9 Bambaata speaks from the past.

by Count Bambaata, Senior NASCAR Correspondent

> "Myths and legends die hard in America. We love them for the extra dimension they provide, the illusion of near–infinite possibility to erase the narrow confines of most men's reality. Weird heroes and mould–breaking champions exist as living proof to those who need it that the tyranny of 'the rat race' is not yet final."
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> *Gonzo Papers, Vol. 1: The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time*, Hunter S. Thompson, 1979.

It's been an interesting ride for someone who has witnessed nearly all of the perspectives and colliding philosophies of the computer security practice. Having met professionals and enthusiasts of other fields of knowledge built upon the foundations of scientific work, I could say few other industries are as swarmed with swine and snake oil salesmen as computer security. I guess the medium lends itself to such delusions of self–worth and importance. Behind a screen, where you can't see the white of the eyes of the people you interact with, anything is possible.

It doesn't help it that, deprived of other values as important as human contact, true friendship and uninterested genuine camaraderie, fame and financial success dictate the worth of the individual. Far from being the essence of the so–called American dream, where the individual succeeds thanks to persistence and true innovation, in computer security, and more specifically, in the area of security I will be addressing in this letter, success comes from becoming a virtual merchant of vacuum and nothingness, charging a commission for doing absolutely nothing, bringing absolutely no innovation, unfortunately at tax payers expense, as we will see later. An economy built upon the mistakes of others, staying afloat only so as long as such mistakes are never addressed and true solutions remain undeveloped and underutilized.

Going back to the early 2000s, there were two major perspectives on publication and distribution of security vulnerabilities. On one side, those against it (not for economical reasons but a philosophy taking from the times when "hacking" actually meant to hack, not for publicity or profit, but curiosity and technical prowess). These "black hats" perhaps represented the last remnants of a waning trend of detesting the widely extended practice of capitalizing security vulnerabilities in a perpetual state of fear and confusion taking advantage of the (then mostly) ignorant user base of networked computers. Opposing them, a large mob in the industry proclaimed the benefits and legitimacy of "full" and "responsible" disclosure. These individuals claimed the right moral choice was to make information about exploitation of vulnerabilities (and the flaws themselves) publicly available.

They were eager to call out "black hats" with disdain, as dangerous amoral people whose intentions ranged from everything between stealing banking credentials, spreading viruses or, well, fucking children if they ran out of expletives and serious sounding accusations for the press. No accusation was too farfetched. Underneath, an entire network of consulting firms thrived on the culture of fear carefully built with hype. Techniques and vulnerabilities known to the anti–disclosure community for years surfaced, leading to events such as the swift sweep of format string vulnerabilities that led to a bug class nearly phasing out of existence within less than two years. Back then, some of the members of the industry were able to market IDS products to customers keeping a straight face. And the swine only got better at that game.

As much as groups such as Anonymous and others have prostituted whatever was left of that original "antisecurity" community and its philosophy, whose purpose had nothing to do with achieving fame out of proclaiming themselves as some sort of armchair bourgeoisie revolutionaries, today the landscape is, if you pardon the expression, hilarious. Fast forward to a post–9/11 America, with the equities problem (COMSEC versus SIGINT) leaning to the side of SIGINT. The consulting houses from the old days and a swarm of new small shops appeared in the radar to supply a niche necessity created as an attempt to address the systematic compromise and ravaging of defense industry corporations and federal government networks.

