Attacking the Lone Star State: 
Cyber-terrorists Hit Texas

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Hackers
Professor Delwiche
Pledged
7:00 a.m. Tuesday Morning

When I woke up one cold, dreary December day I had no idea how much my life, and the lives of millions of other citizens would change. As the alarm on my coffee pot began to incessantly beep I slowly opened my eyes. I was dreading waking up and having to go into work when all I really wanted was to return to my home town for the holidays, seeing as Christmas was only 3 days away. After 15 minutes of lying in bed I slowly brought myself to stand up, put on my fuzzy robe and warm slippers, and pour myself a mug of hot coffee.

I decided to turn on the television while I drank my coffee and got dressed and ready for work. I turned the television to CNN, turned up the volume, and went into my closet to pick out my suit for the day, my daily attire since I began my job 3 months ago. As I sorted through my closet, I could vaguely hear the female reporter cautioning individuals to be safe this holiday season because for the past 5 days, anonymous emails warning of attacks had been sent to government officials in Texas. The reporter stated, “The Austin Police Department has increased security on the capitol building and will not be taking visitors or tours until the threats have been proven false. State officials, attempting to calm the nerves of citizens, explained that the situation is being addressed and they will not stop until the safety of every individual throughout the state is ensured. CNN will continue to inform viewers of any updates as they come…”

I paused. Hmmm...why had I not been informed about the threatening emails? Why am I expected to go into work today? I am the governor’s assistant and not only had I not been informed about the emails, but why am I asked to enter the capitol when it is potentially dangerous? I was frozen. All I could think about was bombs, anthrax, and airplanes. I immediately grabbed the phone and dialed the office. No answer. I continued to call until I heard my co worker, Brenda’s, voice on the other end.
“Hello. Governor Rick Perry’s office could you please hold?” “NO!” I blurted out, “Brenda it is Sheila, I heard about the threats on the news I do not think it is safe to be in the office today. If the threats are targeting Texas, where else would the terrorists strike but the capitol?” Brenda sighed then said, “Oh hi Sheila, things are pretty hectic here today please don’t worry though Mr. Perry assures us that our building has increased security on it and the bomb squad has already performed 3 checks throughout the entire building. I think we are fine. Plus he said we will probably get to leave early today and may have tomorrow off.” “I don’t know,” I said. “I am nervous about this…I think it may be really dangerous.” Brenda pleaded, “Sheila please. Just come into the office and help get some of this work done. We are fine. They are taking the proper measures and I am sure the threats were just from some crazy person looking for attention. This will not be another September 11th; we have come too far as a nation for another catastrophic event of that manner to happen again. Plus, why would anyone in their right mind be interested in attacking Texas?” I said with my eyes glazed over, “Okay I will see you in half an hour.” Click. I hung up the phone and moved, as if a zombie, to get dressed.

As I buttoned the white buttons on my perfectly starched blue blouse, I could not shake the terrible feeling I had; I could not get rid of the pit in my stomach. Perhaps it was my extensive education, four years of undergraduate followed by two years of graduate school, or maybe it was just my intuition speaking to me. Somehow I knew that the emails were not sent by distant harmless individuals. Somehow I knew that the effects of the terrorists would be unlike any felt before in history. Somehow I knew things would never be the same.

I hopped in my old beat up ‘87 Honda Accord, started the engine, took a deep breath and slowly drove out of my apartment complex towards my work, the capitol building. I drove down the road in silence, watching closely for any peculiarities that I may have encountered on the
road. Excessive ambulances or police cars. Screaming women on street corners. Cars exploding before my very eyes. Planes crashing into office buildings. Nothing. I saw no abnormalities nor did anyone else on the streets or in their cars look the least bit concerned about the possibility of yet another terrorist attack. Are these people in denial or have they merely not been watching the news?

I pulled into my parking space, grabbed my sack lunch, and hurried into my office on the third floor. When I opened the door I saw normality; people were bustling around making copies, sending faxes, and answering the phones. There was no evidence of serious concern or of any grave problems. Taking a huge sigh of relief, I walked to my desk and putting my head into my hands, I sat trying to talk reason into myself. Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. You are not going to die today. Everything will be ok.

