

BEYOND GOOD AND “DON’T BE EVIL”

Eric Schmidt is an influential figure, even among the parade of powerful characters with whom I have had to cross paths since I founded WikiLeaks. In mid-May 2011 I was under house arrest in rural Norfolk, about three hours’ drive northeast of London. The crackdown against our work was in full swing and every wasted moment seemed like an eternity. It was hard to get my attention. But when my colleague Joseph Farrell told me the executive chairman of Google wanted to make an appointment with me, I was listening. In some ways the higher echelons of Google seemed more distant and obscure to me than the halls of Washington. We had been locking horns with senior US officials for years by that point. The mystique had worn off. But the power centers growing up in Silicon Valley were still opaque and I was suddenly conscious of an opportunity to understand and influence what was becoming the most influential company on earth. Schmidt had taken over as CEO of Google in 2001 and built it into an empire. I was intrigued that the mountain would come to Muhammad. But it was not until well after Schmidt and his companions had been and gone that I came to understand who had really visited me.

The stated reason for the visit was a book. Schmidt was penning a treatise with Jared Cohen, the director of Google Ideas, an outfit that describes itself as Google’s in-house “think/do tank.” I knew little else about Cohen at the time. In fact, Cohen had moved to Google from the US State Department in 2010. He had been a fast-talking “Generation Y” ideas man at State under two US administrations, a courtier from the world of policy think tanks and institutes, poached in his early twenties. He became a senior advisor for Secretaries of State Rice and Clinton. At State, on the Policy Planning Staff, Cohen was soon christened “Condi’s party-starter,” channeling buzzwords from Silicon Valley into US policy circles and producing delightful rhetorical concoctions such as “Public Diplomacy 2.0.” On his Council on Foreign Relations adjunct staff page he listed his expertise as “terrorism; radicalization; impact of connection technologies on 21st century statecraft; Iran.”

It was Cohen who, while he was still at the Department of State, was said to have emailed Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey to delay scheduled maintenance in order to assist the aborted 2009 uprising in Iran. His documented love affair with Google began the same year, when he befriended Eric Schmidt as they together surveyed the post-occupation wreckage of Baghdad. Just months later, Schmidt re-created Cohen’s natural habitat within Google itself by engineering a “think/do tank” based in New York and appointing Cohen as its head. Google Ideas was born.

Later that year the two co-wrote a policy piece for the Council on Foreign Relations’ journal *Foreign Affairs*, praising the reformatory potential of Silicon Valley technologies as an instrument of US foreign policy. Describing what they called “coalitions of the connected,” Schmidt and Cohen claimed that

Democratic states that have built coalitions of their militaries have the capacity to do the same with their connection technologies. . . . They offer a new way to exercise the duty to protect citizens around the world [emphasis added].

In the same piece they argued that “this technology is overwhelmingly provided by the private sector.”

In February 2011, less than two months after that article was published, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was ousted by a popular revolution. Egypt had been a US client, its military dictatorship propped up by Washington to support America's "geopolitical interests in the region." During the initial stages of the revolution, Western political elites had backed Mubarak. US vice president Biden, who only a month earlier had claimed that "Julian Assange" was a "high-tech terrorist," now informed the world that Hosni Mubarak was "not a dictator" and stressed that he should not resign.⁹ Former UK prime minister Tony Blair insisted that Mubarak was "immensely courageous and a force for good." For Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the Mubaraks were "family friends."

Under the surface, as a close reading of its internal cable traffic shows, the State Department had for years bet on both horses, supporting and co-opting elements of Egyptian civil society even as it helped to keep Mubarak in power. But when the US establishment realized that Hosni was on the way out, it scrambled for alternatives. It first tried to elevate its secretly preferred successor, Omar Suleiman—the much-hated domestic intelligence chief. But the State Department's own diplomatic correspondence from Cairo, which we were publishing in volume at the time, provided a frank appraisal of his background. Suleiman was Egypt's torturer in chief, the CIA's main man in Egypt, and Israel's approved choice for Mubarak's replacement. For these and other reasons Suleiman lost international support and Egyptians rejected him just as they had rejected Mubarak. Never keen to back a loser, the United States pivoted, trying to plant itself in front of the crowd. Its former hesitancy was readily forgotten, and the long, hard road to the Egyptian revolution was spun by Hillary Clinton as a triumph for American technology corporations, and later, for the State Department itself.

Suddenly everyone wanted to be at the intersection point between US global power and social media, and Schmidt and Cohen had already staked out the territory. With the working title "The Empire of the Mind," they began expanding their article to book length, and sought audiences with the big names of global tech and global power as part of their research. They said they wanted to interview me. I agreed.

A date was set for June.

By the time June came around there was already a lot to talk about. That summer WikiLeaks was still grinding through the release of US diplomatic cables, publishing thousands of them every week. When, seven months earlier, we had first started releasing the cables, Hillary Clinton had denounced the publication as "an attack on the international community" that would "tear at the fabric" of government. She was, in a way, right.

