

# Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from a bomb

 [devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20190903-00](https://devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20190903-00)

September 3, 2019



Raymond Chen

One of my relatives is an electrical engineer, and he was part of a small team sent to a customer site to run diagnostics and do other things that electrical engineers do.

The team traveled with suitcases filled with advanced electronic diagnostic equipment to help them do those things that electrical engineers do. (You can tell that I'm very knowledgeable about electrical engineering.)

Upon arrival at the hotel, they opened the suitcases and plugged in the equipment batteries to charge them up, so that they would be ready for the site visit. And then they all went out to look for lunch. When they returned from lunch, they discovered that the hotel was surrounded by police, fire trucks, and even an ambulance. The engineers asked what the hubbub was.

“Somebody found a bomb. Do you happen to know anything about who is in room 1234?”

“Um, that's us.”

It turns out that the housekeeper had noticed a suitcase filled with complicated electronics, wires everywhere, digital LED readouts, all that stuff. So the housekeeper reported a bomb.

The engineers had a lot of explaining to do.

After the dust figuratively settled, the hotel manager told them, “I'm okay with you charging your electronic equipment in the hotel room. But the next time you do it, do me a favor and close the suitcase so housekeeping doesn't see it.”

Believe it or not, this is all a prelude to the actual story.

Back in the day, there was the [Compaq Portable 486](#). The base model with a 80486DX2/66MHz processor, a 640×480 color screen, 4MB RAM, and a 120MB hard drive set you back \$5899 in 1992 (around \$10,600 in 2019 dollars). Or you could upgrade to a 210MB hard drive for just \$1000 more (+\$1800 in 2019 dollars).

The system itself was quite attractive for its time. Here's a nice picture of a unit with an external CD-ROM drive attached via the SCSI port. But it was very heavy. Furthermore, it ran only on AC power; it had no battery. So you could bring it on board your airplane flight, but you couldn't use it, because airplanes didn't have electric outlets in the seats, and even if they did, the outlets couldn't provide enough power to run this beast, and even if they did, you still wouldn't be able to use it because its weight would likely have collapsed the tray table.

It is my understanding that these units were popular with Microsoft account managers, since they were on the road a lot, and the built-in modem let them dial in to work and check email.

One such account manager accidentally left his computer on the curb at the airport in Santiago, Chile. He realized he had left it behind when he arrived at the hotel and noticed that his arm hadn't yet fallen off. By the time he tracked the computer down and returned to the airport, the bomb squad had already come, placed the explosives where the computer's fan goes, and detonated it.

They returned the blown-up computer to him, and he brought it back to the hotel.

"Why not?" he figured, and plugged it in and turned it on.

It booted up.

**Bonus trivia:** It appeared that the Compaq Portable 486 served as the hardware for the Network General network packet sniffer. The packet sniffers were very expensive, and according to legend, when the LAN Manager development team lost access to their only packet sniffer, they wrote NetMon as a software-only replacement.

Raymond Chen

**Follow**

