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# The Solari Report

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## The CIA, NSA & Google with Nafeez Ahmed



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**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Ladies and gentlemen, it is my real privilege to welcome to The Solari Report a gentleman I've always wanted to talk to. He is Dr. Nafeez Ahmed. He is a British author and investigative journalist. He's a scholar and he's the Executive Director of the Institute for Policy Research and Development which is an independent think tank that is focused on the study of violent conflict.

He is an author, a filmmaker, and he's taught at the University of Sussex and Brownell University. His focus academically is on the systemic causes of mass violence – something I'm very interested in.

He used to blog for *The Guardian* and he now has a very interesting and important new initiative called 'Insurge Intelligence' which I'm going to ask him to talk to you about.

I first became aware of his work on 9/11. He's done some remarkable writing and speaking on 9/11, but he this new initiative for Insurge Intelligence and he's got a new series on Google that is just absolutely Six Sigma. It's a ten out of ten, and I can't encourage you enough to read it. After you read it, strip Google from your life.

With no further ado, Nafeez, welcome to The Solari Report and thank you for joining us all the way from London.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** Thank you for having me, Catherine. It's an honor to be able to speak to you about all this.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** When I read this, all I kept thinking of was the line from the movie, "By George, he's got it!"

Tell us about the Google series. It's a two-part series. If you could just



lead us through it and start with what inspired you to do this. I just have to tell you, I think it's a remarkable contribution to our understanding of the world.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** It started off very unexpectedly. I've been writing about the context and the drivers behind mass surveillance for a few years in the context of some of the stuff I've got on security and counter-terrorism and all that stuff.

Especially since the Snowden revelations I think a lot of the stuff that Snowden revealed was already known. It was already entered into the public record in different ways in the preceding decades since 9/11, but I think that with Snowden we had the nail in the coffin. We now had abundant, clear documentation of the vast extent of the national security apparatus and what it was doing in the name of security but in a way which we now know to some extent really has very little to do with security but more to do with power and control and all sorts of other things.

My interest in looking into the issue of surveillance and its intersections with national security and foreign policy was all about trying to explore the why – not so much the fact that it's happening, which I think many have actually known for a while and have been talking about for a while – but really why it is happening and where it is coming from and what the interests are behind this whole drive to control information in this way.

That's something I've been really keen to understand and also open up more dialogue and debate about. I think there has not been enough discussion about how to make sense of this and what is the driving factor behind this.

When I started looking into all of this stuff and I was at *The Guardian*, I did a couple of stories about the role of the Pentagon in doing kind of like preparations for big domestic crises as well as crises internationally, but a lot of stuff about the potential for domestic insurgencies banded around a lot of Pentagon documents. There was a lot of concern about



the impact of unpredictable shocks and economic shocks or food shocks or energy shocks and so on and so forth.

I got this sense that here you had this military establishment that was being asked to draw out plans for how to react when, in a way – and pardon my French – when the shit hits the fan. What do we do when people get angry and upset and states become a little more challenged and it's difficult to govern? What do we do? What is the military response?

A lot of that stuff was done, and a lot of it fed into and gave explanation as to why we saw all of the things that were revealed. That kind of just led me onto this journey of just looking deeper and deeper into reading all kinds of random stuff about what the Pentagon was doing. I ended up keeping tabs on unclassified stuff that was being put out by the Pentagon but that most journalists would not necessarily pick up.

One thing that interested me was when Chuck Hagel, obviously known as the current Defense Secretary, but he's basically been asked to resign if you believe the various reports that have come out from people in the White House – anonymous sources saying that basically saying there was a number of people who got fed up with him and wanted him to go. That actually does tie in to some of the things I'm going to talk about.

That was something that intrigued me because the week before his resignation was announced he had announced this thing called The Defense Innovation Initiative which was this massive new program to basically upgrade the Pentagon, take control of cutting edge technology, disruptive technologies, information technology, robotics, artificial intelligence, biogenetics, and all kinds of fancy technologies that normally you would think belong to the realm of science fiction.

When I was looking into this – and I wrote a piece about this for *VICE*, for their tech magazine *Motherboard* – I found this whitepaper that had

**“A lot of that stuff was done, and a lot of it fed into and gave explanation as to why we saw all of the things that were revealed.”**



been published by the National Defense University in DC which basically looked like the blueprint for what the Defense Innovation Initiative was. It had been published two months before the initiative had been announced by Hagel, and it had been authored by two long-time Pentagon people who had been working essentially as senior advisors or officials inside the Pentagon for decades.

