

# CHERI

## A Hybrid Capability-System Architecture

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# Motivation

## The Eternal War in Memory\*



Example bug: **Heartbleed**  
...allows attackers to eavesdrop  
on communications, steal data  
directly from the services and  
users and to impersonate  
services and users.

Yet another memory safety bug!

\*Laszlo Szekeres, Mathias Payer, Tao Wei, and Dawn Song. SoK: *Eternal War in Memory*.  
In Proceedings of the 2013 IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy. IEEE 2013.

# DARPA CRASH

If you could revise the fundamental principles of computer-system design to improve security...

...what would you change?

# Principle of least privilege

Every program and every privileged user of the system should operate using the least amount of privilege necessary to complete the job.

Saltzer 1974 - CACM 17(7)

Saltzer and Schroeder 1975 - Proc. IEEE 63(9)

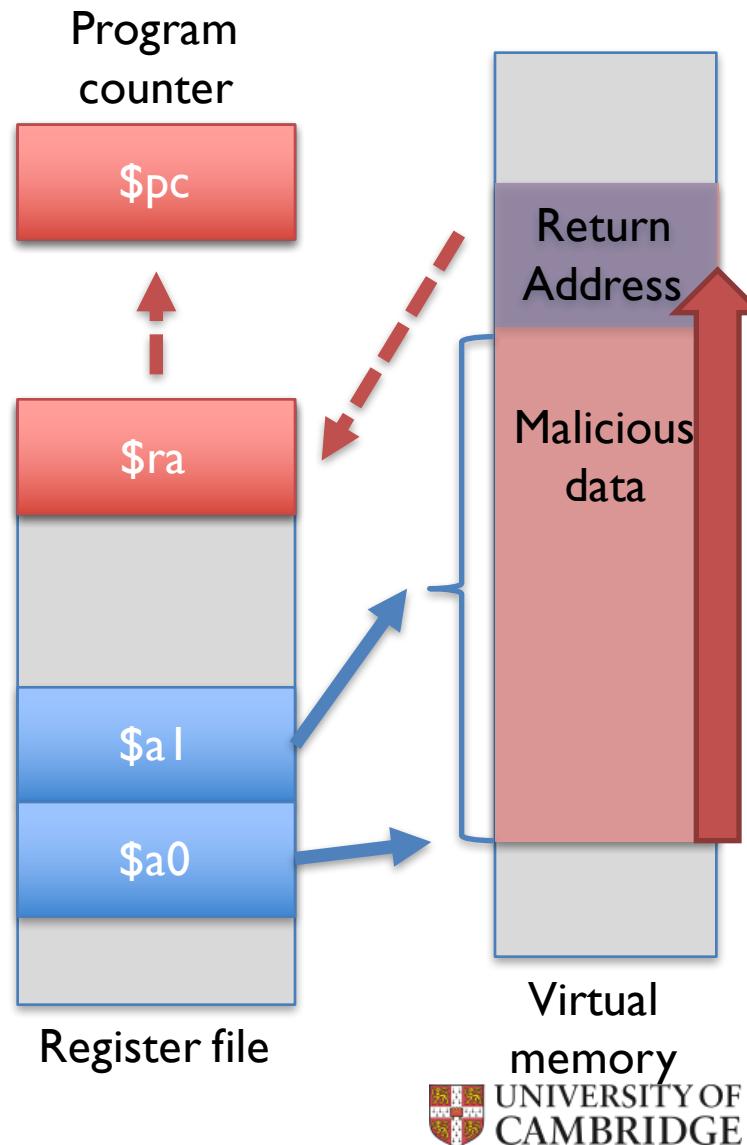
Needham 1972 - AFIPS 41(I)

# Principle of least privilege (2)

- **Access control**
  - Minimize privileges held by users (and hence their processes) in accordance to policy
- **Fault tolerance**
  - Limit the impact of software/hardware faults
- **Vulnerability and Trojan mitigation**
  - Constrain rights gained as a result of software supply-chain compromise (Karger IEEE S&P 1987)
  - Motivation for *sandboxing*, *privilege separation*, and *software compartmentalization* used to mitigate vulnerabilities in contemporary applications

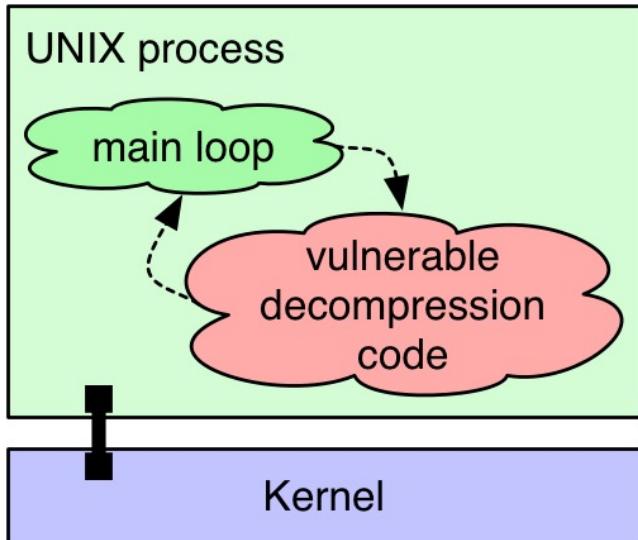
# Architectural least privilege

- Classical buffer-overflow attack
  - Buggy code overruns a buffer, overwriting an on-stack return address
  - Overwritten return address is loaded and jumped to, corrupting control flow
- Why did we allow these privileges:
  - Ability to overrun the buffer?
  - Ability to inject a code pointer that can be used as a jump target?
  - Ability to execute data as code?
- Wouldn't eliminate the bug – but would provide effective **vulnerability mitigation**

