Apple vs. US Government, February 21, 2016.

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by William Dutton

February 21st, 2016

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Recently, Apple was asked to assist in breaking into the iPhone of one of the terrorists responsible for the San Bernardino attack – and Apple refused, citing privacy concerns.

What a difference today in how industry responds to a request for assistance from the government. Decades ago, when I worked at Bell Labs, the government sometimes asked Bell Labs for assistance in analyzing audio tapes from emergencies. One that I recall was from the Apollo 1 disaster, but there were others, such as a shooting in an airline cockpit. Bell Labs accepted its broader responsibility to the Nation.

The government is asking for help from Apple for this one specific iPhone – not the creation of a general backdoor to gain entry to encrypted data and thus risk unwanted intrusions into our privacy. Apple claims that this one iPhone will risk possible future intrusions if the software somehow escapes Apple. This claim amazes me, since Apple is such a control freak with strong controls of its software. I would imagine that software to crack this iPhone could be made specific to only that iPhone with a simple patch – not all iPhones in general.

I would not be surprised if Apple already knows how to bypass password protection and gain access – but does not want to admit this capability. Perhaps that is why Apple is refusing to honor the government's request. Or, as some have suggested, is it just the profit motive?

If I were Apple, I would want to do what the government is asking – and what the court has approved. The alternative is that the government will itself discover how to write its own software to break into this specific iPhone – and possibly other iPhones in the future.

A. Michael Noll

Tags: Apple, encryption, iPhone, privacy, San Bernadino

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