One of them was a guy called Linton Wells who I ended up finding out was linked to this thing called the Highlands Forum. At the time I hadn't really thought that much of it, but from the few bits and pieces that I found on the web – which was very little, really in terms of mainstream coverage – a couple of articles here and there. There was one article in *Government Executive* from 2006 which talked about this Highlands Forum entity which had been apparently sponsored by the Pentagon through the office of the Secretary of Defense, set up in 1994, to basically work on information technology and its relevance to the Pentagon. Apparently it had been running seamlessly since then.

So Linton Wells was connected to this, and I surmised that this appears to have been one of the avenues by which he and his paypub was clearly plugged into that policymaking process which occurred inside the Pentagon at a high level which resulted in what we saw being announced by Hagel a week before he ended up getting chucked out.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Is it possible that Hagel got chucked out because he was stepping on the toes of the private guys who wanted to control those areas?

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** Naturally that is kind of what I think. I mentioned it briefly the issues with Hagel, but what was interesting was that we know that Hagel came in with a very, very outspoken and critical view of the Iraq War – to some extent. I mean, it wasn't necessarily as critical as some of us would have liked it to be, but he was quite outspoken. He has also been outspoken about Israel and the US relationship to Israel.

He is someone who clearly is not a traditional part of that kind of defense establishment, but someone who had been a figure who had his



own perspective and his own opinion.

What was interesting is that when he was asked to redraft budgets – and this is, again, what led me to dig deeper because I was actually trying to find out why Hagel had been chucked out in this way when I was doing this story. It just didn't add up. A lot of the press was just saying lots of different stories about how he didn't gel with certain people. They were all very inconsistent stories.

The one thing that struck me was the number of reports that pointed out that when he was administering the budget and deciding what to cut, one of the things was there were rumors circulating. The rumors were so strong about Hagel's apparent desire to shut down the Pentagon's internal think tank called the Office of Net Assessment which was headed up by this guy, a legendary figure, known as Andrew Marshall who was first appointed by Richard Nixon. He has basically headed up the ONA since then.

What was interesting was that a number of sources affiliated with the ONA had said last year that Hagel's apparent desire to shut down the ONA was basically what they called 'strategic suicide'. This is something no one really talked about when his resignation was announced, but that raised some flags for me. Did this have something to do with what happened?

When I started looking into it more, it became very clear that Hagel was definitely trying to reduce the clout of the ONA, and it was so prominent and annoying for certain people that six former defense secretaries – including Robert Gates – wrote a letter to the Obama administration basically saying, "This is outrageous. How could he attempt to shut down the ONA?"

In the end, the formal response from the government was, "No, we're not trying to shut it down. We're just trying to rearrange it and make it more efficient."

One of the questions that was raised at the time was, "Why are you



trying to shut down in the name of budgets an entity which, compared to all the other things which get major spending, really doesn't take that much spending?"

It's a small think tank which apparently does very important work, which is what the argument was of these six defense secretaries, on futures planning and scenario planning and that kind of stuff. Ultimately all this think tank stuff and research doesn't cost very much. That indicated that Hagel was really trying to slide through under this guise of, "I'm trying to sort the budgets out."

In that process, he was basically trying to take on the ONA. I was wondering what this was about. When I started to look deeper into it, I found that actually it turns out that Andrew Marshall, who is head of the ONA, is also involved in this thing called the Highlands Forum. He co-chairs the Highlands Forum. Also, the head of DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency, also co-chairs the Highlands Forum. There are apparently a number of other agencies which are heavily involved in the Highlands Forum.

I began to look more into it, and it seems to me that there was so little information on this entity that had been set up by the Pentagon in 1994 essentially to study information operations and to kind of catalyze information in the private sector and bring it into the Pentagon so that the Pentagon could stay on top of developments that are going on and bring those into the way that it does informational operations and develop strategy and policy on informational operations across government. That was basically what the Highlands Forum was about, according to the Pentagon records.

When I began to look deeper into that, Google began to come up in terms of relationships between Google executives and people involved in the Highlands Forum. That was when this whole can of worms opened up and I began to look more into Google and ended up uncovering stuff which was actually quite accessible if you looked for it, but nobody had really decided to look for it.





