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Responding to a Complex Problem

The Evolution of US Government Restrictions on Using and Exporting Encryption Technologies (U)

Michael Schwartzbeck

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Encryption technology has long been an important and closely guarded tool for military, diplomatic, and government missions. Nations depend on encryption to communicate private information across the world and through “enemy” territory; without encryption, any nation’s most valued secrets are easily compromised. History books attest to the value the Allies placed on the broken German and Japanese encryption systems during World War II. It is with this sense of worth that the United States guards its encryption capabilities and its efforts to decrypt other countries’ communications. For decades, the US Government has monopolized encryption and decryption efforts, capabilities, and research. In recent years, however, the information revolution has begun to challenge this monopoly with some success. In the last year, several academic, commercial, and free speech advocates have seriously jeopardized the US Government’s legal right to control encryption.

An Early Challenge

On 24 October 1952, President Truman signed a top secret presidential memorandum¹ that consolidated many of the service and national cryptological functions into the National Security Agency (NSA). Since then, NSA has been tasked with protecting and advancing America’s cryptologic capabilities. For decades, NSA has had several mechanisms designed to limit the public discussion of cryptologic research. One method was to embrace

corporate and educational research labs and think tanks through organizations such as the National Security Agency Scientific Advisory Board (NSASAB).

Through the NSASAB, senior NSA scientists historically met with leading industry and university mathematicians and scientists to discuss the cryptologic applications of emerging theories in science and technology.² While NSA officials had a true interest in attracting the brightest thinkers in the United States, they also used the NSASAB as a tool to bring cryptology’s leading thinkers into association with NSA and thus be able to classify their work, which then removed it from the public vision and the eyes of foreign cryptological services.

Another similar project was the creation in 1958 of the Communications Research Division (CRD) within the Institute for Defense Analysis. The CRD was a private, independent think tank dedicated to helping NSA solve advanced cryptologic problems. Co-located at Princeton University’s John von Neumann Hall and a site near the Pentagon, the CRD has been led by such cryptological luminaries as Dr. [redacted] a professor of mathematics at Cornell University; [redacted] a mathematician with both the Sandia Corporation and the University of Illinois; and Dr. [redacted] the chairman of the University of Chicago’s mathematics department.

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The CRD regularly welcomed the nation's brightest thinkers. Their work at CRD was heavily classified, however, and no CRD research has ever been published in the open press.³

The union of compartmented post-graduate research and NSA sponsorship was disrupted in the late 1960s by the introduction into the university environment of affordable computer technology and corporate financial interests. During that time, IBM board chairman Thomas Watson, Jr., set up a cryptology research group that developed a cipher (code-named Lucifer) for use in a cash-dispensing system that IBM had been developing.⁴ At first, the Lucifer cipher was not very sophisticated, but, with the help of Carl Meyer, a German-born electrical engineer with a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, IBM retooled the cipher a number of times; in 1974, it was ready for the market. This cipher had a key that was 128 bits long, significantly longer than the keys of any other publicly developed encryption programs available to the public at the time.⁵

This incredibly long cipher key led many to believe that the Lucifer code would be truly unbreakable, even by NSA's standards. For the first time in its history, NSA's decryption capabilities were seriously threatened by public research, and the agency quickly moved to rectify the situation.

This action effectively demonstrated that "strong" cryptography was still controlled by the government and not available for public sector use. Unfortunately for NSA, this did not solve their problem. The NSA/IBM key-length agreement was widely publicized, and many public researchers felt that the NSA was unfairly stifling their work for secretive, and possibly ulterior, reasons. Many protests were lodged, and a variety of public cryptographic research groups emerged throughout educational and corporate centers in response.

The Information Revolution and Changing Contexts

This disagreement between Intelligence Community (IC) cryptographers and public researchers simmered until the late 1980s, when the information revolution first began to be felt. As interconnectivity and computer technology began to increase exponentially, the Internet began to grow in popularity, and telecommunications, business practices, and international political realities changed dramatically. New issues developed concerning the Global and National Information Infrastructures, global electronic commerce, legal jurisdictions, and intelligence requirements, including:⁶