In many countries, the "fabric" Clinton referred to had been woven from lies: the more authoritarian the country, the bigger the lies. The more a power faction relied on the US to prop up its power, the more it whispered into American ears about its factional rivals. This pattern was repeated in capital cities all over the world: a capricious global system of secret loyalties, owed favors, and false consensus, of saying one thing in public and the opposite in private. The scale and geographic diversity of our publications overwhelmed the State Department's ability to handle the crisis. Threads between players snapped, leaving gaps through which decades of resentment would pour.

The “tears in the fabric” of government appeared almost immediately in North Africa. On November 28, 2010, the first cables were released into an already volatile political environment. The corruption of the regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was no secret in Tunisia, where the population suffered widespread poverty, unemployment, and government repression, while regime favorites hosted lavish parties and looked after their friends. But the State Department’s own internal documentation of the decadence of the Ben Ali government began to instigate public anger and calls to action among Tunisians. Ben Ali’s propaganda minister, Oussama Romdhani, later confessed that our leaks were “the coup de grâce, the thing that broke the Ben Ali system.” The regime began to censor the cables online, further enraging the public. WikiLeaks, Al Akhbar, and Le Monde disappeared from the Tunisian internet, replaced with “Ammar 404”: “Page not found.” The Tunisian publisher Nawaat.org fought back, disseminating translations of the cables under the radar of the Tunisian censorship system. For twenty days the mood simmered until, on December 17, the young fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi, driven to despair by corrupt municipal officials, set himself on fire. In death he was transformed into a symbol, and open rebellion spilled onto the streets. The protests raged over the New Year. On January 10, Tunisia was still in revolt when Hillary Clinton embarked on what she described as her global WikiLeaks “apology tour,” starting in the Middle East.¹⁶ Four days later the Tunisian government fell. Eleven days after that, the civil unrest spread to Egypt. The images were beamed throughout the region on unblockable satellite television by Qatar’s Al Jazeera network. Within a month there were “days of rage” and civil uprisings in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain, and large-scale protests in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Sudan. Even Saudi Arabia and Oman saw demonstrations. The year 2011 became one of serious political awakenings, crackdowns, and opportunistic military interventions. In January Muammar Gaddafi denounced WikiLeaks. By the end of the year he would be dead.

The wave of revolutionary excitement soon washed over Europe and elsewhere. By the time of my meeting with Schmidt in June, the Puerta del Sol was occupied and protesters were facing down black-clad riot police in squares all across Spain. There were encampments in Israel. Peru had seen protests and a change of government.¹⁸ The Chilean students’ movement had taken to the streets. The state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin, had been besieged by tens of thousands of people standing for workers’ rights. Riots were about to erupt in Greece, and then in London.

Alongside the changes on the streets, the internet was rapidly transitioning from an apathetic communications medium into a demos—a people with a shared culture, shared values, and shared aspirations. It had become a place where history happens, a place people identified with and even felt they came from.

The US government’s treatment of the alleged source of the State Department cables, Chelsea Manning, had been witnessed by the whole world. By June a global campaign, coordinated over the internet, had managed to pressure the US government to stop torturing her.

The US financial blockade against WikiLeaks had provoked massive denial-of-service protests from a once apolitical internet youth. Anonymous—once an obscure internet meme—had become a battering ram for the internet’s emergent political ideology. In a spectacular electronic intrusion and information dump, sympathetic hackers operating under the Anonymous banner had exposed a \$2-million-a-month subversion campaign

targeting WikiLeaks and its supporters (including reporter Glenn Greenwald), which had been prepared by a group of private security contractors on behalf of the Bank of America.

Barrett Brown, a talented young freelance journalist, had begun the investigative work into this state-security axis that would eventually land him in a US prison. Bitcoin had gone from being worthless to achieving parity with the dollar. And as early as June, names like “Operation: Empire State Rebellion” and “US Day of Rage” could be heard online, the early reverberations of the popular disenchantment that would by September coalesce into Occupy Wall Street.

The world was ablaze, but the farmlands around Ellingham Hall slept on. Norfolk was an idyllic setting, but my situation was far from ideal. Pinned there under house arrest, I was at a tactical disadvantage. WikiLeaks had always been a guerilla publisher. We would draw surveillance and censorship in one jurisdiction and redeploy in another, moving across borders like ghosts. But at Ellingham I became an immovable asset under siege. We could no longer choose our battles. Fronts opened up on all sides. I had to learn to think like a general.

We were at war. Our “industrial base” was under bombardment. Whole sections of WikiLeaks’ physical and human infrastructure kept disappearing, as the banks placed us under extralegal financial blockades while communications companies, foreign governments, and our human networks were pressured by Washington. Although I had not been charged with a crime, my extradition case ground on through appeal after appeal, swallowing my savings and time and leaving the possibility that at any moment WikiLeaks would be decapitated.

