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(54) **CONTROLLING ACCESS TO RESOURCES IN A NETWORK**

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G06F 21/50 (2013.01)
H04L 29/06 (2006.01)

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CPC ***G06F 21/50*** (2013.01); ***H04L 63/08*** (2013.01)

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USPC 709/229
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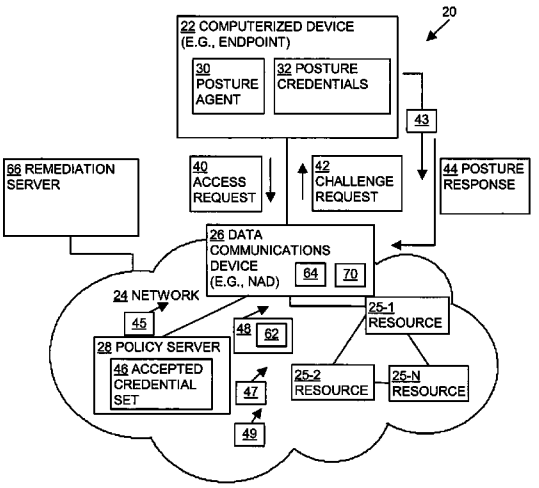
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A computerized device transmits an access request to a data communications device of a network in an attempt to access network resources within the network. The data communications device, in response and in real-time, transmits a challenge request to the computerized device that directs the computerized device to retrieve configuration, or posture, credentials associated with the computerized device. A policy server receives the challenge response and, based upon a real-time analysis of the posture credentials of the computerized device, determines a security state of the computerized device and either provides some level or denies the computerized device access to the network resources based upon the analysis of posture. The data communications device detects the real-time security state of the computerized device prior to providing the computerized device with controlled access to the network resources, thereby limiting vulnerable computerized devices from accessing the network resources and minimizing the risk that the network resources receive or transmit malware.

53 Claims, 7 Drawing Sheets



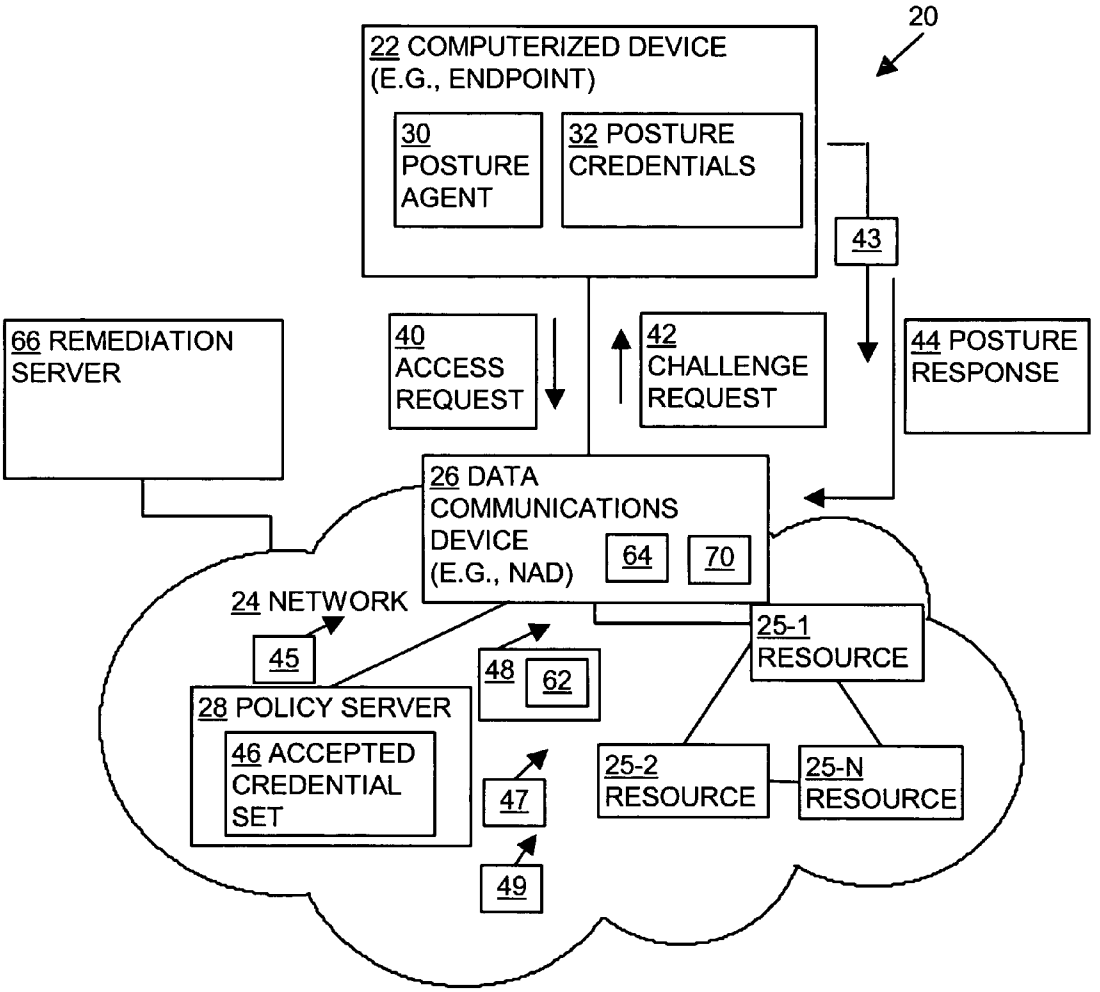

20
22 COMPUTERIZED DEVICE (E.G., ENDPOINT)
30 POSTURE AGENT
32 POSTURE CREDENTIALS
43
66 REMEDIATION SERVER
40 ACCESS REQUEST
42 CHALLENGE REQUEST
44 POSTURE RESPONSE
26 DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE (E.G., NAD)
64
70
24 NETWORK
45
48
62
25-1 RESOURCE
28 POLICY SERVER
46 ACCEPTED CREDENTIAL SET
47
25-2 RESOURCE
25-N RESOURCE
49

FIG. 1

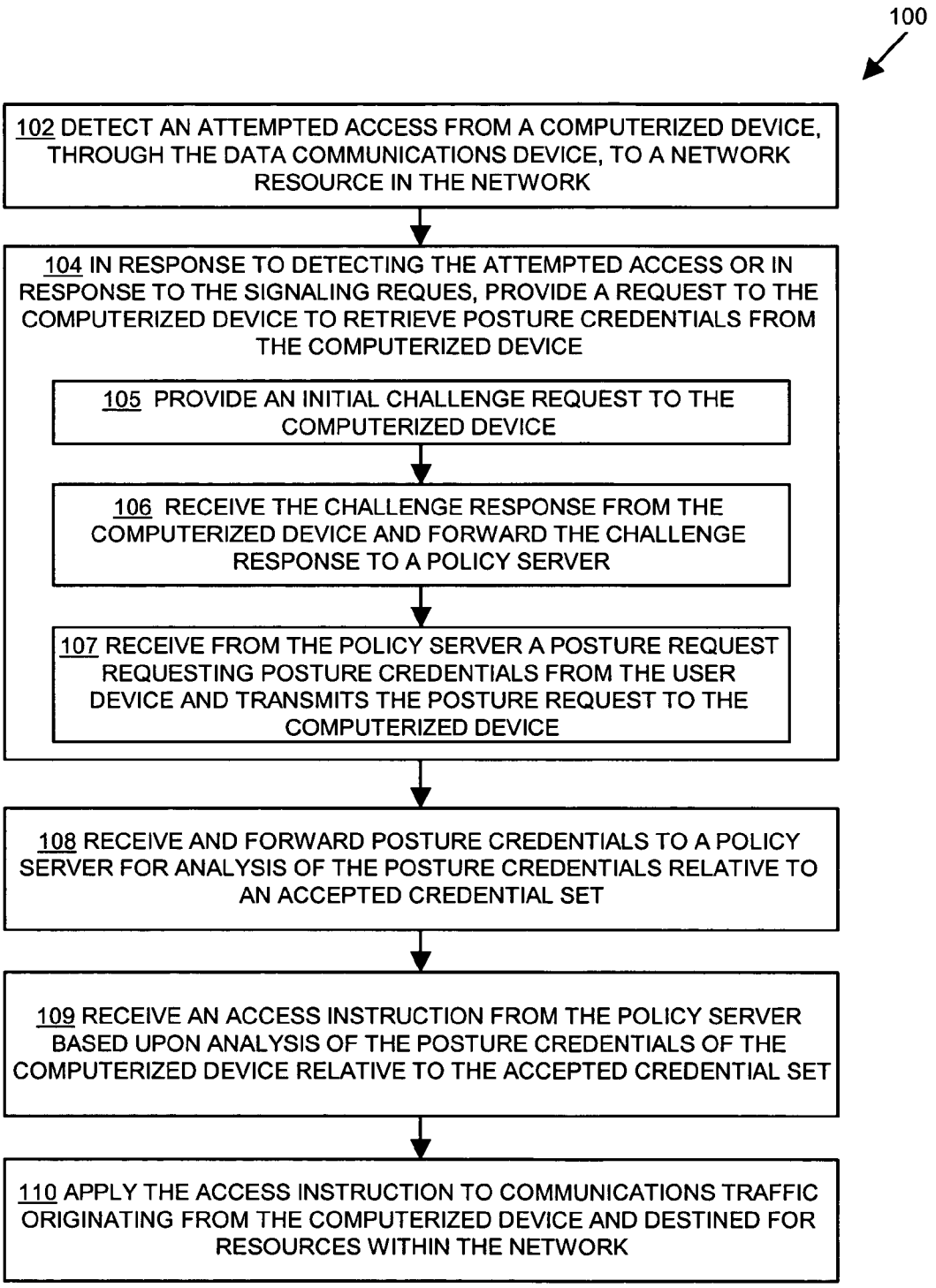

100
102 DETECT AN ATTEMPTED ACCESS FROM A COMPUTERIZED DEVICE, THROUGH THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE, TO A NETWORK RESOURCE IN THE NETWORK
104 IN RESPONSE TO DETECTING THE ATTEMPTED ACCESS OR IN RESPONSE TO THE SIGNALING REQUES, PROVIDE A REQUEST TO THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE TO RETRIEVE POSTURE CREDENTIALS FROM THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE
105 PROVIDE AN INITIAL CHALLENGE REQUEST TO THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE
106 RECEIVE THE CHALLENGE RESPONSE FROM THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE AND FORWARD THE CHALLENGE RESPONSE TO A POLICY SERVER
107 RECEIVE FROM THE POLICY SERVER A POSTURE REQUEST REQUESTING POSTURE CREDENTIALS FROM THE USER DEVICE AND TRANSMITS THE POSTURE REQUEST TO THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE
108 RECEIVE AND FORWARD POSTURE CREDENTIALS TO A POLICY SERVER FOR ANALYSIS OF THE POSTURE CREDENTIALS RELATIVE TO AN ACCEPTED CREDENTIAL SET
109 RECEIVE AN ACCESS INSTRUCTION FROM THE POLICY SERVER BASED UPON ANALYSIS OF THE POSTURE CREDENTIALS OF THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE RELATIVE TO THE ACCEPTED CREDENTIAL SET
110 APPLY THE ACCESS INSTRUCTION TO COMMUNICATIONS TRAFFIC ORIGINATING FROM THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE AND DESTINED FOR RESOURCES WITHIN THE NETWORK