- *US defense and intelligence needs evolved.* There has been considerable debate on the IC's roles, missions, and resources. Public perception of government needs changed with greater interests in counternarcotics, terrorism, transnationalism, and economic issues.
- *Encryption needs proliferated, especially for nongovernment and nonmilitary purposes.* Businesses and individuals created legitimate needs for "strong" encryption. Increasing needs for an electronic means to transfer funds, send and receive data, and conduct commerce over intra- and internets led to a greater need for strong encryption.
- *Expertise in encryption was no longer found only in the military and in the government.* Computer software and hardware firms and academic institutions began producing high-quality encryption codes. Many businesses exist for the sole purpose of creating strong encryption for business purposes.
- *Encryption capabilities became dependent on computer software and hardware.* This led to a greater union between encryption and industry, with all sectors being transformed by the growth of computer technologies.
- *Strong cryptography became widely available.* Both inside the United States and abroad, encryption software has come to be widely marketed.⁷ Even if no US-originated cryptography products are ever exported, it will still proliferate worldwide.
- *The information revolution changed business practices, concepts of government sovereignty, and the way the*

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world is viewed. To a significant degree, the trust that most citizens placed in their governments and their willingness to defer to government authority are gone.

- *Computers are now viewed as contributing significantly to the expansion of personal freedoms such as free speech.* Many see encryption as a critically important method of protecting personal privacy on computer networks. Many also use computer networks extensively for their private business and personal communications needs.
- *Traditional definitions of intellectual property became questionable.* Information no longer has to be printed or made available through newsstands, bookshops, and libraries to be widely circulated.
- *"Product cycles" in computer software, hardware, and telecommunications industries became considerably shorter than government "policy cycles."* Timelines for research, development, production, and marketing of new technologies are much shorter than timelines for government's implementation of new policies. Ponderous government approaches are seen as increasingly illogical and unwarranted.

These issues led public and government cryptoanalysts to feel a need to revisit the issue of government control of cryptography. The Clinton administration understood the changing role of cryptography and tried to address these issues early on. Its first attempt came in April 1993 with the "Clipper chip." The chip was to be installed in all US-produced computers, and it depended on a key escrow⁸ account that would allow the government to hold copies of every key in use by the public, so it

could decrypt any message it felt necessary. Even though the administration promised strict control of the decryption keys,⁹ including storage and warehousing by a disinterested third party, privacy groups complained of an Orwellian plot. AT&T was the only major corporation to sign up for the chip, in a move that its management discovered to be a tremendous error. The Clipper chip was recognized as a failure that would never be accepted by corporate America, and the Clinton administration stopped pushing it.

Next, the Clinton administration suggested that the encryption industry adopt the NSA-approved Digital Encryption Standard (DES) and Digital Signature Standard (DSS)¹⁰ for its encryption needs. The administration wanted DES and DSS to be the standard, all-purpose encryption programs for all public and corporate needs. The largest encryption keys that DES and DSS could use were 56 bits long, and critics complained that 56-bit keys were not strong enough. Besides, critics argued that for NSA to endorse any code, it had to be able to decrypt it on a regular basis. Again, NSA was portrayed as "Big Brother."

Exportation Issue Reveals a Need For Change

The major changes in technology and encryption were illustrated by one US software encryption company when it decided to export its strong encryption code internationally. RSA Data Security was founded in 1979 by three scientists at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who had created and patented a strong encryption program. For a long time, their code was too complex for available computer tech-

nologies. By 1987, however, the computer industry had caught up to RSA and the company began signing contracts with Lotus, Motorola, Apple, and others. But their biggest controversy came in 1991,¹¹ when RSA Data Security tried to market its program to Microsoft, which then wanted to integrate the code into its programs to be marketed at home and abroad.

_____ RSA landed the contract with Microsoft. MasterCard, Visa, and other large financial institutions later announced specifications for Internet financial transactions based on RSA encryption.

This proliferation of RSA's strong code was disconcerting to NSA's cryptoanalysts. NSA feared that if this program was made commercially available and widely disseminated, it would no longer be able to collect, analyze, and produce communications intelligence.¹²

_____ NSA felt that if the people it targets were to get this software, they could communicate electronically without any fear being monitored.

_____ The Arms Export Control Act (AECA) of 1976 and the International Trade in Arms Regulations (ITAR), revised 1992,¹³ severely restrict US companies from exporting

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any and all military and intelligence-related technologies. During the Cold War, most aspects of encryption technology, including the hardware, software, and the mathematical algorithms on which cryptography is based, were classified as military technologies and placed on AECA's "Munitions List." This same list is used to prohibit the export of tanks, fighter jets, and aircraft carriers.

