

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

ASPEN SECURITY FORUM

A CHAT WITH THE DIRECTOR OF THE FBI

Greenwald Pavilion  
Aspen, Colorado

Wednesday, July 18, 2018

Chris Ervin: All right, well good evening, everyone. I am Clark Ervin, the founder and the chairman of the Aspen Security Forum. Welcome to the 9th Annual Aspen Security Forum. It's hard to believe that we've been at it for nearly a decade now. I want to begin by thanking our forum underwriters, Amazon Web Services, Battelle, Deloitte, Lockheed Martin, Microsoft, and Semantic; with additional support from American Airlines and the Mitre Corporation. I want to thank our media partner, NBC and MSNBC. And also thanks to Tom and Bonnie McCloskey for their sponsorship of the McCloskey Speaker Series, of which tonight's opening session is a part.

It is an understatement to say that it's been an extraordinary year in national security and foreign policy since we met last summer here in Aspen. Indeed, it's been an extraordinary week, and it's only Wednesday. Before our very eyes, 70 years of bipartisan consensus on who our friends are, who our foes are, and what America stands for in world affairs has been upended. As one analyst succinctly put it earlier in the week, the world has been turned upside down. So over the course of the next few days, some of the nation's and some of the world's foremost policymakers and policy experts will discuss and debate the implications of the America First policy that is reshaping our relations with literally every corner of the globe, at least for the foreseeable future, and perhaps for many years to come.

So, thank you for joining us tonight. And with that, it's my pleasure to introduce Hugh Thompson, the CTO of Symantec, who will formally introduce tonight's session. Thank you very much.

Hugh Thompson: Thank you, Clark, and good evening, everyone. It is an extreme pleasure as Symantec to be sponsoring the Aspen Security Forum for the second year in a row. The kinds of important discussions that go on here on national security are just critical to our way at life. And at Symantec, we spend every day thinking about security. How do we protect? How do we defend? And very excited to learn this week from the opinions of the amazing attendees that are here, an incredibly impressive group. I'm looking forward to participating in those discussions as well.

So we're privileged tonight to kick off the forum with an extraordinary opening session. I'd first like to introduce Christopher Wray, who was confirmed as Director of the FBI in August of 2017. In the year that's followed, Director Wray has overseen the federal agency most in the public spotlight. While under that scrutiny, Director Wray has had to walk a difficult path, balancing internal concerns for agents and external inquiries from Congressional committees. He's endured partisan attacks from both sides, answered questions regularly from Special Counsel Mueller, and his boss, the president, and faces a hungry press corps every day. Yet in his Congressional testimony and in these new conferences, he appears patient, calm, and handles it with just incredible poise. So hopefully tonight we'll find out exactly how he's able to do that.

Our moderator this evening is NBC Nightly News Anchor Lester Holt. A legend in this space, Holt is one of America's most respected newsmen and is nearing four decades in the television news business. Lester joined NBC news in 2000. He's a veteran of the Today Show and Dateline, before being named lead anchor of the flagship Nightly News program in 2015. Lester is known for getting out of the studio, as is evidenced here, and into the field where the news is actually happening. This desire to be near the news and look news makers in the eye has given his reporting an edge over his competitors, and NBC has dominated evening ratings since Holt has taken over. Congratulations, Lester.

Lester was selected to moderate the first presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in 2016. That was very memorable. Even President Trump, no fan of NBC news, according to his tweets, praised Holt's moderation, saying that he thought it was very fair. Lester is a decorated journalist, having won multiple awards. But more importantly, he has the respect of his family, his colleagues, his industry. And Lester, tonight you have our respect and admiration too. Lester, over to you.

Lester Holt: Well thank you, everyone, for being here. Director Wray, have a seat. We got to spend a little time together in preparation. I find the Director to be a man of a lot of passion, very proud of the FBI, the people that work under him. And I want you to know how important that is to us, because at the end of the day, we all depend on you and we depend on the work of the FBI, and I just want to thank you for your willingness to sit here. And I just want to thank you for taking the time to chat with us. I promise that it wouldn't be any worse than a tooth extraction, so. There's a lot to talk about. We're going to go through some of the headlines that we're all following. I think you know what I'm referring to. And we're going to talk about some other things that the Bureau is doing that don't get quite the headlines but are immensely important. And then at some point we'll take questions from the audience.

But before we get to all that, just tell me a little bit why you wanted to come back into law enforcement.

Christopher Wray: Well you know, it's interesting. I wasn't looking to come back into law enforcement. I did love my time in law enforcement and national security before, and I had a very comfortable life in the private sector. But I always felt that the mission kind of called me back. And then when I kind of got a call out of nowhere about whether or not I'd be interested in coming back, and I started talking to a few close friends, many of them former agents that I'd worked with both in the field or at headquarters, and got excited about the opportunity. It's just an unbelievable group of people and an unbelievable mission. And even though I've just recently injured my calf, I'd like to say I've got an extra spring in my step. There's never a day that I'm to being confronted with some extraordinary example of courage, of selflessness, of patriotism, which is not a word I throw around lightly. So it's a great organization with great people.

Lester Holt: You've been doing this for a little less than a year. Who do you get advice from? Do you talk to your predecessors, Mr. Comey and Mr. Mueller?