FIG. 2

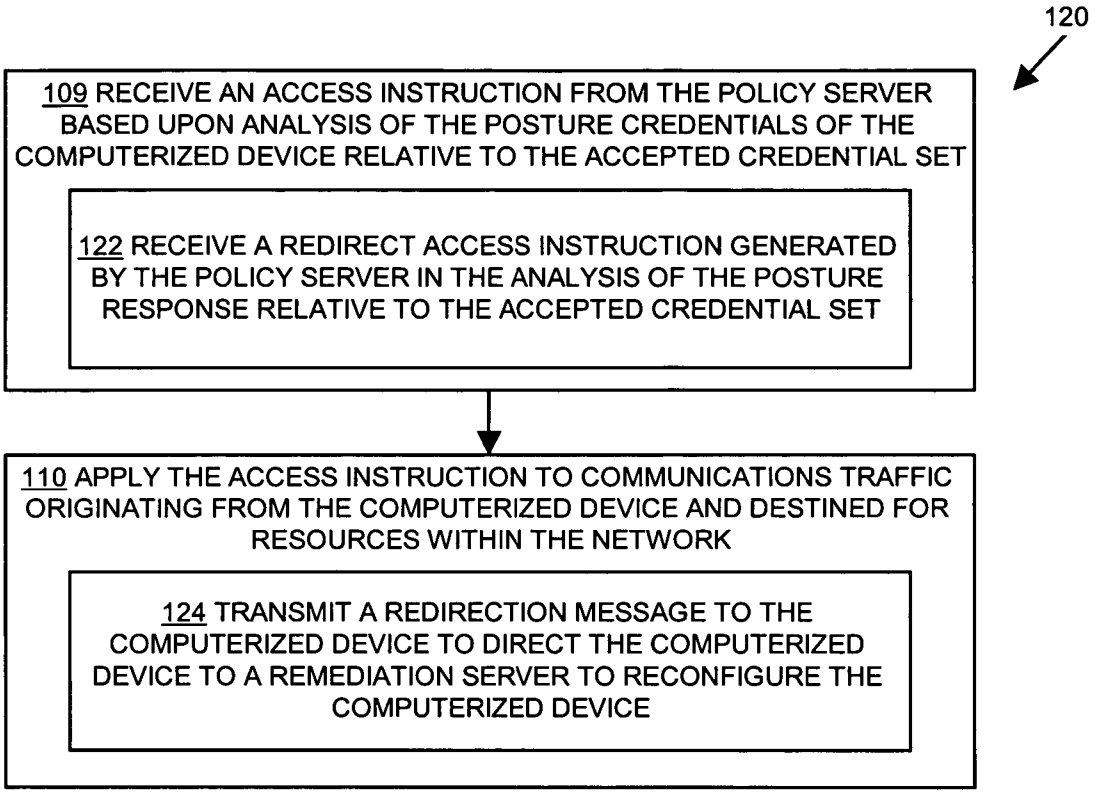

120
109 RECEIVE AN ACCESS INSTRUCTION FROM THE POLICY SERVER BASED UPON ANALYSIS OF THE POSTURE CREDENTIALS OF THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE RELATIVE TO THE ACCEPTED CREDENTIAL SET
122 RECEIVE A REDIRECT ACCESS INSTRUCTION GENERATED BY THE POLICY SERVER IN THE ANALYSIS OF THE POSTURE RESPONSE RELATIVE TO THE ACCEPTED CREDENTIAL SET
110 APPLY THE ACCESS INSTRUCTION TO COMMUNICATIONS TRAFFIC ORIGINATING FROM THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE AND DESTINED FOR RESOURCES WITHIN THE NETWORK
124 TRANSMIT A REDIRECTION MESSAGE TO THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE TO DIRECT THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE TO A REMEDIATION SERVER TO RECONFIGURE THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE

FIG. 3

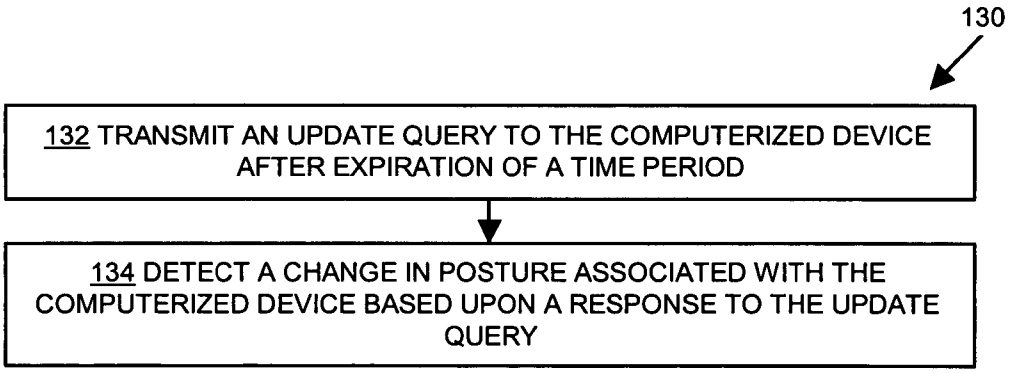

130
132 TRANSMIT AN UPDATE QUERY TO THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE AFTER EXPIRATION OF A TIME PERIOD
134 DETECT A CHANGE IN POSTURE ASSOCIATED WITH THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE BASED UPON A RESPONSE TO THE UPDATE QUERY

FIG. 4

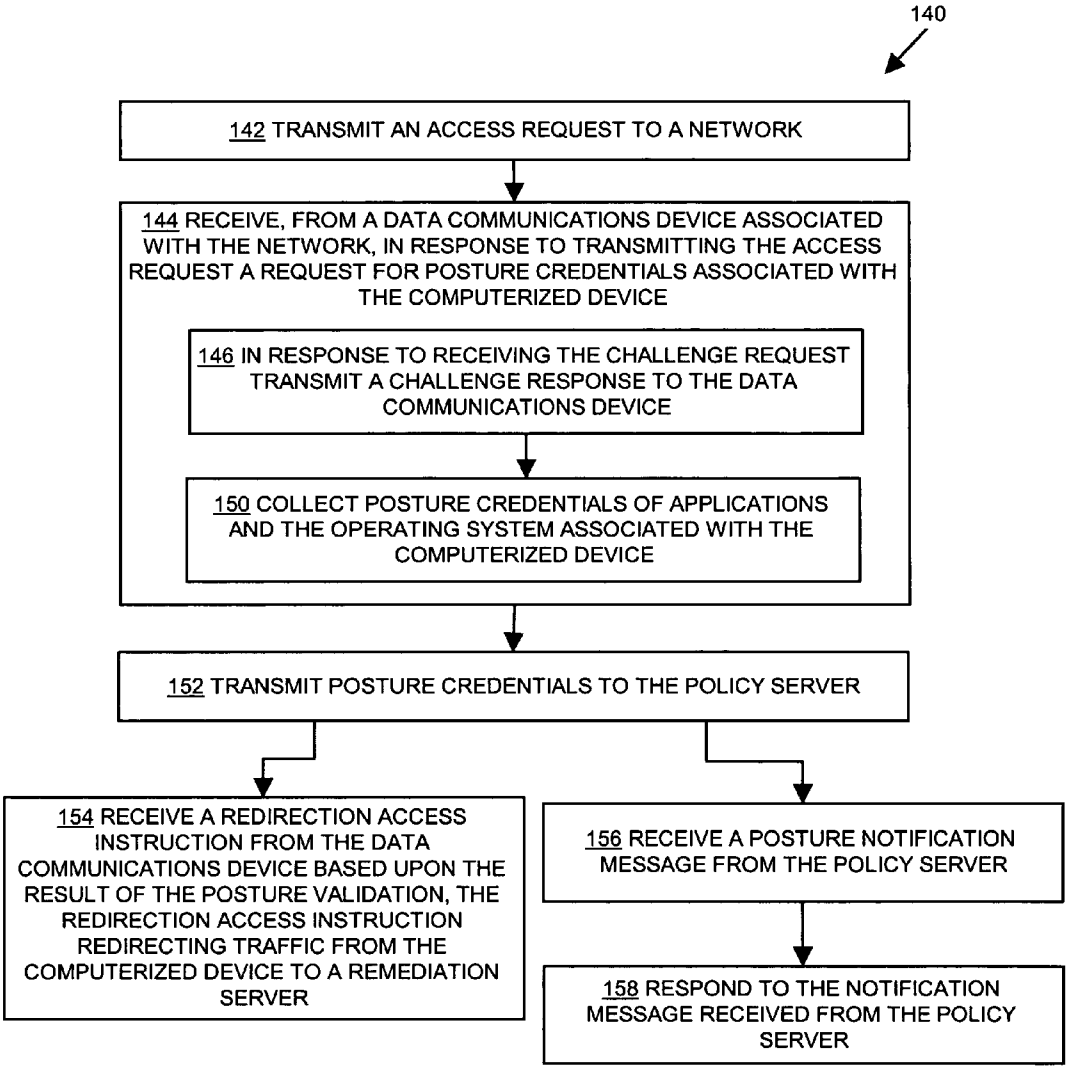

140
142 TRANSMIT AN ACCESS REQUEST TO A NETWORK
144 RECEIVE, FROM A DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE ASSOCIATED WITH THE NETWORK, IN RESPONSE TO TRANSMITTING THE ACCESS REQUEST A REQUEST FOR POSTURE CREDENTIALS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE
146 IN RESPONSE TO RECEIVING THE CHALLENGE REQUEST TRANSMIT A CHALLENGE RESPONSE TO THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE
150 COLLECT POSTURE CREDENTIALS OF APPLICATIONS AND THE OPERATING SYSTEM ASSOCIATED WITH THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE
152 TRANSMIT POSTURE CREDENTIALS TO THE POLICY SERVER
154 RECEIVE A REDIRECTION ACCESS INSTRUCTION FROM THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE BASED UPON THE RESULT OF THE POSTURE VALIDATION, THE REDIRECTION ACCESS INSTRUCTION REDIRECTING TRAFFIC FROM THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE TO A REMEDIATION SERVER
156 RECEIVE A POSTURE NOTIFICATION MESSAGE FROM THE POLICY SERVER
158 RESPOND TO THE NOTIFICATION MESSAGE RECEIVED FROM THE POLICY SERVER

