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America's top spy fears cyber-terror against U.S.

Greenville native says, 'We're not safe, but we're safer'

BY BEN SZOBODY • STAFF WRITER • MARCH 29, 2008

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Mike McConnell, President Bush's director of national intelligence, told The Greenville News on Friday that the country's cyber networks pose a national vulnerability "probably unprecedented in our history," and he hopes to create a robust federal program to prevent an attack that he said would have "an order of magnitude global impact greater than 9-11."

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He also pushed for three key provisions in a controversial surveillance bill pending in Congress, saying passage is crucial because a "significant -- some would even say majority" -- portion of what the U.S. knows about terrorists and their plans comes from listening to their communication.

In an hour-long speech at Furman University, the country's top spy traced his career from modest childhood roots in Greenville through his first semester sleeping in a gym closet at Furman, and later to jobs as intelligence director during the Gulf War and director of the National Security Agency.

Asked to assess U.S. intelligence since 2001, McConnell, whose Cabinet position was created in part to increase sharing between intelligence agencies, said, "We're not safe, but we're safer."

He urged Furman students to consider a life of public service and said he'd like to build a house on a lot he owns in The Cliffs at Glassy.

As head of 16 intelligence agencies, McConnell briefs the president at 7:30 a.m. daily. He oversees more than 100,000 people and a \$45 billion budget.

His former boss at private defense contractor Booz Allen Hamilton has said McConnell was "one of the first senior officials" to recognize the importance of protecting and defending information in the wake of the Cold War, and McConnell broadly outlined the problem in an interview with The News.

Russia and China already are extracting information from U.S. networks, he said, but are deterred from doing harm because of their own interest in the country's economic success.

Given the same ability, McConnell said he doubts al-Qaida would have any such qualms, raising questions about the "fragility" of American systems that run banking and electric power, for example.

In a connected world where a financial transaction no longer is backed by gold or silver but amounts to an "accounting entry," he said an attack that changed 1s to zeros in computer systems could be vastly more devastating than the Sept. 11 attacks.

He declined to discuss the approach of a security program but said it's currently getting a "very vigorous" but classified debate on Capitol Hill.

Born in Greenville, McConnell first attended what was then North Greenville Junior College, then transferred to Furman, where he received a degree in economics. His father was in transportation, his mother in the garment industry.

In his speech Friday, McConnell said he recalled seeing Greenville signs as a child that said, "Impeach Earl Warren," then chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, which his father explained was because people saw Warren heading toward integration.

Later, he said, the U.S. government tapped phones belonging to Warren and Justice Hugo Black because of "uncontrolled power" that, along with subsequent eavesdropping abuses including Watergate, gave rise to the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.



Top spy: Mike McConnell, the nation's director of national intelligence, discusses the threats facing the nation during an interview Friday.

(GEORGE GARDNER / Staff)

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The rules as he describes them were simple: Overseas surveillance required no warrant, while domestic surveillance did. U.S. phone wires, he said, brought the expectation of privacy. Those wires are now glass fiber-optic tubes, he said, with much of the world's communication flowing through U.S. lines.

The result, he said, is warrant protection for foreigners, and the technology shift necessitates what he calls three vital FISA changes.

They include the ability to conduct surveillance against foreign targets without a warrant, regardless of where the communication is intercepted; the requirement of a warrant when U.S. citizens are involved anywhere in the world; and liability protection for telecommunications companies that have cooperated since 9-11.

He called allegations that the government is spying on Americans "patently untrue" and said warrants haven't always been required to eavesdrop on U.S. citizens abroad.

"It isn't giving up anything," he said. "I could argue it's more protection, not less."

He said the current Senate version is "the right bill," while the House version, which doesn't include immunity for private companies, would cause "severe operational impact on my community."

Asked to quantify intelligence improvements, McConnell pointed to the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center, where agencies participate in thrice daily videoconferences to discuss and cross-examine threats.

"My biggest worry at the moment: nuclear weapons in Iran," McConnell said, adding that if Iran acquired such a weapon it would set off a "nuclear arms race," changing the Middle East "overnight."

He listed access to energy as one of the most serious problems facing the country.

McConnell said al-Qaida is currently recruiting Europeans willing to train in Pakistan in buying commercial products such as hydrogen peroxide that can be used for "mass casualties" because they don't need a visa to fly into the United States.

Asked later to assess Europe's engagement on the issue, he said the United Kingdom is "pretty rigorous" because of terrorist events there, while other countries are gradually becoming more vigilant as they uncover threats.

He described the United States as a "reactive" country that has repeatedly lacked spies when they were needed in the face of a new major threat.

His message to students: "We will not prevail unless some of you not only believe in (the Constitution), but you're willing to engage in public service -- you're willing to dedicate yourselves to this kind of profession."

Asked by an audience member who checks his work, McConnell said he is "apolitical" and "professional."

"My job is to speak truth to power," he said, adding he wouldn't talk about private conversations with the president.

Then he said, "Most often, I have to push back very hard with the audience for whom I'm attempting to serve, from the point of view that they'd rather have it a different way."

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SpyGuy wrote:

For about a year now the former Chief Strategist of Netscape has been warning everyone through his articles that this was a huge threat and actually identified several strategies and tactics that if used would compromise the information infrastructure in the U.S. and globally. Why is it, our intelligence services are just waking up to this threat? Why is it throughout history we ignore or dismiss the experts until it is too late. I just did a google search (Kevin Coleman Cyber Attack) and found over 13,000 references. With that much intelligence we should be much further along in protecting and defending against cyber attacks that we are today!

3/29/2008 11:36:51 AM

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