Welcome to the vulnerability market. Flock after flock of vultures fly in circles in a market where obscurity, secrecy and true loyalty are no longer desirable traits, but handicaps. If you are discreet, and remain silent and isolated from the other "players", the buyers will play you out. In a strange mix of publicity

hogs and uncleared greed–crazed freaks, middlemen thrive as the intelligence community desperately tries to address the fact that we are lagging a decade behind the people ravaging our systems, gooks and otherwise. Middlemen provide a much needed layer of separation, while hundreds of thousands of dollars, amounting up to millions, are spent without congressional supervision. Anything goes with the market. Individuals who would never be accepted to participate in any kind of national security–impacting activities live lavish lifestyles, dope addled and confident that their business goes undisturbed. Quite simply, these opportunist swindlers are hustling the buck while the status quo remains unaffected. Just to name one example, Cisco has had its intellectual property stolen several times. Of those compromises, none involving "black hats" resulted in its technology magically appearing at Huawei headquarters. Picture a pubescent 25 year old Chinese virgin incessantly removing "PROPRIETARY" copyright banners from Cisco IOS source, as he laughs hysterically slurping up noodles from a Ramen shake n' bake cup. The tale of Abdul Qadeer Khan, or a certain Crown Corporation, are lullabies compared to the untold stories that, quite probably, some day will be declassified for our grandsons to read, provided that full–blown Idiocracy hasn't ensued, and (excuse the language), nobody gives a flying fuck anymore.

Let's gaze back at the past, something is wrong here. Where did the responsible disclosure geeks go? It was a majestic party. Everyone was having a ball. Suddenly, everyone left and nobody bothered to clean the mess. Perhaps they found a new spiritual path, retiring to a tranquil life enjoying the fruits of the late 1990s and early to mid 2000s, carefree and happy to leave the snake oil salesman life behind. Did they take vows of poverty, donated all they had to the Salvation Army, or the Dalai Lama, and left for Bhutan? Not quite. Please, let me, your humble host, guide you to Crook Planet. It's a strange place. I used to like it in here. Where I come from, they say when you earn someone's trust and friendship, it's a lifelong deal. You break it, and you wish you had never been friends with the poor bastard. In a way, it is better to be wronged by someone you don't know than being played by someone you considered "a friend." The word has reasonably dropped value these days. It's short of meaning "someone I hang out with, can get reasonably drunk with, but that's about it." A long time ago, a friend and mentor told me a real friend is the calm guy bothering himself to go visit you in jail. Everyone else bails out. But that fellow goes there. Like a grandmother, without the weeping. You shake hands. Share a few old stories. Implicitly, you know he's your only chance. But we're drifting slightly from our route. Crook Planet, it was. Yes.

If you were wondering where all those ethical evangelists of the responsible disclosure creed went, well, wonder no more. They've gone silent, because that's where the dough is at. Keeping silent. Not among them, despite the NDAs in place, because they know that remaining silent, makes them vulnerable when facing buyers. There is irony about the turns of history. Here we are, trading mechanisms and tools to subvert technology, when years ago we considered their publication perfectly valid. And there is a need for offensive capabilities. Are American corporations and its federal government under attack? Yes, they are. Does the market, as it is lined out right now, help the tradecraft and improve the status quo? No, it doesn't. But millions are plunging into the pockets of people whose interest, was, is and will always be that we, including the government, remain insecure. People have developed defensive technology that can render certain paths of abuse completely unreliable. The reaction of the greed–crazed freaks in the market, which I and others in similar positions have on record, ranged from negative to cocky ("It will drive up the prices, good for us"). Well, you greedy swine, this was never about the money. At least, it wasn't for me. The kind of offensive capabilities I and my company developed could have netted us immense return on investment if used illegally. And so would yours.

The crude truth is that, by current market prices, they don't even come close to the risk–reward equation our adversaries have. Whether it is sixty thousand or a quarter million for an exploit yielding high privilege access to a modern operating system, the price is still dramatically ridiculous if compared to the value of the intelligence and trade secrets that can be stolen from domestic corporations and the government itself. The market fails to address any of the problems we face today, while it creates a very real threat. Are we protecting ourselves against the exploits being traded among different agencies and defense contractors? Not a chance. We could see offensive security as the realm of smart men, whose greed exceeded their talents, and made them shit in their own nests. Those teenagers who were shrugged off by the industry in the early 2000s (despite the fact that they managed to publish personal informa-