There is very clear evidence that Google had been directly funded by an intelligence community program run by the CIA and the NSA.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** I told you the story this weekend by email of how in 1998 – after they’d stolen my software in the squabble, and my squabble had begun with them – someone I didn’t know very well and didn’t trust at the time came to me and said, “The CIA is going to start a search engine, and they’re going to use a lot of the stuff you and a lot of other people have discovered. It’s going to be called Google.”

I didn’t think anything of it. When I first saw Google, which was a couple of months later, I said, “Oh, I guess this is it.”

I always assumed from the beginning that this was a creature created by the intelligence agencies.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** I think some people certainly did, and I think Silicon Valley and the way that Silicon Valley erupted in that time, it’s not entirely controversial to recognize that the Pentagon and agencies like DARPA took a very keen interest in Silicon Valley. Even DARPA takes credit for creating the internet.

**“It’s not entirely controversial to recognize that the Pentagon and agencies like DARPA took a very keen interest in Silicon Valley.”**

A lot of that – to some extent – is not controversial at all, but what makes it interesting is the extent to which Google has gone out of its way to deny having any kind of relationship with the intelligence community, and contrast that with the extent of the information that I’ve basically brought out, which really appears to make it quite clear that Google had a very close relationship to the intelligence community before it was even incorporated as a company.

That is something that I found quite surprising. Also surprising is the way in which Google responded because they completely to this day have continued to deny it, and also they have not been responsive to specific questions. It comes back to this initiative called the Massive Digital Data





Systems initiative. I don't even remember how I ended up stumbling across it, but this initiative was established around the 1990's. It ran from around 1992 to 1999.

Interestingly, the person who was managing it at the time was a woman who is now a very distinguished academic recognized for her expertise in data mining and data mining for counter-terrorism. Her name is Professor Bhavani Thuraisingham. At that time she was an academic. She had a PhD, but she was working for a private firm known as the MITRE Corporation which is well-known as a leading defense contractor.

Apparently MITRE, according to Thuraisingham, was basically managing this program – the MDDS, Massive Digital Data Systems initiative – on behalf of the US intelligence community.

I interviewed Thuraisingham about this for the story, and she also made a number of comments about the program in a couple of articles that she posted on the University of Texas website, where she is now Director of the Cyber Security Research Institute.

She talks about it in both documents, and she even talks about it in her CV. She very clearly states – and reaffirmed to me in our interview – that Sergey Brin, who was at Stanford at the time, was partly funded by the MDDS program. She also posted a copy of the abstract for the MDDS program which made it clear that this was basically being run by three main agencies of the intelligence community, the DCI, and it specifically mentioned the Community Management Staff.

The Community Management Staff is kind of an inter-agency group which coordinates stuff across the intelligence community under the remit of the DCI which is the Director of Central Intelligence. The other agencies that were involved were the CIA's office of Research and Development and the National Security Agency, but it names the officers who were involved in administering the program. They included Thuraisingham, which is the lead manager of the program which was basically being outsourced by MITRE, as well as her colleague, Rick Steinheiser, who at that time was a senior officer in the CIA's office of



## Research and Development.

They were the two main people who were managing it at Stanford. What she said was that from 1996 to 1998 Sergey Brin received funding from the MDDS through Stanford University. The program was being managed by Professor Jeffrey Ullman who is a leading computer scientist. A number of other students were also receiving funding under the MDDS.

What was happening apparently, at least from 1996 to 1998, was Sergey Brin was actually personally meeting with Thuraisingham and Steinheiser and briefing them about the progress of his research, particularly on the development of the Google search engine.

What is interesting is that none of this is necessarily particularly unusual. The MDDS was – from what I gather – an unclassified program, but it was sensitive in the sense that clearly information about the program is not widely available. There has not been any public records stuff about it. There are no easy, available documents in public about this program, but there were snippets of it. It's been described by Thuraisingham and I ended up finding bits and pieces about it in stuff that she talked about in prefaces to various books that she'd written. It's been mentioned in a couple of journal articles offhand here and there.

But it's all been very vague. There is nothing official about it. I mean, I managed to find an email that had been put out as a research call to the computer science community in the United States on one email list, but that was all. So clearly, I spoke to a couple of people in the intelligence community who used to work in intelligence and they've said to me that they can't say for sure but that it seems that it was probably a sensitive but unclassified program.