FIG. 5

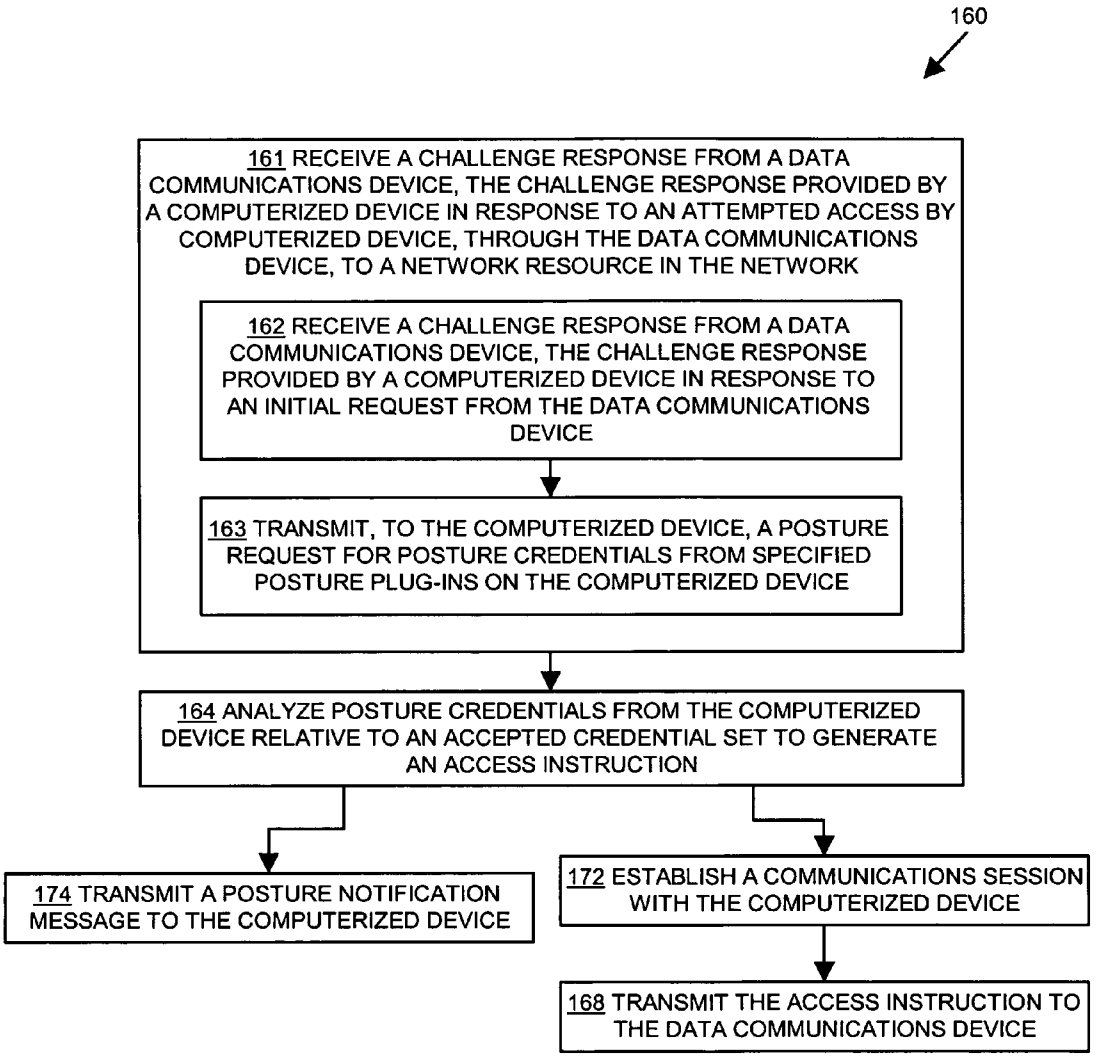

160
161 RECEIVE A CHALLENGE RESPONSE FROM A DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE, THE CHALLENGE RESPONSE PROVIDED BY A COMPUTERIZED DEVICE IN RESPONSE TO AN ATTEMPTED ACCESS BY COMPUTERIZED DEVICE, THROUGH THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE, TO A NETWORK RESOURCE IN THE NETWORK
162 RECEIVE A CHALLENGE RESPONSE FROM A DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE, THE CHALLENGE RESPONSE PROVIDED BY A COMPUTERIZED DEVICE IN RESPONSE TO AN INITIAL REQUEST FROM THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE
163 TRANSMIT, TO THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE, A POSTURE REQUEST FOR POSTURE CREDENTIALS FROM SPECIFIED POSTURE PLUG-INS ON THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE
164 ANALYZE POSTURE CREDENTIALS FROM THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE RELATIVE TO AN ACCEPTED CREDENTIAL SET TO GENERATE AN ACCESS INSTRUCTION
174 TRANSMIT A POSTURE NOTIFICATION MESSAGE TO THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE
172 ESTABLISH A COMMUNICATIONS SESSION WITH THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE
168 TRANSMIT THE ACCESS INSTRUCTION TO THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE

FIG. 6

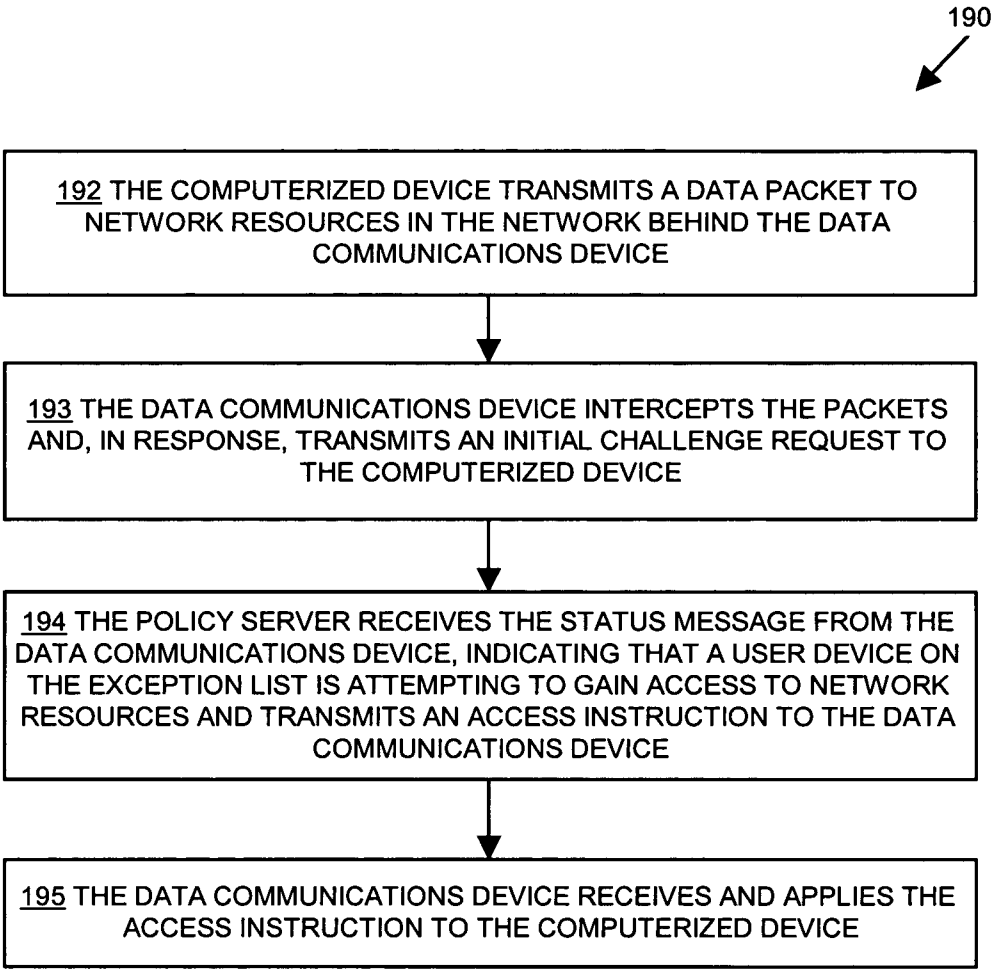

190
192 THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE TRANSMITS A DATA PACKET TO NETWORK RESOURCES IN THE NETWORK BEHIND THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE
193 THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE INTERCEPTS THE PACKETS AND, IN RESPONSE, TRANSMITS AN INITIAL CHALLENGE REQUEST TO THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE
194 THE POLICY SERVER RECEIVES THE STATUS MESSAGE FROM THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE, INDICATING THAT A USER DEVICE ON THE EXCEPTION LIST IS ATTEMPTING TO GAIN ACCESS TO NETWORK RESOURCES AND TRANSMITS AN ACCESS INSTRUCTION TO THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE
195 THE DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE RECEIVES AND APPLIES THE ACCESS INSTRUCTION TO THE COMPUTERIZED DEVICE

