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Uncertain Times

Jessica Taylor '07

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UNCERTAIN

TIMES

Cyberspace has become the new battlefield

BY JESSICA TAYLOR '07

THIS IS THE “MOST COMPLEX AND DANGEROUS ERA OUR NATION HAS EVER BEEN IN.”

That’s how Retired Army Lt. Gen. **John Mulholland '78**, the former associate director for military affairs at the CIA and commander of the Special Operations Command Central, described the current state of U.S. national security at the Riley Institute’s Safe and Free Conference at Furman in April.

Those aren’t exactly reassuring words coming from someone with as much knowledge and experience as Mulholland. Those sentiments were largely echoed by other panelists including Retired Navy Vice Admiral and former Director of National Intelligence **Mike McConnell '66**.

No one who attended Safe and Free, which featured 10 Furman alumni whose career paths span different sectors of national security and news media, left reassured that there was nothing to fear. Instead, they were convinced that our nation faces threats that are dangerous, real and imminent.

The conference did give the greater Furman community a look at how vast the national security sphere is, spanning the military, the intelligence agencies, bio-threats, congressional agencies, the State Department and diplomacy, the tech sector and, yes, even my field of the media.

While our national security complex is impressive, it is far from impregnable, as we have witnessed in recent months as Russian cyberattacks have tested our faith in democratic elections.

While it used to take mighty manpower and intense tactical planning to mount a military operation against another country, McConnell underscored that hostile actors from halfway across the world could launch a cyberattack intended to cripple U.S. information systems.

The extent to which Russia tried to influence the recent U.S. elections remains a hotly debated political topic. President Donald Trump has challenged hacking claims while U.S. intelligence has concluded that Russians hacked emails from the Democratic National Committee and used them to help Trump. Intelligence reports also show that the Russians tried to infiltrate our voting systems and sought other ways to influence the elections.

McConnell said there was “absolutely no question in my mind” that Russia was behind the hacks. “They did it deliberately. They’ll do it again.” He said the attacks were intended to fracture the U.S. and undermine international alliances.

Mike Roosevelt '81, a recently retired CIA analyst who spent much of his career focusing on Russia, emphasized that as the former Soviet Union has seen their military influence wane, they’ve turned to the cybersphere to try and sow discord and distrust of institutions in other countries.

“It’s abundantly clear that they view information warfare on par with traditional hardware—tanks, planes, guns, things like that.”



CONFERENCE ATTENDEES included former Furman President **David Shi '73** (left), former U.S. Director of Intelligence **Mike McConnell '66**, National Public Radio reporter **Jessica Taylor '07**, former White House Situation Room Coordinator **Maurice Owens '00**, former CIA Senior Intelligence Officer **Michael Roosevelt '81**, and **Eli Dourado '02**, director of the Technology Policy Program, Mercatus Center at George Mason University.

Roosevelt said. “It is an integral part of their war mindset. It’s a legitimate battlefield, and it’s a cheap one too.”

Major Gen. **Chris Ballard '84**, the commanding general of the U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command, said the U.S. needs to remain mindful of civil liberties during the war on terror. The debate over how to balance privacy and national security is what makes America unique and the envy of other countries.

“In a world of increasing competition over resources and a narrative of what we can offer the world, I think we’re still in a better place because that’s a part of our character, part of our nation, of what we can bring, and ultimately it will be an advantage instead of a disadvantage,” Ballard said.

When I was asked last fall to join this conference, I must admit I was a bit perplexed. Since I graduated from Furman a decade ago, I have covered campaigns and elections, just concluding my third presidential cycle. My focus is mainly on

electoral politics and the persuasion of voters.

How do we balance privacy, civil liberties and adequately address the security threats posed by ISIS, Russia, North Korea and other foreign actors? It was a concern I heard from voters last fall. These issues and alleged connections between the Trump campaign and the Russians have come to dominate my reporting since returning home from the conference.

I truly believe a free and fair press is critical to keeping the public informed about national security threats and subsequent decisions made by our government.

Belittling concerns and conclusions you simply disagree with as “fake news” undermines the foundation of a free press that’s so critical to our country. Ultimately, such dismissive slogans achieve exactly what outside actors like Russia want to happen—they sow distrust in our institutions and fuel more sniping and division that undermines the very core of our democracy.

Being back on campus with other Furman alumni I had never met before who had chosen such divergent career paths after graduation was enlightening. We all tried to reiterate to students and attendees that our liberal arts and sciences education helped us to think critically and thrive in our diverse, yet complementary, jobs.

We need more people like the alumni panelists gathered for this conference to ensure we have a safe homeland, and we’ll need even more well-qualified people, with critical-thinking, liberal arts and sciences backgrounds in the future. Furman’s engaged learning experience and symposiums like this one expose students to a variety of career paths. Hopefully, too, they encourage more to pursue paths of public service and national security. ●

Editor’s note: The author is the lead digital political reporter for National Public Radio. She works in Washington, D.C., and was a contributing panelist for the Riley Institute’s Safe and Free Conference. Her reflections as a journalist are included in this work.