So what this shows very clearly is that Sergey Brin was associated with the intelligence community at this time. In fact, Thuraisingham even said that the money that MDDS provided wasn't a huge amount of money. He probably got more money from elsewhere – from his National Science Foundation (NSF) grant and other grants in the private



sector, I think they were Hitachi and IBM.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Let me just step in here for a second because how these things go, it's always impossible for you as an investigative journalist to say this, but I'm an investment person so I'll say it.

What happens is the decision is made: We want this to go. Then you put in a little money directly, but then you wrench for other agencies, too. Then you call certain people in the private sector and arrange for them to do that, too.

Money comes in from anywhere from two to ten to twenty different directions, but it's all been arranged.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** I think what is interesting about this is that it doesn't actually matter whether it was arranged or whether it was an accident because one thing that was interesting was that Steinheiser has had a very long relationship with Stanford University. I found this letter from these archives of a renowned computer scientist who pioneered the Association of Artificial Intelligence. His name is Edward Feigenbaum. According to this letter, Steinheiser was going to visit Feigenbaum as long as 20 years ago that he was going to Stanford. I think the letter was dated 1983. The letter was literally about Steinheiser coming, and they were giving him parking directions as to where to find parking on campus.

The point is that he, at that time, was going. He was affiliated to the Office of Naval Research. What we see here is that someone like Steinheiser who clearly at that time was involved in some kind of AI research – there was an AI steering committee of some kind inside the intelligence community linked to the Naval Research where he was at. He was going to Stanford and he was talking to this guy.

There were clearly long-standing relationships here going far back. We also know that DARPA had also had long-standing relationships with Stanford. They had been funding Feigenbaum for decades – millions of dollars they had given him for all kinds of different research.



DARPA had funded Jeffrey Ullman. DARPA had funded many of the financiers that also put in seed funding for Google. So it doesn't really matter where you stand on this ideologically. I mean, for most people who understand how CIA operations work, they are beginning to realize that this is how the CIA tends to do things. If it wants to conceal something, it has to go through front companies and front operations. The whole point is that in the CIA nobody is going to come and say, "Here's some money. Let's just do it and no one can see that we're doing it." No. You've got to try to do it discreetly.

In this case, they were actually a little less discreet in the fact that they had this program that was clearly being run by the CIA and the NSA, and it was actually giving money out to certain people.

What is interesting is whether or not you think that it was done as part of a preconceived arrangement or you consider that Sergey Brin went to Stanford and was at the right place at the right time. He was a bit of a genius. He and Larry Page came up with this amazing idea, and they were in prime position at this time when the CIA and the NSA were all over Stanford and they were looking for stuff, and then they found Brin.

What is very clear is that Steinheiser and Thuraisingham took a very specific interest in what Brin was doing. Why were they seeing him every three months? They were travelling down to Stanford from wherever they worked every three months to get an update on his progress.

Then you take it all together and you collaborate all of that with the way in which Google continued to be having these relationships with the intelligence community. I mean, for example, the CIA guy said to you that the CIA was going to launch Google.

It's very clear – and you're not the only person. Robert Steele is a former

**“In this case, they were actually a little less discreet in the fact that they had this program that was clearly being run by the CIA and the NSA, and it was actually giving money out to certain people.”**



CIA official for the last 26 years or so and is now retired. He was there for about 26 years, and he basically has also come out in 2006 and said that a number of CIA sources had told him that Steinheiser was the liaison with Google for the CIA and had actually arranged funding.

It depends on how you look at it, but when you bring all of these facts together, there is no doubt whatsoever that the CIA – the intelligence community – the moment they recognized what Brin was doing at the very least, they essentially took ownership over what he was doing and made sure that they could operationalize it. That's really what the MDDS is about.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Right.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** On the abstract that Thuraisingham put up on the University of Texas website, you scroll down to the bottom and there is a lot of interesting information in there. That's just in a few paragraphs about the MDDS is about, but you go to the bottom and it says that the customers for this program of research are DOD, the intelligence community, and other potential government agencies.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Let me step back.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** This is what it was being funded for. It was to produce something that would be useful for the Pentagon, for the intelligence community.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Let me step back and look at it from a high level view. The shadow government had a problem. So the wall comes down in 1989, 1990. I think a lot of the technology in Silicon Valley was ceded out of the black budget, so they're reverse engineering stuff out of the black budget and putting it in Silicon Valley. It's a very organic process. They don't quite know where all of this is going to go.