FIG. 7

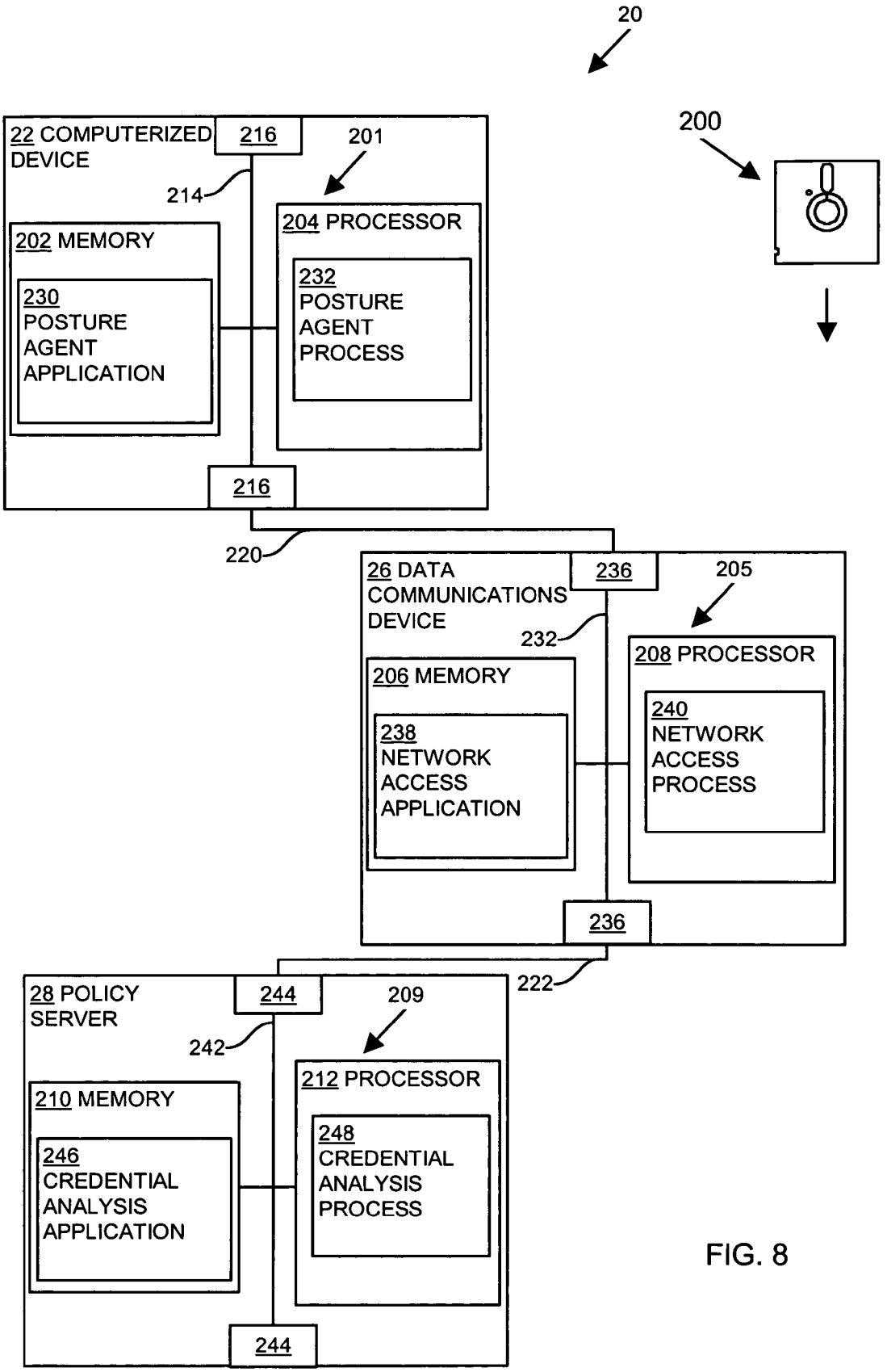

20
200
22 COMPUTERIZED DEVICE
216
201
214
202 MEMORY
230 POSTURE AGENT APPLICATION
204 PROCESSOR
232 POSTURE AGENT PROCESS
216
220
26 DATA COMMUNICATIONS DEVICE
236
205
232
206 MEMORY
238 NETWORK ACCESS APPLICATION
208 PROCESSOR
240 NETWORK ACCESS PROCESS
236
222
28 POLICY SERVER
244
209
242
210 MEMORY
246 CREDENTIAL ANALYSIS APPLICATION
212 PROCESSOR
248 CREDENTIAL ANALYSIS PROCESS
244

FIG. 8

CONTROLLING ACCESS TO RESOURCES IN A NETWORK

BACKGROUND

Conventional computerized devices, such as personal computers or laptop computers, connect to computer networks such as the Internet to transmit and receive content or data with other computerized devices in communication with the network. While connected to the network, the conventional computerized devices can be subject to receive malware, such as computer viruses, worms, spy-ware, spam, or other types of unauthorized applications or content (hereafter referred to as "malware"). unauthorized connections. For example, computerized devices typically include anti-virus applications that prevent execution of malicious programs that can harm the computer system. During operation, an anti-virus application associated with the computerized device can detect, note the presence, and/or remove viruses, thereby helping minimize the effect or proliferation of the virus. In another example, computerized devices such as routers or switches typically include firewall applications that limit certain data communications traffic from entry into a portion of a network. During operation, the firewall applications detect and prevent attempted connections to the associated computerized devices for which the traffic is destined.

A computer resource can become infected via any number of different interface "vectors." One of the most common is infection from a public network connection. For example, laptop computers are often configured to move between locations and connect to different networks. In addition to connecting their laptop computer to the corporate Local Area Network (LAN), users frequently, connect that same laptop computer to other networks that provide a direct connection to the Internet. It is while connected to these other networks that the laptop computer may become infected with malware (e.g., such as viruses or worms). When the laptop reattaches to the corporate LAN, the malware can then infiltrate the corporate network and impair the operation of that network and its associated resources.

To minimize the risk of a network and its resources becoming infected by malware, network-based vulnerability scanners can be used to assess the security "posture" of devices connected to that network. These scans are typically performed on the basis of a predefined scanning schedule. For example, in the case where the operator disconnects the laptop from the second network and reconnects the laptop to the conventional LAN, a vulnerability scanner application scans the reconnected computer (e.g., the applications on the laptop) based upon a predefined scanning schedule to assess the vulnerability "posture" of that laptop. If it is determined that the computer is vulnerable to one or more virus or worm exploits, other applications such as Antivirus Signature or Patch Management update programs may be invoked to mitigate those vulnerabilities and/or remove exploits that have managed to gain a foothold.

For example, assume a user connects a laptop computer to a Local Area Network (LAN) operated by a business and, at a later time, disconnects the laptop computer from the LAN and connects the laptop to a second network, such as the Internet. Further assume that while connected to the second network, prior to reconnecting with the corporate LAN, the laptop becomes infected with an unauthorized application, such as a virus or worm. Also assume that a scanning application periodically scans computerized devices connected to LAN (e.g., once a day) for the presence of known

vulnerabilities in the device operating system, resident applications, associated security programs, and their respective configurations. In the case where a computer connects to the LAN between scheduled scans, that computer can transmit malware onto the network, its resources, and any other device connected to that network. In addition to infecting and impairing the operation of these other devices this malware could impair the operation of the network itself

Another problem with conventional network-based security scanning systems is that the systems cannot always reliably collect the necessary information or detect that there is a problem, either because the systems are unable to access the appropriate information, did not have proper administrative authority, or the time required exceeds predefined resource schedules. These systems also are typically signature-based and only scan for vulnerabilities and exploits that are known a priori. This is why most vulnerability scanners and antivirus applications require periodic signature updates, which creates its own form of race condition relative to the latest class of exploits. This race condition is frequently referred to as a "Day Zero" problem; in that signature based systems frequently are unable to detect the latest exploits on "day zero." It is only after they are updated with the latest signatures that this new class of exploit or vulnerability can be detected.

For example, conventional remote antivirus and vulnerability scanning systems are limited to determining if a computer system operating on a network is configured with up to date virus definitions. Such systems do not provide a mechanism to inquire as to other configuration settings of the computer system operating on the network. By way of a specific example, it may be determined that a certain type and/or version of certain software application contains a known security threat to a network. Virus scanning software may be unable to deal with determining if the application is installed on the computer system. To generalize, conventional security mechanisms do not provide the ability to query the computer system for specific configuration information related to applications, the operating system, virus software, or other security information that may be used to determine the overall "safeness" or security threat that a particular computer poses when operating on a network.

SUMMARY

Conventional techniques for admitting computerized devices onto a network suffer from a variety of deficiencies that involve network security issues. For example, while conventional networks (e.g. wired and wireless LANs, remote VPN access, dial-up access) may authenticate a user or machine prior to admitting a device to the network, these same networks may admit devices without checking whether those devices are capable of introducing malware onto the network. As indicated above, conventional networks may be configured to scan for the presence of vulnerabilities or exploits on devices connected to the network according to a scanning schedule. The drawback with this approach is that many devices may be connected to the network for a significant period of time before they are scanned. It is during periods between these scans that a virus or worm may gain a foothold on these devices. This race condition is compounded by the fact that: a) the latest generation of viruses and worms can propagate across a network much more quickly then their predecessors, and b) more and more devices can roam across networks via technologies such as 802.11-based wireless networking. Accordingly, packet based networks are much more vulnerable to the spread of

malware and conventional network admission and scanning techniques do not provide sufficient security to satisfy minimal security, reliability, or availability requirements.

By contrast, embodiments of the present invention significantly overcome such deficiencies and provide mechanisms that include a robust network security architecture and system for controlling access to a network depending on the configuration state or "security posture" of a device when it attempts to connect to that network. According to some embodiments of the invention, computer systems such as personal computers can be configured with security agent software referred to herein as a security, or "posture" agent that can be remotely activated, and one or more software plug-ins, hereafter referred to "posture plug-ins", that the posture agent uses to collect information associated with the security posture of the computer device. The posture agent may be remotely activated in the form of a sequence of challenge requests transmitted by a router or other data communications device in response to a connection request from the computer device to access restricted resources in the network. A computer device, in one arrangement, is a device with a single network interface ("single-homed") that terminates a network connection, such as a laptop computer or a network enabled Personal Data Assistant (PDA), or a device with multiple network interfaces ("multi-homed") such as another router, switch, bridge, or a laptop or data server computer configured to allow the forwarding, routing, and/or bridging of packets. The challenge request sequence happens in real time and causes the posture agent within the computerized device to collect information associated with the security posture of the computer device, hereafter referred to as "posture credentials", from one or more posture plug-ins, and to transmit these posture credentials securely to a policy server operating within the network to determine what type of admission policy and level of network access should be assigned to that device. Posture credentials collected in real time from the posture plug-ins by the posture agent can identify critical security information such as what particular virus software and virus definition versions are installed within the computer system, when was the last time a local antivirus scan was executed, what operating system patches are installed within the computer system, what particular types and versions of software applications are configured and active within the computer system, and so forth. By providing a security posture based challenge-response mechanism for network admission control, embodiments of this invention are able to dramatically reduce the opportunities for injection of malware into a network.

During an example operation of one embodiment, the computerized device, such as a personal computer attempting to communicate with restricted resources in the network, transmits an access request to the data communications device (e.g., a router configured with embodiments of the invention) in an attempt to access the network resources within the network. The access request may be as simple as transmitting network packets (data, voice, and/or video) to other devices or resources on the network, or involve an explicit signaling request to cause the network admission control challenge-response sequence to take place. The data communications device that detects the presence of the new device initiates a challenge-response sequence to the device that directs a posture agent running on the computerized device to retrieve posture credentials describing the security posture of the computerized device. On detecting a new device the data communication device sends a challenge request to the computer device. The posture agent running on that computer device then transmits an initial challenge response back to the data communications device which forwards the challenge response onto the policy server. The policy server in the network continues the challenge-request sequence, which includes setting up a secure channel to the posture agent via the data communications device so that the posture credentials can be communicated securely. Once the secure channel has been established, the policy server submits a request to the posture agent via the data communications device for all or a selected set of posture credentials. The posture agent requests the specified posture credentials from the associated posture plug-ins installed on the device and transmits the requested posture credentials back to the policy server via the data communications device. Based upon an analysis of the posture credentials returned by the computerized device, the policy server determines what type of admission policy and level of network access and privileges should be extended to the computer device. Devices that are compliant with network admission policy would typically be given full network access. Devices that are only mildly out of compliance may be simply issued a warning that they are in danger of falling out of compliance with corporate policy. Devices that are more significantly out of compliance may be placed on an isolated, or "quarantine" network segment where they can be brought into compliance. Devices that violate core admission requirement may be denied network access entirely. In all cases, the response to device posture is a policy decision deduced by the policy server in response to posture credentials retrieved from a device when it attempts to enter a network.

