

N.S.A. Able to Foil Basic Safeguards of Privacy on Web

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The National Security Agency is winning its long-running secret war on encryption, using supercomputers, technical trickery, court orders and behind-the-scenes persuasion to undermine the major tools protecting the privacy of everyday communications in the Internet age, according to newly disclosed documents.

The agency has circumvented or cracked much of the encryption, or digital scrambling, that guards global commerce and banking systems, protects sensitive data like trade secrets and medical records, and automatically secures the e-mails, Web searches, Internet chats and phone calls of Americans and others around the world, the documents show.

Many users assume — or have been assured by Internet companies — that their data is safe from prying eyes, including those of the government, and the N.S.A. wants to keep it that way. The agency treats its recent successes in deciphering protected information as among its most closely guarded secrets, restricted to those cleared for a highly classified program code-named Bullrun, according to the documents, provided by Edward J. Snowden, the former N.S.A. contractor.

Beginning in 2000, as encryption tools were gradually blanketing the Web, the N.S.A. invested billions of dollars in a clandestine campaign to preserve its ability to eavesdrop. Having lost a public battle in the 1990s to insert its own “back door” in all encryption, it set out to accomplish the same goal by stealth.

The agency, according to the documents and interviews with industry officials, deployed custom-built, superfast computers to break codes, and began collaborating with technology companies in the United States and abroad to build entry points into their products. The documents do not identify which companies have participated.

The N.S.A. hacked into target computers to snare messages before they were encrypted. In some cases, companies say they were coerced by the government into handing over their master encryption keys or building in a back door. And the agency used its influence as the world’s most experienced code maker to covertly introduce weaknesses into the encryption standards followed by hardware and software developers around the world.