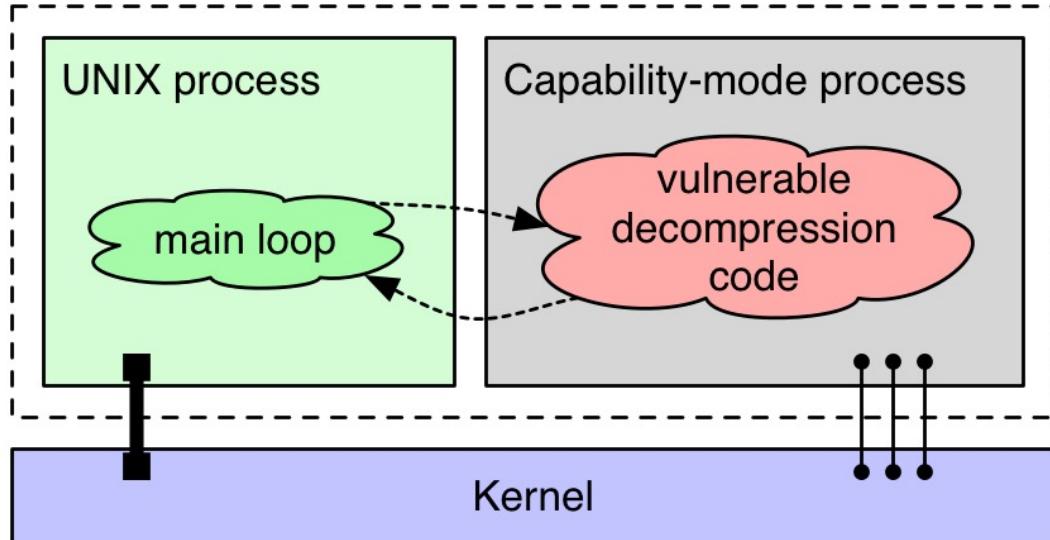


# Application-level least privilege (I)

Conventional gunzip



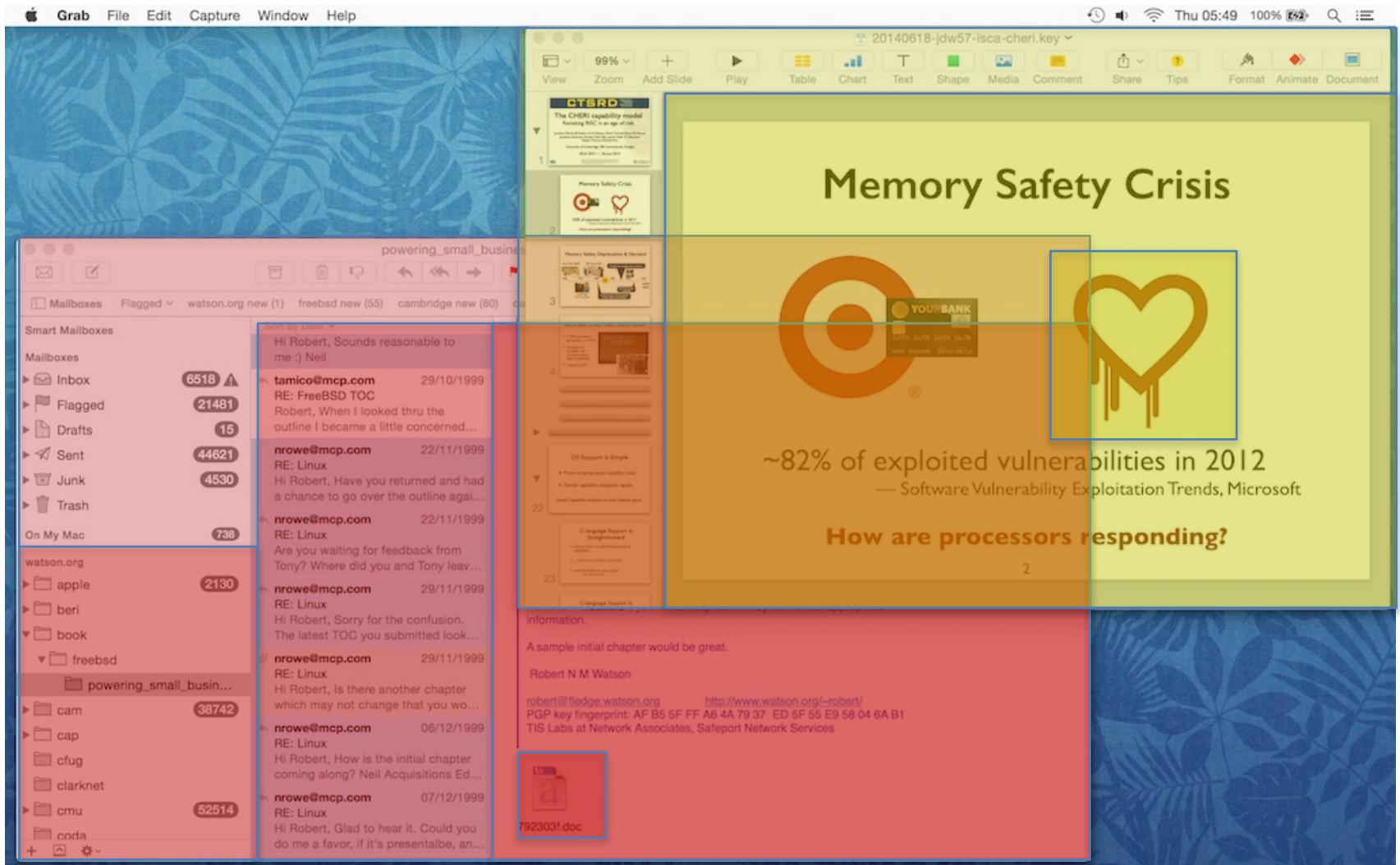
Compartmentalized gunzip

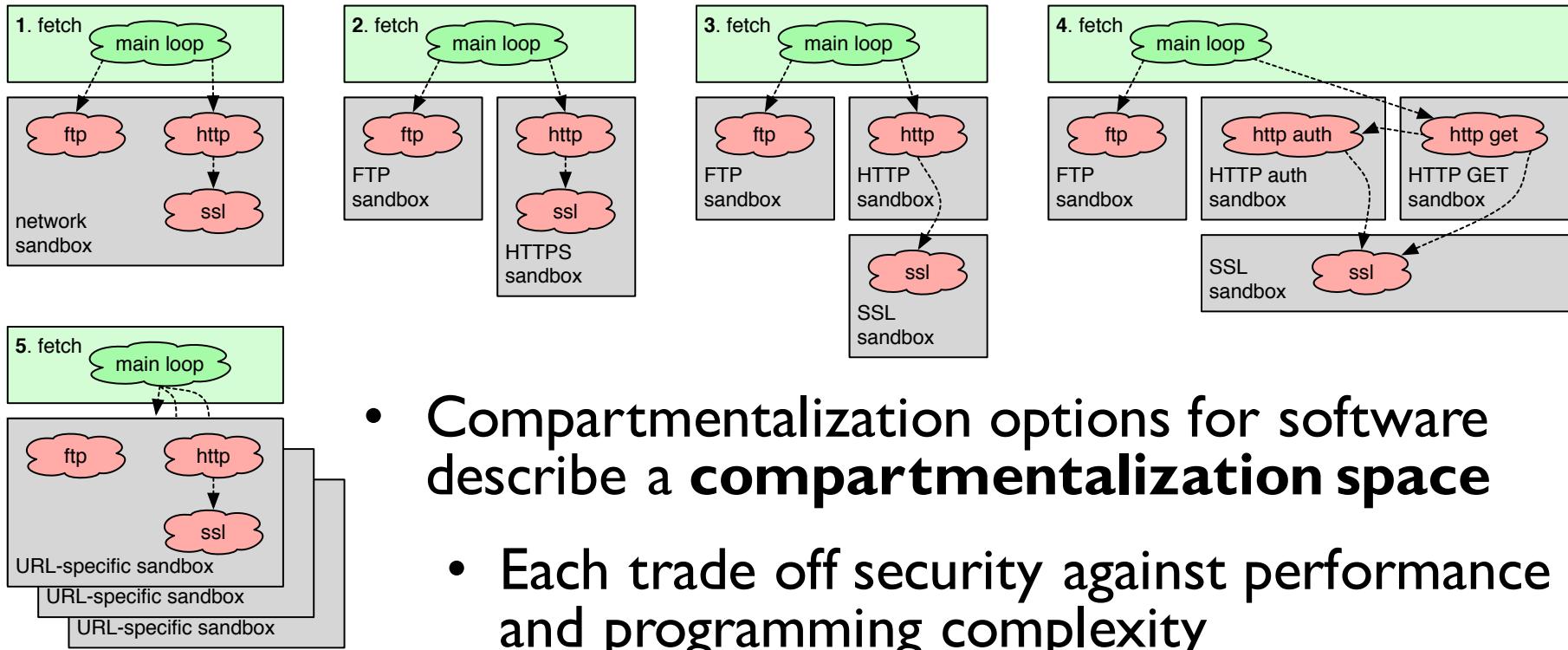


Software compartmentalization decomposes software into **isolated compartments** that are delegated **limited rights**

Able to mitigate not only unknown vulnerabilities, but also **as-yet undiscovered classes of vulnerabilities/exploits!**

# Application-level least privilege (2)

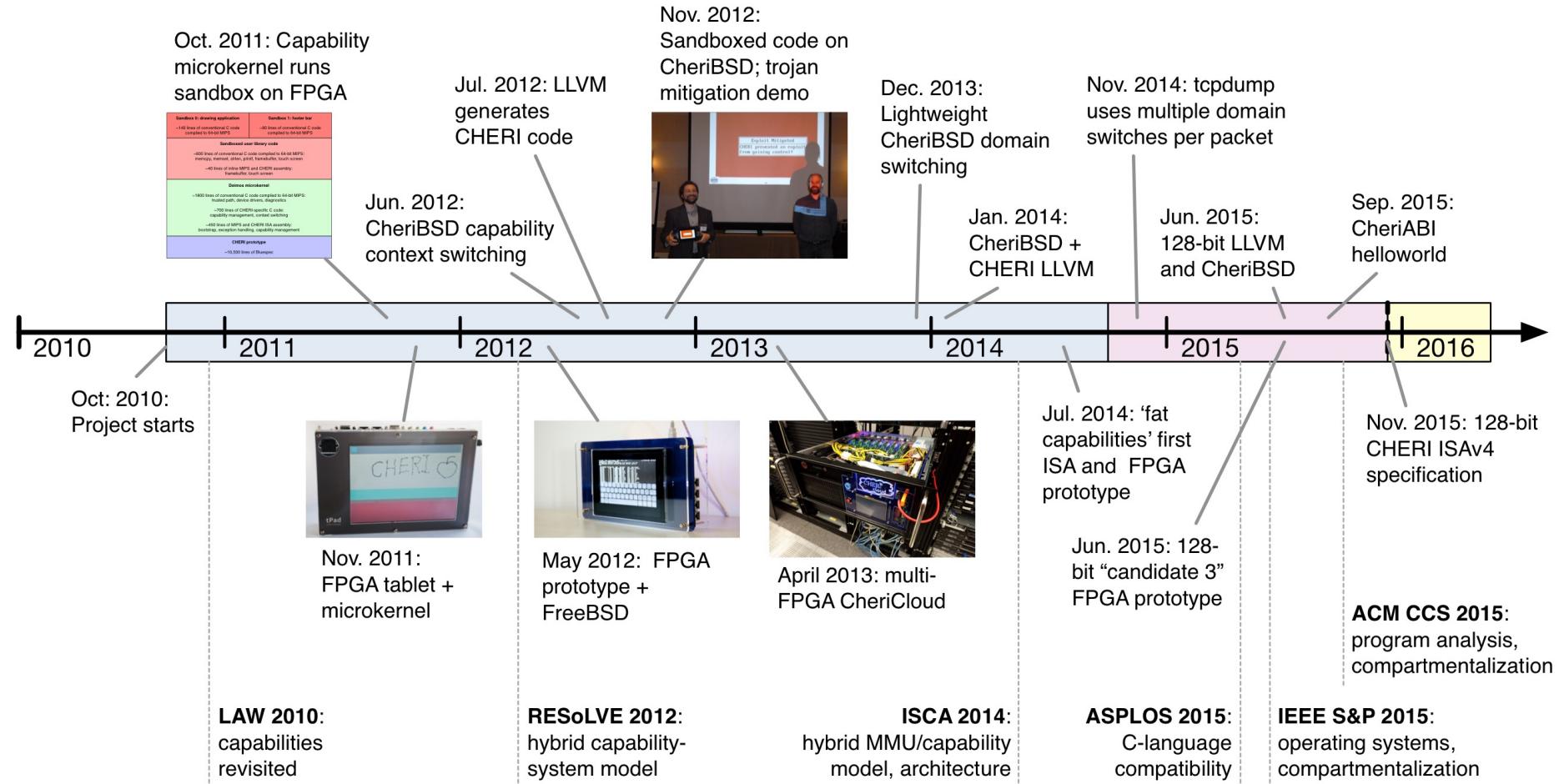




- Compartmentalization options for software describe a **compartmentalization space**
  - Each trade off security against performance and programming complexity
- But MMU-based processes are problematic:
  - Poor spatial protection granularity
  - Limited simultaneous-process scalability
  - Multi-address-space programming model

# REVISITING RISC IN AN AGE OF RISK

# CTSRD: Revisiting the hardware-software interface for security



# A hybrid capability-system model

- De-conflate **virtualization** and **protection**
- Retain **Memory Management Unit (MMU)** to implement (and protect with) **virtual addresses**
  - OS processes, machine virtualization, ...
- Add **ISA-level capabilities** to implement and protect **pointers within address spaces**
  - Fine-grained, compiler-driven **memory protection** for code and data
  - Fine-grained, scalable **compartmentalization**

# CHERI software protection goals

- Target **C-language TCBs** – OS kernels, monolithic applications, language runtimes, ....
  - **Spatial safety** protects against many pointer-misuse vulnerabilities
  - **Temporal safety** supports software models that protect against memory re-use attacks
  - **Scalable compartmentalization** provides exploit-independent mitigation
- Hybrid capability model offers strong binary and source-code compatibility

# CHERI ISA-level features

- **RISC**: simple, compiler-focused ISA extensions avoid microcode and table walking
- **C pointers** map cleanly into ISA-level capabilities
- **Tagged capabilities** protect code and data pointer integrity in registers and memory
- **Pointer metadata**, including **bounds** and **permissions**, limits undesired (re-)use
- **Guarded manipulation** implements **capability monotonicity** and **sealing** for **least privilege**
- **256-bit architectural model**; unpublished efficient **128-bit micro-architectural implementation**