The Department of State had statutory responsibility for administering the AECA and ITAR regulations, which it managed through the Office of Defense Trade Controls (ODTC). Any US corporation wishing to export a technology on the AECA Munitions List was required to submit an export license application to the ODTC, which would then pass the application to the government agency best qualified to decide whether the technology should be exportable or not. ODTC always passed encryption export applications to NSA for review, and any code too strong was denied an export license.

[redacted]
 The Clinton administration was adamant that US companies would not be allowed to export strong encryption.¹⁴ [redacted]

[redacted] Bidzos and RSA were not yet done. Bidzos realized that there was a simple way to skirt the export limitation laws.

Both the AECA and the ITAR are US laws, and, as such, they only pertain only to US companies. Bidzos went to Japan and established a Japanese subsidiary, Nihon RSA.¹⁵ Nihon RSA qualified as a distinct Japanese

company, subject only to Japanese law, and Bidzos was able to do whatever he wanted with his strong encryption technologies.¹⁶ Knowing that his encryption technology was a desired commodity, he shopped it around the Japanese marketplace. He promptly struck a deal to produce encryption chips for Nippon Telephone and Telegraph Corporation.

Others Enter the Exportation Fray

At about the same time NSA and the Clinton administration were losing the battle with RSA and Jim Bidzos, several other public sector cryptographers were beginning to find success in propagating strong cryptography. In the early 1990s, a cryptographer named Philip Zimmerman created PGP (for Pretty Good Protection), data-encryption software that scrambles e-mail messages. PGP is a strong encryption program; 1,024-bit keys are common in this program.¹⁷ Because PGP is a strong program, it fell under AECA and ITAR export control guidelines. Before the US Government could place controls on it, however, the PGP software appeared on the Internet as shareware.¹⁸ Placing PGP on the Internet made it available worldwide to anybody with a computer and a modem,¹⁹ so it had in effect been exported without the prior approval of the US State Department.

Although several other encryption programs were already available on the Internet, users from around the world began downloading PGP; the program became very popular and well respected among Internet users. The US Department of Justice was not pleased with the disregard for US export regulations, and it decided to prosecute Philip Zimmerman. Unfortunately for the Department's case, it could not link Zimmerman to the software website on the Internet, and, in 1996, Zimmerman was acquitted of any wrongdoing.²⁰ This court case was viewed by many as a major victory for the public use and availability of strong encryption.

Another case occurred in February 1995, when the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) sued the US Government on behalf of Daniel Bernstein. The EFF charged that the Federal government was violating Bernstein's First Amendment rights by stifling the research he did as a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley in strong cryptography. As with the PGP case, Bernstein was trying to publish his research papers and place his encryption software, known as Snuffle 5.0, on the Internet, and the government was citing his disregard for AECA and ITAR regulations. In January 1997, Judge Marilyn Patel ruled in favor of Bernstein,²¹ on the grounds that AECA and ITAR violated the free-speech guarantees of the Constitution.

Before long, three separate bills were on the floor of Congress, each guaranteeing the right of Americans to use or sell any encryption they wanted domestically and eliminating export controls on any free or mass-market commercial encryption programs.²² These separate bills were

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introduced by Senator Conrad Burns, Representative Bob Goodlatte, and Senator Patrick Leahy; the Goodlatte and Leahy bills would have also made it a Federal crime to use encryption to conceal the commission of a felony. Senator Robert Dole co-sponsored the Senate bills, charging that “the administration’s big brother proposal will literally destroy America’s computer industry.”²³ Leahy stated, “These bills are pro-privacy, pro-jobs, and pro-business.” While none of these bills became law, they did attract the attention of the media. Government control of strong cryptography quickly became a controversial and popular topic in the media.

Players and the Issues

By this time, each of the major interest groups in this debate had come out with compelling arguments for their own cases and similarly strong arguments denouncing opposing viewpoints.²⁴ The groups can be summarized as follows:

- *NSA cryptanalysts.* NSA’s stake in this argument has been its desire to continue to be able to carry out its primary mission. NSA analysts have stated that the proliferation of strong encryption has severely degraded their ability to collect intelligence. (b)(3)(n) Sophisticated nonstate actors, such as terrorist cells and drug cartels, will be even harder to track.
- *Public researchers.* This group’s main arguments have been the preservation of free speech and the right to continue to do scholarly research. The US courts have shown that the free speech argument has some validity.

- *Corporate investors.* Investors have been looking for a way to ensure that electronic money transactions can be done with a high degree of confidence. Without strong encryption, consumers will not place their trust in electronic transfers, and systems like the Internet will never reach their business potential.
- *Law enforcement officials.* If strong encryption becomes available to the world’s criminals, this group will not be able to gather evidence and track criminals to prevent crimes; this group also fears that its ability to fulfill its duties will be degraded, with serious impact on public safety.

