

Big Brother Calling

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Press the big red button. You've just activated AT&T's 3600, the first widely available phone-security device to use the US government's embattled Clipper cryptochip.

While you might not agree with the politics behind this particular piece of silicon, you can't deny AT&T's excellent engineering.

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For starters, the 3600 is not a telephone: it's a little box about the size of a paperback, with two handset jacks that attach to your phone, two push buttons, and a tiny LCD. It works with most standard phones. And if you're traveling in Russia, an optional acoustic coupler even lets you strap the 3600 directly to the handset of bulky local phones.

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Of course, you need a pair of 3600s to have a secure conversation. When you dial another Clipper phone, the 3600s spend about 15 seconds exchanging a randomly generated 80-bit code key based on the Diffie-Hellman algorithm. After that, everything you say is compressed, encrypted, and sent through a 4800-baud modem into the telephone line. At the other end of the operation, the modem translates the stream

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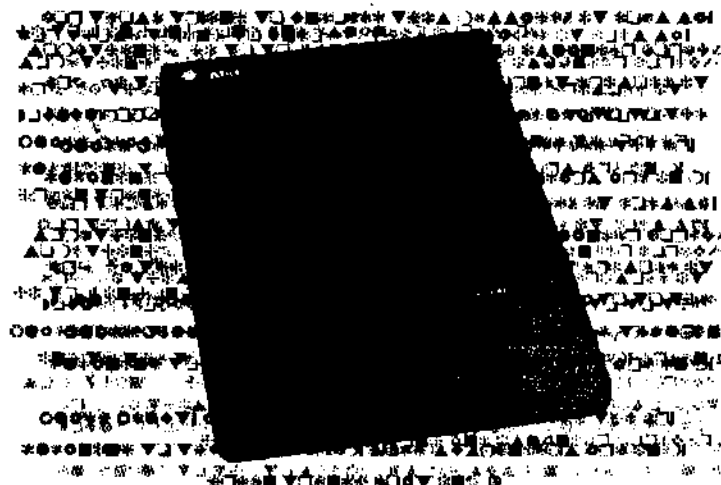
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Ten years from now, will this little black box be worth recovering?

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of data and plays it through the remote telephone's speaker.

Sound generally comes across clear. The only minor annoyance is the 0.3-second delay in each direction that makes it sound like you're talking over an old transatlantic phone line. In the future, faster chips should shorten this delay-time significantly.

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Is a Clipper phone any good? That depends on who you are hiding from. It uses a powerful encryption algorithm, but the US government keeps a copy of every chip's secret key - just in case your phone needs to be tapped. Last year, federal warrants were issued for 1,154 US phone taps, according to the 1994 Wiretap Report by the Administrative Office of the US Courts; 76 percent of those were part of drug investigations.

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So, if you're doing something illegal or if you're part of a political organization under investigation by the FBI (such as Act Up), don't even think about buying the 3600. On the other hand, if you worry about crooks, corporate spies, or foreign governments - and *not* Uncle Sam - eavesdropping on your calls, the 3600 might be just what you're looking for. So far, AT&T says its customers have been mostly federal, state, and local governments. No surprise there! - *Simson Garfinkel*

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AT&T Surety 3600-s: US\$1,295. AT&T: (800) 952 4082, +1 (910) 279 3411.