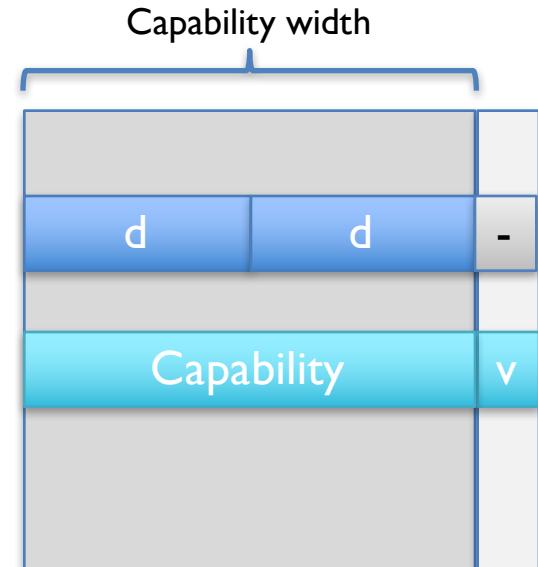
# CHERI architectural elements



General-purpose  
register file



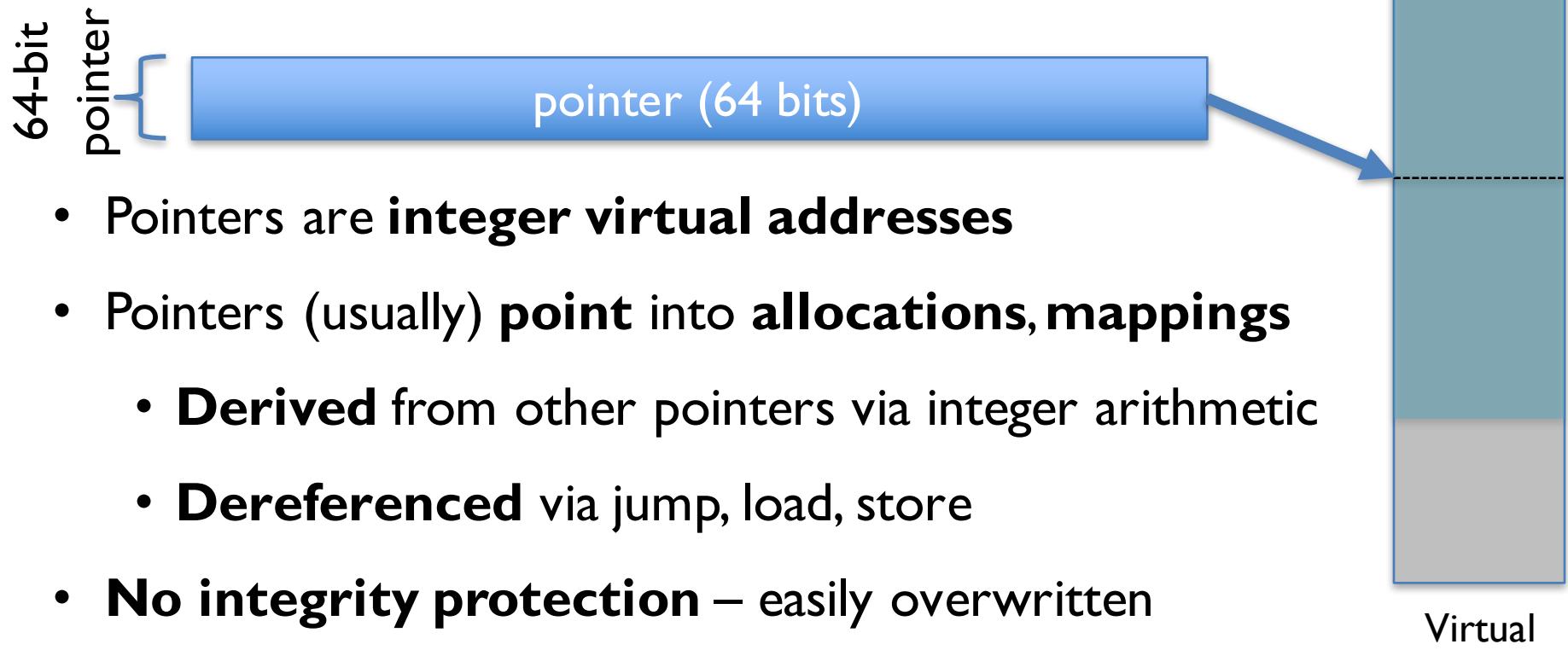
Capability register file



Physical memory

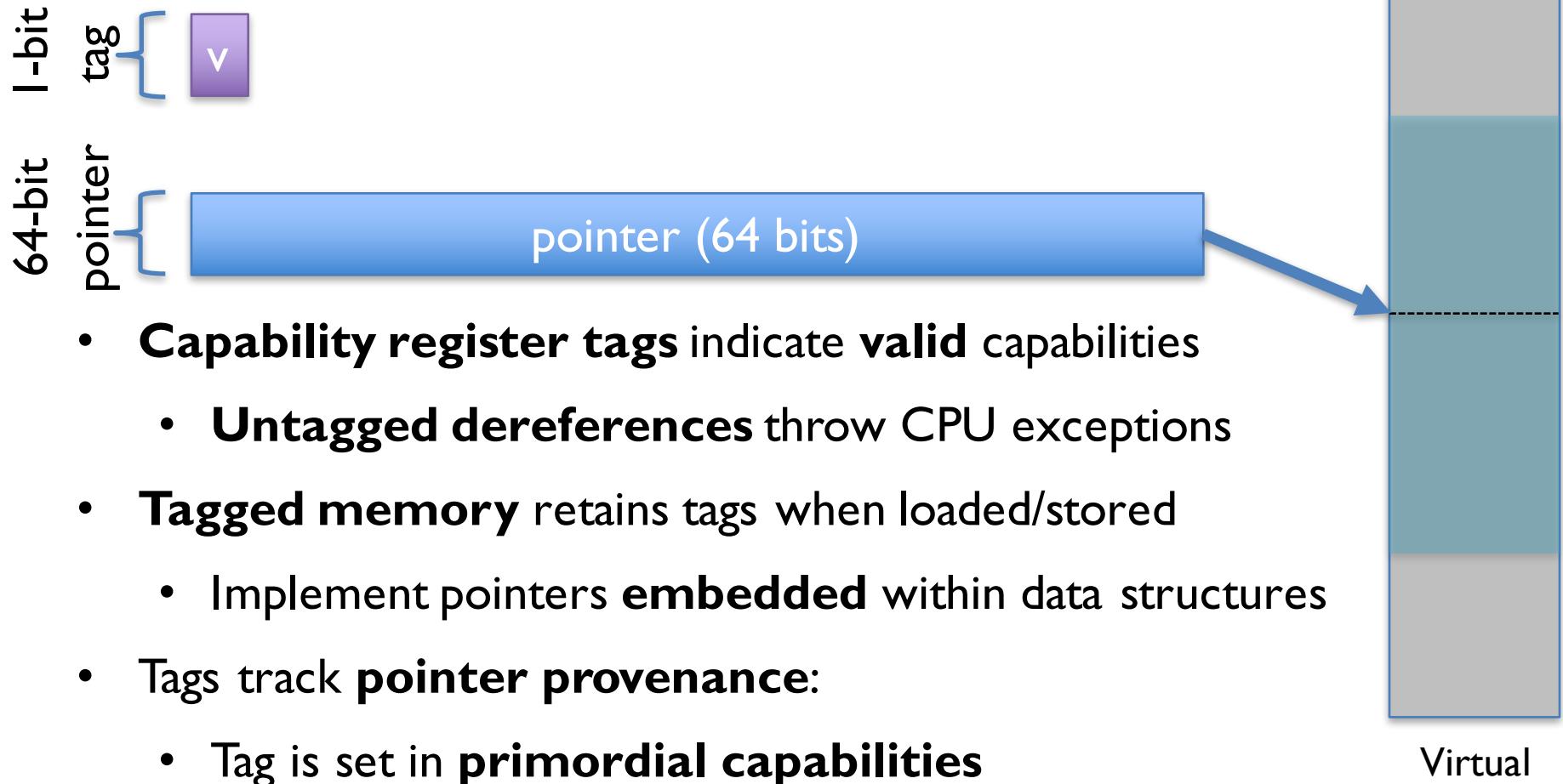
- **Tagged memory** protects capability-sized words in DRAM as pointers
- **Capability register file** holds in-use capabilities (pointers)
- **Program counter capability** (\$pcc) extends program counter
- **Default data capability** (\$ddc) controls legacy RISC loads/stores
- **System control registers** are also extended – e.g., \$epc→\$epcc, TLB