Christopher Wray: Not so much. Not so much. Although Judge Webster is here, and I'm very, very pleased to see him.

Lester Holt: Let's talk about some of the things that I've been covering and the world is certainly watching very carefully right now. Did you watch, and what your reaction was to Vladimir Putin's denials of Russian involvement in the 2016 US election?

Christopher Wray: Well I didn't watch it live. I was in a meeting actually with some of my foreign counterparts, some of our closest foreign partners in the intelligence community. But I certainly saw it afterwards. He's got his view. He's expressed his view. I can tell you what my view is. The intelligence community's assessment has not changed, my view has not changed, which is that Russia attempted to interfere with the last election and that it continues to engage in malign influence operations to this day.

Lester Holt: Aimed at our political system?

Christopher Wray: Aimed at sowing discord and divisiveness in this country. We haven't yet seen an effort to target specific election infrastructure this time, but certainly other efforts, what I would call malign influence operations, are very active. We could be just a moment away from it going to the next level. So to me, it's a threat that we need to take extremely seriously and respond to with fierce determination and focus.

Lester Holt: The suggested has been that it's Russia but there may be others. Are there others?

Christopher Wray: Well there's certainly other countries that are designed to, on a going forward basis, have their own ways of influencing our public opinion, our politicians, our business community. But there's no question that Russia has been by far the most aggressive actor in the space that we're talking about right now.

Lester Holt: You're seeing it in realtime now, that they continue?

Christopher Wray: Absolutely. What they do is they will identify a divisive issue, and through a variety of means, some overt, some covert, some through fake news, some through propaganda, will essentially sow divisiveness, spin people up on both sides of the issue, and then kind of watch us go at each other.

Lester Holt: The set of indictments that were filed, I believe it was last Friday, the 12 Russian intelligence operators, it was very specific in the methods, also very specific ... and you name names. Was that in many ways a shot across the bow that we not only know, we know a lot? Was there a warning embedded in there as well?

Christopher Wray: Well I don't want to comment on the Special Counsel's investigation. I'm going to let the indictment speak for itself. I will say that the FBI, not just in its work on that matter but in lots of other matters, has gotten much, much more sophisticated, much more tech savvy, much more able to partner with foreign governments and get access to information overseas. And so the same basic character that drives the FBI; the diligence, the persistence. You know, the old saying that the FBI always gets its man applies in this space too. And we have tried in a lot of settings to indict individuals overseas, not just Russians, but in other cases, officials of other governments. Some people say, "Oh well, you know, you may never see the inside of a US courtroom." Well number one, they will if they travel. So suddenly their vacation options are significantly limited. And number two, we've been pretty effective and we don't give up.

Lester Holt: Well the offer was made by Mr. Putin himself to allow US agents to travel to Russia and to observe the questioning of suspects. First of all, do you think it was a false promise? And is this something that you or the US Justice Department would ever consider?

Christopher Wray: Well I think I'll leave that one to Special Counsel Mueller, so.

Lester Holt: Moving beyond this case, in general, would you ever envision a world in which you would allow suspects to be interviewed by Russia and observe?

Christopher Wray: Well I never want to say never about anything, but it's certainly not high on our list of investigative techniques.

Lester Holt: There has also been the suggestion from Putin that he would want to come interview Americans. Is that something that you would support?

Christopher Wray: That's probably even lower on our list of investigative techniques.

Lester Holt: I think we've got that clear. Based on everything that ... and I'm talking about in the public realm that we know about the Mueller investigation, the indictments that exist. Is there anything that would allow it to be called a witch hunt?

Christopher Wray: I've been consistent. I get asked this a lot. I do not believe Special Counsel Mueller is on a witch hunt. I think it's a professional investigation conducted by a man that I've known to be a straight shooter in all my interactions with him, in my past life in government, and certainly since then. So I don't think it's a witch hunt.

Lester Holt: Do you think that investigation has been held to its mandate? Or was the mandate extraordinarily broad?

Christopher Wray: Well I can't really discuss the mandate because the scope is in a confidential document.

Lester Holt: But from what you're seeing, there's nothing that suggests that it's running amok or running around the edges?

Christopher Wray: Well as I said, I think Special Counsel Mueller is conducting a professional investigation.

Lester Holt: I want to get back into some of the cyber issues, because they apply in other areas, in a minute. But let me talk about what's happening in the FBI right now. The FBI is under fire. I know you've said many times it comes with the territory, that criticism is part of what you deal with, and your folks are professionals and they are focused. But that stuff does tend to erode. Can you comment on the morale and what it's like to hear the President of the United States malign you and your folks?

Christopher Wray: Look, there are a lot of opinions out there about us from a lot of people, expressed in a lot of different ways. The opinions that I care about, the opinions that I think our workforce cares about are the opinions of people who actually know us through our work and express their views through their engagement with us on our work. So what do I mean by that? We care about the opinions of victims and their families. Who do they trust, when their child is kidnapped, to get them back? Who do the American people trust to keep them safe from terrorist attacks? Who do the American people trust to investigate public corruption? What do judges think when one of our agents takes the stand in their courtroom or when they're presented with a search warrant? What do our state and local partners or our other federal agency partners, our intelligence community partners, our partners in the private sector, frankly, increasingly is a very big part of what we do. What do those people think? And the feedback that we get has been uniformly positive.