The lines of battle were generally drawn with NSA and law enforcement officials on one side and public researchers and corporate investors on the other. Public researchers and corporate investors complained that the US Government was still operating with a Cold War mentality, despite the fact that Cold War paradigms have been replaced; they claimed that any organization as secretive and manipulative as NSA had no place in a free and democratic society. In their eyes, US citizens should have the right to communicate privately, without any fear of government eavesdropping, and they believe free and private speech can only be guaranteed with strong encryption. Bruce Scheier, director of the International Association for

Cryptographic Research, also pointed out that, “The ability to publish is required in any vibrant academic discipline.”²⁵

Business leaders emphasized that electronic financial transactions will only be reliable and safe from tampering when strong encryption is used. And encryption software writers complained about the business opportunities they were missing: the estimated US data encryption market grew from \$384 million in 1991 to \$946 million in 1996. Worldwide totals are believed to have been \$695 million in 1991 and \$1.8 billion in 1996.²⁶ The software industry estimated that, if export controls were removed, US companies could sell as much as \$60 billion a year²⁷ in encryption hardware and software by 2000.

On the other hand, law enforcement concerns generally paralleled NSA’s in that strong encryption would give wrongdoers impenetrable communications that would allow them to operate undetected. As more strong encryption programs become available, more groups will acquire and use encryption, and, even if the US Government is able to crack those codes, it will be at a much greater expense, particularly in costs of computer time.²⁸ Many in the government have also felt that the “free and private speech” argument was disingenuous; as retired Vice Admiral McConnell, vice president of Booz-Allen & Hamilton and former NSA director, charged, “Those who argue in this arena usually have an agenda. Often when they are arguing one set of conditions, they will be using the privacy argument when what they are really trying to do is sell software encryption.”²⁹

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By now, the Clinton administration realized that its encryption policies were not effective and were not addressing the pertinent issues of the debate. Its Clipper chip had failed, its DES and DSS encryption standards were similarly unsuccessful, and the exportation rules were disliked and increasingly ineffective in stopping the spread of strong encryption. President Clinton responded by tasking the National Research Council to do a study on the various arguments for and against US export controls on strong cryptography. The 20 members of the panel represented a wide variety of interests, and they included Kenneth Dam of the University of Chicago Law School, Bruce McConnell of the Office of Budget and Management, former Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti, former deputy director of NSA Ann Caracristi, and Council on Foreign Relations President Leslie Gelb.³⁰ Their 500-page report, "Cryptography's Role In Securing the Information Society," or CRISIS,³¹ was finished in June 1996, and it was highly critical of the Clinton administration's position.

The report concluded that using arms control laws to regulate encryption "is not adequate to support the information security requirements of an information society."³² The authors also believed that the broad outlines of a national cryptography policy could be analyzed in an unclassified environment and that export control restrictions should be "progressively relaxed but not eliminated." The panel also noted that the plan to introduce escrowed encryption keys was not without merit, but that it was "relatively

untried and entails its own potential risks."³³

The panel's consensus was that "widespread commercial and private use cryptography is inevitable in the long run and...its advantages, on balance, outweigh its disadvantages."³⁴ One benefit of adopting this policy, the panel noted, is that US companies could start putting much stronger encryption programs in their software, which would allow US citizens to have an increased standard of cryptographic protection. The panel's final conclusion was that government encryption policies should be examined in the same light as other US economic regulations.

The Administration Moves

The administration did not take long to respond to the National Research Council's recommendations. On 15 November 1996, President Clinton released Executive Order 13206: "Administration of Export Controls on Encryption Products." In this Executive Order, Clinton followed many of the recommendations of the CRISIS report; most important, he took cryptographic hardware, software, and technologies off of the AECA Munitions List and placed them under the statutory responsibility of the US Department of Commerce. Specifically, management of encryption fell under the regulations guiding "dual-use" (both military and civilian) commodities outlined in the Export Administration Act of 1979.³⁵ This move greatly eased the government controls on public use and exportation of strong cryptography. The only major requirement for exportation was a key escrow system. The result-

ing differences in the old and new encryption policy are listed below:³⁶

"Clipper Chip" Era Policy (February 1994)

- *Hardware implementation:* Clipper chip required in each piece of US software.
- *Algorithm classification:* Secret.
- *Maximum key length:* 40-bits.
- *Decryption keys held by:* US Government.
- *Decryption keys held:* For all crypto, both domestic or internationally exported.
- *Keys available to:* Law enforcement and intelligence agencies.
- Exported strong crypto requires key recovery.
- No limit on domestic use of cryptography.