# Pointers today

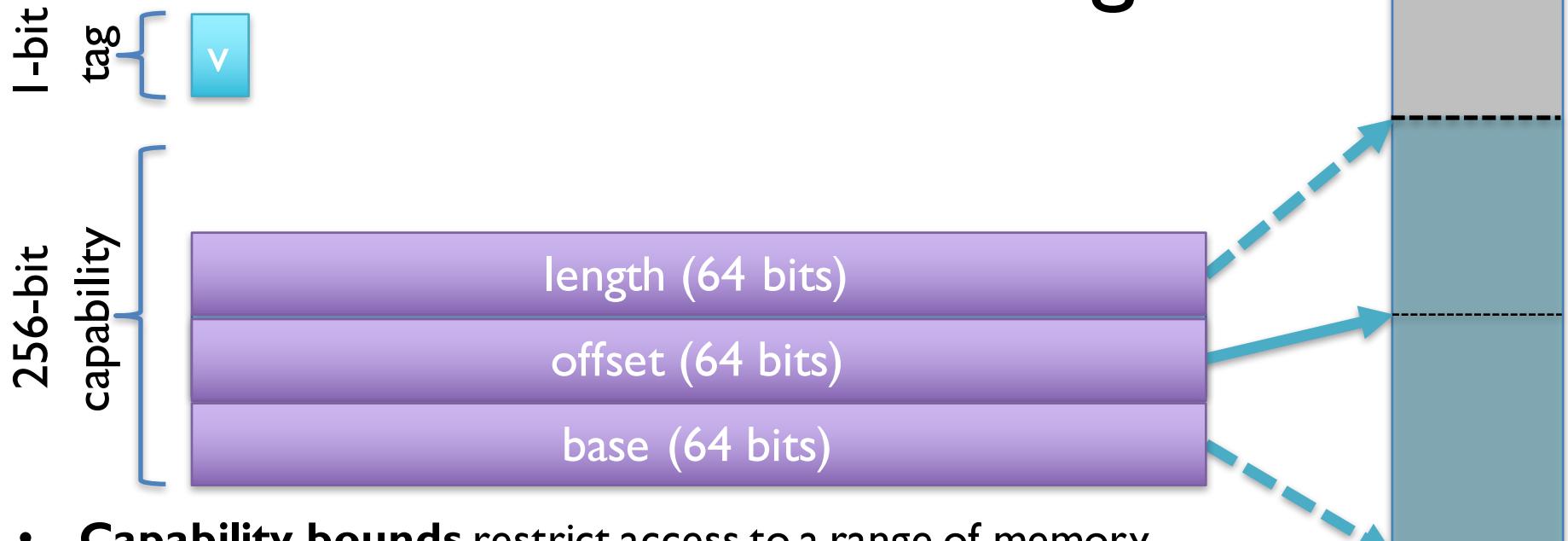


Virtual  
address  
space

# Tags for integrity and provenance

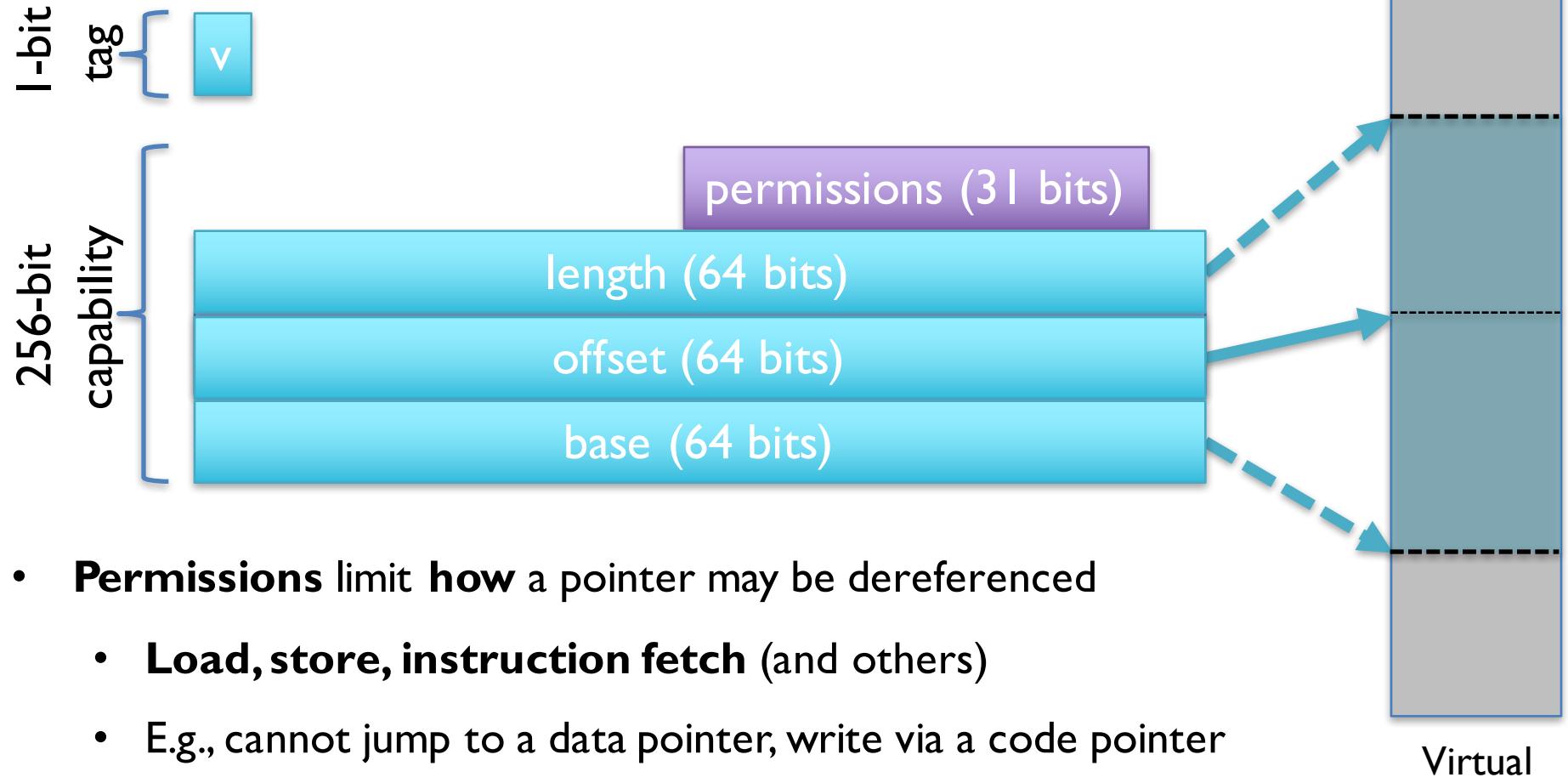


# Bounds checking



- **Capability bounds** restrict access to a range of memory
  - Architectural **base**, **length**, and base-relative **offset**
  - Pointer can float within bounds – and beyond
- **Set bounds** instruction subsets a current capability range
  - Used by heap, stack **allocators** – but also for explicit subsetting
- **Out-of-bounds dereference** throws a hardware exception

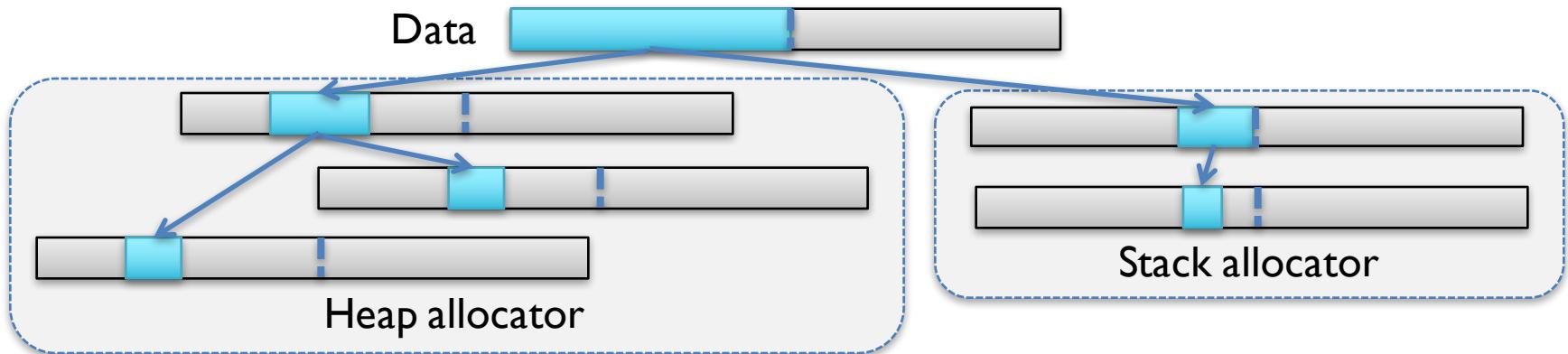
# Permissions



- **Permissions** limit **how** a pointer may be dereferenced
  - **Load, store, instruction fetch** (and others)
  - E.g., cannot jump to a data pointer, write via a code pointer
- **Permission mask** instruction reduces permissions
- **Unauthorized de-reference** throws a hardware exception

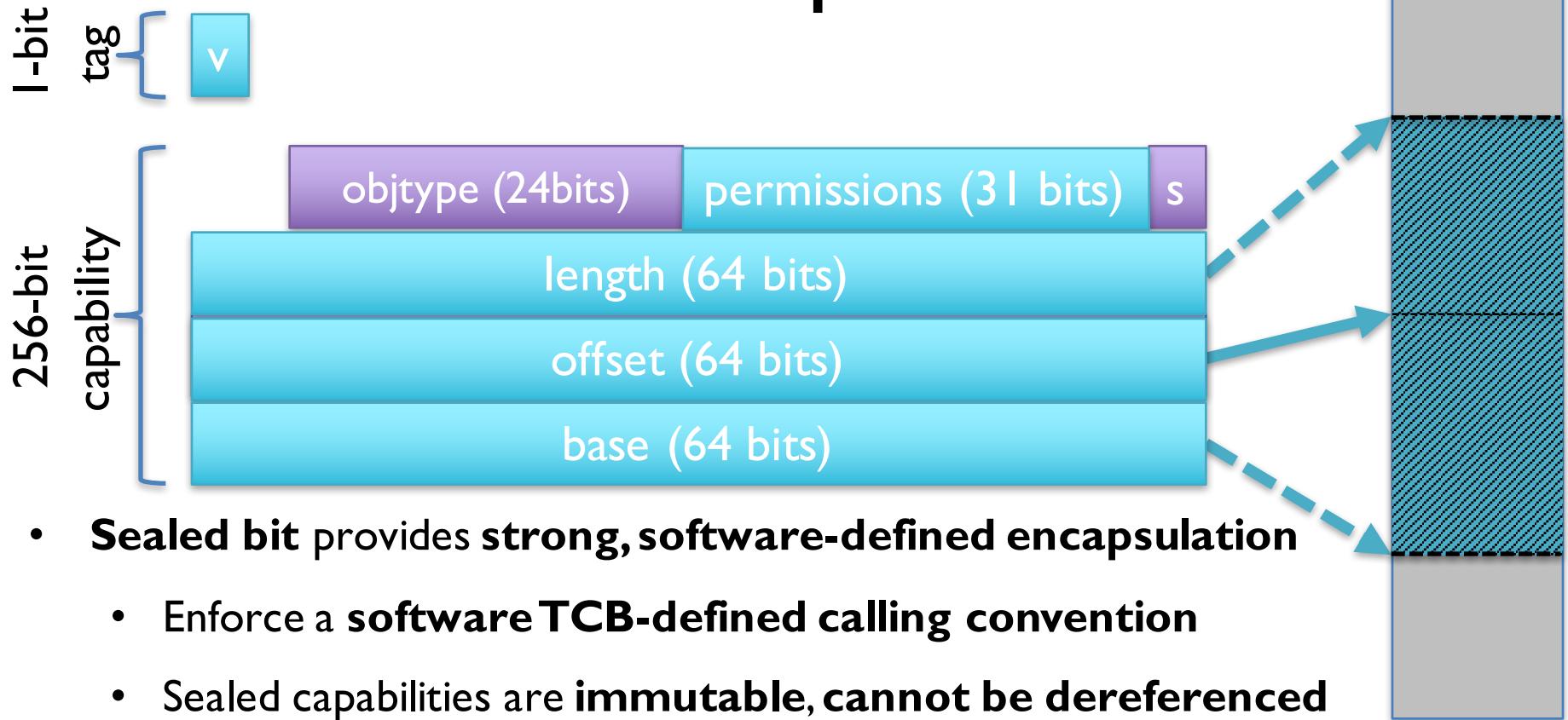
Virtual  
address  
space

# Pointer provenance and monotonicity



- **Pointer provenance:** pointers must be derived from other pointers
- **Guarded manipulation / capability monotonicity:**
  - **Tags** can be cleared but not set
  - **Bounds** can be narrowed but not widened
  - **Permissions** can be cleared but not set
  - E.g., received network data cannot be interpreted as a **code pointer**
  - E.g., **data pointers** cannot be manipulated to access other heap objects

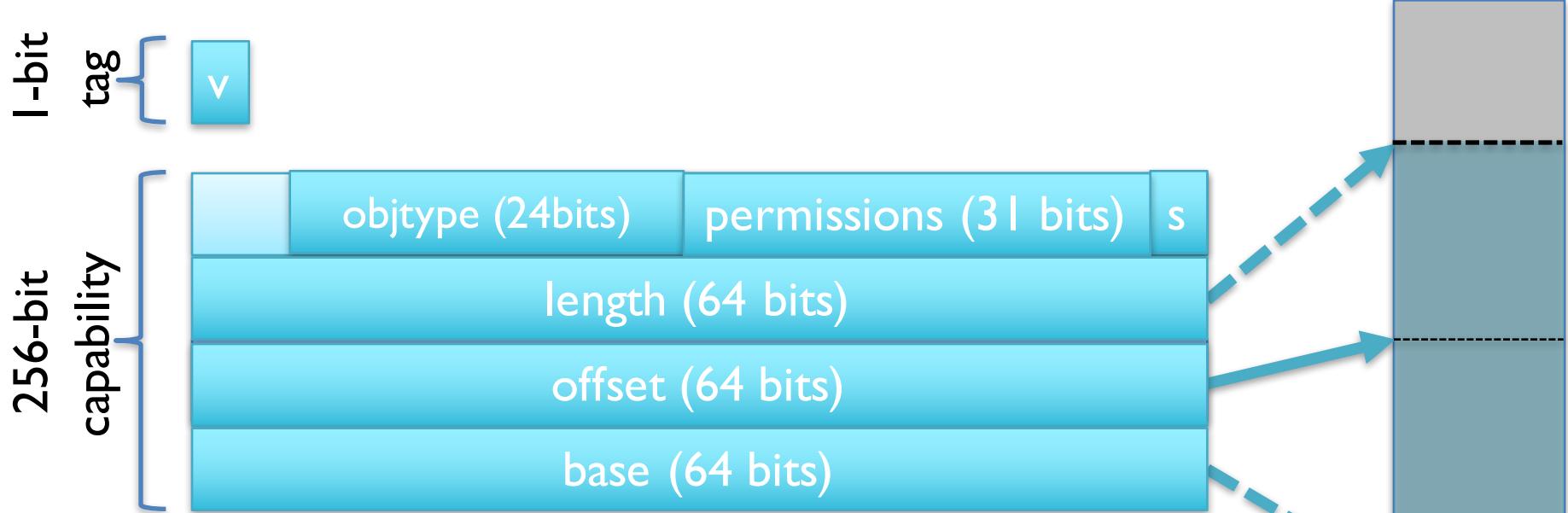
# Sealed capabilities



- **Sealed bit** provides **strong, software-defined encapsulation**
  - Enforce a **software TCB-defined calling convention**
  - Sealed capabilities are **immutable, cannot be dereferenced**
- **Object types** atomically link multiple capabilities
  - **Object capabilities** pair **code** and **data capabilities**
  - Foundation for **secure hardware-software object invocation**