Forcing myself to focus, I set to work beginning at the top of my to do list. I began to make copies for Governor Perry, return phone calls, send faxes, and schedule meetings. Having occupied myself successfully for over four hours, I decided to take a brief lunch break and I pulled out my homemade ham and cheese sandwich and walked into the break room. I sat down with Brenda, who was also eating her homemade sack lunch. “So Brenda you were right. I have no idea why I was being so ridiculous earlier. Everything really is fine in the building. I think I just freaked out because the terrorist threat seemed so close to home. Phew I am so relieved.” Brenda smiled back, “Sheila, I hate to say this, but I told you so.” She continued to smile, “So what are your plans for Christmas?”

Just before I was able to tell Brenda about my holiday plans, Governor Perry himself walked into the break room. “Sheila. I need to speak to you immediately.” Without thinking I hopped up, grabbed the remnants of my sack lunch, and followed him into his office. Allowing
me to enter his quiet office first, he followed me and closed the door behind us. “Sheila I just got
off the phone with Smith from the Texas Department of Corrections and he said that he just
received an automated notification saying that five prisoners are to be released today. It just so
happens the five prisoners were originally convicted on at least one count of manslaughter and
were waiting on death row.” I stood speechless. He continued, “Now I do not know how it is
possible but it seems as though the prisoners are going to be released according to the Texas state
law because the official files mandate their timely release. It does however, look suspicious to
both Smith and I. Either the five prisoners went to court simultaneously or a judge ruled that
their sentences be up, or the system is somehow broken. I find it hard to believe, however, that a
judge would call for the release of five inmates on death row on exactly the same day.
Nevertheless, the prisoners are set to be released unless we can somehow explain the change in
records.” I stood speechless and overwhelmed. “Sheila,” he said, “It is pivotal that we fix this
and as the governor of this state I must help.” I finally mustered enough energy to simply say,
“Yes sir I understand. I too want to help fix this immediately.” The sick feeling which I was
feeling earlier began to impair me yet again.

Just then the Governor’s phone began to ring relentlessly. He immediately picked the
receiver up and after a few moments a look of pure horror overcame his face. I sat quietly trying
to process the events and thought of ways in which we could best solve the mysterious release of
the prisoners. He hung up and put his head in his hands for a brief moment. “All of the prisoners
in the state of Texas are now scheduled to be released this week...beginning today. The records
of their crimes are no longer present nor is the information surrounding their trials or
imprisonments. It seems as though the entire criminal system has been...deleted.” Shocked I
remained still. Could this possibly be related to the threatening emails? “Sir,” I asked. “I hope I
am not overstepping my boundary, and I do not know precisely what was said in the emails sent to the Texas government officials, but do you think this could possibly be related to the threats?”
Governor Perry stared at me for what felt like, an eternity. “So you are saying Sheila that you think terrorists may have hacked into our private government information and... changed it?”
Even though it sounded slightly ridiculous, I nodded. Is it possible? Could individuals really possess not only the intelligence but also the skill to hack into confidential government information and records?

The phone continued to ring off the hook. Governor Perry finally hanging up the phone for a brief second, told me to grab my coat and follow him; we had to go to the Department of Corrections. We hurried to his car and I quickly opened my car door, still trying to piece together the strange occurrences. “Sheila, we cannot tell the public about this yet. We need to figure out exactly what is happening and we must also figure out how to immediately address this problem without causing mass panic and chaos” he strictly stated. “Okay sir,” I simply said.

He speedily pulled his black Mercedes into a visitor spot in front of the office and we frantically swung open the entrance door, sprinting inside. Already, the entire office was a frenzy of workers trying to figure out what was happening. Smith, who looked disheveled and stressed, yelled, “Rick, I have called in technical support for backup to critically analyze the computers as well as Texas Homeland Security so that we can immediately figure this out. There is no doubt that this was an intentional attack. Not only was critical information erased but also incorrect release dates were added, therefore serving as an indicator that this was a premeditated event. We have to make sure the problem is immediately corrected and that the prisoners are not released so that we can protect our citizens. We also need a team trying to find the bastards that did this to our system.”
Governor Perry and I simply nodded and set to work following Smith around the office and listening to the technology experts try to explain how someone could have hacked the classified system. “Hacking into a government’s private system is very hard and tedious; this operation took much time and planning,” one expert said bewildered. “Wherever they performed this incredible hacking job, they must be found and punished or else there is no guarantee they will stop hacking confidential records. It would be very wise if you could keep an eye out for any other abnormal activities taking place within further Texas departments.”

