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Letters to the Editor

From: Peter Barnet <pbarnet@undisclosed.com>
To: Nick Gardiner <enpg@thepassypress.com>
Sent: 24 November 2018 at 12:01:37 CET
Subject: Cyber Essay, November 2018

Dear Sir,

“The Existential Threat of Cyber...” essay just published is chilling. And, if last year’s congressional hearings on Facebook and Russian interference in the 2016 election are a precursor, our political class is unprepared to meet it.

Indeed, cyber theft and cyber warfare present security threats that most citizens and politicians simply do not understand and I agree with the writer that in this case the fractionated structure and culture of our democratic society puts the US at a competitive disadvantage to monolithic totalitarian regimes: China, Russia, North Korea, etc. If we fail to harness full and committed collaboration between Silicone Valley and our defense/intelligence communities, it is unlikely we could prevail. If we do not ignite the necessary national will, it is unlikely we could prevail and if we descend into another cold war (and there is some indication we are doing just that) the cyber security risks will fast forward.

Yes, I agree we may need a super congressional committee and certainly a robust national debate on how to meet this challenge...and the urgency is clear but the national will is not. We have been here before.

In 1940, Americans were divided between isolationism and intervention in the growing European war. Pearl Harbor erased the divide and the US went to war with a unified and committed national will. The Manhattan Project brought science and government together to build the bomb. They then divided over whether to deploy it. But the effort was total and we beat both the Germans and the Russians to it. Years later after 40 years of nuclear arms competition. The cold warriors agreed The MAD Doctrine (Mutually Assured Destruction). First strike/second strike no longer mattered, both sides would be destroyed.

The Manhattan Project and The MAD Doctrine present a possible road map and an end state objective to lessen/ neutralize the cyber threat. God forbid we must suffer a catastrophic event to unite the country and its fractionated interests to defend national cyber security. Today we have the communications tools to foster national will that did not exist in 1940. We do not need a Pearl Harbor but we do need the political leadership that Roosevelt and Reagan exemplify if we are to prevail.

Failing this we may be forced into anti-democratic measures such as shutting down the internet or even outlawing certain technologies as Jimmy Carter did with the Neutron Bomb (too easy to use). We have consistently bent our democratic values in wartime (censorship, habeas corpus, etc.). All these issues should be part of the debate.

We will not eliminate the cyber theft and the threat of cyber war until we have dominant blocking technology (superior algorithms) or the costs of deploying them become too high for both state and non-state actors (MAD). The writer makes a powerful argument that we must forget about partisan politics and silos of interest if we are to succeed. National security is an American issue which affects us all and around which we must unite. It is our duty.

Sincerely,

Peter Barnet

Peter Barnet has been an Associate Professor of Global Communications at the American University of Paris and former EVP and Chief Client Officer Europe at Young & Rubicam. He is a resident of Paris and a graduate of Yale College.