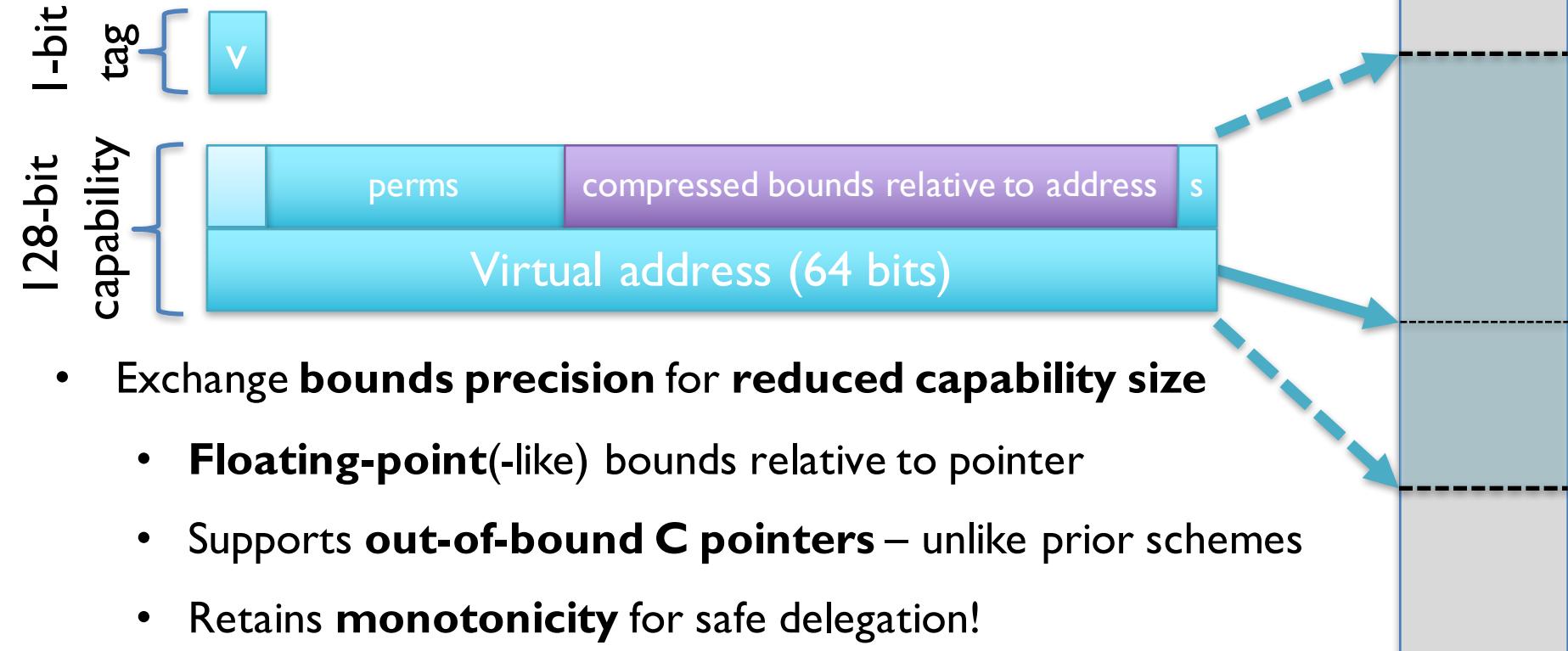
Virtual  
address  
space

# 256-bit architectural capabilities



- **CHERI capabilities are fat pointers with strong integrity**
  - **Tags** protect integrity; can't dereference invalid capability
  - **Bounds** limit range of address space accessible via pointer
  - **Permissions** limit operations – e.g., load, store, instruction fetch
  - **Guarded manipulation** enforces monotonic rights decrease
- Architectural description not the **micro-architectural** implementation

# 128-bit micro-architectural capabilities



- Exchange **bounds precision** for **reduced capability size**
  - **Floating-point(-like)** bounds relative to pointer
  - Supports **out-of-bound C pointers** – unlike prior schemes
  - Retains **monotonicity** for safe delegation!
  - Care required with **security-imprecision trade offs**
- DRAM tag density from 0.4% to 0.8% of memory size
- Fully functioning prototype with software stack on FPGA

Virtual  
address  
space

# Architectural least privilege

## CHERI memory protection:

- Eliminates out-of-bounds accesses
- Prevents injected data use as a code or data pointer
- Data pointers cannot be used as branch or jump targets
- Control-Flow Integrity (CFI) limits code-pointer reuse
- Scalable compartmentalization mitigates as-yet undiscovered attack techniques and supply-chain attacks

## While:

- Retaining current programming languages and models
- Supporting incremental deployment in software stack

Program



Virtual  
memory

# SOFTWARE DEPLOYMENT

# Virtual memory and capabilities

	Virtual Memory	Capabilities
Protects	Virtual addresses and pages	References (pointers) to C code, data structures
Hardware	MMU,TLB	Capability registers, tagged memory
Costs	TLB, page tables, lookups, shootdowns	Per-pointer overhead, context switching
Compartment scalability	Tens to hundreds	Thousands or more
Domain crossing	IPC	Function calls
Optimization goals	Isolation, full virtualization	Memory sharing, frequent domain transitions

CHERI hybridizes the two models:  
pick the **best** for each problem to solve!

# Binary and source-code compatibility

More compatible

Safer



## N64

All pointers are registers

## Hybrid

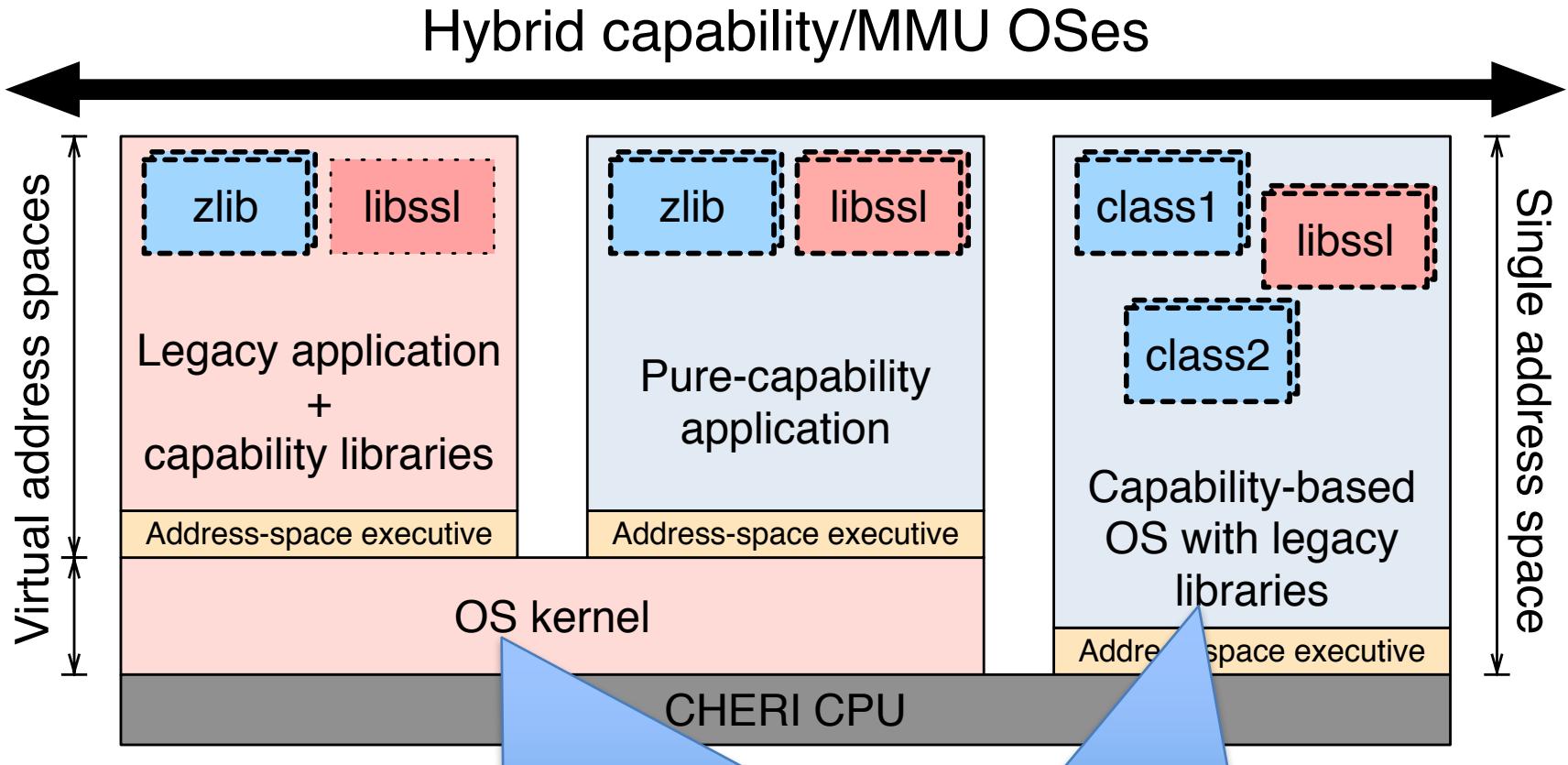
Some pointers are capabilities;  
e.g., annotated data pointers, stack  
and/or code pointers

## Pure-capability

All code and data  
pointers are capabilities

- **Hybrid code:** annotated use for data/code pointers, automatic use in return addresses, some stack pointers, etc.; N64-interoperable.
- **Pure-capability code:** ubiquitous data-pointer protection, strong Control Flow Integrity (CFI). Non-N64-interoperable.
- **Strong C-language compatibility:** capabilities are designed to represent pointers, support almost all common **C-language idioms**
- **CHERI Clang/LLVM prototype** supports both code models

