



Cyber Command chief to seek expanded powers

By Grant Slater - Medill News Service
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In his first Capitol Hill appearance since the U.S. Cyber Command began operating last month, the head of the command told House lawmakers Thursday that he planned to ask Congress for permission to operate more freely on the Internet.

Army Gen. Keith Alexander, who also heads the National Security Agency, said Cyber Command, based at Fort Meade, Md., is growing and needs new powers to accomplish its mission.

"Right now, the White House is leading a discussion on what authorities we need," Alexander said in testimony restrained by its classified nature. He did not elaborate on what authority the command center would seek.

Alexander acknowledged concerns about privacy and civil liberties as the military and intelligence agencies expand their presence on the networks that also form the backbone of U.S. private industry.

Business groups and advocates for civil liberties have expressed concerns that the government would seek to regulate that space in the name of national security.

"A lot of people bring up privacy and civil liberties," Alexander said. "I say, 'What specifically are you concerned about?'"

He pointed out that people don't complain that antivirus programs are violating their civil liberties when they scan computers for worms or malicious software.

"We have a responsibility to protect the civil liberties of the American people that is nonnegotiable," he said.

Jim Harper, information policy director at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the military must restrict itself to the protection of military domains and possibly the network infrastructure of the federal government.

Alexander mentioned the need to create a secure zone for vital infrastructure like the country's financial system to operate. But Harper said this is a step too far and beyond the military's mandate.

"Those are not national security interests," Harper said. "If those are, then we have a hard time finding anything that's not."

When Cyber Command reaches full capacity in the next year, it will employ up to 1,100 civilian and military personnel.

The new command combines two now-defunct military departments that maintained and secured the Defense Department's global networks.