Each month brought news of yet another government task force. So many US and Australian agencies were involved that both countries started to refer to their “whole of government” response in internal documents. The Pentagon’s “WikiLeaks War Room” alone had swollen to over a hundred people. A US grand jury was started against us, targeting my staff and me, and is ongoing at the time of writing. The FBI kept raiding our extended human network and attempting to recruit informers. Suddenly, lots of people had “WikiLeaks” on their business cards, but they were not doing business for WikiLeaks.

A vast train of sycophants and opportunists were also knocking at my door, surfing the economic gradient created by the conflict, each waiting to grab a moment of proximity and spin it into an expensive tabloid scandal or a favor to be paid. All we could do was keep our heads down and keep fighting. We rolled out 251,000 US State Department cables, along with thousands of pages of secret files from Guantánamo Bay, to over a hundred countries—a serious logistical, legal, cultural, and political endeavor.²⁸ In rare moments of recess—through the prism of a shaky rural internet connection, which kept shutting down in the snow—we kept track of the changes that were afoot and were able to reflect on the meaning of it all. We promised our sources impact and we were delivering. If people were going to prison it would not be for nothing.

It was into this ferment that Google projected itself that June, touching down in a London airport and making the long drive up into East Anglia to Norfolk and Beccles. Schmidt arrived first, accompanied by his then partner, Lisa Shields. When he introduced her as a

vice president of the Council on Foreign Relations—a US foreign-policy think tank with close ties to the State Department—I thought little more of it. Shields herself was straight out of Camelot, having been spotted by John Kennedy Jr.'s side back in the early 1990s. They sat with me and we exchanged pleasantries. They said they had forgotten their dictaphone, so we used mine. We made an agreement that I would forward them the recording and in exchange they would forward me the transcript, to be corrected for accuracy and clarity. We began. Schmidt plunged in at the deep end, straightaway quizzing me on the organizational and technological underpinnings of WikiLeaks.

Some time later Jared Cohen arrived. With him was Scott Malcomson, introduced as the book's editor. Three months after the meeting Malcomson would enter the State Department as the lead speechwriter and principal advisor to Susan Rice (then US ambassador to the United Nations, now national security advisor). He had previously served as a senior advisor at the United Nations, and is a longtime member of the Council on Foreign Relations. At the time of writing, he is the director of communications at the International Crisis Group. At this point, the delegation was one part Google, three parts US foreign-policy establishment, but I was still none the wiser. Handshakes out of the way, we got down to business.

Schmidt was a good foil. A late-fiftysomething, squint-eyed behind owlsh spectacles, managerially dressed—Schmidt's dour appearance concealed a machinelike analyticity. His questions often skipped to the heart of the matter, betraying a powerful nonverbal structural intelligence. It was the same intellect that had abstracted software-engineering principles to scale Google into a megacorp, ensuring that the corporate infrastructure always met the rate of growth. This was a person who understood how to build and maintain systems: systems of information and systems of people. My world was new to him, but it was also a world of unfolding human processes, scale, and information flows.

For a man of systematic intelligence, Schmidt's politics—such as I could hear from our discussion—were surprisingly conventional, even banal. He grasped structural relationships quickly, but struggled to verbalize many of them, often shoehorning geopolitical subtleties into Silicon Valley marketese or the ossified State Department microlanguage of his companions. He was at his best when he was speaking (perhaps without realizing it) as an engineer, breaking down complexities into their orthogonal components.

I found Cohen a good listener, but a less interesting thinker, possessed of that relentless conviviality that routinely afflicts career generalists and Rhodes Scholars. As you would expect from his foreign-policy background, Cohen had a knowledge of international flash points and conflicts and moved rapidly between them, detailing different scenarios to test my assertions. But it sometimes felt as if he was riffing on orthodoxies in a way that was designed to impress his former colleagues in official Washington. Malcomson, older, was more pensive, his input thoughtful and generous. Shields was quiet for much of the conversation, taking notes, humoring the bigger egos around the table while she got on with the real work.

As the interviewee I was expected to do most of the talking. I sought to guide them into my worldview. To their credit, I consider the interview perhaps the best I have given. I was out of my comfort zone and I liked it. We ate and then took a walk in the grounds, all the while on the record. I asked Eric Schmidt to leak US government information requests to

WikiLeaks, and he refused, suddenly nervous, citing the illegality of disclosing Patriot Act requests. And then as the evening came on it was done and they were gone, back to the unreal, remote halls of information empire, and I was left to get back to my work. That was the end of it, or so I thought.

Two months later, WikiLeaks' release of State Department cables was coming to an abrupt end. For three-quarters of a year we had painstakingly managed the publication, pulling in over a hundred global media partners, distributing documents in their regions of influence, and overseeing a worldwide, systematic publication and redaction system, fighting for maximum impact for our sources.

