

LBAR Lesson VIII: Security (Part 2 – Threat Identification)

We noted previously that to secure something meant to remove the fear or apprehension that otherwise accompanies the use of that thing. In that vein, we saw that to secure Cyberspace (cyber-security) meant to remove, or attempt to remove, the dangers that accompany our new means of communication. Yet we also saw that securing something can often have the paradoxical effect of making the user less cautious; cyber-security involves not only internet security (virus protection, firewalls, data encryption), but also securing individuals, i.e., teaching people to protect themselves by being cautious in their cyberspace activities.

What we want to do today is to enlarge the sphere of our thinking by moving from the individual level (which represents our individual needs, desires and concerns) to the level of society, or more particularly, to the political level (where we meet the needs, desires and concerns of all citizens as a whole). In many respects our country – the United State of America – is similar to any one of us as citizens with regard to how it behaves in Cyberspace. How does the U.S. Make use of Cyberspace?

In a nutshell, everything the government does, whether we are talking about what it does for us, or what it asks us to do, has been put on the internet. I mean by that simply this: just as our individual communications are enhanced in Cyberspace by removing the limitations imposed upon them by physical space, so too does our government enhance its means of communication with us by making use of Cyberspace. What are some examples of interactions/transactions that our citizens have with our government? [driver's licenses, post office, taxes, constituency services, etc.] Cyberspace has not replaced any of these interactions; indeed, one can still spend plenty of time in the DMV if you do not get there early enough? What Cyberspace has done is to create opportunities for citizens to interact with their government in non-physical ways, thereby making the process more efficient (hopefully!). Thus, you can renew your driver's license online (though you have to go to the DMV physically to get the license initially – why? Could this be done online as well?), you can buy stamps or schedule mail pickup online, you can file your taxes electronically, and you can contact your representatives by email. Again, by offering more options to do the same thing, the idea is that Cyberspace benefits our civic life by making it more accessible, and by extension, improving the quality of political life in the United States.

Yet, if it is true that Cyberspace creates both benefits and dangers for individual users, then the same should be true of Government. If there are people in the world that would take your physical property, or even do physical harm to you, and by extension, if those same people are an even greater threat for doing these same things because of Cyberspace, then it stands to reason that government too must seek to secure itself in Cyberspace, i.e., it must seek to remove the fear or apprehension that surrounds its use of Cyberspace. But what does our government fear? It has, after all the police and the military; you would not think people with guns and tanks would fear people with computers. But in fact government does fear those who would use computers maliciously, as it is exposed to the same threats that individuals are when it makes use of Cyberspace [ex: hacking – personal data; viruses] . Yet government also must fear something we as citizens do not normally think about – it has to fear other governments, especially those not friendly to us. The most obvious example is terrorists, those who would make use of Cyberspace to communicate with others for the sake of doing harm to us. Thus, in addition to all the individual level threats faced by citizens, government must also fear the malicious behavior of other governments or non-state actors (terrorists). This means government must be proactive in protecting itself, and hence, its citizens. How does it do this? Also consider what it would mean if government become overconfident in its attempt at security.