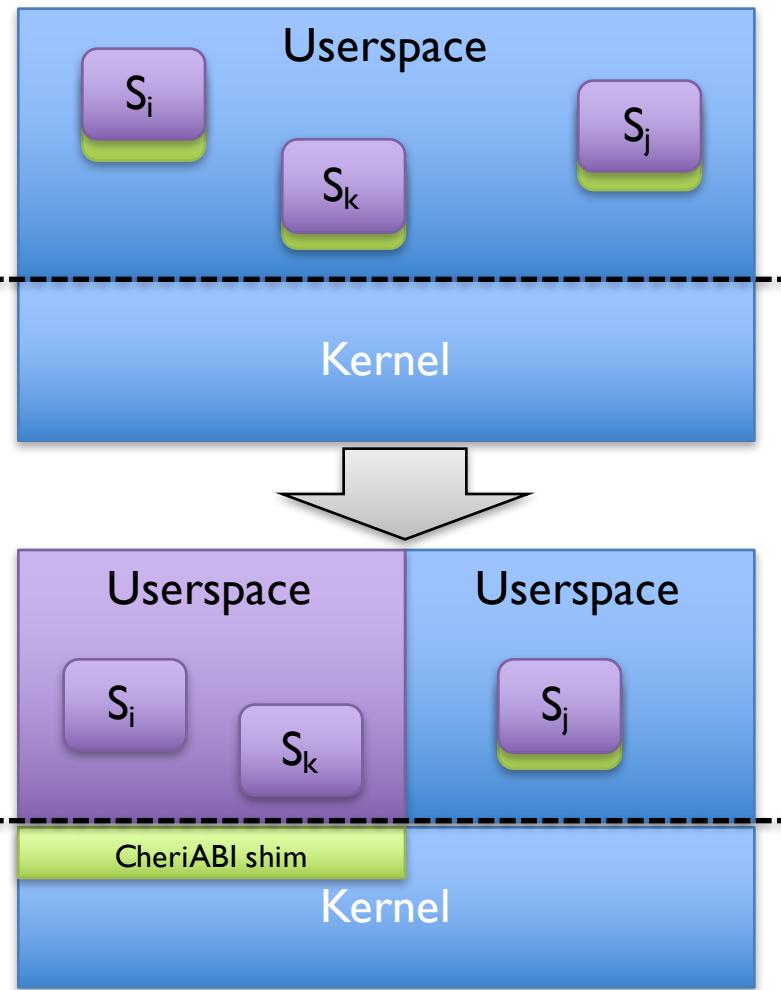
# Software deployment models



**Hybrid MMU-capability models:** protection and compartmentalization within virtual address spaces

**Single-address-space systems**  
are possible but not our focus

# Capability-aware system-call ABI



- CheriBSD kernel implemented the 64-bit MIPS ABI
  - Hybrid-ABI shims within processes
- **CheriABI** adds pure-capability syscall ABI, C runtime, libraries
  - Pure-capability userspace binaries
  - Majority of C-language FreeBSD userspace “just works” – e.g., SSH!
  - Support for many more pure-capability applications/benchmarks
- **Ubiquitous memory protection for critical TCBs**



MIPS ABI



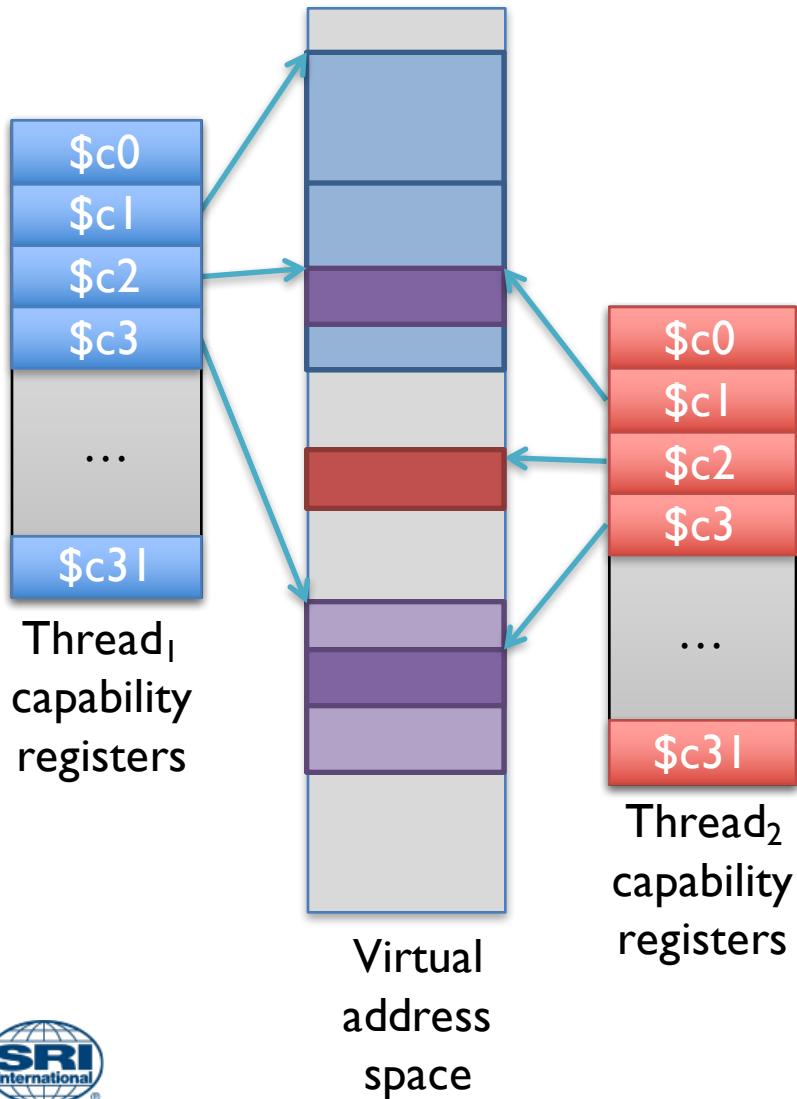
Hybrid ABI



Pure-capability ABI

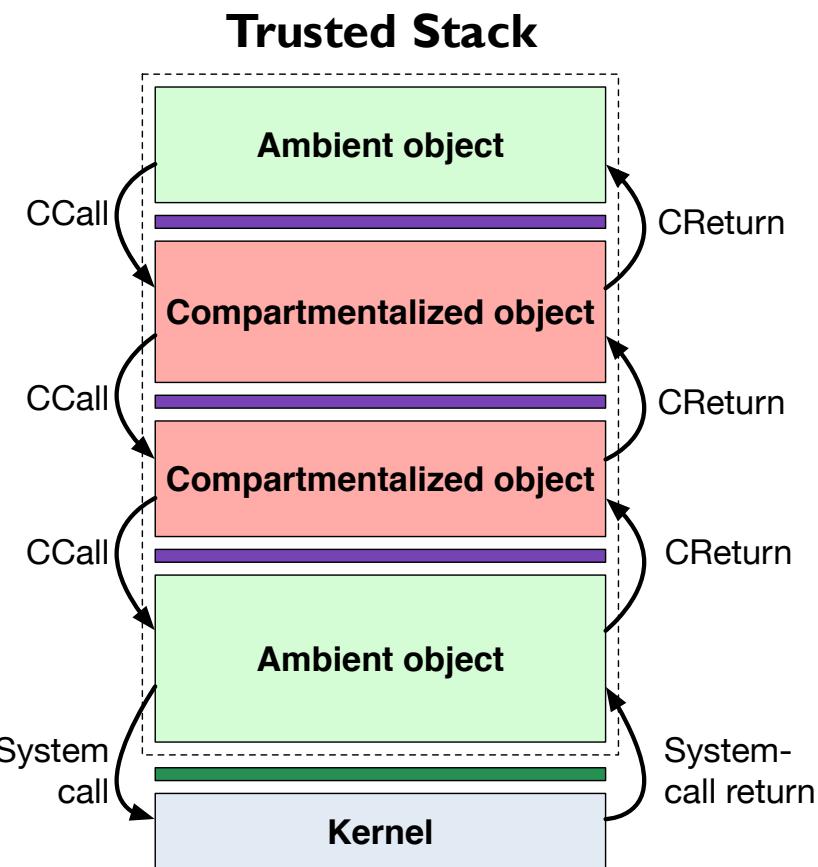
# COMPARTMENTALIZATION

# In-process object-capability model



- **Intra-process protection domain**
  - Capability register file contents
  - Transitive closure of capabilities
- **Domain transition**
  - Per-thread capability register-file transformation ("Call", "Return")
- libcheri implements **classes, objects**
  - **Encapsulation, mutual distrust**
  - **Objects** are sealed code + data capabilities with identical types
  - **Capability arguments / return values** allow efficient delegation

# Object-capability call and return



- **Default object** has ambient authority: full address space and system calls
- **Compartmentalization runtime** constructs constrained objects with explicitly delegated rights
- **Synchronous function-call-like CCall/CReturn** supports current application/library interfaces
- **Trusted stack** stitches together call chains of mutually distrusting objects
- **CCall/CReturn ABI** clears unused registers to prevent data/capability leakage between objects

# Application implications

## Pros

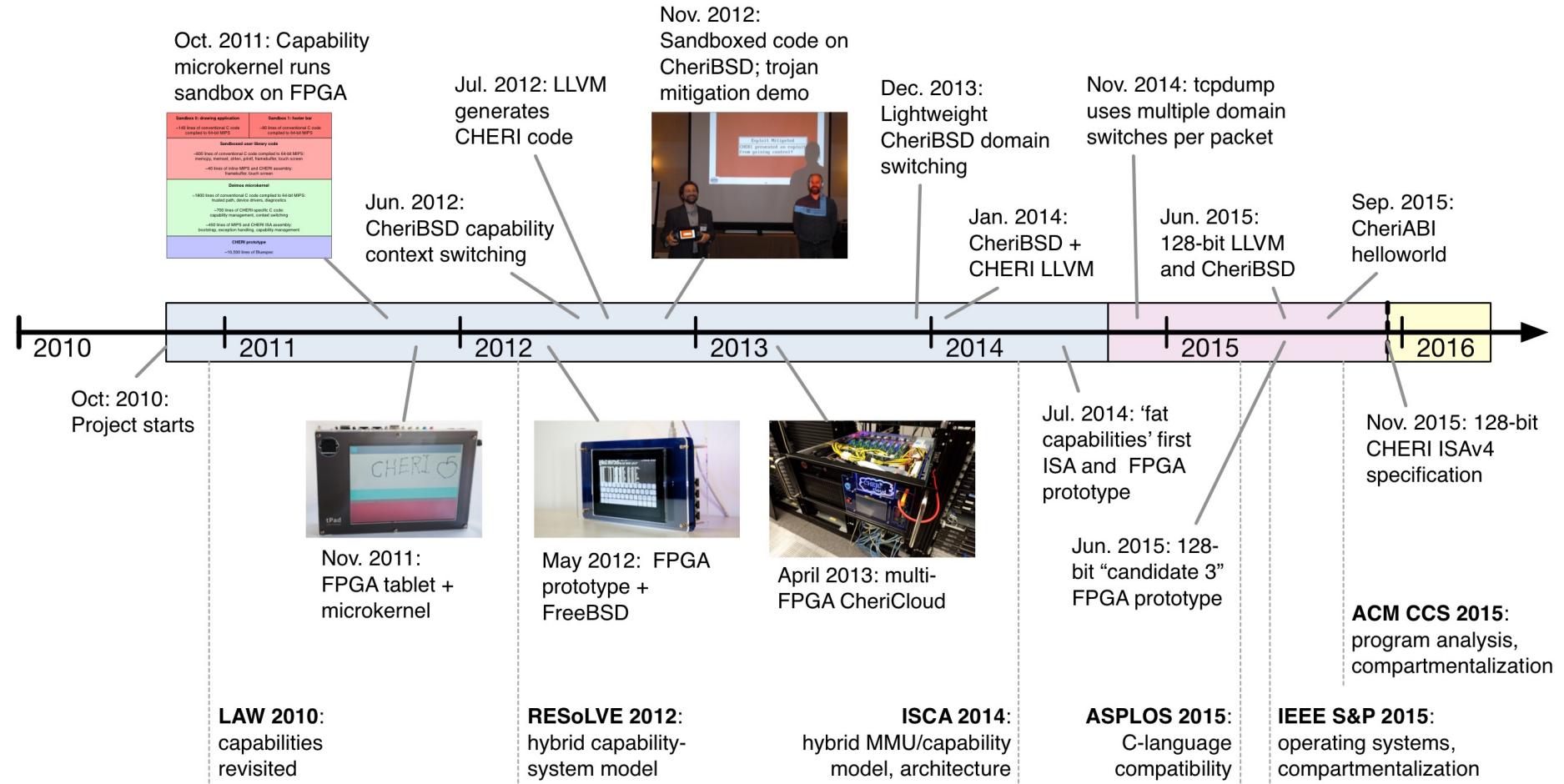
- Single address-space programming model
- Referential integrity matches programmer model
- Only modest work to insert protection-domain boundaries
- Objects permit mutual distrust
- Constant (low) overhead relative to function calls even with large memory flows

