Experts say US must do more to secure the Internet

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(AP) -- The government must take a more active role in securing the Internet, industry experts told Congress Tuesday, arguing that as businesses and governments rely more on cyberspace the prospect of a serious attack grows.

Comparing the digital age to the dawn of automobiles, analysts said more government regulations may be the only way to force the public and private sectors to adequately counter cyber threats. They compared the need for new oversight to regulations for seat belts and safety equipment that made the highways safer.

At stake is the need to secure the financial and power systems vital to national security and daily life without choking off business innovation and competition. President Barack Obama declared cybersecurity a major priority early last year, but his administration struggled to make progress, not naming a new cyber coordinator until December.

"Cyber has become so important to the lives of our citizens and the functioning of our economy that gone are the days when Silicon Valley could say hands off to a government role," Michael McConnell, former director of national intelligence, told the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.

The panel has been trying for the past year to draft legislation that would map out a way the government and private industry could work together to protect critical computer networks, set industry standards and promote

more high-tech education and public awareness.

The calls for more government authority over the Internet's free enterprise has alarmed privacy advocates and other critics, forcing Congress to grasp for ways to encourage rather than mandate better online security.

Now on their fourth major draft, committee leaders have struggled to overcome protests from industry leaders and private groups who say the government should provide financial and other incentives, but stay away from regulation that might constrain the electronic age.

McConnell and others, however, warned that cyber attacks are already siphoning millions of dollars out of the economy and that critical networks that run the power grid, transportation lines, and nuclear safeguards are all vulnerable to "hacktivists" aimed at striking America.

U.S. computer networks - from the Defense Department to small companies - are scanned and probed millions of times a day. The assaults range from small time hackers looking to steal credit card data to nation states and terror groups aimed at espionage or disrupting vital computer systems.

The days of the Internet Wild West are over, said James Lewis, a cybersecurity expert and senior fellow at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"Just as cars were not built to be safe until government pressure changed auto manufacturers' behavior, cyberspace will not be secure until government forces improvement," he said.

Lewis said increased security will require new standards and rules for industry, international agreements, and new ways to improve the

education and professionalism of those working on the networks.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., chairman of the committee, said the government must work with the private sector, because neither can do it alone. He noted that private industry owns or controls roughly 85 percent of computer networks, and said companies meeting with the committee have balked at greater government control.

The Senate bill, drafted by Rockefeller and Sen. Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, also would raise the White House cyber adviser to a Cabinet-level position that would need Senate confirmation.