And when I look at morale, I'm more interested, again, in how people express their views through actions. I'm a big believer in the idea that talk is cheap; actions matter a lot more. So I look at, how is our recruiting done? Our recruiting is great. We have about 12,000-plus. We'd like to have even more agents applying every year. We have a 5% selection rate. That's better than Harvard. It's better than Yale. It's better than Princeton. I look at our attrition rate at the backend. Our attrition is 0.8%. This year it's 0.6%. I bet there's not an organization out here that has a 0.6% attrition rate. So again, that's because people who work in the FBI love the mission. They love the mission, and that's what keeps them there. Would they prefer not to get criticized? Of course we would prefer not get criticized. But at the end of the day, the criticism that we care about is the criticism from people who actually would know us through our work. So the day juries don't trust us, that I care about.

Lester Holt: You're not seeing that.

Christopher Wray: I'm not. I'm not.

Lester Holt: You're not seeing defense attorneys go, "Well, it's the FBI."

Christopher Wray: In fact, it's funny you mention that. There was a case not that long ago, a case in Kansas where a number of individuals had tried to blow up a building at an apartment complex that had Somali immigrants in it. During the jury selection ... and this got covered by the press. The first part, during the jury selection, there were some jurors who were saying that they had heard a lot of negative things about the FBI, and there was some handering that went with that. Well what the press didn't cover is what happened after that. After the jury got selected, after they heard from eight-plus agents from all over the country on the stand on a four week trial, took the jury less than a day to convict the defendants on all counts. So again, people who saw our work up close, in an informed way, they trust us. And that's what matters the most.

Lester Holt: But how has the criticism, again from the President of the United States, how has it affected your ability to work with other agencies, with other countries, your coordination? I mean, you've been accused of essentially doing illegal things, wire taps that didn't exist.

Christopher Wray: As I said, I just came back with a meeting with a number of our foreign partners. The engagement that we have, the feedback that we get from foreign partners, from other partners in other agencies has been, "We love you guys. It's great. What can we do to help? We need even more of you." I joke, although it's only half joking, you asked about my predecessors. One thing I do experience that I'm not sure any of them did is that it's pretty common for me to meet somebody and have them introduce themselves and then say, "I just want you to know we're all praying for you." The first couple times that happened I thought, gosh, I just had my physical, I'm fine. I believe strongly in the power of prayer, so I always say thank you. And then my third reaction is, I haven't seen TV in the last two hours. Is this all the other stuff? Or is something new happening? But the important point is, they're all coming up and saying, "We support you. We're praying for you. What can we do to help?"

Lester Holt: The DOJ's Inspector General report was not kind to the FBI. What did you take away from it that really made you stop and think about the way that business is conducted?

Christopher Wray: Well I thought the Inspector General's report was tough. That's usually been my experience with inspector general reports. But it was fair. It was objective. We learned some important lessons. We have a lot of things we're doing right now to implement those lessons. I will say it's important to keep in context the report. This is a report that focuses on a small number of people, some of them very high profile, but a small number of people on one investigation over a period of about 15 months. We're an organization of 37,000 people that does thousands and thousands of investigations every year, and it's about to turn 110 years old. So ...

Christopher Wray: ... Every year and it's about to turn 110 years old, so some level of perspective, I think, is appropriate, but that doesn't mean we don't take it very, very seriously. To me, one of the central lessons from the report is the importance of process. That's one of the themes that I've been pounding home in every town hall I go to, all around different field offices, different headquarters divisions, which is we need to make sure that we're not just doing the right thing, but we're going it in the right way. How you get from point A to point B matters almost as much as the result.

The reason that matters is that, when people start making exceptions, when people start deviating from policy, guidelines, our norms, even if their heart is in the right place and even if they might feel like they have a good reason for it, that's when things go off-track. To me, we need to be in a situation where ...

We'll get criticized for the results no matter what we do. If you think about something as basic as any investigation we do, we're either going to be able to charge somebody, in which case he ain't going to like it and we're going to get criticized by him, his lawyer, his family, his friends, or maybe we're not going to be able to make the case, in which case there's a whole number of group of people who are going to be disappointed and may criticize us. Our safe place, the reason why the FBI, I think, has the brand that it's had over 110 years is that our process needs to be bulletproof. To me, I think most people, when they think of the FBI, think straight shooters, both literally, of course, but figuratively, too. That's what we need to make sure we are in everything we do, every investigation, every intelligence analysis, every personnel decision. If we do that, I'm confident everything will turn out.

Lester Holt: Granted, there are a lot of agents, a lot of employees of the FBI, and only a handful of people making the news in these ways, but, let me ask you, Peter Strzok has become a rallying cry right now for those who are worried about the FBI and the sense of bias. How damaging has that been?

Christopher Wray: Again, we're talking about one person in that instance, and there's a pending personnel matter. As I said, I want to make sure that we're doing things, following our process, doing things by the book. Our inspector general report has referred a number of individuals to our disciplinary process, and I think it's very, very important that we let that process, without delay, work itself through and get to a result, as opposed to responding to hew and cry. I'm not going to make decisions based on yelling and screaming, I'm going to make decisions based on the process.