What is developing out in Silicon Valley is technology that could literally reengineer the financial industry out of existence, not to mention significantly reengineer the defense budget, the military, and everything



else. They needed to get a handle on it.

I think they did two things. One is they poured money and then pumped and dumped Silicon Valley. In 1998 Silicon Valley was full of people who wanted to reinvent the world and make the world safe for humanity, etc. You go back ten years later and it's basically a group of defense contractors.

That was number one, but I think number two was: How do we run a global empire with a friendly face? They came out of World War II with a great spin as to why the US was a friendly face when it wasn't, and they kept the violence very covert.

I think the question was: Now that we're the only global superpower, how do we do that? They took one look at this technology and said, "Okay, this is how we do it. We basically have complete information awareness of every person." But how do you market that? You need young, friendly, entrepreneurs like Brin or Mark Zuckerberg who make the kids and the young people just grab this and go.

So to me, these are just friendly fronts and they don't really even understand what happened.

It's funny because you see the intelligence community get around one entrepreneur and not the other, and the other one is hardworking and has a great product, and he can't understand why his thing is not going, and yet this other guy is going in speedy, miraculous ways. Everything just keeps coming together. It's all synchronicity.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** Absolutely. I mean, if you think about it from the perspective of someone like Brin or Page or you're a student at Stanford doing your PhD and you're developing this technology, and suddenly there are people around you who are going to give you money, you're like, "This is going to be a huge opportunity." Then you've got doors opening to the government and intelligence, and you feel important. You're helping to save people, and it's a well-known thing.



One of the things that people always say is when the CIA is trying to bring people into the fold, it's all about making you feel good. They make you feel like you're contributing. They make you feel important.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Right.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** It's very easy to imagine a younger tech entrepreneur with their eyes just lighting up and the world opening up to them in a way that they never would have imagined before.

This is certainly something that has been happening across the board, but what is really fascinating about the story of Google and other tech companies related to it is the extent to which people inside the intelligence community and people who may not be in the intelligence community but are closely aligned with the intelligence community – whether they're wealthy financiers or bankers or whatever – the extent to which you have people who are sympathetic to the Pentagon and its values all imbedded in those networks, having their fingerprints on these kinds of tech starters like Facebook, Google, and others is absolutely mind-blowing.

When I started looking at the connections to the Pentagon's Highlands Forum which actually does exactly like what you were saying in terms of this idea of, "Well, wait a minute. We've got this global empire. How do we find a way to run this and keep people happy? The answer is information."

It's extraordinary to see how precisely that mindset was apparent inside the Highlands Forum, which is all about information and informational warfare and information operations.

The guy who was asked by William Perry, who at that time was Clinton's Defense Secretary, Perry apparently asked Richard O'Neill, who was a former Navy cryptologist who had gone on to be a Pentagon staffer, to set up the Highlands Forum. Eventually they decided they were going to set it up in the private sector rather than making it a formal Pentagon thing, which according to Richard O'Neill, was all





about avoiding bureaucracy, avoiding regulatory restrictions, and allowing no holds barred discussions. Essentially it was about keeping outside of the spectrum of any kind of public scrutiny it seemed.

They set this thing up, and what was really interesting was that Richard O'Neill, who now founded and set up and was now running this Highlands Forum, was bringing in private contractors like Booz Allen Hamilton and Science Applications International Corporation. He had Google executives coming and people from eBay and PayPal and Cisco, and people who were closely connected to the very financiers who gave seed funding to google.

We can go on and on about the networks that were involved in this, but in the 1970's, according to Colonel John Alexander who was another former senior US intelligence official, he wrote in a book he mentioned that Richard O'Neill wrote this paper for the US Navy as part of his thesis all about information operations. Apparently the paper identified three main targets for information warfare, and it was called 'A Strategy for Perception Management.'

According to John Alexander, this was actually the first time that this idea of perception management had been articulated in such a cogent way. Of course, information operations have been a core part of US policy and British policy and Western policy for many decades before then, but he said that this was the first time it had really been coherently worked out.

The three main targets, interestingly, were the adversary. The idea was to make the adversary feel vulnerable. The second target, he said, were kind of governments and partners. That included the domestic government. The idea was that they needed to feel that they have to be involved and support the policy that the Pentagon has adopted. And the third target of information warfare are the general publics who have to be convinced that the cost is worth it.

