

DID NSA JUST REVEAL ITS CHINA BIOS STORY WAS MADE UP?

Secrecy News just released an NSA notice to Congress of authorized disclosure of classified information. The notice was dated December 13, just two days before 60 Minutes had a solicitous piece on the NSA.

Here's the classified information the NSA says they gave what must be 60 Minutes.

- (S//SI//NF) [redacted] These discussions ranged in classification, up to [redacted]. Noteworthy among the classified topics disclosed were NSA's use of metadata to locate terrorists, the techniques we use and the processes we follow to assist in locating hostages, [redacted] overseas support to the warfighter and U.S. allies in war zones, and NSA support to overall USG efforts to mitigate cyber threats. The [redacted] personnel executed non-disclosure agreements that covered all classified discussions.

The reference to assisting in locating hostages probably map to the metadata analysis of pirates done onscreen (albeit with altered phone numbers).

But what's not there in unredacted form – at least beyond the vague description of “USG efforts to mitigate cyber threats” was the China kaboom story told on the show.

John Miller: Could a foreign country tomorrow topple our financial system?

Gen. Keith Alexander: I believe that a foreign nation could impact and destroy major portions of our financial system, yes.

John Miller: How much of it could we stop?

Gen. Keith Alexander: Well, right now it would be difficult to stop it because our ability to see it is limited.

One they did see coming was called the BIOS Plot. It could have been catastrophic for the United States. While the NSA would not name the country

behind it, cyber security experts briefed on the operation told us it was China. Debora Plunkett directs cyber defense for the NSA and for the first time, discusses the agency's role in discovering the plot.

Debora Plunkett: One of our analysts actually saw that the nation state had the intention to develop and to deliver, to actually use this capability— to destroy computers.

John Miller: To destroy computers.

Debora Plunkett: To destroy computers. So the BIOS is a basic input, output system. It's, like, the foundational component firmware of a computer. You start your computer up. The BIOS kicks in. It activates hardware. It activates the operating system. It turns on the computer.

This is the BIOS system which starts most computers. The attack would have been disguised as a request for a software update. If the user agreed, the virus would've infected the computer.

John Miller: So, this basically would have gone into the system that starts up the computer, runs the systems, tells it what to do.

Debora Plunkett: That's right.

John Miller: —and basically turned it into a cinderblock.

Debora Plunkett: A brick.

John Miller: And after that, there wouldn't be much you could do with that computer.

Debora Plunkett: That's right. Think about the impact of that across the entire globe. It could literally take down the U.S. economy.

John Miller: I don't mean to be flip about this. But it has a kind of a little Dr. Evil quality— to it that, "I'm going to develop a program that can destroy every computer in the world." It sounds almost unbelievable.

Debora Plunkett: Don't be fooled. There are absolutely nation states who have the capability and the intentions to do just that.

John Miller: And based on what you learned here at NSA. Would it have worked?

Debora Plunkett: We believe it would have. Yes.

As I noted at the time, the story – the claim that a country of 1.3 billion people who have become very interdependent with the United States would want to destroy the US economy – was a bit absurd.

I'll need to go back and review this, but the jist of the scary claim at the heart of the report is that the NSA caught China planning a BIOS plot to shut down the global economy.

To.

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Of course, if that happened, it'd mean a goodly percentage of China's 1.3 billion people would go hungry, which would lead to unbelievable chaos in China, which would mean the collapse of the state in China, the one thing the Chinese elite want to prevent more than anything.

But the NSA wants us to believe that this was actually going to happen.

That China was effectively going to set off a global suicide bomb. Strap on the economy in a cyber-suicide vest and ... KAB0000000M!

And the NSA heroically thwarted that attack.

That's what they want us to believe and some people who call themselves reporters are reporting as fact.

Anyway, like I said, no unredacted mention that this was among the classified information shared with CBS. Even accounting for the fact that NSA didn't identify the country in question to CBS, even the description of the plot would seem to be classified.

If it were true.

But it doesn't appear on the list of classified things revealed to CBS.