A Message from Nand Mulchandani

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FEATURING
Nand Mulchandani
Chief Technology Officer, Central Intelligence Agency

CSIS EXPERTS
Gregory C. Allen
Director, Wadhwani Center for AI and Advanced Technologies, CSIS
Gregory C. Allen: (Off mic) – from Nand Mulchandani, the chief technology officer of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Nand Mulchandani: My name’s Nand Mulchandani and I’m the chief technology officer at the CIA. I’m sorry I was not able to be there in person, although the idea of a CIA officer appearing in a video message from an undisclosed location does not seem that odd. So I’m happy to have been able to show up in some form to support the launch of this new center at CSIS.

Well, first, congratulations, Greg Allen. Greg is a close friend and colleague from our time at the Pentagon, where we both worked at the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center, which is also known as the JAIC. I had just joined government after a full career as the CEO and founder of multiple startups in Silicon Valley, so the whole idea of technology policymaking – especially in the area of something moving as rapidly as AI – was both exciting and absolutely new to all of us. Greg, along with a few of our other amazing policy folks, was at the center of thinking through what all of this would look like. And it is wonderful to have someone with his depth of experience leading this new center.

Another connection with CSIS is when Greg helped General Jack Shanahan and me launch our software-defined paper some months ago. The idea of rethinking our basic architecture of our warfighting and intelligence systems with AI at the center of everything is going to be fundamental for our ability to stay ahead in this new technology and military race.

Now on the subject of AI and all the rapid changes we’re seeing out there in the world. At this exact moment it is hard saying something new and exciting that may have not already been covered by others, but here’s my own personal perspective and take on the situation.

Being too close to this technology and the technology industry in general makes you a bit skeptical about the new breakthroughs that happen all the time. As someone who lived through the first AI winter, I’ve been wary of all the discussions around these systems developing intelligence of some form. And as a matter of fact, the current phase of AI revolution is not new. AI has already been delivering all kinds of incredible changes and value for a long time now, although in a much subtler way, and never really crossed over into the direct consumer space the way it has now.

To put this in perspective, I like thinking about this current phase in the context of some of the other big changes that we’ve been through. The internet revolution in the ’90s focused on massive transformation in what I think of as communication and transactions. The mobile revolution added ubiquity to this previous revolution. And now I think we’re seeing a
revolution in content and creativity that is literally going to transform anything that deals with those two issues.

I’ve been trying to cope with this current change by examining my own biases and point of view, and the first one is the concept of conceptual blindness, which is a trap that one can fall into in dealing with situations like this. The frame of reference that one develops to comprehend new things has a huge impact on our ability to recognize change and deal with that. So questions like: Have we arrived at the singularity? Are these new AI systems truly intelligent?

The change in thinking for me has become to ask the question: Does it really matter? Does it only matter that these systems actually seem intelligent whether than any strict but also ill-defined idea of intelligence that we may have?

The second issue is the concept of building a metaphysical shelter, which is how we put a lid on our anxiety by trying to understand these changes with the same tools and frameworks that we have applied to other problems or concepts that we have difficulty understanding. So trying to take these new ideas and cramming them into older frameworks sometimes does not work or under-optimizes the opportunity that these new breakthroughs give us.

So what will all this look like once the hype cycle has worked its way through and the dust has settled? Was this a false start or going to turn into something enduring? Who knows? But of course, this is what making work – what makes working in the tech industry so exciting. We’re already seeing all kinds of energy being poured into taking this new technology and moving this into all kinds of incredible directions. So maybe the trick is to hold on tight and ride the wave.

But now let me tie this back to reality. It’s great to talk about all this at a high level with lots of philosophy and metaphysical examination. Unfortunately, in government we have to deal with the real and not the metaphysical.

So what we’re dealing with now is the idea of to get a handle on the policy and national security issues in dealing with this rapidly-changing area where even the drivers of this change have no idea what they’ve conjured up. Our ability to understand some of these AI technologies was already challenged. With the current size, scale, and scope of these implementations, it’s becoming even harder. We already have huge issues with explainability, bias, security, legal issues, and testing, and these problems have just become massively harder now.
So it is great to see organizations like CSIS who work at the intersection of industry, academia, and government to think through these problems in depth. And with this new center, the idea of applying supersized resources to a supersized problem seems very timely. So, Greg and the CSIS team, congratulations. And we will eagerly await the solution to all these complex problems very soon – no pressure. Thank you very much.

Mr. Allen: That was Nand, and somehow he made me feel pressure. (Laughter.)

But the great news is that this concludes a terrific event, the launch of the Wadhwani Center. So to those of you online, thank you so much for joining us today. For those of you here in person, there is a food and drink reception just outside and I look forward to chatting with you there. Thank you all and take care. (Applause.)

(END)