Lester Holt: Do you believe the President is sincere in his claims that the FBI is against him? I don't mean do you think he's right or wrong, but do you think he is sincere?

Christopher Wray: About?

Lester Holt: About his complaints about the FBI, that it is somehow working against him.

Christopher Wray: I think I have a very professional relationship with the President. I don't try to weigh in on all of his opinions. As I've said to somebody recently, I'm not much of a Twitter guy, so we're just going to focus on doing our job.

Lester Holt: Your own survey data indicates the FBI workforce is frustrated with leadership. Why do you think that is? I'm wondering do you think there is a feeling among the rank and file, they want you to be more forceful, come out in a stronger defense?

Christopher Wray: The survey, one of the things that's important about that survey is that it was relatively early in my tenure. One of the other interesting takeaways from it was that the morale of the organization, which you asked about earlier, stayed constant, even through all the turbulent times we've been through, and the affection and the enthusiasm and the passion for the mission remained unchanged. I'm a more low-key guy. I get that. It's going to take people a little while to get to know me, but the feedback that I get when I go out, and I'm trying to get to all 56 field offices by the end of the year and I'm up in the high thirties now, and the feedback I get in office, after office, has been strong.

That was also a time period that was right around the time that the then-deputy director had just gone on terminal leave and the reasons for it were not yet apparent, so I think that may have contributed to the results.

Lester Holt: Are there times you feel it's time for a morale talk? For example, after the news conference in Helsinki, did you gather folks together? Did you send a message? Did you say, "Buck up," or, "We're okay?"

Christopher Wray: I find that our folks, contrary to what you hear on TV or see on TV, love the mission. I look at story after story and example after example ... I look at the ... I went to the San Juan office. Those people had been through a real storm, not just a figurative one, and the enthusiasm that they had for the mission and the work was really off the charts. I look at the woman in Miami that I met the other day who had got 12 stitches in her face and, the next day, she's back at it. I look at the guy in Chicago on SWAT who got shot at point-blank range by an AK-47, lost the use of his right arm, re-taught himself to shoot left-handed, re-qualified for SWAT left-handed. Try to think about how hard that would be. Does that guy love his job?

Lester Holt: The House has made some pretty unusual demands for documents related to the Clinton and Mueller investigations. Have there been any ... Have you been asked across lines that you're uncomfortable with on that level?

Christopher Wray: There's always going to be a tension between congressional oversight and protection of sources and methods and ongoing criminal investigations. My experience has been that, if both sides are looking to try to work it out in a responsible way, you can get there. I'm committed to being responsive to congressional oversight, but I am also unwilling to budge on talking about

ongoing investigations and protecting sources and methods. I think our partners, our foreign partners, expect that from us. I think our sources expect that from us. There can be tension, but we're working our way through the ...

Lester Holt: Have you, in fact, had to give over some of that information?

Christopher Wray: I think we've managed to walk a fine line, but in a way that I think is respectful of both issues.

Lester Holt: Are you worried about a precedent being set if you give you much, in your view?

Christopher Wray: I think, if we start exposing sources and methods, we are setting a dangerous precedent. I think, if we start talking about ongoing criminal investigations in a way that puts those investigations at risk, we are setting a dangerous precedent. There will always be somebody who says, "Oh, no, no, no, this one is special. This one is different. This is a unicorn. We should do it this time." I think one of the central lessons of the IG report you mentioned earlier is that those are precisely the times when it's important to do it by the book and stay consistent with precedent.

Lester Holt: You say that the criticism, you essentially let it roll off, but what about the increasing pressure in these instances from Congress? Is it making it more difficult for you to do your job?

Christopher Wray: Look, I think Congress has a job to do. Obviously, there are some days that I enjoy more than others, but I think they have a job to do and we have a job to do. Hopefully, we can find ways to both do our jobs.

Lester Holt: Did James Comey open the door by sharing lots of the documents with Congress after it appeared that Clinton investigation was closed?

Christopher Wray: Well, I think the IG report sort of speaks for itself on that so I'm not going to try to re-characterize their findings. Certainly, as I said before, I think one of the central lessons of that report is that the policies we have, the guidelines we have, the long-standing norms and practices that we have are there for a reason. They're there to protect the institution, especially when it's most tempting, when there's the most pressure to just capitulate. I guess what I would say is I've read some news stories that suggest that we're engaged in wholesale Stonewall, again, obstructionism, and nothing could be further from the truth.

On the other hand, I've also read stories that suggest we're just capitulating wholesale and turning over all kinds of unprecedented information. That's also not true.

Lester Holt: There have also been stories that you threatened to resign. Have you ever hit a point on that issue of sources and methods or anywhere else where you said, "This is a line?"

Christopher Wray: I'm a ... As I said, I'm a low-key, understated guy, but that should not be mistaken for what my spine is made out of.

Lester Holt: So you have ...

Christopher Wray: I'll just leave it at that.

Lester Holt: Okay. All right. Let's ... There's been a lot of talk about Russia, for obvious reasons, but I do want to talk about China. Do you ... From your perspective and the things that you're looking at, do you see China as an adversary and, if so, on what levels?

