

How a Future Cyber War Could Plunge America Into Chaos

If war ever reaches the American home front, most people might expect to hear an air raid siren. But what they may actually hear is silence, when many of the things they rely upon each day stop working.

The Commission on the National Defense Strategy recently warned senators the United States is “unprepared” for a “devastating” cyber war that will bring life in towns and cities across America to a standstill.

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Former Congresswoman Jane Harman, co-chair of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy, told senators, “The public is essentially clueless about the massive cyberattacks that could be launched any day by our adversaries. Not just nation-states but rogue actors as well.”

Experts see the next war beginning with a keyboard attack on America’s critical infrastructure, threatening to cut off the internet, electricity, water, transportation and financial systems. It would mean almost everything, from phones to gas pumps to cash machines to traffic lights, suddenly stops working.

Cybersecurity expert Dr. Samantha Ravich of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies said, “We’re very vulnerable.”

Ravich served on Congress’s Cyberspace Solarium Commission and as a deputy national security adviser in the Bush White House. She’s especially concerned about the lack of protection at America’s many municipal water stations.

“A soft underbelly of our country is our water system. And those water utilities don’t often have the best cyber security. They have old technology,” Ravich said.

After a cyberstrike on your local water plant, your water tap might not work, or your water could become dangerous to drink.

In 2021 a hacker tried to poison the water supply of Oldsmar, Florida, by increasing the levels of sodium hydroxide. The city now says it was operator error, but in the last year, foreign actors from Iran and Russia have been linked to water facility attacks in Pennsylvania, Indiana and Texas.

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Shawn Waldman, CEO of Ohio-based Secure Cyber and a member of CyberOhio’s Critical Infrastructure Working Group says, “One hundred percent of the water systems that I’ve been involved with have been extremely vulnerable to external attacks, specifically.”

Waldman warns that adversaries are constantly testing America’s cyber defenses for vulnerabilities in preparation for war.

“We’re in a cyber cold war today,” Waldman said. “We’ve got vulnerabilities with our radar systems and our air traffic control. We’ve got vulnerabilities in our 911 systems.”

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