

THE TERMINAL MEN

By Willie Schatz
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They first sprang into existence as cartoon characters whose sole purpose was making life miserable for television's "Super Friends." They were the Legion of Doom, and they were led by arch-criminal Lex Luthor.

In the end, of course, even the elite Legion proved no match for the likes of Superman and went the way of most of his enemies -- consigned to cartoon oblivion.

But the Legion of Doom was reincarnated in a different form in the early 1980s by a group of adventurers poised on the edge of the electronic age. They called themselves hackers, and their quarry was not a visitor from another planet. The target for "Phiber Optik," "Acid Phreak" and "Knight Lightning," as some members of the Legion called themselves, was -- and still is -- the computer.

The telephone networks linking corporate and government computer systems were their maze. The passwords and security screens that protected networks from outsiders' access were obstacles to outwit. They schemed to get inside these systems and browse through information files at will.

It was a game, hacker versus hacker, played in unfettered spirit of discovery.

"Hackers will do just about anything that doesn't involve crashing {bringing down} a system," said a New York City Legion member who goes by the computer name of "Acid Phreak," but who would not further identify himself. "That's the only taboo. We don't sell military secrets. We're just out to learn. We transfer data about records that we find in systems. But we draw the line on how we use that data. We use it to play around, not abuse it."

And then, without much warning, it wasn't just a game anymore.

For a diverse group of men from New York City, Middletown, Md., and elsewhere, the change announced itself in the past few months through a series of knocks on the door by investigators bearing warrants. In raids that followed a two-year, nationwide investigation of potential computer fraud, Secret Service agents seized 42 computers, 23,000 computer disks and other items from hackers, including Acid Phreak and Phiber Optik. The equipment will not be returned to its owners until the service finishes examining it as evidence for possible criminal violations.

So far, the Secret Service sweep -- called Operation Sun Devil -- has produced only two arrests.

Other investigations linked to the Secret Service campaign have resulted in several indictments of hackers, some of whom are alleged to be members of the Legion of Doom. Those indicted have been charged with

But with the increasing dependence of business and society upon electronic networks, the incursions of hackers became less and less tolerable.

As early as 1984, a report by the House Judiciary Committee called attention to the "activities of so-called 'hackers,' who have been able to access both private and public computer systems, sometimes with potentially serious results."

The report also quoted Wilbur Miller, then president of Drake University, who told the committee that there has been a tendency on the part of the public to view such violations as "intellectual pranksterism."

"This is simply not the case," Miller added. "The ubiquity of computers in virtually every dimension of our everyday lives underlines this point and dictates our concern."

Congress responded by passing the Counterfeit Access Device and Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, which provided penalties of as much as three months in jail for unauthorized access to computers. A 1986 revision established criminal penalties for six additional types of unauthorized computer access, including entering government computers.

The legislation, while not halting hacking, apparently has curbed it severely.

The law authorized the Secret Service to investigate offenses, and the agency has responded in ways that have spawned something of a backlash among computer users.

Mitchell Kapor, the inventor of Lotus 1-2-3, the world's most popular financial software package, is expected to announce next month the formation of a coalition that will establish a hackers' legal defense fund, lobby Congress to change the 1984 law and help fight what Kapor said had the potential to be a "witch hunt."

Birth of the Legion

None of this was an issue when the creator of the Legion of Doom took as his model Lex Luthor and the cartoon Legion. The computer group was loosely based on the television characters, who had names such as Black Manta and Bizarro.

"The name {Legion of Doom} has nothing to do with the group's intentions," said an 18-year-old New Yorker whose computer name is Phiber Optik. The name is a cartoon spoof, he said.

"But it is a name that demands respect," he said. "Its purpose was to get the best minds of the time together and have them communicate with each other. The name doesn't demand any respect now, though. It accomplished much more a few years ago."

And the group, which he said never had more than 15 to 20 members, apparently has become much less particular about the quality of those members.

Then the Secret Service came. Since its visit, Rose said, his client base has dwindled to one Baltimore-based accounting firm.

The Battle Continues ...

For its part, the Secret Service says it isn't targeting any particular group of hackers.

"We don't really know who belongs to the Legion of Doom," said Dale Boll, assistant special agent in charge of the Secret Service's fraud division. "We've never given them much real credence. ... They haven't been a predisposed target. We focus on individuals committing serious offenses."

"We are not in the business of slowing down technological innovation or stopping the Lewis and Clarks of the 21st century," said Earl Devaney, special agent in charge of the fraud division. "We're only looking for folks committing federal crimes and doing malicious damage."

"We think the deterrent effect of Operation Sun Devil has been very beneficial," he added. "A lot of hackers get lulled into a sense of anonymity behind their computers. There's a psychological sense they won't get caught. But now they know they will."

That thought may slow them, but it apparently will not stop them.

"After all this stuff, we know what not to do next time," Phiber Optik said. "And there will always be a next time."

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