

Obama's Great Internet Giveaway

BY FRED ELBEL

Al Gore didn't invent the Internet, but President Obama thinks it's his to give away. On March 14, 2014, Obama declared that he would relinquish control of the Internet on September 30, 2015, to a purportedly undetermined foreign entity. This directly contravenes U.S. national interest and the democratic principle of a free, open, and uncensored Internet.

History

The Internet was invented in the United States under ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), under which the first terse electronic message was sent in 1969. The Internet was at first only available through government and educational institutions until 1992, when it became available to commercial entities.

In 1998, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) was created as a California-based nonprofit organization to oversee assigning of all domain names worldwide, such as *.com*, *.org*, *.edu*, *.gov*, etc. While the organization operates under contract with the U.S. Commerce Department, governments have international input into the organization's decisions via an oversight body. Technically, ICANN oversees the "root zone file," which contains all domain name and IP address information. ICANN also acts as steward over the Domain Name System (DNS), which is the mechanism by which websites are accessed on the Internet.

The U.S. Senate and House of Representatives (via S.Con.Res.50 and H.Con.Res.127) have affirmed the United States support for the multistakeholder model of Internet governance. Yet the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) — a U.S. Government agency — has stated that it will not accept a situation where the NTIA role is replaced with a government-led or an inter-governmental organization solution. Thus, the path seems to lead directly toward dubious U.N. control.

United Nations Internet control

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Russia and China have lobbied strenuously for the United Nations' International Telecommunication Union (ITU) agency to take over ICANN. They have pressed to impose a fee for international access to providers such as Google and Facebook. They have also lobbied to outlaw anonymity on the Internet so as to make identification of dissidents easier. This would have serious repercussions, even in the United States.

Senior State Department official Christian Whiton noted the calamitous consequences of turning the Internet over to hostile forces, including:

- Obstruction of technological innovation as antagonistic governments and bureaucracies attempt to dictate how the Internet can — and cannot — operate.
- More Internet control over the *content* of the Internet by governments that regard it as a threat. Freedom of speech would be substantially eroded. Even under today's Internet, Vladimir Putin has censored independent media and critics relating to the Crimea takeover. Authoritarian regimes such as Iran, North Korea, China, North Korea, and Russia clearly favor censorship, and it is to be expected that multinational groups such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation would also support censorship.
- Use of the Internet as an instrument of warfare. The Internet (or parts of it) could be disabled at critical junctures. Although Congress has opposed U.N. Internet control, a treaty between countries in the ITU which goes into effect next year will allow governments the express authority to shut off citizens' access to the global Internet!
- U.N. taxation of domain name registrations and ultimately other Internet transactions.

Why the giveaway?

Just as the United States protects freedom of the seas, the U.S. has equitably developed and protected the Internet.

Yet last year's Snowden leaks and the recent NSA

spying scandal have resulted in a significant international backlash. It appears that Obama is seeking to appease international interests with the surrender of a strategic United States asset — which the world's freest nation is most aptly suited to administer.

What can be done

When President Carter made the decision in 1978 to give away the Panama Canal — a strategic American asset — it was not immediately evident that the Canal would fall into hostile hands. With Obama's Internet giveaway, we can pretty much rest assured that the Internet will indeed fall into governance by an agency dominated by those who oppose openness, free speech, and unimpeded commerce.

Once the giveaway is finalized, the U.S. will have no viable ability to enforce Internet freedom.

Americans inherently recognize this danger — a March 19, 2014, Rasmussen poll revealed that nearly two-thirds of U.S. voters oppose giving up control of the Internet. Dan Jaffe, executive vice president of the Association of National Advertisers, stated, "To set ICANN so-called free is a very major step that should be done with careful oversight. We would be very concerned about that step."

Esther Dyson, Internet expert and the founding chairwoman of ICANN (1998-2000), said that U.N. oversight would be a "fate worse than death."

In 2000 the Commerce Department general counsel stated that it had not allocated resources to determine whether legislation would be a prerequisite to transferring the ICANN contract. Thus, it appears that Congress can derail Obama's portentous giveaway.

If you are concerned about the future of the Internet, contact Congress. Express your justifiable concern over this unconscionable act. ■

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