms has assaulted us with the risks of hacking on a daily basis. No industry, government, or media outlet source is safe: Twitter, Target, Home Depot, SONY, J.P. Morgan, the Internal Revenue Service, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, and Ashley-madison.com’s adulterers’ site, with its 37,000,000 members, all have been hit. There is no doubt that cyber terrorism has made us question the safety of using any cyber site or resource.

Despite the best efforts of cyber security professionals armed with a variety of intercept, detection, and deterrent software, successful attacks still are taking place at an alarming rate. The apparent ease of penetration and inability to identify threats until after an incident occurs has made it possible to create a new industry of thieves that have found back doors and other intrusion means through which they can extort, compromise, sell, and destroy information while being any place in the world.

In support of these invaders is a collection of software tools: password and wireless crackers, sniffers, spanners, vulnerability scanners, e-mail flooder, and other instruments of intrusion and disruption. While cyber security breaches have been a present threat for decades, much of the hacking performed in the past was done for the sheer sport of showing off prowess and gaining bragging rights. Those days are gone. The new breed of hackers is not the benevolent hackers of old, but a new group interested in the profits that can be derived from its efforts. Hacking has turned into an industry—and a very financially rewarding one.

Credit card hacking and the sale of information is a big business. Like all well-defined industries, hacking has a distribution system worthy of any major information network. Credit card data stolen from retailers, for instance, is sold in an underground hacker market (forums). The information containing customers’ card numbers, names, and addresses are put up for sale and priced to match the value of the product. One such website, registered in Latvia, lists the credit card information (name, credit card number, expiration date, authentication code, etc.) along with zip codes, security codes, and e-mail addresses from the information stolen from the hacked site—in this particular case, Target. Like any good merchant, the seller enhances the product’s effectiveness by making it easier for the buyer to use the cards for purchasing goods online or withdrawing money from bank accounts. The value of the card directly is proportionate to how new the information is. The information on a credit card that recently has been stolen, and whose theft has yet to be discovered, may have a value of upwards of $100 per card. The value decreases dramatically as the time from the theft increases.

To stymie the efforts of law enforcement personnel attempting to infiltrate hacker marketplaces, the most sophisticated criminals hide their “carder forums” on the “Dark Web,” which conceals the location of the computer servers hosting the websites. Secrecy is ensured by routing computer messages randomly through several places on the Internet, wrapped in encrypted code, so no single point can link the source to the destination, making the sites nearly impossible to trace.

While hacking of credit card and other information that might lead to identity theft may garner much of the headlines, hackers bent upon destruction create even more dangerous situations. Damage to critical infrastructures components can cause immeasurable harm. A report by the University of Cambridge Centre for Risk Studies and Lloyd’s of London Insurance put together a scenario of a cyber attack blacking out New York and Washington, D.C. It estimated the impact upon the U.S. economy of upwards of one trillion dollars.

The hacking of airplane systems in mid-flight can destroy a pilot’s ability to control a jetliner with hundreds of people aboard. The recently disclosed act of hackers being able to penetrate the networks that operate key components of an automobile identifies an issue that affects millions of car owners. What started out as a means to unlock car doors remotely became more intrusive and dangerous, as the hackers took control of a Jeep’s audio system, wiper controls, and, finally, steering mechanism. In a demonstration, the Jeep then was driven off the road.

The pervasive nature of hacking has given rise to a feeling of cyber paranoia. So, it is understandable why a simple software glitch at the New York Stock Exchange portended thoughts of the ultimate hack that could halt trading around the world. In response, stock prices fell. The issue ultimately was identified as a relatively simple computer program malfunction and not a cyber attack.

If the problem seems overwhelming, then you are starting to grasp the magnitude and complexity of what is facing those who are vested with the responsibility of guarding those resources that define the very essence of our daily lives. With the magnitude of the problem being so clear, it would seem that there should be few obstacles to a consensus approach to address the situation. However, while there are a great number of private sector initiatives and a strengthening of the regulatory environment to ensure greater diligence in the testing of institutions, there is no coordinated holistic approach to dealing with cyber terrorism.

The private sector has addressed the problem with proactive measures centered around the sharing of information, which has proven to be more effective than the sharing of information between the private and public sector, most notably the Federal government. A common bond tends to exist among private entity groups as part of a co-dependency that is a re-
think we'll move a long way to where we need to
go in this arena."

The lack of trust that exists between the pri-

tate and public sectors is hindering the efforts
to create the very important cyber-terrorism
policy. The fundamental distrust probably was

summed up best by the ranking Republican

member of the committee, Tom Coburn of Ok-
lahoma, who said there is an assumption in
government that businesspeople are going to
do something wrong, not right. Sen. Coburn

envisions a situation where two Internet service

providers are sharing cyber-threat information

when the Justice Department antitrust division

lawyers insist: "Hey, wait a minute; you have to

prove that was necessary for cyber security

rather than you guys colluding to keep some-

body out."

In fact, the Internet Service Providers never

have demonstrated that they were not willing
to share information among themselves if they

felt it was in the best interest of national securi-
ty, but the divide will continue to impede any

meaningful policies to counter cyber terrorism.

If the lack of the more than 20,000,000 ac-
counts at the Office of Personnel Management

and the numerous retail, financial, manufactur-
ing, utility, health care, tech, transportation,
military, and other municipal, state and Federal
government agencies cannot prompt action, it is
doubtful that anything short of an unhink-
able event will be able to do so.

Now we see the Senate proposing legisla-
tion for Automobile Cyber Security Standards.

While this may be a headline-grabbing event,

and certainly is an important issue, it will not
replace an overall strategy for protecting our

cyber infrastructure. By embarking upon an-
other piece of legislation, the Senate is failing
to deal with the bigger issue of Internet securi-
ty. While hacking of automobile systems is a

problem, it is not as important as overall cyber

legislation. Consider the protection of the fi-
nancial systems or, even more basic, the power
grids and the damage that would be caused by

a cyber-terrorist attack.

The nation needs to create an environment
that will foster the open exchange of information
and subject matter expertise to combat the
damaging acts of cyber terrorism. Without
such a program, hackers will continue to have
a major advantage over organized and unco-
ordinated tactics to prevent and limit damage
from their assaults. This leaves the consumer

and insurers to bear the brunt of the incursions
into their private information to commit fraud-
ulent acts upon their well-being and their digi-
tal identification.

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