

Blackout Revolution

The Secretary of Homeland Security read the latest report and sighed. He reached up and rubbed his temple with one hand, trying to massage the beginnings of a headache away. It did not work, and he opened his desk drawer and pulled out the bottle of Ibuprofen he kept there. There were only a handful of pills left. He would have to pick up another bottle this week. They seemed to disappear fast these days, and it seemed he was always buying more.

The news was grim. OCR (Original Constitution Republic), the extremist hacking group, had just released another batch of emails. If they were true, it would not be good. In the latest email dump, the CEO of California Electric Company appeared to be trying to cover up safety failures that caused the wildfire last year. Even more damning, they also released a recorded Teams meeting with the CEO ordering a coverup. The timing could not be worse as FERC (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission) had just cleared the company of any wrongdoing.

OCR has been reporting corruption in corporate and government entities for the last couple of months. Some of the reported corruption was true. Some of it was completely fabricated. Some of it was not illegal, but the way OCR spun the story made the activity seem so. OCR used social media to get such reports to go viral, which was concerning.

The latest viral story was that the electrical grid was close to collapse. A heat wave had engulfed the country and was predicted to continue through the end of July. This was the second week of record-breaking high temperatures. Rolling blackouts have been implemented in several markets to manage the electrical demand. OCR's predictions seem to have come true as the California Electric Company grid had just collapsed.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," Alex said.

Stacy, his executive assistant, entered the room.

"Mr. Secretary, they are ready for you in the briefing room."

"Thank you, Stacy, I'll be right there."

He got up from his desk and followed her to the briefing room. He walked into the room full of government officials from various agencies sitting at the table. He took a seat at the head of the table.

"Let's get started," Alex said.

FBI Special Agent Mark Smalls, leading the task force, stood up and started the briefing.

"Mr. Secretary, I am going to summarize what we know about OCR and then get into the latest attack."

"Proceed," Alex said.

"Thank you, Mr. Secretary. As you know, OCR is an extremist collective of hackers who are trying to discredit the government. They claim to want to restore the United States to the original founding

structure. They want Federal Agencies disbanded and power restored to the States. They also want to go back to the original ten amendments of the Constitution. Because of their beliefs, they have garnered support from domestic militia groups and seem to be working with these groups to discredit the United States Government. Do you have any questions so far, Mr. Secretary? “

“I’ve been briefed on the background of OCR; please continue,” Alex responded.

“Yes, Mr. Secretary. As you are aware, the recent heat wave has been causing rolling blackouts in several electric markets. The California Electric Company grid collapsed earlier today, causing a blackout for most of Southern California. We believe that OCR is responsible for the blackout.”

“How is that possible?” Alex asked.

“We are not sure yet, Mr. Secretary. The investigation is ongoing, but prior to the blackout, we had reports of loss of control of the grid management system. There were additional reports of IT assets used to manage the grid being encrypted with ransomware.”

“How are we responding?”

“FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and FERC are coordinating a response to deliver humanitarian aid and restore the grid.”

There was a knock at the door, and an aide opened the door.

“Sorry to disturb you, but you need to see this.” The aid said to Special Agent Smalls.

The aid handed a paper to Special Agent Smalls. He read the paper, and his face turned white.

“Is this true?” he asked the aid.

“It is a high-confidence report, sir.”

“What is it?” Alex demanded.

“Mr. Secretary, we have a report that the electric grid just went down in Texas. We have two regional blackouts happening at the same time. This is no coincidence.”

One Week Later – Department of Homeland Security Briefing Room

“Let's get the briefing started,” Alex said.

Special Agent Mark Smalls stood up and started the presentation.

“Good morning, Mr. Secretary. Today's briefing will summarize our response to the grid outages, banking outages, rioting, and militia activity. “

“Proceed,” Alex said.

“Of course, Mr. Secretary. One week ago, the attacks against the energy sector took down the grids in Southern California and Texas. Additional attacks against New York and Washington, DC grids failed. However, both of those markets are on manual management due to the attack damaging some IT assets. The rolling blackouts are lasting longer due to manual operations, but both those regions still have power.”