The data communications system, therefore, detects the presence of a new host attempting to access restricted resources in the network, and initiates an exchange that allows a policy server to gather real-time security state, or "posture", of the computerized device prior to providing the computerized device with access to the network resources, thereby limiting at-risk or vulnerable computerized devices from accessing the network resources and minimizing the risk that the network resources receive malware. It is also possible that this invention is used only for monitoring and auditing compliance of computer devices to a security policy, rather than enforcing compliance to security policy as the above-mentioned examples suggest. In other words, it is possible to allow computer devices to access resources in the network regardless of the posture of the device, while still performing the challenge-response sequence for the purpose only of monitoring and auditing compliance to a security policy.

In one arrangement, the data communications device assigns devices that are out of compliance with admission requirements to a quarantine, or remediation network. This remediation admission policy is issued by the policy server based on comparison of the posture credentials of the device relative to predefined network admission requirements, or security policy. At the same time the policy server determines access, the policy server can transmit one or more notification messages to the posture agent and/or posture plug-ins running on the computer device attempting the gain access to the network. The notifications may include the results of the posture check, remediation actions (if any) and an informational message to be displayed to the user, or written to a local log file. Displaying an informational message would be appropriate on a computer that includes a user console, whereas simply logging the message would be more appropriate for a device such as a printer that may not possess a human readable display. In addition, when

directed by the policy server, the posture agent may forward the notification to one or more posture plug-ins for processing.

In response to a notification, an additional posture agent or posture plug-in response might be to automatically connect the computer device, or prompt a user to manually connect the computer device, to a remediation server that resides on the quarantine network, where the remediation server is configured to upgrade or provide up-to-date patches to the operating system or applications, such as anti-virus applications, associated with the computerized device. The device should be admitted into the original network if the remediation process was successful. Otherwise the device will be again identified as being at some level of non-compliance and the appropriate response will be invoked by the policy server.

The remediation server acts to minimize the susceptibility of the computerized device to an unauthorized application, such as a virus, thereby minimizing the potential for the computerized device to carry an unauthorized application onto the network at a later time. In this manner, embodiments of the invention can perform the real-time analysis of posture credentials that describe the configuration of the computer system attempting to gain access a network. This analysis can result in a posture agent and/or posture plug-ins receiving a quarantine message causing the computer system to be reconfigured to more fully comply with required security policy prior to being able to communicate within the network.

Once the computer device has completed the remediation process, the computer device, can attempt to re-enter the original network. This may be achieved by the computer device transmitting a message to the data communications device to request that the posture of the device be re-validated, and/or the data communications device may periodically query the computer device for a posture update, hereinafter called "posture update query". When the posture agent responds to a posture update query in a way that indicates that the posture has been updated, the data communications initiates a fresh challenge-response sequence to enable the policy server to re-assess the posture credentials and apply new admission to the data communications device. The posture update query mechanism is used to detect any change in posture of the computer device. Changes may be to due to the remediation process, other software update processes, user action, or infection by some type of malware. In particular, in one embodiment, between each periodic full challenge-response sequence to check posture credential as described above, the data communications device may periodically transmit the posture update query message to the posture agent.

The status query mechanism is an optimized, secure version of the full challenge-response mechanism that operates only between the posture agent and the data communications device and does not involve the policy server. The status query mechanism is a simple authenticated challenge-response mechanism used to determine whether the posture on the computer device has changed, and also to make sure that the computer device that responds to the request is the same one that was previously authorized to access the network. If the status query fails, e.g. because the posture agent responds with an error, the posture agent does not respond at all or the posture agent indicates that the posture agent has changed, the data communications device attempts the full challenge-response sequence to enable the policy server to re-assess the posture credentials and apply a new access policy on the data communications device.

In another arrangement, even after a computer system has been authorized to communicate in the network using the aforementioned examples and even if the computerized device does not indicate that the posture has changed, the network can nevertheless periodically re-run the full posture check of authorized computer systems to ensure that their posture is still compliant with the network admission policy. This is useful in addition to the posture update query mechanism above because the rules in the policy server may change. In particular, in one embodiment, the data communications device periodically re-initiates the full challenge-response sequence after expiration of a time period to enable the policy server to request the posture agent to re-transmit the posture credentials for evaluation against the latest admission policy rules configured in the policy server.

In another arrangement, the invention also allows posture credentials to be checked at the same time as a user of a computerized device or the computerized device itself is authenticated. The invention allows the policy server to request user identity information, machine identity information as well as posture credentials in the same secure tunnel, and apply network access policies based on some combination of who the user is (e.g. joe smith.companyX.com) whether the computerized device is a corporate asset (e.g. machine1. engineering. companyX.com) as well as the value of posture credentials as described above. By allowing user identity, machine identity and posture credentials to be checked together at one time, more powerful admission policies can be enforced on the policy server. For example, different types of posture information may be checked for different users, e.g. computer systems belonging to employees of an organization may be expected to have the posture agent with specific posture plug-ins installed on the computer devices, whereas consultants or business partners of an organization may not. Different categories of user may be provided different types of access based on who they are and the type of posture information that can be gleaned from the device being used to access the network. The invention thus allows the network to be protected not only from computer devices that may be vulnerable to infection based on their security posture, but also makes sure that networks are used only by legitimate, known users and known machines.

According to other embodiments of the invention, computer systems such as personal computers may not be configured with a posture agent that can be remotely activated. This may be because the posture agent software is not yet available or may never be implemented devices with less common operating systems (e.g. printers) or it is not feasible to deploy in certain customer environments where the computerized devices used are not owned or managed by a single organization, (e.g. universities). In this case, embodiments of the invention allow for exception lists to be created in the data communications device to exempt specified computerized devices from the posture admission control check and to have pre-configured access policies applied.

In another arrangement, the data communications device, on detecting a new computer device attempting to access restricted resources in the network, and on detecting that it does not have a posture agent installed, may nevertheless ask a policy server for a network admission policy for the computer device. The policy server may consult a local exception list based on the identity of the computer device, or it may trigger real-time network-based vulnerability scanning of the computer device, fingerprinting of the computer device, Web page script download to computer device and possibly other mechanisms to determine as much informa-

tion about the computer device in the absence of a posture agent being installed on the device.

Based on posture information gleaning from these other mechanisms, the policy server may determine the appropriate admission rules to be downloaded to the data communications device including allowing access to restricted resources, quarantining the computer device or denying access completely. In this manner, the invention allows network admission control to be applied even in the absence of a posture agent on all computerized devices attempting to use the network.

It is to be understood that the system of the invention may be embodied strictly as a software program, as software and hardware, or as hardware alone. The features of the invention, as explained herein, may be employed in data communications devices and other computerized devices and software systems for such devices such as those manufactured by Cisco Systems, Inc. of San Jose, Calif.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing and other objects, features and advantages of the invention will be apparent from the following description of particular embodiments of the invention, as illustrated in the accompanying drawings in which like reference characters refer to the same parts throughout the different views. The drawings are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon illustrating the principles of the invention.

FIG. **1** shows a data distribution system, according to one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **2** illustrates a flow chart of a procedure performed by a data communications device of the system of FIG. **1**, according to one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **3** illustrates a flow chart of a procedure performed by a data communications device of the system of FIG. **1**, according to one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **4** illustrates a flow chart of a procedure performed by a data communications device of the system of FIG. **1**, according to one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **5** illustrates a flow chart of a procedure performed by a computerized device of the system of FIG. **1**, according to one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **6** illustrates a flow chart of a procedure performed by a policy server of the system of FIG. **1**, according to one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **7** illustrates a flow chart of a procedure performed by the system of FIG. **1** when the computerized device attempts to access resources in the network, according to one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **8** illustrates a configuration of the system of FIG. **1**, according to one embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Embodiments of the present invention provide a comprehensive network security architecture that includes mechanisms for controlling access to resources in a network based on some combination of the security posture of the computer system as well as the identity of the computer system and the user of the computer system. In one configuration, an operating environment includes a computerized device and a network having network resources, a data communications device, and a policy server. The operating environment may also include audit servers that are able to do on-line scanning or fingerprinting of computerized devices in the absence of a posture agent being installed.

During operation, the computerized device such as a personal computer transmits packets or a signaling request to the data communications device in an attempt to access the network resources within the network. The data communications device, in response, initiates a sequence of challenge requests to the computerized device that ultimately directs the computerized device to retrieve configuration credentials associated with the computerized device in a secure manner. Generally, the configuration credentials indicate a security "posture" of the computerized device. After the data communications has sent the initial challenge request to the posture agent and the posture agent responds, the data communications device forwards the response to the policy server. The policy server continues with the challenge-response sequence to the computer device via the data communications device. The policy server receives the challenge responses and, based upon an analysis of the posture credentials of the computerized device, determines a security state of the computerized device and either provides some level of or denies the computerized device access to the network resources based upon the analysis. The data communications system, therefore, detects the real-time security state of the computerized device prior to providing the computerized device with access to the network resources, thereby limiting at-risk or vulnerable computerized devices from accessing the network resources and minimizing the risk that the network resources receive malware. In effect, this invention helps "dampen" the propagation of worms and viruses, and related side effects, by preventing systems capable of participating in such an outbreak from gaining access to the network.

FIG. **1** illustrates a data communications system **20**, according to one embodiment of the invention. The data communications system **20** includes a user device (e.g., computerized device) **22** and a network **24** having network resources **25**, a data communications device **26**, and a policy server **28**.

The user device or computerized device **22** is configured to attempt to access the network resources **25** within the network **24**. Example user devices **22** include, but are not limited to, personal computers (e.g., laptop computers), data servers, IP-enabled and cellular telephones, personal digital assistants (PDA's), etc. Other user devices include multi-homed network devices such as routers, switches, and wireless access points, for example. The user device **22** includes sets of configuration credentials **32**, also referred to hereinafter as "posture plug-ins". Each posture plug-in **32** indicates a security posture with respect to a particular manufacturer's application (e.g., security status, setting, value, active applications, or other configuration data) of the user device **22** with respect to one or more security vulnerabilities of the device. The security posture of the user device **22** relates, for example, to the user device's **22** ability to resist reception or transmission of malware (e.g., viruses), content (spam and/or data theft), or access by unauthorized users. For example, in one arrangement, the user device **22** includes a posture plug-in **32** that indicates the status of an anti-virus applications installed on the user device **22** (e.g., the association of an anti-virus application with the user device **22** or a version of the anti-virus application or its virus definition files associated with the user device **22**). In another arrangement, the user device **22** includes a posture plug-in **32** that indicates the status of intrusion prevention (e.g., firewall) applications associated with the user device **22**. In another arrangement, the user device **22** includes a posture plug-in **32** that indicates the version of operating systems used by the user device **22** or the presence of

updated "patches" associated with the operating systems. It is to be understood that the posture plug-in **32** represents any type of configuration information that a computerized device **22** can maintain and that the posture agent **30** is able to access, as will be explained herein.