But in an act of gross negligence the Guardian newspaper—our former partner—had published the confidential decryption password to all 251,000 cables in a chapter heading in its book, rushed out hastily in February 2011.³¹ By mid-August we discovered that a former German employee—whom I had suspended in 2010—was cultivating business relationships with a variety of organizations and individuals by shopping around the location of the encrypted file, paired with the password's whereabouts in the book. At the rate the information was spreading, we estimated that within two weeks most intelligence agencies, contractors, and middlemen would have all the cables, but the public would not.

I decided it was necessary to bring forward our publication schedule by four months and contact the State Department to get it on record that we had given them advance warning. The situation would then be harder to spin into another legal or political assault. Unable to raise Louis Susman, then US ambassador to the UK, we tried the front door. WikiLeaks investigations editor Sarah Harrison called the State Department front desk and informed the operator that "Julian Assange" wanted to have a conversation with Hillary Clinton. Predictably, this statement was initially greeted with bureaucratic disbelief. We soon found ourselves in a reenactment of that scene in *Dr. Strangelove*, where Peter Sellers cold-calls the White House to warn of an impending nuclear war and is immediately put on hold. As in the film, we climbed the hierarchy, speaking to incrementally more superior officials until we reached Clinton's senior legal advisor. He told us he would call us back. We hung up, and waited.

When the phone rang half an hour later, it was not the State Department on the other end of the line. Instead, it was Joseph Farrell, the WikiLeaks staffer who had set up the meeting with Google. He had just received an email from Lisa Shields seeking to confirm that it was indeed WikiLeaks calling the State Department.

It was at this point that I realized Eric Schmidt might not have been an emissary of Google alone. Whether officially or not, he had been keeping some company that placed him very close to Washington, DC, including a well-documented relationship with President Obama. Not only had Hillary Clinton's people known that Eric Schmidt's partner had visited me, but they had also elected to use her as a back channel. While WikiLeaks had been deeply involved in publishing the inner archive of the US State Department, the US State Department had, in effect, snuck into the WikiLeaks command center and hit me up for a free lunch. Two years later, in the wake of his early 2013 visits to China, North Korea, and Burma, it would come to be appreciated that the chairman of Google might be conducting, in

one way or another, “back-channel diplomacy” for Washington. But at the time it was a novel thought.

I put it aside until February 2012, when WikiLeaks—along with over thirty of our international media partners—began publishing the Global Intelligence Files: the internal email spool from the Texas-based private intelligence firm Stratfor.³³ One of our stronger investigative partners—the Beirut-based newspaper Al Akhbar—scoured the emails for intelligence on Jared Cohen. The people at Stratfor, who liked to think of themselves as a sort of corporate CIA, were acutely conscious of other ventures that they perceived as making inroads into their sector. Google had turned up on their radar. In a series of colorful emails they discussed a pattern of activity conducted by Cohen under the Google Ideas aegis, suggesting what the “do” in “think/do tank” actually means.

Cohen’s directorate appeared to cross over from public relations and “corporate responsibility” work into active corporate intervention in foreign affairs at a level that is normally reserved for states. Jared Cohen could be wryly named Google’s “director of regime change.” According to the emails, he was trying to plant his fingerprints on some of the major historical events in the contemporary Middle East. He could be placed in Egypt during the revolution, meeting with Wael Ghonim, the Google employee whose arrest and imprisonment hours later would make him a PR-friendly symbol of the uprising in the Western press. Meetings had been planned in Palestine and Turkey, both of which—claimed Stratfor emails—were killed by the senior Google leadership as too risky. Only a few months before he met with me, Cohen was planning a trip to the edge of Iran in Azerbaijan to “engage the Iranian communities closer to the border,” as part of Google Ideas’ project on “repressive societies.” In internal emails Stratfor’s vice president for intelligence, Fred Burton (himself a former State Department security official), wrote:

Google is getting WH [White House] and State Dept support and air cover. In reality they are doing things the CIA cannot do . . . [Cohen] is going to get himself kidnapped or killed. Might be the best thing to happen to expose Google’s covert role in foaming up-risings, to be blunt. The US Gov’t can then disavow knowledge and Google is left holding the shit-bag.

In further internal communication, Burton said his sources on Cohen’s activities were Marty Lev—Google’s director of security and safety—and Eric Schmidt himself.³⁶ Looking for something more concrete, I began to search in WikiLeaks’ archive for information on Cohen. State Department cables released as part of Cablegate reveal that Cohen had been in Afghanistan in 2009, trying to convince the four major Afghan mobile phone companies to move their antennas onto US military bases.³⁷ In Lebanon he quietly worked to establish an intellectual and clerical rival to Hezbollah, the “Higher Shia League.” And in London he offered Bollywood movie executives funds to insert anti-extremist content into their films, and promised to connect them to related networks in Hollywood.

Three days after he visited me at Ellingham Hall, Jared Cohen flew to Ireland to direct the “Save Summit,” an event cosponsored by Google Ideas and the Council on Foreign Relations. Gathering former inner-city gang members, right-wing militants, violent nationalists, and “religious extremists” from all over the world together in one place, the event aimed to workshop technological solutions to the problem of “violent extremism.” What could go wrong?