Smalls paused to move to the next slide.

“Both the Texas and California utilities are working around the clock to restore operations. Neither is able to pay the ransom demand, so restoration of the IT assets is in progress, but it will take some time. Current estimates are at least two more weeks, but we feel that is overly optimistic. Any questions so far, Mr. Secretary?”

“How much is the ransom?”

“Ninety-three billion dollars.” Special Agent Smalls responded.

“What! That is outrageous! Why so high?”

“It is the exact amount of aid the US has provided to Ukraine since the start of the war. We learned of the ransom demand when OCR publicly announced we would not pay the ransom. We never received a ransom demand, though.”

“What? I don't understand.” Alex asked.

“They never made the ransom demand to the utilities or to anyone in the Federal Government. They released some fabricated emails stating the US refused to pay their ransom demand to restore the power. But they point out that the United States gave Ukraine the same amount of money to support the war. It supports their narrative that the US Government is more worried about foreign aid than helping Americans.”

“Can we pay the ransom?” Alex asked

“The FBI's stance has always been not to pay the ransom. It would be hypocritical to violate our own policy.”

“I see,” Alex said. “We might need to reconsider this policy.”

“Yes, Mr. Secretary.”

“I'll take it up with the President. Please continue.”

“Yes, Mr. Secretary. Due to the power outages, rioting and looting are tearing Southern California apart. Chronic police staffing shortages are complicating efforts to restore order. The governor of California has called up the National Guard, but we have reports that up to 40% of some units are not reporting in. Since the National Guard is short-staffed, they are struggling to restore order. The chaos has completely destroyed some communities, and Emergency services are non-existent. Gangs have taken over the inner cities, which are no longer safe for the citizens. This is complicating the grid recovery as utility companies can’t get crews out to the damaged substations.”

“What damaged substations?” Alex asked.

“During the rioting, some substations were damaged and are not operational. The utility has not been able to determine why because they can’t assess the damage. We do not know at this time if the damage was intentional or not, but the California utility can’t switch to manual operations because of it.”

“Why am I only just hearing of this now?” Alex asked.

“Because we were only notified of this problem today. Apparently, the substations have been damaged for a week now.”

“What are we doing about it?”

“We are working with the governor and giving him any support he needs.”

“What about Texas?”

“That is a different problem entirely. The governor there had similar problems with a shortage of police and the National Guard. To fill the ranks, he enlisted the help of local militias to keep the peace. Unfortunately, the militia were caught on video shooting looters. This led to protests and riots. Citizens are taking the law into their own hands as vigilantes. The situation is very volatile right now. The governor is refusing to condemn the militias.”

“Jesus, what was he thinking enlisting the militias?” Alex asked.

“They were part of his political base. They helped him get elected.”

“This is getting out of hand. We need to remove him from office.” Alex said.

“Mr. Secretary, we don’t have the authority to remove a sitting governor. It has to start with the State legislature, and a majority in both houses support him.”

“I know that Agent Smalls, I’m not stupid.” Alex retorted.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Secretary, I didn’t mean to imply you were.”

“Isn’t he violating some Federal Law by using Militias? Aren’t they considered domestic terrorists?” Alex asked.

“None of the militias he used are on a terrorist list.”

“Fine, let's move on.”

“Yes, Mr. Secretary. There was also an attack on a couple of the regional banks simultaneously with the attack on the electric utilities. We assess with high confidence that they are related. Normally, an attack on a regional bank would not cause much of a problem, but with OCR amplifying the message on social media, the situation is getting blown out of proportion. OCR has managed to convince people to withdraw money from these financial institutions. This led to a run on the banks, which reduced their cash reserves to dangerously low levels. The Federal Reserve is in the process of taking over the banks to increase stability.”

“Do we know how they were able to attack all these targets at once?”

“It appears that a zero-day exploit was used to compromise all the hacked organizations. The vendor has released a patch, and we have shared the methods and Indicators of Compromise (IOC) with partner organizations. That hole has been plugged, Mr. Secretary.”