Christopher Wray: Well, I think China, from a counterintelligence perspective, in many ways represents the broadest, most challenging, most significant threat we face as a country. I say that because, for them, it is a whole of state effort. It is economic espionage as well as traditional espionage, it is non-traditional collectors as well as traditional intelligence operatives. It's human sources as well as cyber means. We have economic espionage investigations in every state, all 50 states, that trace back to China. It covers everything from corn seeds in Iowa to wind turbines in Massachusetts and everything in between. The volume of it, the pervasiveness of it, the significance of it is something that I think this country cannot underestimate.

Lester Holt: Are they going after things, though, differently than, for example, what you've been seeing with the Russians and our democratic process?

Christopher Wray: It's a different kind of threat. Obviously, the Russian threat is a significant one that I think we need to deal with very aggressively indeed, but I think the China threat ... China is trying to position itself as the sole dominant superpower, the sole dominant economic power. They're trying to replace the United States in that role. Theirs is a long-term game that is focused on, as I said, just about every industry, every corner of society in many ways. It involves academia, it involves research and development, it involves everything from agriculture to high tech. Theirs is a, as I said, a more pervasive, a broader approach, but, in many ways, more of a long-term threat to the country.

Lester Holt: You clearly see it as a major threat but do you have a sense that we don't, that not enough attention is paid to it, in general?

Christopher Wray: One of the ... Actually, one of the bright spots that I have observed in my first 10+ months on the job is on this issue, in that it's one of the few things I've seen that, in a country where sometimes it feels like people can't even agree what day of the week it is, on this, I think people are starting to come together. I see

it in the inter-agency, I see it up on the Hill when I'm talking to the intelligence committees across the spectrum. I think people are starting to wake up and kind of rub the cobwebs or the sleep out of their eyes. My hope is that we're in a moment where, as a country, we can pivot and really start to take this much more seriously.

Lester Holt: Is it more difficult, though, when it's espionage against a company that ... You have to almost rely on their sophistication as much as your own. Does that make it uneven and challenging?

Christopher Wray: It is challenging but, then ... You identified one of the reasons, but I think that also presents opportunities, which is why conferences like this become important, because, in the economic espionage arena, public/private partnership is at a premium. The more companies engage with us about what they're most worried about, what threats they are seeing, we can leverage each other in a way to provide more for a common defense. Economic security is national security, but economic security is also their intellectual property, so we have a shared interest in a way that's a little different than the more traditional military complex kind of intelligence throughout.

Lester Holt: We have ... We've been focused on North Korea, primarily from the nuclear threat, but we've looked back at the Sony hack. What are you seeing from North Korea? Is there any lessening of their aggressiveness, in terms of hacking, and what are their goals?

Christopher Wray: North Korea represents a significant cyber-threat, although their cyber-threat, I think, in our assessment is much ... Is a little more one-dimensional in its goal, which is typically designed to generate revenue. Obviously, the sanctions have had an impact over the years, and so they're focused in a variety of ways at trying to generate money for the regime through front companies and various other means. I do think their tactics are more sophisticated than, I think, perhaps people appreciated several years ago.

Lester Holt: Cyber-terrorism. Cyber affects essentially everything you do right now, but, in terms of the risk to our infrastructure, what do you see there and what are we doing about it?

Christopher Wray: Well, there's ... Some people use the cyber-terrorism label for different things. On the one hand, there's a cyber-terrorism which is really more terrorist organizations using social media to disseminate propaganda, techniques, that kind of thing. Recruiting, et cetera. I think of cyber-terrorism ... I think our cyber division thinks of cyber-terrorism more as a terrorist organization using destructive computer attacks to further their goals. While there's some of that happening and we think it's on the upswing and we think, if you think ahead to where we're going next, it's a very real concern, we're trying to kind of bring both the counter-terrorism part of the organization and the cyber part together to try to treat it as a multi-disciplinary threat.

Lester Holt: Okay. Like your predecessor, James Comey, you have warned about this idea of going dark, the going dark problem, specifically the inability to examine locked smartphones. Even with a court order, how serious a problem is this? How many cases does this actually present an impediment to justice?

Christopher Wray: It's a significant problem. It's a growing problem. I find that, when I go and talk to state and local law enforcement groups, when I talk to foreign partners, when I talk to intelligence community counterparts, this issue that is the effect of default encryption, even in the face of lawful process, is a real issue for us and people are less safe as a result of it. Now, we're committed to strong encryption. We have a cyber-security mission, too, so we have to figure out a way to square that circle and do both. I have been encouraged by some of the feedback we've gotten from a variety of corners that, if people actually put their heads together, that there are solutions to be had.

I do know that we're going to have to find a solution because, to the extent that the bad guys have shifted more and more to living their whole lives through encrypted devices and encrypted messaging platforms that, if we don't find a way to access that information with lawful process, we're in a bad, bad place as a country.

Lester Holt: Have you ...