Cohen's world seems to be one event like this after another: endless soirees for the cross-fertilization of influence between elites and their vassals, under the pious rubric of "civil society." The received wisdom in advanced capitalist societies is that there still exists an organic "civil society sector" in which institutions form autonomously and come together to manifest the interests and will of citizens. The fable has it that the boundaries of this sector are respected by actors from government and the "private sector," leaving a safe space for NGOs and nonprofits to advocate for things like human rights, free speech, and accountable government.

This sounds like a great idea. But if it was ever true, it has not been for decades. Since at least the 1970s, authentic actors like unions and churches have folded under a sustained assault by free-market statism, transforming "civil society" into a buyer's market for political factions and corporate interests looking to exert influence at arm's length. The last forty years have seen a huge proliferation of think tanks and political NGOs whose purpose, beneath all the verbiage, is to execute political agendas by proxy.

It is not just obvious neocon front groups like Foreign Policy Initiative. It also includes fatuous Western NGOs like Freedom House, where naïve but well-meaning career nonprofit workers are twisted in knots by political funding streams, denouncing non-Western human rights violations while keeping local abuses firmly in their blind spots. The civil society conference circuit—which flies developing-world activists across the globe hundreds of times a year to bless the unholy union between "government and private stakeholders" at geopoliticized events like the "Stockholm Internet Forum"—simply could not exist if it were not blasted with millions of dollars in political funding annually.

Scan the memberships of the biggest US think tanks and institutes and the same names keep cropping up. Cohen's Save Summit went on to seed AVE, or AgainstViolentExtremism.org, a long-term project whose principal backer besides Google Ideas is the Gen Next Foundation. This foundation's website says it is an "exclusive membership organization and platform for successful individuals" that aims to bring about "social change" driven by venture capital funding. Gen Next's "private sector and non-profit foundation support avoids some of the potential perceived conflicts of interest faced by initiatives funded by governments." Jared Cohen is an executive member.

Gen Next also backs an NGO, launched by Cohen toward the end of his State Department tenure, for bringing internet-based global "pro-democracy activists" into the US foreign relations patronage network. The group originated as the "Alliance of Youth Movements" with an inaugural summit in New York City in 2008 funded by the State Department and encrusted with the logos of corporate sponsors.⁴⁵ The summit flew in carefully selected social media activists from "problem areas" like Venezuela and Cuba to watch speeches by the Obama campaign's new-media team and the State Department's James Glassman, and to network with public relations consultants, "philanthropists," and US media personalities. The outfit held two more invite-only summits in London and Mexico City where the delegates were directly addressed via video link by Hillary Clinton:

You are the vanguard of a rising generation of citizen activists. . . . And that makes you the kind of leaders we need.

In 2011, the Alliance of Youth Movements rebranded as "Movements.org." In 2012 Movements.org became a division of "Advancing Human Rights," a new NGO set up by

Robert L. Bernstein after he resigned from Human Rights Watch (which he had originally founded) because he felt it should not cover Israeli and US human rights abuses. Advancing Human Rights aims to right Human Rights Watch's wrong by focusing exclusively on "dictatorships." Cohen stated that the merger of his Movements.org outfit with Advancing Human Rights was "irresistible," pointing to the latter's "phenomenal network of cyberactivists in the Middle East and North Africa." He then joined the Advancing Human Rights board, which also includes Richard Kemp, the former commander of British forces in occupied Afghanistan.⁵² In its present guise, Movements.org continues to receive funding from Gen Next, as well as from Google, MSNBC, and PR giant Edelman, which represents General Electric, Boeing, and Shell, among others.

Google Ideas is bigger, but it follows the same game plan. Glance down the speaker lists of its annual invite-only get-togethers, such as "Crisis in a Connected World" in October 2013. Social network theorists and activists give the event a veneer of authenticity, but in truth it boasts a toxic piñata of attendees: US officials, telecom magnates, security consultants, finance capitalists, and foreign-policy tech vultures like Alec Ross (Cohen's twin at the State Department).⁵⁴ At the hard core are the arms contractors and career military: active US Cyber Command chieftains, and even the admiral responsible for all US military operations in Latin America from 2006 to 2009. Tying up the package are Jared Cohen and the chairman of Google, Eric Schmidt.

I began to think of Schmidt as a brilliant but politically hapless Californian tech billionaire who had been exploited by the very US foreign-policy types he had collected to act as translators between himself and official Washington—a West Coast–East Coast illustration of the principal-agent dilemma. I was wrong.

Eric Schmidt was born in Washington, DC, where his father had worked as a professor and economist for the Nixon Treasury. He attended high school in Arlington, Virginia, before graduating with a degree in engineering from Princeton. In 1979 Schmidt headed out West to Berkeley, where he received his PhD before joining Stanford/Berkley spin-off Sun Microsystems in 1983. By the time he left Sun, sixteen years later, he had become part of its executive leadership.

