

Opinion: Private sector must be partners in national cybersecurity

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A debate that could have far-reaching effects on our cybersecurity will begin next week in the U.S. Senate. Just two weeks ago, Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.V., and Sen. Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, introduced a brief but potentially far-reaching draft bill to establish "within the Executive Office of the President, the Office of the National Cybersecurity Adviser." This provides a compelling opportunity for our political and business leaders to jointly develop a comprehensive, coordinated national cybersecurity plan.

Maintaining the integrity of our nation's critical communications and data infrastructure is a matter of national and economic security. The volume and severity of threats against our nation are mounting, and public apprehension over the likes of the Conficker computer worm represents only the tip of the cybersecurity iceberg. We are becoming more vulnerable to potentially devastating cyberattacks at the same time that our existing cyberdefenses and best practices are being rendered less effective by well-funded and organized adversaries. Paying attention to this cybersecurity adviser bill is paramount to the long-term safety of America.

According to the bill, the cybersecurity adviser "may consult with federal departments, agencies and other entities." While it is not clear what "other entities" means, it should mean that the private sector in general, and emerging and established companies in Silicon Valley in particular, will be included.

We need to harness the nimbleness of Silicon Valley to help the U.S. government empower its agencies to become early adopters of best-in-class technology solutions, whether they come from bootstrapped entrepreneurs, venture-backed startups, or large corporations.

Criminals attacking our nation in cyberspace do not discriminate between the government and private industry. The need for collaborative information sharing and unified threat protection shouldn't either. As the public debate develops on this Senate bill, there will be many who reject the notion of what the media is dubbing as a "cyberczar." Instead, thought leaders from both the public and private sectors should revisit the fundamental notion of how we should go about defining successful approaches to joint problem solving.

Equally important, a new protocol for confidential information sharing must be established as soon as possible, and this information could be disseminated through a round-table of top-level corporate Internet security experts, venture capitalists who are experts in new security technologies and methods, and government representatives from the Defense, Commerce and Homeland Security communities.

Because it is a matter of national and economic security, establishing an office for a national cybersecurity adviser who reports to the president will bring unanticipated benefits. America is already late to realize that we must embrace a new and integrated collaboration between the public and private sectors to truly promote innovation. To ignore this reality in cybersecurity will only make it more difficult for our country to effectively protect itself from attack. Let's not wait for a cyberattack equivalent to 9/11 to completely break our technology backbone before we are ready to fix it.

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