The posture plug-ins **32**, in one arrangement, is configured in an extensible messaging format, such as Type-Length-Value (TLV) format or an extensible markup language (XML) format. The TLV or XML format is a well-defined, application-independent form for representing information or data. As indicated above, the user device **22** may have one or more posture plug-ins **32** as provided by the manufacturer of an application, or third parties. With the posture plug-ins **32** provided in the extensible messaging format, as devices external to the user device **22** (e.g., the policy server) access the posture credentials, such devices can, in turn, recognize the information contained within the configuration regardless of the source (e.g., manufacturer) of the posture credentials **30**. Separate independent applications may operate within the computerized device **22** to maintain the different posture plug-ins **32**. As an example, some posture plug-ins **32** can be maintained by virus software while other posture plug-ins **32** are maintained by the operating system of the computerized device **22**. There is a well-defined application-programming interface (API) hereinafter named "posture plug-in API" that each posture plug-in manufacturer must implement to allow the posture agent to access posture information.

The user device **22** also includes a posture agent **30** configured to receive a sequence of challenge requests **42**, and in response, collects posture credentials from the installed posture plug-ins **32** and transmits posture credentials **32**, associated with the user device **22**, to the policy server **28**. The posture agent **30**, embodied as a software or hardware application, works in conjunction with the data communications device and policy server **28** to verify a security status of the user device **22** prior to the user device **22** accessing the network **24** (e.g., the network resources **25** within the network **24**). Such verification minimizes the ability for the user device **22** to transmit an unauthorized application or content (e.g., such as a virus or a worm) into the network **24**, thereby potentially "infecting" the network resources **25** within the network **24**. The posture agent **30** may also receive notifications from the policy server **30** based on the results of the posture check that may include informational messages or remediation actions to be performed. These notifications may be processed by the posture agent **30** itself or these notifications may be passed to the responsible posture plug-in **32** for processing using the posture plug-in API. The posture agent **30** is also responsible for determining whether the posture of the computer device **22** has changed by learning of any changes from the posture plug-ins **32** through the posture plug-in API. The posture agent **30** is responsible for answering the periodic posture update query from the data communications device between the full posture challenge-response sequences.

The network **28** is a computer network, such as an enterprise network or the Internet, which includes the network resources **25**, the data communications device **26**, and the policy server **28**. The network **28** may include network access from user devices **22** through different types of network transport including a wired local area network (LAN), a wireless LAN, a VPN connection, or a dial-up connection, for example.

The network resources **25-1**, **25-2**, **25**-N, in one arrangement, are configured as servers that contain content accessible by the user device **22** via the network **24**. In another arrangement, the network resources **25-1**, **25-2**, **25**-N are configured as peripheral devices, such as printers, or network attached storage, for example, that may be accessible (i.e., if allowed according to the system of the invention) by the user device **22** via the network **24**.

The data communications device or network access device **26**, which may be a router, switch, gateway or other such device deployed one or more Layer 2 or Layer 3 network hops from the user device **22** is configured to detect attempted connections to the network **24** by the user device **22**. As an example, the data communications device **26** can maintain a table of those computerized devices **22** that have already been authorized for access to various resources within the network **24**. When an access attempt (e.g., a new TCP SYN connection from a new source IP address or a special access request e.g. 802.1x EAP Start message) is made from a new computerized device **22** into the network **24**, the data communications device **26** can detect such access and trigger operation of the system of the invention. The data communications device **26** generally works in conjunction with the policy sever **28** to limit the ability for the user device **22** to transmit an unauthorized application into the network **24**. The data communications device **26** is also responsible for helping detect when the posture of authorized computer devices **22** has changed so that the full challenge-response posture sequence can be triggered again. The data communications **26** is also further responsible for periodically triggering the full posture challenge-response sequence even if a posture change has not been detected.

The policy server **28** is a computerized device configured to determine the particular posture credentials to request from the posture agent, and validate the posture credentials **32** associated with the user device **22**. Based upon the review of the posture credentials **32**, the policy server **28** either allows some level of network access or denies the user device **22** access to the resources (e.g., the network resources **25**) within the network **24**. The policy server **28** is responsible for downloading the appropriate access instructions to the data communications device **26**. The policy server **28** also determines what notifications e.g. remediation actions, informational messages to be displayed to user, to send back to the computerized device once the posture has been reviewed and the level of access determined. In addition to checking posture credentials, the policy server **28** may also be responsible for authenticating the computerized device **22** and/or authenticating the user of the computerized device **22**, and determining an access policy based on both posture information and identity information.

During operation of the system **20**, the user device **22** transmits packets or a signaling request **40** to the network **24** in an attempt to access the network resources **25** within the network **24**. The data communications device **26** intercepts the packets or access request **40** and, in response, transmits an initial challenge request **42** to the computerized device **22**. The posture agent **30** of the computerized device **22** transmits, to the data communications device **26**, a response **43** to the challenge **42**. The data communications device **26** forwards the response **43** to the policy server **28**. The policy server **28** then transmits one or more challenge requests **45** to the posture agent **30** on computerized device **22** via the data communications device **26** to set up secure communications between the posture agent **30** and the policy server **28**. Once secure communications have been established, the policy server **28** makes one or more further challenge requests (e.g., posture requests) **47** for posture credentials from specified posture plug-ins **32** on the user device **22** via the data communications device **26**. The policy server **28**

may also make one or more requests **49** to authenticate the computerized device **22** or the user of the computerized device **22** via the data communications device. The data communications device **26**, policy server **28**, and posture agent **30** may securely transmit posture and/or identity using protocols such as the Extensible Authentication Protocol (EAP), Protected Extensible Authentication Protocol (PEAP) and Flexible EAP Authentication using Secure Tunnel Protocol (EAP-FAST) over various network transports, including a Layer 2 transport such as wired LAN (Ethernet) and wireless LANs, and a Layer 3-based transport such as User Datagram Protocol (UDP).

When a policy server **28** makes the posture request **47** to the computerized device **22**, the policy server **28** directs the posture agent **30** (i.e., operating as a daemon) of the user device **22** to retrieve the specified posture credentials from associated posture plug-ins **32** installed on the user device **22**. The posture credentials **32** indicate a security posture of the resident operating system and associated applications of the user device **22** (e.g., the presence of anti-virus or firewall software associated with the user device **22** or an indication of the versions or patch updates of these applications of the user device **22**). The posture agent **30**, for example, can utilize the posture plug-in API described above to request the specified posture credentials from the associated posture plug-ins **32** installed on the computerized device **22**. The posture agent **30** packages the posture credentials **32** from the requested posture plug-ins within a posture response message **44**, for example. The user device **22** transmits the posture response **44** to the network **24** where the posture response **44** includes the posture credentials **32** of the user device **22**. The data communications device **26** receives the posture response **44** and transmits or forwards the challenge response containing the posture credentials **32** to the policy server **28** for processing.

After receiving the posture credentials using the above message flow (e.g., initial challenge request **42**, challenge response **43**, challenge request **45**, posture request **47**, and posture response **44**), the policy server **28** compares the posture credential information from posture plug-ins **32**, with an accepted credential set **46**. For example, assume the posture credential information **32** indicates that the user device **22** is configured with an anti-virus application from a particular manufacturer and has a particular virus definitions update. The policy server **28** reviews the accepted credential set **46** to detect the presence (e.g., a listing) of the identity of the anti-virus application and definition version from the particular manufacturer within the accepted credential set **46**. Assume, for example, that based upon the comparison the policy server **28** detects the presence of, or a listing of, the same anti-virus application and definition version from the particular manufacturer within the accepted credential set **46**. In such an example, in one arrangement, the policy server **28** transmits an access instruction **48** to the data communications device **26** that directs the data communications device **26** to allow communications between the user device **22** and the resources **25** within the network **24**. Assume in another example, however, that based upon the comparison the policy server **28** fails to detect the presence of, or a listing of, the anti-virus definition version from the particular manufacturer within the accepted credential set **46**. In such an example, in one arrangement, the policy server **28** transmits an access instruction **48** to the data communications device **26** that directs the data communications device **26** to restrict or completely reject communications from the user device **22** to the resources **25** within the network **24**. This may include providing limited network access, such as only providing a path out of a corporate network to the Internet, but fully restricting access to any internal sub-networks.

In the above-described arrangement, the system **20** detects the real-time security posture of a user device **22** prior to providing the user device **22** with access to the network resources **25**. By detecting the real-time security state of the user device **22**, the system **20** limits "vulnerable" user devices **22** (e.g., user devices **22** that are not configured with anti-virus or up-to-date anti-virus applications) from accessing the network **24**. As such, the system minimizes the risk that the network **24** or network resources **25** become "infected" with malware. For example, the policy server **28** detects the presence or absence of particular anti-virus applications associated with the user device **22** and either allows or denies the user device **22** access to the network resources based upon the results of the detection. The policy server **28**, therefore, minimizes the potential that the user device **22** carries a virus to infect the network resources **25** of the network **24**. In addition, since the posture agent **30** uses a well-defined and extensible posture plug-in API to identify, collect and gather configuration credential information from posture plug-ins **32** developed for various manufacturer-specific applications, as new security features are implemented within computer systems such as personal computers, the policy server **28** can request the posture agent **30** to request additional types of posture credentials from an existing posture plug-in **32** or from an additional posture plug-in produced by a new security application or third-party. This allows the system of the invention to limit the processing burden of the posture agent by using a posture plug-in to query each vendor specific application and ensure that a new version of the posture agent **30** does not need to be installed on a computer device **22** whenever new posture credentials or posture plug-ins **32** are available and need to be checked.

In effect, the posture agent **30** serves as an extensible policy "broker" that fields posture requests from a policy server **28** and returns posture credentials to the policy server **28** based on responses from one or more posture plug-ins **32**. The posture agent **30** also acts as a broker for delivering notifications back to the posture plug-ins **32** from the posture server **28** in response to the comparison of the posture credentials to accepted credential set **46**.

While FIG. **1** and the above description outlines operation of the system **20** as a whole, the following Figures, and associated descriptions, provide details regarding the operation of each of the computerized device **22**, the data communications device **24**, and the policy server **28** within the system **20**.

FIG. **2**: Data Communications Device

FIG. **2** illustrates a flowchart **100** of a procedure performed by the data communications device **26** of data communications system **20** when controlling a user device's **22** access to resources **25** in the network **24**.

In step **102**, the data communications device **26** detects an attempted access from a computerized device **22**, through the data communications device **26**, to a network resource **25** in the network **24**. For example, the data communications device **26** receives packets or an access request **40** from the user device **22**, such as a TCP SYN packet transmitted from the user device **22** during a connection initiation handshaking procedure initiated by the user device **22**, or a special signaling request from user device **22** to the data communications device **26** to initiate the authentication and/or posture validation process.

In step **104**, in response to detecting the attempted access or in response to the signaling request, the data communications device **26** provides a request to the computerized device **22** to retrieve posture credentials **32** from the computerized device **22**. In one arrangement, the data communications device **26** transmits and receives a series of messages to retrieve the posture credentials from the computerized device **22**. Steps **105**, **106**, and **107** outline an arrangement of such a process.