**“He had Google executives coming and people from eBay and PayPal and Cisco, and people who were closely connected to the very financiers who gave seed funding to google.”**



That's kind of an extraordinary set of three targets of information warfare that we see, and what apparently John Alexander said was that this scheme went all the way up to and was presented to the top leadership of the Pentagon. Apparently they said that it was a really good idea, but in his words, "They buried it."

What is interesting is that I'm not sure why John Alexander said that they buried it. Is that disinformation? Well, maybe he didn't know, but the Highlands Forum that was now being set up and run by Richard O'Neill was set up to exactly do what he had actually described in that paper.

It's no coincidence that we then see the Highlands Forum being used by the Pentagon as this nexus to literally canvas what was going on in the private sector, especially bringing information technology experts and entrepreneurs and really scouring the market to see what is next and what is on the edge and what the next big thing is that is going to happen. How could we incorporate this into what the Pentagon is doing?

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** There are two stories I want to tell you. One is that I was a subscriber to Esther Dyson's newsletter at the time, in the 1990's. She used to have a conference once a year out in the desert. Everybody who was anybody in the information technology world would go.

I was out there in 1997, and there were venture capitalists who were throwing huge amounts of money at all the entrepreneurs. You would go and see your presentation and an entrepreneur would have an idea, and it was very clever, but it was never going to go. It was never going to make a difference to two busy parents with two busy kids. It was never going to make a difference and there was really no market, but it was a very neat, clever idea.

The place was just inundated with venture capitalists, and the entrepreneur needed \$25,000 to prototype his idea. The guy was saying, "I'll give you \$10 million, but you have to take at least \$10 million."



I'll never forget Bill Ryan who was the public relations guy for Yahoo Finance. We just got freaked. We went early and had lunch, and you had guys handing out \$10 million at a time for things that were clearly never going to go.

Of course, what happened is they all got pumped up and then sold into the pension funds, and a huge pump and dump. So a couple of years later I finally understood, but when that process was over, Silicon Valley was owned by Wall Street. They had been pumped and dumped, and it was all over. Wall Street was the king, and a lot of it was really oriented to serving defense.

There was a real integration of the national security infrastructure with all the young guys in Silicon Valley.

That is story number one. Story number two I have to tell you. I was sitting in Hamilton Securities. We prided ourselves in 1995 for being one of the leaders in using computer technology in creative ways.

Anyway, my Chief Financial Officer comes to me and he says, "We need a personnel system."

I said, "That's a complete waste of time and money. I don't want a personnel system."

He said, "No, we have to have one."

I said, "Okay. At the end of this year, we're going to require every employee to build an HTML website about themselves on the internet, and then we'll stitch them together. That will be our personnel system."

That's what we did, and then when Facebook came along I said, "Oh, they're going to do it for the world."

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** Oh, wow!

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Oh, yeah. You don't want to get me started on Facebook. I



have lots of Facebook stories I'd love to tell you. It's the same kind of thing. You know the agency is going to create a blah, blah, blah.

So you've written this series on Google. I hope you'll write the series on Facebook.

One of the things I wanted to tell you was that I went out to Esther Dyson's thing in 1997, and who has got the big table is Goldman Sachs because Goldman Sachs was right in the middle of everything. Of course, you nailed it because the key to getting these things to go is they have to go financially. That is always the question: How do you figure out how to get this thing to go financially? Part of that is: How do you make sure it has a successful IPO? You breed it up through the venture space, but then you get it to the point where it can go in the market, and you've got to get it to go with investors.

Firms like Goldman play a very critical role in all of that. Anyway, I hope your next series is going to be Facebook.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** It's interesting you mention all of that because Esther Dyson is actually a long-standing member of the Pentagon Highlands Forum. I don't know if you were aware of that.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** You know, not today, but sometime I will regale you with Esther Dyson stories.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** She has obviously been going along for a lot of the nexus that you experienced. It's also interesting because Goldman Sachs just keeps coming up repeatedly with relations in the tech stuff.

What was really fascinating about it was how direct some of the connections were. I mean, apart from the fact that we see that revolving door between Goldman Sachs executives, for example Stephen Friedman who was a former chairman. He was on the executive board up until last year or something, but he stepped down.

