

ANGLO-AMERICANS AT CYBERWAR: TWO WEEKS OF CUPCAKES

I've been meaning to return to this Ellen Nakashima story on our cyberwar efforts. As you recall, it lays out the turf war between the CIA and DOD over clandestine cyberops, partly by telling the story a fight over whether or not to disrupt the jihadist online magazine "Inspire."

Last year, for instance, U.S. intelligence officials learned of plans by an al-Qaeda affiliate to publish an online jihadist magazine in English called Inspire, according to numerous current and senior U.S. officials. And to some of those skilled in the emerging new world of cyber-warfare, Inspire seemed a natural target.

The head of the newly formed U.S. Cyber Command, Gen. Keith Alexander, argued that blocking the magazine was a legitimate counterterrorism target and would help protect U.S. troops overseas. But the CIA pushed back, arguing that it would expose sources and methods and disrupt an important source of intelligence. The proposal also rekindled a long-standing interagency struggle over whether disrupting a terrorist Web site overseas was a traditional military activity or a covert activity – and hence the prerogative of the CIA.

The CIA won out, and the proposal was rejected. But as the debate was underway within the U.S. government, British government cyber-warriors were moving forward with a plan.

When Inspire launched on June 30, the magazine's cover may have promised an "exclusive interview" with Sheik Abu

Basir al-Wahishi, a former aide to Osama bin Laden, and instructions on how to “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom.” But pages 4 through 67 of the otherwise slick magazine, including the bomb-making instructions, were garbled as a result of the British cyber-attack.

It took almost two weeks for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to post a corrected version, said Evan Kohlmann, senior partner at Flashpoint Global Partners, which tracks jihadi Web sites.

The Telegraph elaborated on that story by telling of the swell cupcake recipes MI6 replaced the bomb recipe with.

The cyber-warfare operation was launched by MI6 and GCHQ in an attempt to disrupt efforts by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to recruit “lone-wolf” terrorists with a new English-language magazine, the Daily Telegraph understands.

When followers tried to download the 67-page colour magazine, instead of instructions about how to “Make a bomb in the Kitchen of your Mom” by “The AQ Chef” they were greeted with garbled computer code.

The code, which had been inserted into the original magazine by the British intelligence hackers, was actually a web page of recipes for “The Best Cupcakes in America” published by the Ellen DeGeneres chat show.

Written by Dulcy Israel and produced by Main Street Cupcakes in Hudson, Ohio, it said “the little cupcake is big again” adding: “Self-contained and satisfying, it summons memories of childhood even as it’s updated for today’s sweet-toothed hipsters.”

It included a recipe for the Mojito Cupcake – “made of white rum cake and draped in vanilla buttercream”- and the Rocky Road Cupcake – “warning: sugar rush ahead!”

By contrast, the original magazine featured a recipe showing how to make a lethal pipe bomb using sugar, match heads and a miniature lightbulb, attached to a timer.

So apparently this operation against Inspire, which had government hackers and their bosses on two continents scheming and in-fighting, succeeded in delaying for two weeks the publication of a bomb recipe that probably existed elsewhere on the Internet already.

With cupcakes.

And these spooks are apparently impressed enough with themselves that they’re boasting about it openly to journalists.

Dudes. Two weeks of cupcakes do not equate to Stuxnet.

I’ve been pondering the apparent self-congratulation over this op ever since I read this story, particularly in light of the seeming similarity between this op and the WikiLeaks hack last year. Do our cyberwarriors consider it a legitimate “win” to simply delay the publication of a transnational internet operation for a week or so? At what cost? And by “cost,” I mean both the tens of millions we’re investing to develop, apparently, the capability to engage in juvenile pranks. And also the cost in credibility as a purported defender of free speech wastes its time harassing, but not preventing, the free speech of groups it doesn’t like.

I mean, there must be more to our cyberwarfare than two weeks of cupcakes, isn’t there?

Of course, there must be, if the CIA was concerned about sources and methods. Presumably,

CIA was already monitoring who was reading Inspire. Which—whatever it says about the First Amendment in this country—is probably still a better use of cyberwar time and dollars than two weeks of cupcakes.

Or are we to believe that the Generals think we're going to win the GWOT by playing cyber-whack-a-mole with a group whose competitive advantage over us is in its nimbleness?