“Good, I am glad we are making some progress.”

Agent Smalls moved to the next slide.

“Protests are happening nationwide. Various groups are protesting the electric failure, the bank failure, and the Texas governor's decision to use militia. Clashes between the various groups have turned violent on several occasions, and protesters on both sides have been killed and wounded. Several Governors have declared curfews with little effect. They don't have enough resources to enforce the curfew.”

Agent Smalls moved to the next slide.

“Militia activity is increasing. Several new militias have formed, supporting the beliefs of OCR. This does not appear to be initiated by OCR but rather appears to be organic. We have reports of the militias taking over policing activity in certain areas. It appears that this solution is gaining steam.”

There was a knock at the door. An ashen-faced aid poked his face in the door and looked at Alex.

“Mr. Secretary, you need to turn on the news. The Texas governor has just been assassinated.”

One week later

“Mr. Secretary, today’s briefing will be short because I know you need to meet with the President.”
Special Agent Mark Smalls said.

“Thank you, Special Agent Smalls,” Alex said.

“The heat wave has finally passed, and the rolling blackouts have ended. Recovery operations are proceeding slowly, but power is being restored in both regions.”

“Good to hear we are making progress,” Alex said.

“The banking sector is struggling right now. Last week, the Federal Reserve paused cash withdrawals in an effort to stop the run on the banks. OCR responded by urging everyone to move their money to Bitcoin. Within twenty-four hours, many regional banks were below the cash reserve threshold required by law due to the following cash exodus. The Federal Reserve then paused all transactions except payments to other financial institutions. This has led to increased protests and militia activity.”

“How are we responding?” Alex asked

“One of the proposals is to declare a national curfew to keep protestors off the streets. The details are in the report you have.”

“I see.”

Special Agent Smalls continued.

“Several more cities have experienced violent protests and looting. There are neighborhoods in most major cities that lack emergency services due to the violence. Some have local militias taking over law enforcement and other emergency services.”

“What is the proposal to deal with this?” Alex asked.

“One of the proposals is to deploy the military to restore law and order.”

“That is going to be a tough sell to the President,” Alex said.

“Understood, Mr. Secretary.” Special Agent Smalls responded.

“Finally, we believe with medium confidence that OCR is actually a hacking organization supported by Russian, Chinese, and North Korean hackers. Many of the tactics and techniques they have used to breach organizations, amplify social media outrage, and destroy IT assets are very similar to how those foreign groups operate.”

“Why a medium confidence assessment?” Alex asked.

“The counterargument is that these tactics and techniques are so widely known that skilled hackers could replicate them. Additionally, Russia and China have offered humanitarian support for those Americans affected by the blackouts and rioting, but also warned the US Government to avoid blaming foreign governments for its own failings.”

“I see,” Alex said.

“Finally, the assignation of the Texas governor has lit a powder keg with the militias. There was a failed attempt to assassinate the Californian governor. A militia group loaded a leer jet with explosives and used autopilot to crash it into the governor's mansion. Luckily, the governor survived the attack and is currently in a secure location.”

Agent Smalls continued.

“OCR has come out in support of the attack on the California governor and condemned the killing of the Texas governor. They have called on their followers to resort to political assassination to achieve their goals. They have posted a hit list of political targets.”

“Have we been able to identify any of the OCR hackers?” Alex asked.

“Not yet, Mr. Secretary.”

“Anything else you need to say?” Alex asked.

Special Agent Smalls paused, considering his next words very carefully.

“Mr. Secretary, with some political candidates for president coming out in support of OCR, this has the potential to change the political dynamic in this country. The founding fathers built this country based on the peaceful transfer of power, not the assassination of political opponents. We should consider scaling back some of our responses to the crisis to lower the temperature in the country. Given the current situation, I fear that this could get further out of control.”

“I appreciate the candor, Special Agent Smalls. I’ll take that into consideration when I speak with the President.” Alex said.

Alex gathered his reports and left to speak with the President.