He had been asked to serve under President Bush on the Intelligence



Advisory Committee and had played all kinds of roles in various investigations into intelligence, and had – in that context – been in close contact with people involved in the NSA and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and specifically other types of agencies because of the government investigations and enquiries that he was involved in.

Apart from that, there was a whole connection with George C. Lee who I was surprised to find was the main guy who had funded a new partnership between the Pentagon Highlands Forum and the Monterey Institute for International Studies (MIIS) and their Cyber Security Research initiative.

In this partnership it now seemed the Highlands Forum was going to be doing a lot of sessions in liaison with the MIIS, but George C. Lee was the guy who basically put down from himself personally the money which allowed this initiative to take off. He is also the same guy who was responsible for some of those massive valuations of Facebook and Google and eBay and PayPal.

That precise nexus that you talk about where you see how there's the CIA sitting there thinking, "We're just going to put money into something," which they are now doing through their private...

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** They always do it so they make money.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** Absolutely. I think it's interesting how it's all about networks rather than it being this kind of easy, obvious thing that you can see. It's all about networks of influence and the fact that there are so many of these people in Goldman Sachs, which is clearly one of the go-to funds in terms of if you want money raised for your favored tech company, that is who you go to.

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the intelligence community which have gone back decades and which are constantly mobilizing through these personal relationships which are just cementing those ties.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Right.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** I think that for me was something that I've been aware of, but I was quite shocked at the extent to which it seemed to be operating in relation to all of these big names that we see all the time.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Here's why. Many people think of the US government as a government. I don't think of the US government as a government. It's not a sovereign government. It doesn't have information sovereignty. It doesn't have financial sovereignty.

If you look at the bank accounts for the US government, they are run by the New York Fed as depository, which means they are run by the agent banks including Goldman Sachs. If you go into a big financial operation in government like HUD, all the servicing and mortgage portfolios are run by the big New York Fed member banks, and they have control and they have information control; the government officials don't.

What you're describing on Chuck Hagel was he may have been trying to revert things to government bureaucracy control, and it's the same thing with IT. When most people see the US government they see 21 government agencies. I don't see that. I see five defense contractors who control all the databases.

When I was Assistant Secretary, I used to try to get data on the Section 8 program, and Lockheed Martin wouldn't give it to me. I couldn't make them give me my own data.

It's a much more integrated, complex picture that is different than what it looks like.

Here is one other thing I want to bring up before we close, and that is at the same time that this is going on, you have a literal financial coup



d'état going on, including \$4 trillion going missing through the government – very much engineered through the information systems. I suspect that is a story that is connected to the marvelous story you've written. I'm calling it 'The Google Series'.

If you have not yet talked to Bill Hamilton, who was the former NSA employee who started Inslaw, who built PROMIS software, and you're interested in that aspect, I would encourage you to do it. There are so many different interesting aspects to your story.

That leads me to what we can do, and one of the things that we can do is support your Insurge Intelligence. Why don't you tell us about that and what is next for you?

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** I was at the *Guardian*. I've been a freelance and independent journalist for almost fourteen years now. Most of you might have seen my work at the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, and *Foreign Policy Atlantic*, and other places.

I got a gig at the *Guardian* which is great. I had a contact and everything else. I wrote a couple of stories which seemed to be essentially pissing my editors off.

I was lucky enough that when I had my contract I had complete editorial control as part of my contract, so it was a very rare type of agreement. It was a really great gig.

But it also meant that I would often put my head in the lion's mouth without realizing it because I wasn't going directly through an editor; I was just posting stuff to the website.

I apparently crossed a real line when I wrote a story about Gaza and Israel's operation to protect its edge. It's something that I've been following for many years – the role of Gaza's gas and the gas resources that have been discovered offshore in the Gaza Marine, and how those resources are increasingly problematizing the conflict and making it much more attractable and complicating it and taking it in these





unexpected directions.

So I wrote a story which brought in the gas connection. I certainly was not trying to argue that the whole conflict was all about resources, but rather I was trying to demonstrate the extent to which resources are increasingly playing this very important role in these kinds of conflicts.

Literally the day after I posted the article I got a call from one of my senior editors. They literally just unilaterally told me that my contract was terminated and that was it.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** So this was more offensive than what Glenn Greenwald did with Snowden.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** Yes.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** I just want to point that out!

