



POLITICS

# Obama, at South by Southwest, Calls for Law Enforcement Access in Encryption Fight

By MICHAEL D. SHEAR MARCH 11, 2016

AUSTIN, Tex. — President Obama said Friday that law enforcement must be legally able to collect information from smartphones and other electronic devices, making clear, despite disagreement within his administration, that he opposes the stance on encryption taken by technology companies like Apple.

Speaking to an audience of about 2,100 technology executives and enthusiasts at the South by Southwest festival here, Mr. Obama delivered his most extensive comments on an issue that has split the technology community and pitted law enforcement against other national security agencies. Mr. Obama declined to comment specifically on the efforts by the F.B.I. to require Apple's help in gaining data from an iPhone used by one of the terrorists in the December attack in San Bernardino, Calif.

But the president warned that America had already accepted that law enforcement can “rifle through your underwear” in searches for those suspected of preying on children, and he said there was no reason that a

person's digital information should be treated differently.

“If, technologically, it is possible to make an impenetrable device or system, where the encryption is so strong that there is no key, there is no door at all, then how do we apprehend the child pornographer?” Mr. Obama said. “How do we disrupt a terrorist plot?”

If the government has no way into a smartphone, he added, “then everyone is walking around with a Swiss bank account in your pocket.”

Mr. Obama's decision to embrace the law enforcement position on encryption represents a fundamental break with a tech community that has strongly supported his political career. For years, the president nurtured close ties to Silicon Valley, tapping the youthful talent there to help him reshape the federal government's aging technology infrastructure and seeking out leading executives for private advice and millions in campaign cash.

That partnership was in part a result of a philosophical affinity between Mr. Obama and technology executives that included broad agreement about gay rights, immigration, civil liberties and health care. Mr. Obama has repeatedly said he remains a fierce defender of civil liberties, including the right to privacy.

Within the administration, there is a division over encryption between the F.B.I., along with other law enforcement agencies, which says it must have a way of breaking into encrypted devices, and the intelligence community, which worries that the same techniques could be used against the American government. In his comments, which were greeted with polite silence, Mr. Obama said he, too, supported the development of strong encryption to make sure that the government can protect banks and critical infrastructure. And he said he wanted proper oversight of law enforcement. But, he said, technology executives who are “absolutist” on the issue are just wrong.

“This notion that somehow our data is different and can be walled off

from those other trade-offs we make, I believe, is incorrect,” he said.

Mr. Obama spoke broadly at the music, film and technology festival about the need for technology to be used to support civic life and the functioning of democracy.

He became the first sitting president to visit the festival, which in the past three decades has become a mecca for the high-tech, social-media set. He made his comments during an hourlong conversation with Evan Smith, the editor in chief of The Texas Tribune.

At the festival, the president sought to make the case that the technologies behind today’s entertainment and communication apps should also be directed at solving the problems of voter turnout, access to information and civic engagement. “We want to create a pipeline where there is a continuous flow of talent that is helping to shape the government,” he told the audience.

Mr. Obama is something of a technology geek, so his presence at the festival does not come as much of a surprise. He enjoys dinners with technology moguls and has tapped the wealth of Silicon Valley for his two presidential campaigns.

He has talked to his closest advisers about creating a high-tech presidential center when he leaves office, in part to help visitors engage with his legacy and in part to encourage better use of technology in society.

He has also sought to lure more tech executives and engineers to government to make federal agencies more responsive to their customers. Mr. Obama created the **United States Digital Service** as a kind of troubleshooting team to upgrade the technology associated with government services, and he has filled its staff largely with veterans of Google, Microsoft and other such companies.

“The work they’re doing is impactful — and it’s hard to see how they don’t

become a permanent feature of our government,” Jason Goldman, the chief digital officer for the White House, said in an article posted on the Medium website on Thursday. “Indeed, this might be President Obama’s most important accomplishment as the First Tech President: establishing a lasting legacy of service that will carry on long after he leaves office.”

Still, questions about how to harness the power of Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat to help government are not always clear, especially when the companies involved are, above all, designed to make money for their shareholders.

This spring, the White House will host what it is calling a summit meeting on civic engagement, and aides said the president would use it to continue the conversation about the role that technology could play.

*Follow The New York Times’s politics and Washington coverage on Facebook and Twitter, and sign up for the First Draft politics newsletter.*

A version of this article appears in print on March 12, 2016, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Obama Calls for Law Enforcement Access in Encryption Fight.