CircleUp Meeting, 11/24/2019

By Molly Hoffman

“Are we at war?”

This question was raised by Dennis M. Dalphino at Sunday’s (11/24) CircleUp Middle Peninsula meeting at the Gloucester Public Library. Dalphino, who spent most of his 32-year career in intelligence with the Defense Intelligence Agency, was there to present a program titled “Russian Interference on Elections: It’s more than Elections.” Joe Schlatter, a retired Army officer who worked in numerous intelligence assignments focusing on China and East Asia, following service as an artillery officer in Vietnam, presented the second half of the program.

Dalphino provided historical context. He opened with two quotes from an Ancient Chinese philosopher that are applicable to today: “The best way to win the war is without a shot,” and “In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity.”

In1991, said Dalphino, Operation Desert Storm established the United States as the only superpower. Russia and China were both taken by surprise, and neither was in a strong position. A Russian theory of war developed that says, “Non-military means are the preferred way to win war,” and “The objective is to achieve an environment of permanent unrest and conflict within the enemy state.” This means chaos is the method.

Dalphino pointed out that the last time the US declared war was in 1941. One U.N. Police Action and several Congressional resolutions have followed. In the 21st century, said Dalphino, non-nuclear war will be “asymmetrical,” which means that if the opponent is too strong to beat militarily, it is better to go after weak spots instead, with technology a “wonderful tool” for that purpose.

All of which led Dalphino to ask, “If people are waging war against us, yet there is no Congressional resolution, no Congressional declaration of war, are we at war?”

With that as background, Schlatter focused on Russian interference in the 2016 US election. He said that the seventeen agencies of the United States Intelligence Community assessed Russian goals in the 2016 election. The main goal was to undermine the democratic process and then apply lessons learned to future elections.

There are two avenues of attack, said Schlatter, direct attack and influence operations. In 2016, direct attack involved hacking into voting systems because disruption of the process can make people doubt the results. People registered to vote were not in the books, and in parts of Florida and North Carolina, officials opened their poll books on Election Day to find nothing there. Influence operations focused on social media, especially in swing states.

Schlatter explained that Russian President Vladimir Putin understands that Russia cannot compete economically or militarily, so he hopes to weaken the United States internally. The goals are to disrupt the democratic process by creating and expanding distrust and chaos, and to weaken US alliances with other countries.

To fight this, said Schlatter, people need to spread facts. They should not assume that everything on they see on internet or TV is true, but they should support “mainstream media,” which has experience finding and sifting for facts. And they should fact check for truth. Schlatter also emphasized always leading with values.

Said Schlatter, “Democracy takes a lot of work.”