Sun had significant contracts with the US government, but it was not until he was in Utah as CEO of Novell that records show Schmidt strategically engaging Washington's overt political class. Federal campaign finance records show that on January 6, 1999, Schmidt donated two lots of \$1,000 to the Republican senator for Utah, Orrin Hatch. On the same day Schmidt's wife, Wendy, is also listed giving two lots of \$1,000 to Senator Hatch. By the start of 2001 over a dozen other politicians and PACs, including Al Gore, George W. Bush, Dianne Feinstein, and Hillary Clinton, were on the Schmidts' payroll, in one case for \$100,000.⁵⁷ By 2013, Eric Schmidt—who had become publicly over-associated with the Obama White House—was more politic. Eight Republicans and eight Democrats were directly funded, as were two PACs. That April, \$32,300 went to the National Republican Senatorial Committee. A month later the same amount, \$32,300, headed off to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. Why Schmidt was donating exactly the same amount of money to both parties is a \$64,600 question.

It was also in 1999 that Schmidt joined the board of a Washington, DC-based group: the New America Foundation, a merger of well-connected centrist forces (in DC terms). The foundation and its 100 staff serve as an influence mill, using its network of approved national security, foreign policy, and technology pundits to place hundreds of articles and op-eds per year. By 2008 Schmidt had become chairman of its board of directors. As of 2013 the New America Foundation's principal funders (each contributing over \$1 million) are listed as Eric and Wendy Schmidt, the US State Department, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Secondary funders include Google, USAID, and Radio Free Asia.

Schmidt's involvement in the New America Foundation places him firmly in the Washington establishment nexus. The foundation's other board members, seven of whom also list themselves as members of the Council on Foreign Relations, include Francis Fukuyama, one of the intellectual fathers of the neoconservative movement; Rita Hauser, who served on the President's Intelligence Advisory Board under both Bush and Obama; Jonathan Soros, the son of George Soros; Walter Russell Mead, a US security strategist and editor of the *American Interest*; Helene Gayle, who sits on the boards of Coca-Cola, Colgate-Palmolive, the Rockefeller Foundation, the State Department's Foreign Affairs Policy Unit, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the White House Fellows program, and Bono's ONE Campaign; and Daniel Yergin, oil geostrategist, former chair of the US Department of Energy's Task Force on Strategic Energy Research, and author of *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*.

The chief executive of the foundation, appointed in 2013, is Jared Cohen's former boss at the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, Anne-Marie Slaughter, a Princeton law and international relations wonk with an eye for revolving doors.⁶¹ She is everywhere at the time of writing, issuing calls for Obama to respond to the Ukraine crisis not only by deploying covert US forces into the country but also by dropping bombs on Syria—on the basis that this will send a message to Russia and China. Along with Schmidt, she is a 2013 attendee of the Bilderberg conference and sits on the State Department's Foreign Affairs Policy Board.

There was nothing politically hapless about Eric Schmidt. I had been too eager to see a politically unambitious Silicon Valley engineer, a relic of the good old days of computer science graduate culture on the West Coast. But that is not the sort of person who attends the Bilderberg conference four years running, who pays regular visits to the White House, or who delivers "fireside chats" at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Schmidt's emergence as Google's "foreign minister"—making pomp and ceremony state visits across geopolitical fault lines—had not come out of nowhere; it had been presaged by years of assimilation within US establishment networks of reputation and influence.

On a personal level, Schmidt and Cohen are perfectly likable people. But Google's chairman is a classic "head of industry" player, with all of the ideological baggage that comes with that role. Schmidt fits exactly where he is: the point where the centrist, liberal, and imperialist tendencies meet in American political life. By all appearances, Google's bosses genuinely believe in the civilizing power of enlightened multinational corporations, and they see this mission as continuous with the shaping of the world according to the better judgment of the "benevolent superpower." They will tell you that open-mindedness is a virtue, but all perspectives that challenge the exceptionalist drive at the heart of American foreign policy will remain invisible to them. This is the impenetrable banality of "don't be evil." They believe that they are doing good. And that is a problem.

Google is different. Google is visionary. Google is the future. Google is more than just a company. Google gives back to the community. Google is a force for good. Even when Google airs its corporate ambivalence publicly, it does little to dislodge these items of faith. The company's reputation is seemingly unassailable. Google's colorful, playful logo is imprinted on human retinas just under six billion times each day, 2.1 trillion times a year—an opportunity for respondent conditioning enjoyed by no other company in history. Caught red-handed last year making petabytes of personal data available to the US intelligence community through the PRISM program, Google nevertheless continues to coast on the goodwill generated by its “don't be evil” doublespeak. A few symbolic open letters to the White House later and it seems all is forgiven. Even anti-surveillance campaigners cannot help themselves, at once condemning government spying but trying to alter Google's invasive surveillance practices using appeasement strategies.