In step **105**, the data communications device **26** provides an initial challenge request **42** to the computerized device **22**. For example, when the computerized device **22** receives the challenge request **42** from the data communications device **26**, the computerized device (e.g., the posture agent **30** of the computerized device **22**) transmits a response **43** to the challenge **42** to the data communications device **26**.

In step **106**, the data communications device receives the challenge response **43** from the computerized device **22** and forwards the challenge response **43** to a policy server **28**. The policy server **28**, in one arrangement, then transmits a sequence of challenge requests to the posture agent **30** on computerized device **22** via the data communications device **26** to set up a secure communications between the posture agent **30** and the policy server **28**.

Once secure communications have been established, in step **107**, the data communications device **26** receives from the policy server **28** a posture request **47** requesting posture credentials **32** from the user device **22** and transmits the posture request **47** to the computerized device **22**. Such a request **47** allows the policy server **28** to authenticate the device or user of the device **22**. When a policy server **28** makes a posture request **47** to the computer device **22**, the policy server **28** directs the posture agent **30** of the user device **22** to retrieve the specified posture credentials from associated posture plug-ins **32** installed on the user device **22** and transmit the requested posture credentials back to the data communications device **26**.

In step **108**, the data communications device **26** receives and forwards posture credentials **32** to a policy server **28** for analysis of the posture credentials **32** relative to an accepted credential set **46**. As indicated above, the configuration credentials **32** indicate a security posture or security status of the user device **22**.

In step **109**, the data communications device **26** receives an access instruction **48** from the policy server **28** based upon analysis of the posture credentials **32** of the computerized device **22** relative to the accepted credential set **46**. The access instruction **48** directs the data communications device **26** to either allow some level of network access or deny the computerized device **22** access to the network resources **25** of the network **24**.

In step **110**, the data communications device **26** applies the access instruction **48** to communications traffic originating from the computerized device **22** and destined for resources **25** within the network **24**. By applying the access instructions **48** to communications from the user device **22**, the data communications device **26** allows or denies computerized device **22** access to the network **24** based upon the probability or risk of the user device **22** carrying malware, content, or viruses (e.g., the "vulnerability" of the user device **22**). Such application of the access instructions **48** minimizes the ability for a computerized device **22** to introduce an unauthorized application or content into the network **24**, thereby infecting or causing malfunction of the network resources **25**.

For example, assume that during the analysis of the posture credentials **32** of the computerized device **22**, the policy server **28** detects the presence of an anti-virus application (e.g., or an up-to-date anti-virus application) associated with the user device **22**. The access instructions **48** generated by the policy server **28** and then transmitted to the data communications device **26** direct the data communications device **26**, in turn, to allow communications traffic between the user device **22** and the network resources **25**. In such an example, because the user device **22** includes an associated anti-virus application, the user device **22** has a relatively low risk for receiving, and therefore transmitting, a virus to the network resources **25** of the network **24**. As such, the data communications device **26** allows the user device **22** to access the network resources **25**, based upon the access instruction **48** because the user device has a low probability or risk of passing a virus into the network **24**.

In another example, assume that during the analysis of the posture credentials **32** of the computerized device **22**, the policy server **28** fails to detect the presence of an anti-virus application (e.g., or an up-to-date anti-virus application or virus definition file) associated with the user device **22**. The access instructions **48** generated by the policy server **28** and then transmitted to the data communications device **26** directs the data communications device **26**, in turn, to restrict (e.g., prevent) communications traffic between the user device **22** and the network resources **25**. In such an example, because the user device **22** fails to include an associated anti-virus application, the user device **22** has a relatively high risk for transmitting a virus to the network resources **25** of the network **24**. As such, the data communications device **26**, in one arrangement, denies the user device **22** access to the network resources **25**, based upon the access instruction **48** because the user device has a relatively high probability or risk of passing a virus into the network **24**.

For example, assume that the policy server **28** compares the posture credentials **32** of a user device **22** with an accepted credential set **46**. Further assume that based upon the comparison, the policy server **28** finds a discrepancy between the posture credentials **32** of the user device **22** and the accepted credential set **46**. The policy server **28**, as a result, transmits an access instruction **48** to the data communications device **26** that directs the data communications device **26** to prevent the user device **22** from accessing the network resources **25**. In this example, when the data communications device **26** applies the access instruction **48** to communications from the user device **22**, the data communications device **26** substantially completely restricts (e.g., denies) the user device **22** from communicating with or accessing the network resources **25** at all. Such application of the access instructions **48** minimizes the probability for the user device **22** (e.g., a "vulnerable" device or a device susceptible to a virus) to introduce an unauthorized application or content into the network **24**, thereby infecting or causing malfunction of the network resources **25**.

In another example, when the data communications device **26** applies the access instruction **48** to restrict a user device's **22** access to the network resources **25**, the data communications device **26** limits the user device's **22** access to only a portion of the network resources **25** (i.e., for example, of the network resources **25-1**, **25-2**, and **25-N**, the data communications device **26** allows the user device **22** to communicate only with resources **25-1**, and **25-2**). The access instruction **48** may permit traffic from user device **22** only to certain destination addresses, e.g. IP address of remediation server, and only to certain protocols or ports, e.g. HTTP traffic. Therefore, as the data communications device **26** applies the access instruction **48** to communica-

tions traffic originating from the computerized device **22**, the data communications device **26** limits or restricts user device access to a subset of the network resources **25** based upon the results of the examination.

In one arrangement, application of the access instruction is based on both an address associated with the computerized device **22**, such as a source address (i.e., the network address of the user device **22**), and a destination address (e.g., a network address of a resource **25** in the network **24** such as a remediation server). The data communications device **26** uses the source address and the destination address associated with the data traffic (e.g., access request **40**, challenge response **43**, and posture response **44**) from the user device **22**, to restrict user device **22** access to particular resources **25** within the network **24** (e.g., the data communications device **26** provides a layer 3 restriction). This can result, for example, in providing a limited path to certain network resources **25-1**, while disallowing access to other resources **25-2** through **25**-N.

In another arrangement, the application of the access instruction is a specific protocol associated with the data traffic from the user device **22**. Data traffic includes a communications protocol identifier (e.g., HTTP, SMTP) that indicates the communications protocol used by the user device **22** in communicating with the network resources **25**. During operation, the data communications device **26** examines the communications protocol identifier to restrict user device **22** access to particular resources **25** within the network **24** by limiting the kinds of applications that can be used (e.g., only Web access). Thus, the data communications device **26** allows the user device **22** to access the network resources **25** that are configured to communicate only according to the communications protocol identified by the user device **22** (e.g., the data communications device **26** provides a layer 2 or layer 3 or application layer restriction).

As described, the data communications device **26** restricts the computerized device's **22** access to resources **25** within the network **24** based upon instructions **48** provided by the policy server **28**. The data communications device **26** also works in conjunction with the policy server **28** to upgrade or "fix" applications associated with the user device **22** when the policy server **28** detects that the user device **22** is vulnerable or susceptible to a virus or has other configuration problems.

FIG. **3**: Data Communications Device and URL Redirect:

FIG. **3** illustrates a flowchart **120** that, taken in conjunction with FIG. **1**, outlines additional steps performed by the data communications device **26** when performing steps **109** and **110**, as shown in FIG. **2**.

In step **122**, when (e.g., in addition to or instead of) receiving an access instruction **48**, the data communications device **26** receives a redirect access instruction **62** generated by the policy server **28** in the analysis of the posture response **44** relative to the accepted credential set **46**.

For example, assume that when comparing the posture credentials **32** of the user device **22** with the accepted credential set, the policy server **28** detects the presence of an anti-virus application associated with the user device **22** and further detects that the anti-virus application is out-of date (e.g., the user device does not have the most recent version of the anti-virus application). Based on such detection, the policy server **28** determines that a redirect access instruction **62** should be applied to HTTP traffic from the user device **22**. When the data communications device **26** receives communications traffic from the computerized device **22**, the data communications device **26** applies the redirect access instruction **62**.

In step **124**, when applying the redirect access instruction **62**, the data communications device **26** transmits a redirection message **64** to the computerized device **22** to direct the computerized device **22** (e.g., HTTP traffic from the computerized device **22**) to a remediation server **66** to reconfigure the computerized device **22**.

For example, during operation, when the data communications device **26** applies the redirect access instruction **62** the data communications device **26** transmits, to the user device **22**, a remediation server address as part of the redirection message **64**. Rather than establishing communications with the network resources **25**, the user device **22** establishes a connection with the remediation server **66**. The remediation server **66**, in one arrangement, is configured to upgrade or provide up-to-date patches to applications, such as anti-virus applications, associated with the user device **22**. The remediation server **66** acts, for example, to minimize the susceptibility of the user device **22** to an unauthorized application, such as a virus, thereby minimizing the potential for the user device **22** to carry an unauthorized application or content onto the network **24** at a later time.

During operation, after the data communications device **26** validates the posture of the user device **22** and applies the appropriate access instruction **48** and/or redirect access instruction **62**, the user device **22** establishes a connection with one or more network resources **25** during a communications session. The duration of such a connection can last for a relatively long period of time. During this time period, an operator or the remediation process can upgrade certain security applications associated with the device so that a non-compliant device now becomes compliant to security policy (e.g. updates the anti-virus signature file to the most current version). In addition, it is also possible that an operator can reconfigure certain applications associated with the user device (e.g., removes an anti-virus application) or replace the user device with a second user device (e.g., where the configuration credentials of second user device have not been tested by the policy server **28** with respect to the accepted credential set) so that the device is no longer compliant with security policy. In the former case, with respect to the system **20**, the user device **22** is no longer a risk to the network and should be given access to network resources **25** in network **24**. In the latter cases, with respect to the system **20**, the user device **22** may be susceptible to receiving and introducing a virus into the network **24**.

In order to detect a posture change on a user device **22** and to make sure that the user device is still the same device **22** as was previously authorized, the data communications device **26** periodically polls the user device **22** using the posture update query. In the case where the data communications device **26** detects a change in the state of the user device **22**, the data communications device **26** attempts to re-authorize the posture of user device **22** as explained in FIG. **1** (i.e. triggers the re-start of the full system process as described in FIG. **1**). If this attempt is unsuccessful, the data communications device **26** may remove all access permissions for user device **22** to minimize the risk of virus or malicious content introduction by the user device **22** to the network **24**.

FIG. **4**: Data COMMS Device Status Query

FIG. **4** illustrates a flowchart **130** of a procedure performed by a data communications device **26** when querying the status of the user device **22**.

In step **132**, after the full challenge-response sequence has completed and the computerized device **22** has been authorized, for example, the data communications device **26** transmits a posture update query to the computerized device

22 after expiration of a time period. For example, in one arrangement, the data communications device **26** includes a timer **70**. During operation, when the data communications device **26** applies an access instruction **48** for the user device **22**, provision of such access initiates operation of the timer **70** such that a timer counts from a start time to a preset end time. After expiration of a preset time period (e.g., the time period between the end time and the start time), the timer **70** causes the data communications device **26** to transmit an posture update query to the computerized device **22** to ensure that its configuration has not changed since the last full challenge response sequence and that the user device is the same device that was last checked. In one arrangement, the posture update query challenges the user access device to demonstrate knowledge of a shared secret that was derived and shared during the full challenge-response sequence described in system operation shown in FIG. **1**. Demonstration of the secret information can be produced by the posture agent **30** only, for example, by responding appropriately to a random challenge from the data communications device by hashing the random number in the challenge with the shared secret.

