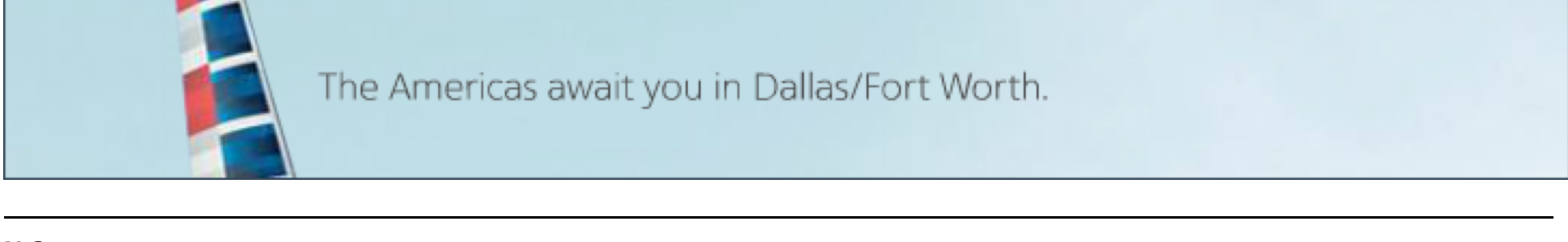


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# Postal Service Discloses Major Theft of Its Employees' Personal Data

By DAVID E. SANGER NOV. 10, 2014



Databases containing postal workers' and retirees' names, birth dates, addresses and Social Security numbers were breached.

John Gress/Reuters

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WASHINGTON — The [Postal Service](#) on Monday became the latest government agency to announce a major theft of data from its computer systems, telling its roughly 800,000 employees and retirees that an attack “potentially compromised” databases containing postal employees’ names, birth dates, addresses and [Social](#)

[Security](#) numbers.

The announcement came just weeks after the White House disclosed an intrusion into its unclassified computer systems, which resulted in a shutdown of some of its communications while the malicious software was being removed.

The working assumption at the White House was that its troubles were caused by Russian hackers; the [Postal Service](#) attack, by contrast, seemed to have the signature of Chinese hackers. But attributing attacks is difficult, and first indications are frequently inaccurate.

“It’s an unfortunate fact of life these days that every organization connected to the Internet is a constant target for cyberintrusion activity,” Patrick R. Donahoe, the postmaster general, said in a written statement. “The United States Postal Service is no different. Fortunately, we have seen no evidence of malicious use of the compromised data.”

The statement also indicated that the intruders may have obtained telephone numbers and email addresses of Postal Service customers who contacted the agency’s customer care center between the beginning of the year and mid-August. But there was no evidence, the statement said, that credit card numbers or other information from transactions with the Postal Service was affected.

The F.B.I., which conducts cyberespionage investigations, confirmed in a statement that it was examining “the nature and scope of this incident.” But it said nothing about who, or what country, might be responsible.

The agency most likely knows more than it is saying: For years the F.B.I., with the help of the National Security Agency, tracked the activities of Unit 61398 and other People’s Liberation Army units believed responsible for cyberespionage against both the United States government and private targets. But it took years before it acted, when the Justice Department, in May, [indicted five members](#) of the P.L.A.

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If the attack was Chinese in origin, it raises the question of what the value would be in obtaining personal information about employees and customers. Unlike the White House, the Postal Service does not handle much classified or otherwise secret information. But some cyberexperts speculate that what the intruders are seeking is an understanding of how federal computer systems operate, and what kinds of data were available.

In the cases of attacks this year on Target and Home Depot, which have generally been attributed to Eastern European criminal groups, there has been no evidence of credit card fraud or the use of personal data — leaving a mystery about what the cyberintrusion was intended to reveal. On black markets, email information has some value, and [Social Security](#) numbers have even more. But it is not clear why intruders would be interested in postal employees.

Mr. Donahoe wrote that “as a result of this incident we have significantly strengthened our systems against future attacks,” raising questions about why those systems were not upgraded years ago.

Postal Service officials said that the data files that were compromised had records on over 800,000 current or past employees, from the top executives to postal clerks in remote locales. The service said it was offering all of them free credit monitoring for a year, similar to a step Home Depot took after its recent discovery of the theft of consumer data.

The Postal Service was notified of the breach by its office of the inspector general in mid-September. It was unclear why it took nearly two months to notify the employees.



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