Nobody wants to acknowledge that Google has grown big and bad. But it has. Schmidt's tenure as CEO saw Google integrate with the shadiest of US power structures as it expanded into a geographically invasive megacorporation. But Google has always been comfortable with this proximity. Long before company founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin hired Schmidt in 2001, their initial research upon which Google was based had been partly funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). And even as Schmidt's Google developed an image as the overly friendly giant of global tech, it was building a close relationship with the intelligence community.

In 2003 the US National Security Agency (NSA) had already started systematically violating the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) under its director General Michael Hayden. These were the days of the “Total Information Awareness” program. Before PRISM was ever dreamed of, under orders from the Bush White House the NSA was already aiming to “collect it all, sniff it all, know it all, process it all, exploit it all.” During the same period, Google—whose publicly declared corporate mission is to collect and “organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful”—was accepting NSA money to the tune of \$2 million to provide the agency with search tools for its rapidly accreting hoard of stolen knowledge.

In 2004, after taking over Keyhole, a mapping tech startup cofunded by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) and the CIA, Google developed the technology into Google Maps, an enterprise version of which it has since shopped to the Pentagon and associated federal and state agencies on multimillion-dollar contracts. In 2008, Google helped launch an NGA spy satellite, the GeoEye-1, into space. Google shares the photographs from the satellite with the US military and intelligence communities. In 2010, NGA awarded Google a \$27 million contract for “geospatial visualization services.”

In 2010, after the Chinese government was accused of hacking Google, the company entered into a “formal information-sharing” relationship with the NSA, which was said to allow NSA analysts to “evaluate vulnerabilities” in Google's hardware and software. Although the exact contours of the deal have never been disclosed, the NSA brought in other government agencies to help, including the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security.

Around the same time, Google was becoming involved in a program known as the “Enduring Security Framework” (ESF), which entailed the sharing of information between Silicon Valley tech companies and Pentagon-affiliated agencies “at network speed.” Emails obtained in 2014 under Freedom of Information requests show Schmidt and his fellow Googler Sergey Brin corresponding on first-name terms with NSA chief General Keith Alexander about ESF. Reportage on the emails focused on the familiarity in the correspondence: “General Keith . . . so great to see you . . . !” Schmidt wrote. But most reports overlooked a crucial detail. “Your insights as a key member of the Defense Industrial Base,” Alexander wrote to Brin, “are valuable to ensure ESF’s efforts have measurable impact.”

The Department of Homeland Security defines the Defense Industrial Base as “the worldwide industrial complex that enables research and development, as well as design, production, delivery, and maintenance of military weapons systems, subsystems, and components or parts, to meet U.S. military requirements [emphasis added].” The Defense Industrial Base provides “products and services that are essential to mobilize, deploy, and sustain military operations.” Does it include regular commercial services purchased by the US military? No. The definition specifically excludes the purchase of regular commercial services. Whatever makes Google a “key member of the Defense Industrial Base,” it is not recruitment campaigns pushed out through Google AdWords or soldiers checking their Gmail.

In 2012, Google arrived on the list of top-spending Washington, DC, lobbyists—a list typically stalked exclusively by the US Chamber of Commerce, military contractors, and the petrocarbon leviathans. Google entered the rankings above military aerospace giant Lockheed Martin, with a total of \$18.2 million spent in 2012 to Lockheed’s \$15.3 million. Boeing, the military contractor that absorbed McDonnell Douglas in 1997, also came below Google, at \$15.6 million spent, as did Northrop Grumman at \$17.5 million.

In autumn 2013 the Obama administration was trying to drum up support for US airstrikes against Syria. Despite setbacks, the administration continued to press for military action well into September with speeches and public announcements by both President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry. On September 10, Google lent its front page—the most popular on the internet—to the war effort, inserting a line below the search box reading “Live! Secretary Kerry answers questions on Syria. Today via Hangout at 2pm ET.”

As the self-described “radical centrist” New York Times columnist Tom Friedman wrote in 1999, sometimes it is not enough to leave the global dominance of American tech corporations to something as mercurial as “the free market”:

The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist. McDonald’s cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies to flourish is called the US Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.

If anything has changed since those words were written, it is that Silicon Valley has grown restless with that passive role, aspiring instead to adorn the hidden fist like a velvet glove. Writing in 2013, Schmidt and Cohen stated,

What Lockheed Martin was to the twentieth century, technology and cyber-security companies will be to the twenty-first.

One way of looking at it is that it's just business. For an American internet services monopoly to ensure global market dominance it cannot simply keep doing what it is doing, and let politics take care of itself. American strategic and economic hegemony becomes a vital pillar of its market dominance. What's a megacorp to do? If it wants to straddle the world, it must become part of the original "don't be evil" empire.