## Cons

- Still have to reason about the security properties
- Shared memory is more subtle than copy semantics
- Capability overhead in data cache is real and measurable
- ABI subtleties between MIPS and CHERI compiled code
- Lower overhead raises further cache side-channel concerns

# VALIDATION AND REFINEMENT

# CTSRD: Revisiting the hardware-software interface for security



# CHERII experimental prototype

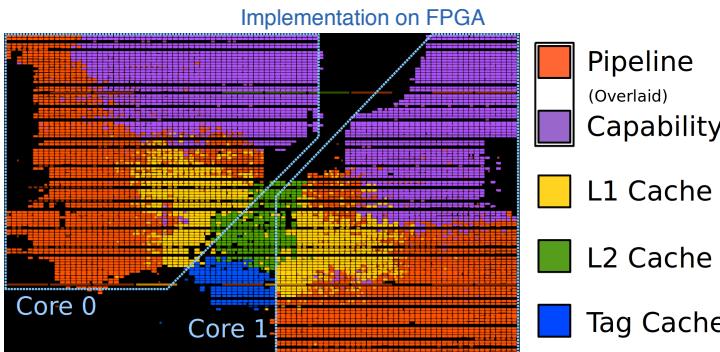
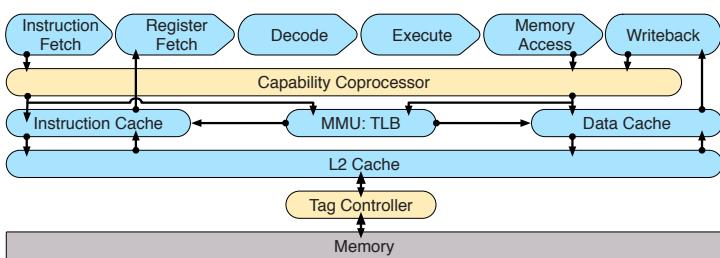
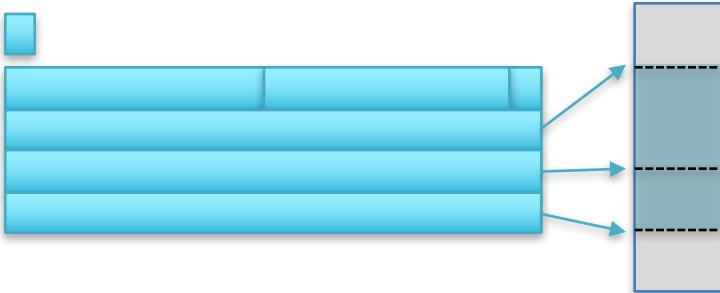
- Hardware:

- 64-bit MIPS + CHERI ISA extensions
- Formal ISA model (in Cambridge L3)
- BSV HDL prototypes (FPGA target)
- Pipelined, L1/L2 caches, MMU, multicore
- Capability extensions, tagged memory
- 256-bit and 128-bit prototypes

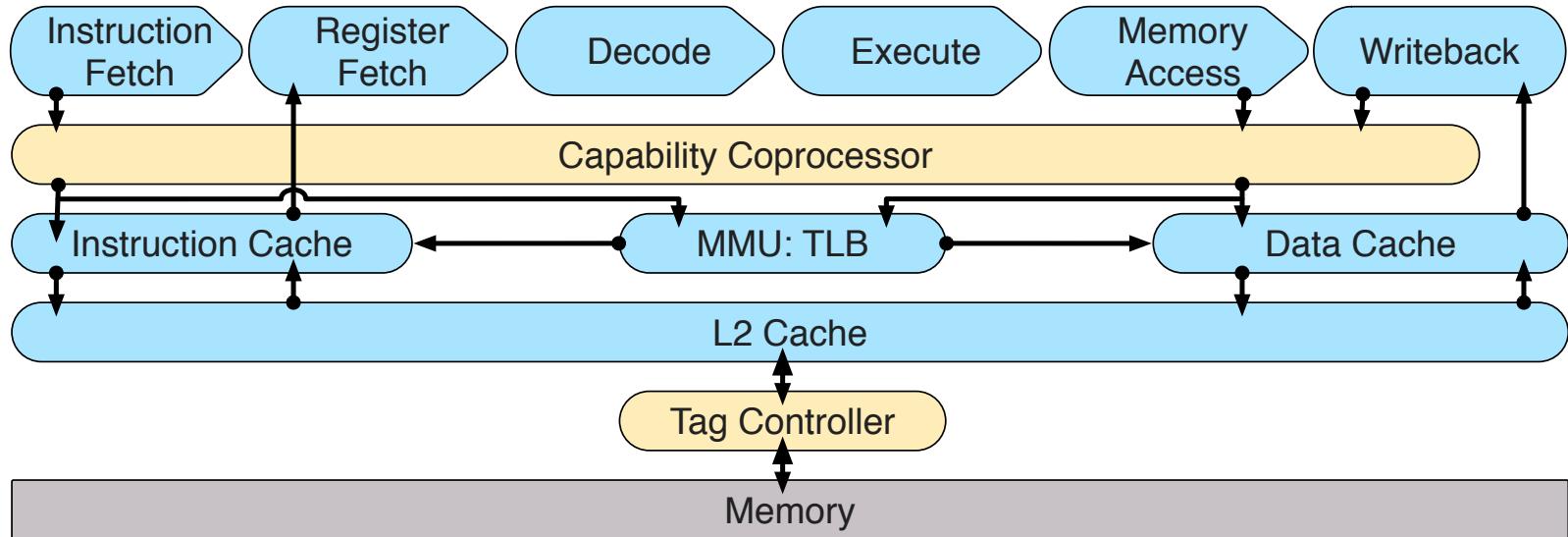
- Software:

- CheriBSD operating system
- CHERI clang/LLVM compiler
- Adapted applications

- Open-source HW and SW

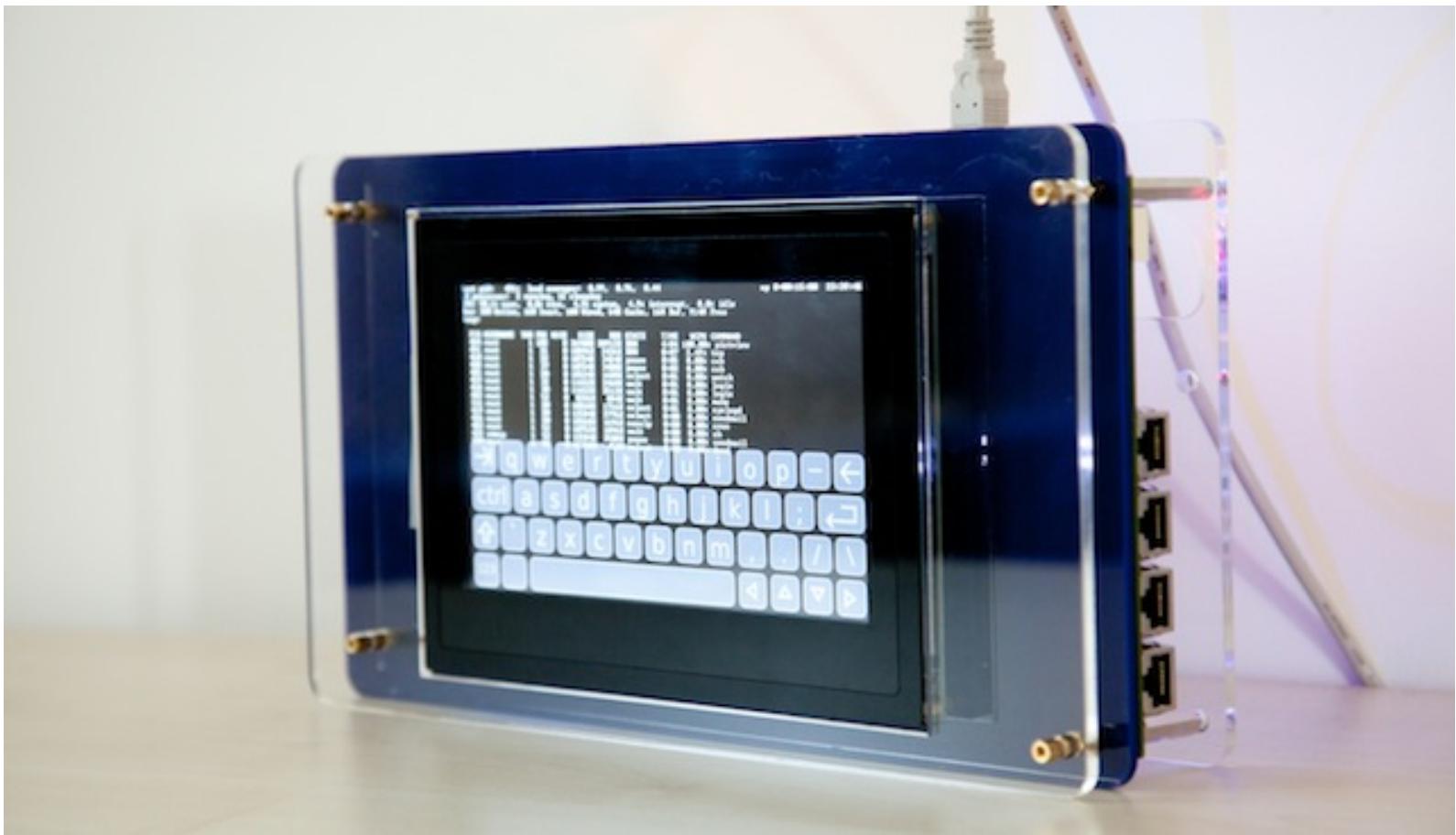


# CHERI micro-architectural additions



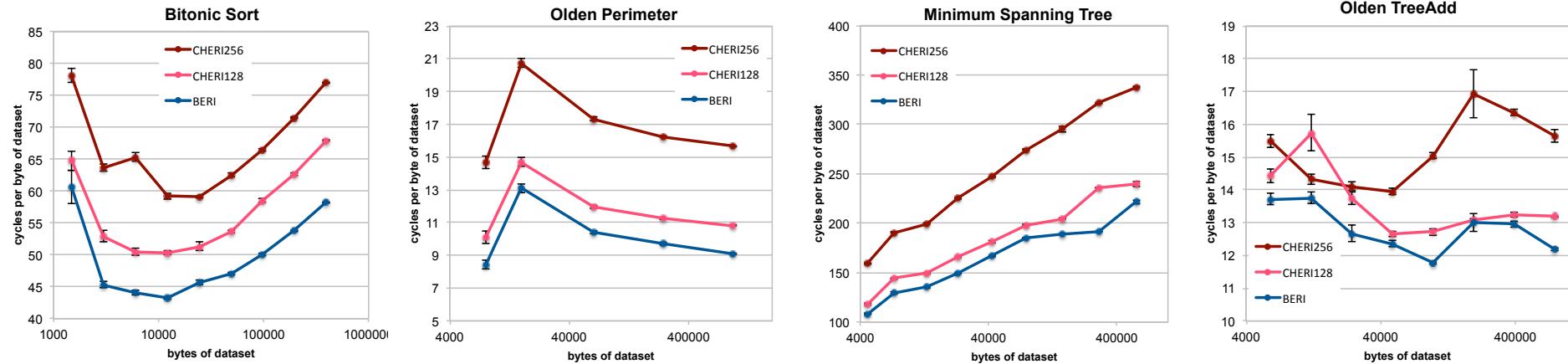
- ‘**Capability coprocessor**’ provides capability registers, instructions
- **\$ddc, \$pcc** interpose on **MIPS** load/store ISA, instruction fetch
- Processing ‘before’ MMU makes capabilities **address-space relative**
- **Tag controller** associates tags with in-memory capabilities
- Our implementation: **memory partitioned**, with a region holding all tags

