

FRANK HAYES ■ FRANKLY SPEAKING

VA's Testimony

JAMES NICHOLSON BLEW IT. And just how badly the Veterans Affairs secretary blew it was obvious last week, when yet another computer containing names and personal data of thousands of veterans was reported missing (see story, page 18). This time, it disappeared from an outside contractor's office, and there wasn't a thing the VA could have done about it. But never mind the facts: Almost instantly, politicians of all stripes were again lamenting the threat to vets and calling for Nicholson's head on a platter.

What did Nicholson do wrong? Nothing. It's what he said — or rather, what he failed to say — that will likely cost him his job.

He may still have a chance to salvage the situation, though — if not for himself, then for those who will still be responsible for IT security at the VA after Nicholson has been kicked to the curb.

To do that, he'll have to go in front of a succession of congressional committees and say something he should have said months ago.

Something like this:

"At the end of July, one of our subcontractors discovered that a PC containing information on as many as 38,000 veterans was missing. It wasn't stolen by a burglar from the home of an employee who took it home without permission, or by a smash-and-grab thief from someone's car. It disappeared from an office in a building with security guards, surveillance cameras and card keys. It may not even be stolen, just misplaced. We don't know. For now, we're assuming the worst.

"That PC was entirely under the control of the subcontractor, Unisys. There's nothing anyone at the VA could have done to prevent its loss. But it happened on my watch. I'm responsible.

"I wasn't happy to hear that veterans' personal information once again may be at risk. I know that none of you are happy about it, either.

Some of you have demanded my resignation. Again.

"But I am here today to tell you that as long as I am VA secretary, you'll keep hearing about security breaches.

"You'll hear about them because we'll continue to tighten our security. We'll continue to improve our reporting of security incidents, and we'll continue to move faster each time we find a problem.

"As our security improves, we'll discover more incidents, some old, some new. We'll report them faster and in more detail.

"And the number of incidents you hear about will skyrocket.

"It will continue to skyrocket until we finally get our security problems under control. That will require changing both the technology and the culture of the VA when it comes to securing data and reporting security incidents.

"It will take years.

"Now you have a choice. You can demand better security for our veterans' personal information. I hope you do. But if you do that, you'll continue to hear reports of data security problems at the VA for a long time to come.

"Or you can demand a stop to them. You can fire me and tell my successor that you never want to see another news story about a data security incident at the VA.

"In that case, you'll be sending a strong message to the VA and to every other federal agency: Do not look for security problems. Bury them when they're discovered. Do whatever it takes to hide the incidents. But never admit that security has been breached.

"You will send the message that you don't care whether data is safe — you just don't want to hear bad news.

"Many federal departments may be willing to lie to you about that bad news. I and the VA will not.

"I made a serious mistake in recent months. I failed to explain to you that the news you hear about our security issues will get worse as our security actually gets better.

"So let me make this clear to you today: We are curing our security problems. But as long as we are, there will be bad news — and I will deliver it to you.

"The day I don't is the day you'll deserve my resignation." ▸



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Let's Try This One More Time

This company offers several ways to contact IT for help, ranging from an intranet ticketing system to emergency pagers. "I got a panicked call directly from one user who had tracked me down via a company receptionist who was aware of the emergency pager schedule," reports a support pilot fish on the scene. "At the same time, I noticed a 911 emergency call had been placed from the same user's office moments before. Upon investigation, he confessed that he had intentionally dialed 911 in an attempt to contact our emergency technical support line. Needless to say, it's doubtful the local emergency dispatch center had access to a service to assist this particular caller."

Oops!

Pilot fish at this start-up develops an online application that



The cards aren't marked "This side up," and they can go into the readers four

ways – but three won't work. "I'm called into my boss's office, and he's frustrated trying to get a document signed, and I can see his card is in upside down," says fish. "This calls for all my diplomatic skills – I don't want to embarrass him. So I get on the phone and call myself and pretend to be troubleshooting. As usual, this elicits a user trip to the coffee area. While he's gone, I flip his card – and all is well when he returns."

Not IT's Problem

This user is on the road, so it's his assistant who relays a trouble report by e-mail to the help desk: "He is having problems with the screen shaking on his laptop." Pilot fish replies: "When will he be back in the office? This may not be one we can fix remotely. Assistant's e-mailed response: "Never mind. The building was shaking. The computer is OK."

Close Call

Staffers at this army base are issued electronic signature cards for signing financial reports, and there are the usual shakedown problems. One common issue, according to a pilot fish working there:

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