tion of industry professionals and routinely compromised their systems, assumed to be, at the very least, slightly more secure than those of the laymen) compromised Fortune 50 corporations and obtained trade secrets ranging from proprietary operating system source code to design documents. For free, at zero cost. The first hackers unlocking the Apple iPhone had proprietary schematics of Samsung devices. Today, you can acquire the schematics of any phone in the markets of Shenzhen, China. The most public cases of "whistle blowers" have been individuals with top level clearances. As wave after wave of swine beat on their chests and chant patriotic lures, they salivate for a piece of the defense budget, hoping policy never changes. The problem, clearly, isn't the need for offensive capabilities. They are necessary. The Cold War never quite went cold. What we don't need, though, is swine playing the prom queens for us. Because it is only a matter of time until this entire clusterfuck of a party backfires on us, and it's going to be an interesting crash landing when they start dodging the liabilities. These people do not care about the status quo. They are milking the cow, for as long as it lasts, just like it happened when disclosing information had any sizable "return on investment." Once the hush money goes away, they might as well go back to the old tale of responsible disclosure. Crook Planet is also Turncoat Planet.

Everyone is willing to remain silent, for a fee. Developing security mitigations to protect both the defense industry and the layman is frowned upon. Talking about the market is frowned upon. Disclosing that former "ethical security researchers" are in it and silent for the big bucks is frowned upon. Acknowledging that the adversary is ahead of us because we are greedy swine hustling for tax payers' money is frowned upon. It's all bad for "business." This hyped up "cyber war" of sorts, unless we do something about it, and do it now, is going to be about as successful as the "War on Drugs" and the "War on Terror." Billions going into the deep pockets of people whose creed is green, and made out of dollar bills, but are too dumb to figure out, that in the scheme of things, they are their (and our) own worst enemies.

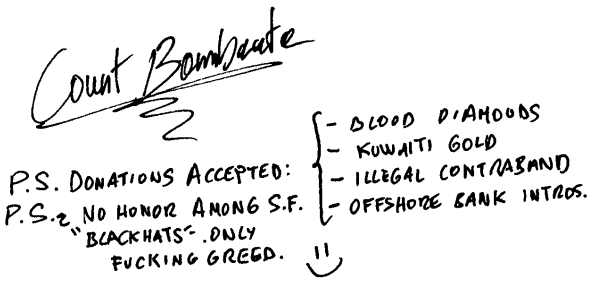
So much for sworn commitment to defend the Constitution and laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and... Domestic? For a fee. Thankfully, the federal government and its institutions aren't exclusively packed with swine and salesmen. There are, too, good people, no different than you or me, whose goal is to help their fellow men. Baudrillard called America "the last primitive society on Earth." A society capable of swift change, of both great and depraved actions. Like good ole' Hunter said, "In a nation run by swine, all pigs are upward–mobile and the rest of us are fucked until we can put our acts together: Not necessarily to Win, but mainly to keep from Losing Completely." We better get this act together, soon.

I have managed to arrive at this point still remaining a gentleman. No names were called out. But if something happened, if I had the wrong hunch, professionally or personally, if I was disturbed in any way, or those whom are dear to me, let it be clear enough, that I'm not driven by wealth nor power, and even though I've never supported organizations like WikiLeaks, [39] I'm this fucking close to picking up a phone and start slipping letters into mail boxes.

All these years, when companies such as Microsoft created databases filled with files on the scene (thanks to their "Outreach" program, a theme park version of a COINTELPRO), and contractors and firms did the same, my own files grew in size, not with gossip, but a very different kind of dirt. "To live outside the law you must be honest," as the Dylan song goes.

The question is: are we feeling lucky? Well... Are we?

Sincerely yours,



Count Bambaata, Head of the
Department of Swine Slaughtering and
Angry Letters Filled With Expletives

[39] With their eerie fixation on demonizing America, as much as we owe domestic swine for letting them have any dirt in first place, let's not confuse things here and dodge the blame.