# Demo Tablet Platform



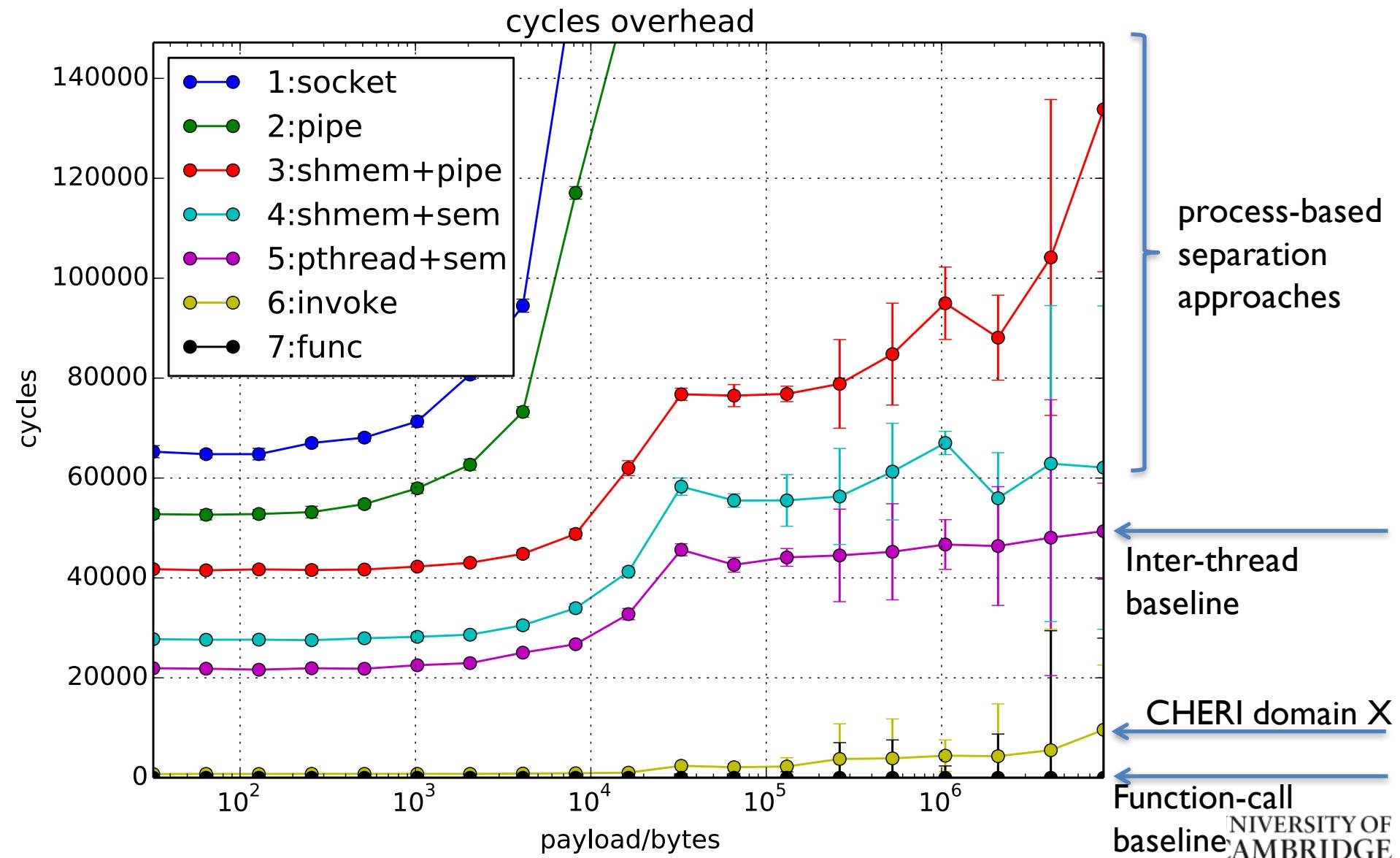
Terasic DE-4 tablet hosting 100MHz CHERI processor, CheriBSD OS

# Pointer-intensive benchmarks for pure-capability code (worst case)

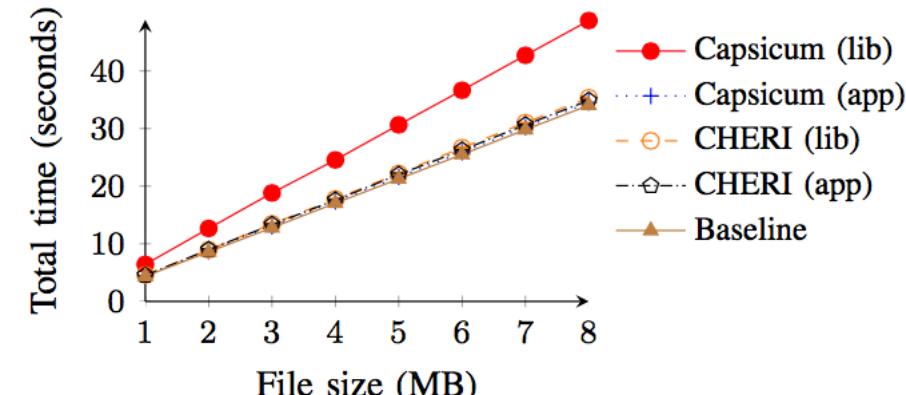


- Primary cost: D-cache footprint from pointer-size increase
- Cycles overhead vs. data-size parameter (range of working-set sizes)
  - 8.1% - 80.1% 256-bit capabilities
  - 2.5% - 24.3% 128-bit capabilities
- “In the noise” for Dhrystone & tcpdump (256-bit capabilities)
- Other security/performance options – e.g., only return-address capabilities

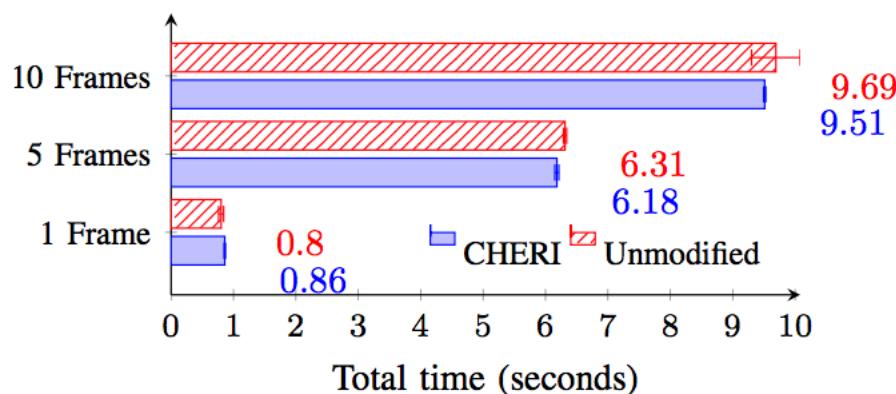
# Sandboxing: Domain-switching overhead



# Library compartmentalization



Application vs. library-based compartmentalization for gzip and zlib



Library-based compartmentalization of zlib and gif2png performance

- Compartmentalize within libraries without disturbing public API/ABI
- Allows unmodified applications to benefit from compartmentalization of key system classes/libraries
- Memory-based APIs are extremely inefficient to pass between processes
- Very efficient between CHERI compartments as pointers delegate memory access

# CHERI papers (I)

- **ISCA 2014:** Fine-grained, in-address-space memory protection
  - **Deconflate virtualization and protection**
  - **Hybrid model** adds capabilities while retaining an MMU
  - **Capabilities:** pointers with **tags, permissions, bounds**
  - **Manual annotations** protect selected stack/heap pointers
  - **C-language TCBs:** OSes, language runtimes, etc.
- **ASPLOS 2015:** Explore and refine C-language compatibility
  - Converge **fat-pointer** and **capability** models
  - **Binary-compatibility models** and **C compilation**
  - **Large-scale software study** of C-language compatibility

# CHERI papers (2)

- **Oakland 2015:** Hybrid hardware-software compartmentalization
  - **Sealed capabilities** and **object types**
  - Hardware-enforced **object-capability model**
  - Efficient, in-address-space **HW-SW domain transition**
- **ACM CCS 2015:** Compartmentalization modeling and analysis
  - **Conceptual model** for software compartmentalization
  - **LLVM-based static analysis tools** to analyze compartmentalized designs to validate security goals
  - **Annotations** for security goals, compartments, sensitive data, vendor information, past vulnerabilities, ...
  - **Analyses** of Chromium, OpenSSH; KDE compartmentalization

# Current R&D directions

- Improve architecture, micro-architectural performance
  - Converge register files, 128-bit “compressed” capabilities
  - Opcode footprint reduction through ISA load/store reuse
- Explore and mature software security and development models
  - Compiler, linker, and ABI refinement
  - Control-Flow Integrity (CFI)
  - Compartmentalization programming models
  - Selected system calls within compartments (a la Capsicum)
  - Complete pure-capability CheriBSD implementation
  - Temporal safety (e.g., accurate C garbage collection)

# Broader implications

- Model is applicable to other RISC ISAs – ARMv8, RISC-V, etc.
  - Some design decisions are **deep** – e.g., tags, monotonicity
  - Others are **shallow** – e.g., separate vs. merged register files
- Many incremental SW paths, security/performance tradeoffs
  - Deploy selectively for data/code pointers? (e.g., stack, CFI)
  - Deploy in key class libraries? (no need to recompile applications)
  - Language runtimes / JIT: Java, Javascript, memory safety
  - Kernel compartmentalization (i.e., microkernels)
  - Single-address-space systems (de-emphasise conventional MMU)
- Reduce protection pressure on the TLB/page-table system
  - Restore memory protection at PB-scale (HP's “The Machine”)

# Conclusions

- RISC ISA and CPU design implement capability model
- In-address-space pointers become capabilities
  - Complements MMU-based virtual memory
  - Fine-grained memory protection for code, data
  - Scalable compartmentalization
  - Strong compatibility with C-Language TCBs
- Open-source implementation, ISA specification:  
<http://www.cheri-cpu.org/>

## Q&A