But part of the resilient image of Google as "more than just a company" comes from the perception that it does not act like a big, bad corporation. Its penchant for luring people into its services trap with gigabytes of "free storage" produces the perception that Google is giving it away for free, acting directly contrary to the corporate profit motive. Google is perceived as an essentially philanthropic enterprise—a magical engine presided over by otherworldly visionaries—for creating a utopian future. The company has at times appeared anxious to cultivate this image, pouring funding into "corporate responsibility" initiatives to produce "social change"—exemplified by Google Ideas. But as Google Ideas shows, the company's "philanthropic" efforts, too, bring it uncomfortably close to the imperial side of US influence. If Blackwater/Xe Services/Academi was running a program like Google Ideas, it would draw intense critical scrutiny. But somehow Google gets a free pass.

Whether it is being just a company or "more than just a company," Google's geopolitical aspirations are firmly enmeshed within the foreign-policy agenda of the world's largest superpower. As Google's search and internet service monopoly grows, and as it enlarges its industrial surveillance cone to cover the majority of the world's population, rapidly dominating the mobile phone market and racing to extend internet access in the global south, Google is steadily becoming the internet for many people. Its influence on the choices and behavior of the totality of individual human beings translates to real power to influence the course of history. If the future of the internet is to be Google, that should be of serious concern to people all over the world—in Latin America, East and Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, the former Soviet Union, and even in Europe—for whom the internet embodies the promise of an alternative to US cultural, economic, and strategic hegemony. A "don't be evil" empire is still an empire.

By the time "The Empire of the Mind" eventually became *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business*, published in April 2013, I had formally sought and received political asylum from the government of Ecuador, and taken refuge in its embassy in London. At that point I had already spent nearly a year in the embassy under police surveillance, blocked from safe passage out of the UK. Online I noticed the press hum excitedly about Schmidt and Cohen's book, giddily ignoring the explicit digital imperialism of the title and the conspicuous string of pre-publication endorsements from famous warmongers like Tony Blair, Henry Kissinger, Bill Hayden and Madeleine Albright on the back. I assumed it must be because it was powerfully argued. I had someone carry a copy past the police cordon so I could read it.

I was astonished. Billed as a visionary forecast of global technological change, the book failed to deliver—failed even to imagine a future, good or bad, substantially different to the present. The book was a simplistic fusion of Fukuyama "end of history" ideology—out of vogue since the 1990s—and faster mobile phones. It was padded out with DC shibboleths,

State Department orthodoxies, and fawning grabs from Henry Kissinger. The scholarship was poor—even degenerate. It did not seem to fit the profile of Schmidt, that sharp, quiet man in my living room. But reading on I began to see that the book was not a serious attempt at future history. It was a love song from Google to official Washington. Google, a burgeoning digital superstate, was offering to be Washington's geopolitical visionary.

I waited for the stringent criticism the book would receive. But none came. From the mainstream press and the tech sector there was only uncomprehending praise. Growing impatient, I reviewed it myself. The piece was published in the New York Times on June 2, 2013. I wrote that “as it encountered the big, bad world,” Google had “thrown its lot in with traditional Washington power elements, from the State Department to the National Security Agency.” Google apologists tried to dismiss the review as paranoid. But four days later, newspapers around the world were filled with the stories of Edward Snowden's NSA leaks. Front and center was the PRISM exposé, revealing the extent of what Eric Schmidt had been hiding when I had asked him, in June 2011, to leak the US government's data requests to WikiLeaks.

Some of the statements attributed to me in *The New Digital Age* did not sound like things I would have said. I had our archive department dig up the old recording, and I listened back. Sure enough, perhaps unsurprisingly given the level of the book's analysis, Schmidt and Cohen had misrepresented my words. As I listened to the recording I came to see the wider value of the discussion, and how the surrounding and subsequent events had given it a historical resonance.

The discussion contains strong and previously uncommunicated descriptions of the philosophy behind WikiLeaks and how technology affects power dynamics and social structures. It includes concepts for how to use decentralized technology to protect revolutionary activity—ideas I would love to see taken and implemented. And at the level of symbolism, the discussion sees two different futures of the internet in conversation with each other: the one, a pervasive internet of centralized corporate governance; and the other, a vibrant, decentralized internet, fit for the emancipation of human history and human beings.

When *Google Met WikiLeaks* is the transcript of the discussion in book form. To make it more accessible for a general reader, OR Books and I have gone through the text and provided explanatory footnotes. Besides the transcript, I am including some other pieces of writing that lend it context. “The Banality of ‘Don't Be Evil’” is my New York Times review of Schmidt and Cohen's book, now fully referenced. “Deliver Us from ‘Don't Be Evil’” is a short overview of how WikiLeaks and the content of our discussion were represented (or misrepresented) in *The New Digital Age*. Throughout the book, references are made to various attempts by the US government and its allies to retaliate against WikiLeaks and its associates. Readers unfamiliar with these attempts can find a short summary, “Background on *US v. WikiLeaks*,” at the end of the book. An accompanying website—when.google.met.wikileaks.org—contains a collection of raw extracts of leaked US State Department cables and Stratfor internal emails, released by WikiLeaks, along with other material that informs the critique made in these pages.

—Julian Assange May 2014.