Christopher Wray: What's interesting is that these same companies are going to have to, if they want to have access to markets in countries that have governments that are decidedly not like ours, that don't believe in quaint notions like due process and a separate judiciary, if anybody thinks that those countries aren't going to insist on access, I got a bridge I can sell you. At some point, we're going to ... This is a global problem. Again, I think, if industry and government put their heads together, as somebody who has been on both sides of the table, I really believe that this is a kind of thing that, if people go into the conversation with a goal of trying to solve the problem, as opposed to trying to exacerbate the problem, we'll get there.

Lester Holt: There's still a lot of daylight between you and Silicon Valley. Are you making any progress ... I guess, is there room for compromise here?

Christopher Wray: I think there should be. I don't want to characterize our private conversations we're having with people in the industry. We're not there yet, for sure, and, if we can't get there, there may be other remedies like legislation that would have to come to bear, but I really do believe that, if people come at it with a goal that I think we all share of having both strong cyber-security and protecting flesh and blood Americans, again, there's a way to do this. We're a country that has unbelievable innovation. We put a man on the moon, we have the power of flight, we have autonomous vehicles. The number of things that are created every day in this country really defies imagination sometimes, and so the idea that we can't solve this problem as a society, I just don't buy it.

Lester Holt: I want to talk about terrorism in the more traditional manner that we've looked at, at ISIS. There's been great progress on the battlefield, on the traditional battlefield, against ISIS. What are you seeing, though, in terms of your battlefield? Are you seeing fewer and fewer responding to the online propaganda?

Christopher Wray: I think the terrorist threat has not lessened, it has just changed. We have ... We do see fewer people traveling overseas to fight for ISIS. The battlefield has become decidedly less attractive to some of them, thanks to the great work of our DOD partners. What we're seeing instead, though, is a different kind of threat that, in many ways, just presents a whole different level of challenges, which is what we call the home-grown violent extremists, which are people already here who are radicalizing here, inspired by different parts of the global jihadist movements that are out there, and they are basically responding to calls to essentially, "Don't bother coming over here where you'll get killed in the battlefield. Stay where you are and attack at home." We have, even as we're sitting here, we have a thousand active investigations in all 50 states into people like the kinds I'm describing. That's not even counting traditional ISIS investigations or domestic terrorism investigations.

These ... What makes these challenging is ... You think about the old model, when I was in this work last time. We spent a lot of time looking at al-Qaeda sleeper cells and things like that. If you think about the classic, and this audience will have the sophistication to appreciate why this is such an issue, if you think about a classic al-Qaeda sleeper cell, you're talking about 15, 20, 30 people engaging over a period of time and planning and fundraising and strategizing and preparing and practicing and they're communicating with each other in some ways. If you know what to do, there are a lot of dots out there, that old expression about connecting the dots. There are a lot of dots to connect, if you look in the right place. What these threats represent, you could have one guy at home in mom's basement, not that there's anything wrong with that, but ...

Christopher Wray: -at home in mom's basement, not that there's anything wrong with that. Who's, maybe, lost his job or has slight mental health issues, slight substance abuse issue, disaffected in some way and has access to the internet and has nothing but time on his hands. And those people are a threat, because they're not communicating with a lot of people, and their attack methods are crude but agile.

So, instead of some spectacular attack involving a plane, it's not that complicated to take a car and go drive it into a busy pedestrian walkway.

Lester Holt: You're talking about 1,000 active cases. Is it a see something, say something thing that may not pan out to be anything or how are these things popping up in your radar when they are so isolated?

Christopher Wray: Well, in many cases, we'll have a source in the community that comes forward. We have a lot of human sources out there; that's a very important part of what we do. Sometimes we'll pick up things through other kinds of investigation, but we do need people in the community to speak up because what we know is most of the kinds of people that I'm describing didn't just wake up one day and decide to kill somebody.

There was a progression over a period of time, and when we look back, after an attempted attack, you can almost always see that there is a point along the continuum where the person crossed over from just being radicalized to being mobilized. And so what we need are people. There's almost always a neighbor, a family member, a friend, a coworker, somebody who observed that, and we need to be in a situation where people trust us enough to, as you say, see something, say something.

Lester Holt: Do you have the man power?

Christopher Wray: Well, we can always use more resources. I will say, look, we have 37,000 people in the FBI, but we also have fantastic task force officers. For almost every street agent, there is a task force officer which is someone from another agency, another federal agency, state and local partners, intelligence community partners, foreign partners, and they work on our task forces. And we consider them part of the FBI family, and that's a significant force multiplier.

Lester Holt: What have you done to avoid a repeat of what happened earlier this year where the FBI failed to follow up on tips about a young man who later became the school shooter in the Parkland attack? At the time, you said, "We're gonna take a look at that." What have you learned?

Christopher Wray: Well, we did a number of things. We immediately sent teams from our inspection division out there to drill down and my instructions were basically, "Nothing's off-limits. So, look at policies, process, people, training, the whole nine yards." And I think what we discovered, of course, is that there's a tension between trying to move as quickly as you can and the sheer volume. And at the same time, asking all the right questions in order to then move things along.

And so, we've started to make a number of changes to prevent people from being able to close out a call without more supervisory input. We're trying to bring in more agent judgment on that, but again, part of it is training, part of it is technological that is in you can't close out the file without certain sign-offs by certain people. So, there's a number of things we're trying to do like that.