Newer, Revised Policy (October 1996)

- *Algorithm classification:* Unclassified.
- *Maximum key length:* Unlimited, if keys are recoverable when requested.
- *Decryption keys held by:* Corporate third parties following government guidelines.
- *Decryption keys held:* Only for exported crypto with keys 56 bits or longer.
- *Keys available to:* Law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

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- Exported strong crypto requires key recovery.
- No limit on domestic use of cryptography.

This major shift in policy was met with increased enthusiasm from the public sector as well as the government. Vice President Gore said, "This initiative will make it easier for Americans to use stronger encryption products—whether at home or abroad."³⁷ Robert Holleyman, President of the Business Software Alliance, was also impressed, calling the plan "forward progress."³⁸ Stephen Walker, CEO of Trusted Information Systems, likened the policy change to "imagining during the Cold War that the Berlin Wall would fall."³⁹ A few others were not so impressed: Senator Conrad Burns stated, "This debate is not over by any stretch of the imagination."⁴⁰

Encryption Key Recovery

Although some public researchers and corporate investors were still leery of the key escrow mandate, most of the groups involved in this debate accepted the escrow requirement, which was one of President Clinton's major requirements for this easing of encryption regulations. The administration has given industry a two-year grace period, at the end of which there will need to be a viable key recovery system in place and operating. Many large companies have backed the escrow system; Dorothy Denning, a cryptography expert from Georgetown University, lauded it as a useful way to recover keys "necessary to unscramble important data left by a deceased, departed, or unethical employee."⁴¹

That the escrow accounts would be held by a trusted third party in the corporate world eased many of the "Big Brother is watching" concerns. More important, keys will only be given to the US Government in response to warrants or court orders. To show its support, IBM has teamed up with Apple, Digital, Groupe Bull, Hewlett-Packard, NCR, Sun, Trusted Information Systems, and even RSA Data Security⁴² to develop an interoperable key-recovery industry standard. RSA's James Bidzos conceded, "We are seeing the market move to emergency access [of keys]."⁴³ Soon after, America Online, Compaq, Motorola, Novell, Northern Telecom, and 29 others joined in escrow discussions, which has strengthened the industry alliance.⁴⁴

Detractors of the key escrow system are led by Victor Parra, president and CEO of the 550-member Electronic Messaging Association (EMA). Parra is frustrated that keys have to be held by third parties; he feels that employees of the user company are the only key holders that can really be trusted. Parra notes that e-mail and Internet transactions will tend to be limited to domestic firms, because international trading partners will be uneasy with a third party having escrow access. EMA has also noted that the two-hour limit to turn over requested keys is unreasonable, and many software makers have agreed that encryption software prices will rise as a result of escrow requirements.⁴⁵

Escrow Goes International

William Reinsch, the Undersecretary for Export Administration at the US Department of Commerce, wants

the policy to move beyond US borders and create a worldwide standard for key escrow. Reinsch theorizes that, if escrow becomes pervasive and institutionalized in international commerce, terrorists and criminals will be forced to submit to key recovery systems.⁴⁶ This would also help prevent US companies from relocating overseas to avoid current US escrow requirements.

The European Commission is considering an encryption industry standard for key recovery similar to the one proposed by the Clinton administration, and, if implemented, all codes used throughout Europe would require a trusted third party to hold a copy of the key. IBM supports the new US and European escrow proposals; to those US firms that oppose the move, they state, "We would prefer that they take a more global focus."⁴⁷ Another group, a consortium called Eurobit-ITAC-ITI-JEIDA, comprised of major Canadian, European, Japanese, and US business firms, has called for the harmonization of regulations on the export, import, re-export, and use of cryptography. Their goal is to develop a set of principles that, "reach consensus on issues which need to be treated at the worldwide level."⁴⁸

International support does seem to be growing. Representatives from the nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) backed the concept of key recovery systems⁴⁹ during a January 1997 conference. The OECD emphasized that information security is an international matter because information systems cross national boundaries. At a separate RSA Data Security-sponsored conference, David Aaron, US Special

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 15. Tim Beardsley, "For Your Eyes Only?" *Scientific American* 275, (September 1996), p. 44.
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