Minutes turned to hours and soon I began to feel the weight of my exhaustion setting in. Hours later, the countless experts could still not recover the deleted documents about the inmates nor could they trace the location to where the computer hacking was coming from. Precious time continued to tick away.

5:00 a.m. Wednesday Morning

“Oh. My. God. I cannot believe this. Sir this problem may be bigger than we ever anticipated,” one government official hysterically declared. All of the men and women in the office, with wide eyes, hurried over to the computer. “It appears that just an hour or so ago another department was hacked into. All of the documents for the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts have been significantly altered. It appears that every Texan in the system is now in tremendous debt, ranging in monetary amounts. The numbers are completed skewed and the original records of all the tax revenues for the state of Texas have been falsified. The original and correct records are nowhere to be found. The IRS is going to have a heyday with this. Steve! I need you to contact all of the banks and look for abnormally large money transfers of the missing tax dollars.” Governor Perry, with hands on his hips, somberly stated, “Okay, first I think it is time we openly and honestly inform the public. This is quickly spiraling out of control. Second, I
think it is time that we receive help on the national level. Americans need to know that we are being attacked. Our safety, private information, and money are being hacked into by cyber terrorists. Sheila, go post on our website that our current threat level is now red, indicating that state personnel are immediately addressing the terrorist situation as well as the emergency needs of our state. It is our moral obligation to inform individuals and their families that their personal information and files have been invaded in addition to the fact that all prisoners in the state of Texas could possibly be walking the streets. However, even though we are going to explain the situation it is also imperative that we maintain our composure and reassure citizens that the government is doing its best to solve the problem.” The entire office stood, with tired and blood shot eyes, clinging to every word that was spoken.

9:00 am Wednesday

Governor Perry, pulled out a pack of cigarettes, turned, and walked outside into the freezing morning air. After having updated the website and contacted the news stations, I stepped outside to talk with the governor. He stood with hands in his pockets, staring blankly into space.

“How could we have been so naïve? Bombing the capitol building? Wow, it was way too obvious. We are living in 2009 and it is now quite apparent that technology and forms of terrorism have not stopped evolving. Maybe we as Americans are way too dependent on computers and computer networks. Something of this manner was bound to eventually happen and the terrorists are slowly beginning to take over our networks. Whether the reason is political or religious, the terrorists have created mass panic, insecurity, a huge infringement of privacy, quite possibly stolen enormous sums of money, and allowed dangerous prisoners back into our society. Never before has an attack of this large scale manner hit our country. Sheila, I just do not know what we are going to do.” I glanced down at the ground.
He continued, "I remember being quoted on our website saying, 'Emergency workers in Texas are well prepared to respond to any type of threat, but every Texan has a role to play in homeland security. Learn what you can do to protect your family and help safeguard our state. Together, we will make sure Texas is safer and stronger.' Wow. Our government was surely not prepared for this form of terrorism. This will most certainly be a learning experience that we must recover from." I nodded and said, "Sir, we have no choice but to remain strong and not only correct the hacking that was performed on our own computer networks, but we will also work to ensure that justice is brought to the terrorists. This unlawful attack will not intimidate us nor will it coerce us." He just stared at me.

"Before we go back in that room and piece back the millions of records, data, and information and before we work to ensure that all of our citizens feel safe and protected, sir...could I ask you for a cigarette?" And with that, a glimmer of hope shone in the governor's eyes and a small smile appeared on his face. I slowly inhaled the cigarette, enjoying my four minute break from the chaos and pandemonium that loomed inside the office and throughout the country. Then I stomped out the cigarette butt, and we turned and walked into the building, bracing ourselves for the days, months, and even years of recovery that lurked in the future.
Bibliography