I will also say, though, that the concern that somehow that episode was gonna lead to fewer people speaking up, we didn't see that. In fact, we saw the opposite. We've actually been overloaded with calls of people with various threats, and so all of our field offices and our public access line are working

overtime trying to crank through the mountain of calls and tips that we've gotten.

Lester Holt: Well, director, I'm enjoying the conversation. We're down to our last fifty minutes, so you want to take some audience questions?

Christopher Wray: Absolutely.

Lester Holt: Alright. I don't know how we're doing this. How are we doing this? Share a microphone?

Speaker 1: Yeah, we have microphones.

Lester Holt: Oh, okay. So, raise your hands, then, I guess, and I'll ... With a question. Yes. Sir, this lady in the black.

Hi.

Speaker 2: Hi. This is probably an unexpected question. As class secretary, Chris, we'd like to know if you're monitoring our class Facebook page at Andover and also, are you gonna get the band back together? Maybe do a bipartisan band with [Bill Parsons 00:44:31]?

Christopher Wray: Well, it's a small world, isn't it? Yeah, I played bass in a number of bands when I was in high school, but those days are, unfortunately, somewhat behind me. But we have a different kind of band now and I think we're playing a good tune, so.

Lester Holt: I didn't know you were a bass player; I'm a bass player.

Christopher Wray: Oh, well, good. We should talk offline, absolutely.

Lester Holt: I have a band. Come jam with out band.

Yes, another question over here somewhere? Did I see a hand? Where did I see a hand? There was one right over here. In the blue shirt, I guess?

Charlie Dunlap: Thank you very much for coming to the conference and speaking so candidly. Charlie Dunlap from Duke University. You mentioned academia as being one of the areas that's under threat by the Chinese. Some universities have campuses, including Duke, in China. What should the universities be doing to protect against this threat? Do you have any suggestions or ideas?

Christopher Wray: Well, the first thing I would say is, while it's a multidisciplinary concern, the biggest focus is, of course, more on the graduate level as opposed to the undergraduate level. And it's obviously much more focused on STEM issues and so forth, but I think trying to ... Communicating with the local FBI office, I think, is important because we have found, in a way that I find very encouraging and a

bright spot, frankly, in the country, that over the last few years as we have started to engage more with universities in a awareness raising way, the response, while initially a little guarded and concerned.

Was a time not that long ago where the FBI wasn't exactly welcomed with open arms on college campuses, but it's actually been very gratifying, and to me, that says something very optimistic about this country. That once people get the facts, we're not telling them what to do. We have to be more creative about how we can share information sometimes which is sensitive. But I've been, like I said, very encouraged in a lot of different universities around the country at the way people have responded and pushed back on certain research development exchanges and so forth.

And it's a challenge, right? We have an open, collaborative research environment which is one of the strengths of this country, but people need to do it with their eyes open and really think carefully about what they're getting into.

Lester Holt: Any more questions? I guess right down here in front, in the yellow.

Speaker 3: Hi, Director Wray, how are you?

Lester Holt: Fine.

Speaker 3: You rely a great deal on the cooperation of communities and in a community like Charlottesville, we understand from reports that the Russians may have been playing. But they couldn't have been playing unless we were doing it to ourselves. So, what can local communities do to inoculate ourselves from this type of manipulation and to create a more robust structure so that we can help you?

Christopher Wray: I think there's a role for government and community and individuals in all of this. Obviously, as law enforcement and national security, we can't and shouldn't be trying to police content. But what people can do ... The best weapon against propaganda and misinformation and information warfare is information. So, the more people are thinking critically about what is this I'm reading? Who really is the source of this? And the more in cooperation with say, social media companies, the more disinfected of transparency we can provide to who the source of certain things is, the origins of certain things are. The more people, I think ...

And I trust the American people to be a lot smarter about stuff if they know who's behind what they're reading. And so, we're looking at ways to try to increase awareness, but in the meantime, communities can suggest to people ... I think we all benefit from critical thinking. Don't just believe everything you read. I know that sounds pedantic and basic, but there are a lot of times in this country where I think people would benefit from being reminded of that.

Lester Holt: Yes, the gentleman right here. We'll get a microphone to you here.

Paul Thompson: Mr. Director, thanks so much for coming. I'm Paul Thompson, professor of Homeland Security at Penn State, and we're teaching our students a lot of the same things you're talking about all the time.

But you've been a student of the Constitution and a practitioner of the Constitution all your life. There's lots of discussion now, in Washington and elsewhere, that the Constitution is no longer up to the challenges the country faces. And there are forces that would like to see major changes made. How do you feel about that? Do you feel that you're adequately armed with all the necessary Constitutional provisions and statutes to do your job?

Christopher Wray: I feel like our Constitution is a strength, not a limitation.

Now, we have legislation. There are statutes, not the Constitution itself, but there are statutes that in many cases are out of date based on technology. Sometimes, you read a certain statute and you feel like it was written at the time of the horse and buggy instead of some of the technological challenges we have now. So, there's plenty of room for our laws to be updated to make it easier for national security and law enforcement to do their jobs. But our mission is to protect the American people and uphold the Constitution.