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** It was weird because obviously after that experience, that was quite an egregious form of censorship as far as I could see. I've not seen something like that happen, and the *Guardian* is one of the better papers as far as coverage and limitations and all the rest of it.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Right.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** I was quite shocked to see a liberal paper do that in that way. So one of the things that I've been doing in terms of information stuff is looking at – and I'm sure you have been covering this stuff as well – is the extent to which information technology has in many ways transformed our economy, but also opened up so many new possibilities for distributed technologies, whether it's in terms of energy or finance. There is this whole emerging movement now which is very difficult for centralized states to control its coop and to benefit and profit from them in the way that they used to.

Certainly things like solar energy and this new Bitcoin and all the other things, whatever one might think of them, they're certainly challenging a



lot of these traditional modes of doing things.

That made me think more and more about trying to set up media which is independent and which is not accountable to corporate financing and not accountable to government funding but accountable to people. That was when I thought, “Maybe this is the right time.” That was something that I was toying with for a while but never really had the impetus to just go out there and do this.

I thought, “Why don’t we have a crowd-funded investigative journalism project which does attempt to basically tackle these controversial issues that the mainstream is too scared to touch, and go into these areas and join the dots and really go deep into these issues?”

That was why I decided to go down this route of moving my whole way of doing things away from just pitching to mainstream and setting up something which is independent and publicly funded – crowd-funded.

So far it has been a real success. I’ve used this website called [www.Patreon.com](http://www.Patreon.com) where basically they have all kinds of creative people who are artists or writers or journalists who basically have a community of people who love their work. The idea is that you either pay per product or you pay per month, something like that.

I’ve got this new little community of patrons now who have basically contributed something that altogether – just in the couple of months since launching the crowd-funding – generated \$2,000 a month.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** I’ve asked my bookkeeper for us to join. If we’re not on now, we will be shortly.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** That would be amazing.

**“That was why I decided to go down this route of moving my whole way of doing things away from just pitching to mainstream and setting up something...”**



It's all about trying to shift the way people think about media and try to encourage others. What we're saying is it doesn't even have to be very much. You can pay anything you want. If it's per month, you can pay as little as \$1 a month or as much as you would like.

What I'm trying to do is move towards the point where the more patron subscribers we have, in an ideal scenario we can reduce the amount that people are actually paying. It's virtually negligible because we have large numbers.

The idea is that we have enough funds that we're able to set up a proper platform. At the moment it's all about funding my journalism, but ideally I would love to be able to hire other investigative journalists who are doing important work that is not getting the attention it deserves. I can bring them on board and make their work sustainable.

Also, the biggest thing for me is getting people involved – not just in terms of donating, but getting them involved because they have ownership and there is that incentive to be involved in how we craft the platform. What kind of stories do you want us to investigate? Who do you want us to hire? How do you want us to be able to create an analyzed news that is out there? Do you want us to set up the platform in different ways?

It's kind of opening up this really exciting way of doing media, and it's an adventure. I'm looking forward to seeing where it goes.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Well, you keep illuminating the censored stories, Nafeez.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** Thank you.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** I can't think of a more wonderful thing to do with our gifting budget than to put some towards your effort. I think Insurge Intelligence is a wonderful idea.

We will have a link to it in the blogpost for The Solari Report and to all your other websites as well, and to the Google Series. It will all be there.



In closing, are there any other ideas? I have to make a pitch. Please get off of Gmail and onto Startmail. I can't tell you how many of our subscribers are on Gmail. It just makes me nervous.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** It's definitely an issue. I mean, I'm on Gmail. I didn't expect that I would end up having a dilemma about it.

It's kind of annoying because Google is very, very useful. It's a great tool.

As a journalist, I do need to basically think about sensitivity, and I do need to make sure that I protect my sources. In terms of some stuff, I can't use Gmail.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** One of the things I would encourage you to do is watch a wonderful documentary called *Terms and Conditions*. If you haven't seen it yet, I really encourage you to watch it. It's about when you use these various tools the terms and conditions that you really agree to. It's quite remarkable. Take a look at it if you get a chance.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** Okay. I will do that definitely.

**C. AUSTIN FITTS:** Well, Nafeez, I can't thank you enough. Keep us posted on what we can do to support you. We will have all of this up next week in the blogpost. We're in cahoots.

**NAFEEZ AHMED:** Fantastic. Thank you so much.

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