



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on July 22, 2015

NSA Sponsoring Summer Camps for Future Cybersnoops

“We try to start at an early age, quite frankly, to identify who might be interested, who might have the kind of skills and knowledge that would help us,” National Security Agency (NSA) director Admiral Michael Rogers told Augusta, Georgia, television station [WFXG](#).

He wasn’t kidding. The NSA, in conjunction with the National Science Foundation, is now in the business of running summer camps across the nation to teach kids as young as the eighth grade how to hack computers, intercept wireless communications, and fly drones — in other words, to do all the things the NSA is illegally, or at least unethically, doing — the better to prepare them for careers in the surveillance state.

The program, called GenCyber, is in its second year and is booming. Last year there were just six summer camps; this year there are 43, with about 1,400 students, at a cost to taxpayers of roughly \$4 million. The NSA would like to have 200 camps across all 50 states by 2020.

Steven LaFountain, a veteran of more than three decades at the NSA, was charged with “making sure a steady flow of top minds continues to go to work for the nation’s technical surveillance agency,” according to an October [CNBC report](#).

“We’ve come to the realization that we need to reach back further than college to get kids interested in cybersecurity,” LaFountain told CNBC. “A lot of studies show that by the eighth or ninth grade, kids are either turning to STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] or they’re turning off from the STEM fields. And so we want to ... want to get more of them interested cyberspace.”

GenCyber is one way to accomplish that objective, and judging by its rapid expansion, it is succeeding. LaFountain told freelance journalist [Ali Raza](#) that the demand for the summer camps is so great that the NSA could easily reach its goal of 200 camps well before 2020.

“The camps,” wrote Raza, “vary in length; some are day camps, some count as sleepovers. There are different camps for high school and middle school. Some are just for girls, some just boys, some mixed. Some camps are just for teachers.”

The curriculum for the camps also varies. According to the *New York Times*, “The N.S.A. gives each camp loose guidelines, but largely leaves it up to the colleges and universities and the instructors running them to decide which topics and exercises to cover. Unlike other popular programming and engineering camps, though, the N.S.A. also mandates that GenCyber camps be offered free of charge.”

Many of the camps concentrate on hacking, the idea being that students have to know how to hack before they can learn how to defend against cyberattacks. “At California State San Bernardino, where





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there is an N.S.A. camp open only to local Girl Scouts, campers will build, program and fly drones,” said the *Times*. “Campers at Norwich University in Vermont will put together their own computers.” [CNN](#) reported that students at South Dakota’s Dakota State University camp “are shown how they can use antennas and computers to intercept common wireless data commonly found everywhere.” And, noted the *Times*, those at Marymount University in Alexandria, Virginia, get a visit to Big Brother’s Fort Meade, Maryland, headquarters.

Of course, the danger in teaching students how to act like NSA agents is that they will then act like NSA agents, applying the techniques they’ve learned for illegal purposes. Thus, schools hosting camps “are required to teach the ethics of computer security,” LaFountain told CNBC.

That was too much even for a mainstream media outlet to swallow. “But part of what you’re trying to do at the NSA is steal information,” the news channel pointed out. “I mean, that’s what the NSA is for.”

LaFountain replied, “Well, we want to have people that have those skills, but you want to make sure that it’s applied in a legal manner, right?” He had earlier asserted that the NSA’s actions in vacuuming up Americans’ private data are “within the authorities given to us by our laws and our government. And so we’re doing what is best for the nation.”

One doesn’t remain for over 32 years at an agency such as the NSA unless one is a true believer, after all. Asked about his reaction to former NSA contractor Edward Snowden’s disclosures of the NSA’s unconstitutional activities, LaFountain said, “I was probably a little ticked off, I’d say, because I believe in what we do here at the agency.”

He also believes there are enough up-and-coming cyberspies who share his sentiments. “There are lots of students out there that I think aren’t bothered by the politics of things,” he told CNBC, and he’s hoping GenCyber will help bring some of them into the NSA’s fold.

Perhaps. Of the students at the Dakota State camp, CNN wrote, “NSA controversies over mass surveillance programs ... appear to take a back seat to their thrill at using new technology.” On the other hand, the *Times* recounted “a high-volume debate on the ethics of Mr. Snowden and WikiLeaks” at the Marymount camp.

The NSA claims that GenCyber isn’t just about recruiting new blood for itself — indeed, LaFountain told the *Times* the agency “would not make sales pitches to campers” — but also about improving information security in the private sector, and undoubtedly businesses would prefer to have taxpayers foot the bill for training future employees than to pay for it themselves. But there’s no getting around the fact that LaFountain’s job is to bring the next generation of techies into the NSA and inoculate them against both public criticism and the temptation to become the next Snowden.

“Obviously, the government is hoping, especially the NSA, is hoping that they’ll be able to take advantage of some of these students as they progress,” Peter Stephenson, director at Norwich’s Center of Advanced Computing and Digital Forensics, told Raza. “But,” he added, “there’s no requirement here that these students move on to government.”

Nevertheless, the NSA’s foray into summer camping can hardly be considered a positive sign for the future of the Republic. If there’s one thing America doesn’t need, it’s more people willing to shred the Constitution in the name of “national security.”



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