Lester Holt: Any more questions, gentleman in the back? He's got his hand up. Right there, yeah. She's coming right behind you with the mic. Yeah.

Speaker 4: Thanks very much.

Thanks to both of you. Director Wray, the name that hasn't been mentioned very much, if at all, in the last 45 minutes is of course the president's himself. And it is the president who has taken direct aim at the bureau frequently and has accused the bureau of a whole host of illegal acts which Lester mentioned, but also a bias against him and a whole host of nefarious activities. And he shows no sign of stopping those attacks, for whatever political ends they may be.

I want to ask you this question. I'm not gonna ask you if you think that's patriotic or not, I'm just gonna ask you directly. Does that serve the country's national security interests to have the commander-in-chief take such consistent aim at the FBI as well as the Department of Justice? And just as a follow, if you're disappointed, in your role and a life of public service, that you haven't heard more consistent parrying of those attacks from sitting Republican lawmakers?

Christopher Wray: We're big boys and girls. We get criticized by all sorts of people. I come back to the answer I gave Lester before which is my focus is on what are the people who experience through our work think? At the end of the day, our work is what

endures, and I'm far more interested in what those people say and reflect than I am by various other comments.

And what I try to say to our people is we need to be remembering who it is we do this work for. We do this work for the victims, for the 325,000,000 American people that are out there. We're in a different age. There's a lot of opinions. There's a lot of rhetoric. Doesn't mean I appreciate all of it, doesn't mean our people appreciate all of it. But we got pretty thick skins and we just need to be focused on doing our jobs.

Lester Holt: Get this gentleman right here.

Greg Amadon: Hi. Greg Amadon from Seattle and Aspen. Thanks for being here. I'd like to know what are the three things that keep you up at night? And also, what's the question you weren't asked that you wished you were?

Christopher Wray: I'm tempted to answer both questions with the same one. I told my wife, "Well, sometimes people want to ask me what keeps you awake at night." And she says, "Can you ask them, please, what will keep you awake at night?"

We have a long list of threats. Obviously, I'm concerned about a lot of the same things most Americans are concerned about. I think in many ways, the threats that I'm worried about are the ones that are coming around the corner. I think as an agency, as a government community, we tend to be so focused on chasing the threat of today that pretty quickly, that becomes the threat of yesterday and not the threat of tomorrow or next year or the year after that.

So, one of my big points of emphasis is try to encouraging the very, very creative and smart 37,000 men and women of the FBI to try to think around the corner, over the horizon, and think about what's the threat that hasn't come yet, that's just now starting to emerge? So, what I worry about, in many ways, is are we not seeing that 'cause we're so busy in the moment.

As to the question I wasn't asked is why is not all the other unbelievable work that is done by the men and women of the FBI every day in this country, the hundreds and hundreds of violent gang members that are being put away just this year alone, the hundreds of kids that are rescued just this year alone, the terrorist attacks that have been disrupted in the last twelve months or less, why is all that not being talked about?

If you, and in no disrespect to our good friends in the news media, but if watch television, you would think the FBI basically has had only two investigations. Both involving the last presidential election. And hopefully it's not a shock to anybody in this room that we actually have 37,000 men and women, brave, principled, selfless people who work their tails off who are inspiring people to work with. And I think we need more people in America asking what are those people are doing?

Lester Holt: And that is gonna, I think, wrap ... Actually, we do have time for one more question. Just we have time for one more question, so let's have this lady right here how about? In the middle.

Speaker 5: Hi, there. Betsy Woodruff with the Daily Beast. Speaking of the other investigations the FBI is working on, can you give us any quantification, either number of agents, number of open investigations, to the extent the FBI's focused on foreign influence operations in the United States?

Christopher Wray: Well, a lot of our counter-intelligence work I would call focused on foreign influence operations. We do have a foreign influence task force which is viewed more as a central coordinating body at Headquarters that then works with all the field offices and the counter-intelligence, cyber, criminal, and even counter-terrorism agents that are out there working on it. And the reason I bring up all of those is because I think one of the big changes we've made since before the last election, just in the first few months when I got on board, is we've tried to view this more as a multi-disciplinary problem.

It's not just a counter-intelligence problem. Yes, it's a tool of foreign intelligence efforts, but it's also got cyber means. But on top of that, there are all sorts of criminal laws that can get violated in the process. So, there are criminal investigations that can be used as disruption techniques against foreign influence. And even counter-terrorism. You might be scratching your head saying, "Well, what does counter-terrorism have to do with foreign influence?"

But just along the lines of the question about Charlottesville, for example, to the extent that we have domestic terrorism in this country that is spun up by various ideologies, foreign influence is being used, in many ways, to capitalize on that and spin up domestic extremist movements to create terrorist attacks here inside.

So there is, again, there's a multidimensional effort. So there is a lot of agents and analysts and professional staff in all four of those divisions working on the issue. I don't have a number, but it's a significant number if you count all the investigations that flow out of that effort. It's not all Russia, of course. There's different kinds of influence from different countries.

Lester Holt: Alright. Well, with that, we do have to end. Director, thank you so much for your time.

Christopher Wray: Thank you.

Lester Holt: Been a real pleasure, thank you so much.

Christopher Wray: Thank you. For sure. Thank you.