In step **134**, the data communications device **26** detects a change in posture associated with the computerized device **22** based upon a response to the posture update query. The data communications device **26** interprets either an actual response or a lack of a response from the computerized device **22** to determine the state of the computerized device **22**.

For example, assume that a first user device **22** establishes a connection with a network resource **25** in the network **24**, via the data communications device **26**. Further assume that prior to the data communications device **26** transmitting a posture update query to the first user device **22** (e.g., prior to expiration of a preset time period as measured by the timer **70**) an operator replaces the first user device **22** with a second user device (e.g., where the configuration credentials **32** of second user device have not been tested or verified by the policy server **28** with respect to the accepted credential set **46**). In such an arrangement, after the data communications device **26** transmits the posture update query to the second user device, the second user device is unable to interpret and respond to the posture update query because the state information (e.g., a hash of the original acceptable credentials **32**) that is expected by the data communications device **26** will not be present on the substituted computerized device **22**. The device **22** would most probably not respond. As such, a non-response to the posture update query as well as a subsequent attempted full posture check indicates to the data communications device **26** the connection of a potentially unverified user device **22** to the network **24**. Based on the non-response, the data communications device **26** reduces network access privileges or terminates the connection between the user device **22** and the network resource **25** to reduce the risk of reception or transmission, by the network resources **25** of an unauthorized application from a "vulnerable" user device or a device susceptible to a virus. In this manner, periodic posture checking can be performed.

In another example, assume that a user device **22** establishes a connection with a network resource **25** in the network **24**, via the data communications device **26**. Further assume that, prior to the data communications device **26** transmitting a posture update query to the first user device **22** (e.g., prior to expiration of a preset time period as measured by the timer **70**), an operator disables or reconfigures an anti-virus application associated with the user device **22**. In such an arrangement, when the data communications device **26** transmits the posture update query to the user device **22**, the user device **22** indicates the change in configuration of the operating system and anti-virus application to the data communications device **26** in a query response. When the data communications device reviews the query response and detects the change in posture, the data communications device **26** triggers a full posture credential challenge-response sequence as explained in system operation described in FIG. **1**. Based on the results of the new posture check, the policy server **28** may apply new access instructions **48** and/or redirect access instructions **62** to the user device **22** that reduces network access privileges or terminates the connection between the user device and the network resource **25** to reduce the risk of reception, by the network resources **25** of an unauthorized application from a "vulnerable" user device or a device susceptible to a virus.

In another example, assume that a user device **22** establishes a connection with a network resource **25** in the network **24**, via the data communications device **26**. Further assume that the user device **22** is not deemed by the policy server **28** to be compliant with security policy and is given restricted access to network resources **25** sufficient only to remediate itself. Before the remediation is complete, the user device **22** will respond to posture update queries from the data communications device **22** in a way that indicates no posture change. However, once remediation has completed successfully, the posture agent **30** will indicate that the posture has changed on the next posture update query from the data communications device **26**. In such an arrangement, when the data communications device **26** transmits the posture update query to the user device **22**, the user device **22** indicates the change in configuration of the operating system and anti-virus application to the data communications device **26** in a query response. When the data communications device reviews the query response and detects the change in posture, the data communications device **26** triggers a full posture credential challenge-response sequence as explained in system operation described in FIG. **1**. Based on the results of the posture check, the policy server **28** may apply new access instructions **48** to the user device **22** that increases network access privileges between the user device and the network resource **25** to enable normal network access.

Rather than relying only on the posture update query, the invention also allows the posture agent **30** to asynchronously request the data communications device **22** to re-initiate the challenge-response sequence for posture credentials from posture plug-ins **32**, as described in FIG. **1**, as soon as the posture agent is notified by any posture plug-in **32** that the posture has changed. The posture agent **30** determines from a posture plug-in **32** that the posture has changed using the posture plug-in API. The posture agent **30** determines that the posture has changed in one of two ways: the posture agent **30** periodically polls the installed posture plug-ins for a posture change, or the posture plug-in **32** asynchronously notifies the posture agent **30** as soon as it determines that the posture has changed. When the posture agent **30** learns of a posture change from one or more posture plug-ins **32**, it sends a signaling request to the data communications device **22** to re-start the challenge-response sequence described in FIG. **1**. When the data communications device **22** receives a request from the posture agent **30** to re-initiate the challenge-response sequence, it does so as explained in system operation described in FIG. **1**. Based on the results of the posture check, the policy server **28** may apply new access

instructions **48** to the user device **22** that increases or decreases network access privileges between the user device and the network resource **25**.

Additionally, in one arrangement, the data communications device **26** periodically re-executes the sequence described with respect to FIG. **1** based on expiration of a preset time period. A timer associated with the data communication device **26**, for example, initiates measurement of a time period after the data communication device **26** receives the access request **40** from the computerized device **22**. In one arrangement, after a timer reaches the preset time period, the data communications device transmits to the computerized device **22** a challenge request **42**, as part of the re-executed challenge response sequence of FIG. **1**.

FIG. **5**: Posture Agent

As indicated above, the data communications device **26** plays a role in controlling a user device's **22** access to resources **25** in the network **24**. The user device **22** works in conjunction with both the data communications device **26** and the policy server **28** in accessing the network resources **25**.

FIG. **5** illustrates a flowchart **140** of a procedure performed by the computerized device **22** when accessing resources **25** in the network **24**.

In step **142**, the computerized device **22** transmits an access request **40** to a network **24**. For example, the user device **22** transmits packets or an access request **40** into the network **24**, such as a SYN packet or an 802.1x EAP Start message. The data communications device **26** intercepts the packets or access request **40** and, in response, transmits a request for posture credentials (e.g., an initial challenge request **42** as part of the challenge response sequence described in FIG. **2**) to the computerized device **22**.

In step **144**, the computerized device **22** receives, from a data communications device **26** associated with the network, in response to transmitting the access request **40**, a request for posture credentials associated with the computerized device **22**. Steps **146** and **150** describe an example of procedures executed by the computerized device **22** when receives a response to the access request **40**.

For example, the data communications device **26** transmits a challenge request **42** to a computerized device **22**. In step **146**, in response to receiving the challenge request **42**, the computerized device **22** (e.g., posture agent **30**) transmits a challenge response **43** to the data communications device **26**. The data communications device **26** forwards the challenge response to the policy server **28**. The policy server **28** then transmits one or more challenge requests to the posture agent **30** on computerized device **22** via the data communications device **26** to set up secure communications between the posture agent **30** and the policy server **28**. Once secure communications have been established, the computerized device **22** receives one or more posture request **47**, from the policy server **28** for posture credentials from specified posture plug-ins **32**.

In step **150**, the request (e.g., the sequence of challenge response requests) causes a posture agent **30** operating with the computerized device **22**, to collect posture credentials **32** of applications and the operating system associated with the computerized device **22**. As indicated above, the posture credentials collected from the posture plug-ins **32** of the user device **22** relate to a security posture (e.g., security status) of the user device **22**. The security posture of the user device **22** indicates the user device's **22** ability to resist reception or transmission of malware (e.g., viruses), content (e.g., spam or data theft), or access by unauthorized users.

In step **152**, the computerized device transmits posture credentials to the policy server **28**. As indicated above, by providing posture credentials **32**, such as via a posture response **44**, to the data communications device **26** and, in turn, to the policy server **28**, the user device **22** allows the system **20** to verify the security (e.g., security posture) of the user device **22** prior to connecting to the network **24**. As such, the user device **22** operates in conjunction with the data communications device **26** and the policy server **28** to minimize the probability for the user device **22** to introduce an unauthorized application into the network **24**, thereby infecting or causing malfunction of the network resources **25**, or to receive malicious content from other sources.

FIG. **5** also illustrates additional steps performed by the computerized device **22** when accessing resources **25** in the network **24**.

In step **154**, the computerized device **22** receives a redirection access instruction **64** from the data communications device **26** based upon the result of the posture validation, the redirection access instruction redirecting traffic from the computerized device **22** to a remediation server **66**. For example, as indicated above, the data communications device **26** redirects HTTP requests from the user device **22** to the remediation server **66** after the data communications device **26** receives access instructions **62** from the policy server **28**. Based on the redirection, rather than establishing communications with the network resources **25**, the user device **22** establishes a connection with the remediation server **66**. The remediation server **66**, in one arrangement, is configured to upgrade or provide up-to-date patches to applications, such as anti-virus applications, associated with the user device **22**. The remediation server **66** acts, for example, to minimize the susceptibility of the user device **22** to an unauthorized application, such as a virus, thereby minimizing the potential for the user device **22** to receive malicious content or introduce an unauthorized application onto the network **24** at a later time.

In another example, the computerized device **22** displays the redirection access instruction. In such an example, the redirection access instruction informs a user as to the results of the posture validation, resulting network access, and any actions that may need to be performed for remediation purposes, thereby providing the user with access to the redirection access instruction. FIG. **5** also illustrates additional steps performed by the computerized device **22** based on the results of verifying the posture of the device **22** by the policy server **28**.

In step **156**, the computerized device **22** receives a posture notification message from the policy server **28**. For example, in addition to determining the access instruction **48** that is downloaded to the data communications device **26**, the policy server **28** may also send one or more notification messages to the user device **22** via the data communications device **26**. Similar to the format of the posture credentials, the notification messages are also configured in an extensible messaging format, such as a Type-Length-Value (TLV) or an extensible markup language (XML) format on the policy server. The TLV and XML formats are well-defined, application-independent form for representing information or data. With the posture notification message formatted in the extensible messaging format, third-party manufacturers of posture plug-ins **32** can recognize the information contained in the notification messages and act on these notifications accordingly.

There are several forms of notification. A posture notification may indicate the result of the posture validation check (i.e. that the posture is compliant with security policy or

non-compliant). The notification message may contain a text message for display to a user or for logging to a log file (e.g., messages to display to the user or a log or URL's of the remediation server **66** and any remediation actions to be performed). For example, in the case that a user device **22** is non-compliant, the message may be displayed to the user or written to a log file indicating that the device has been quarantined and needs to be remediated. The notification message may also include a link to a remediation server or the IP address of the remediation server **66** that a user may click on or an application on the user device **22** may process to remediate the user device **22** automatically. Notifications may be processed by the posture agent **30** or the posture agent may forward the notifications to the posture plug-ins **32** via the posture plug-in API.

In step **158**, the computerized device **22** responds to the notification message received from the policy server **28**. For example, in one arrangement, the computerized device **22** displays the notification message, in the form of a text message, to the user. In another arrangement, the computerized device **22** activates a link, associated with the notification message, to direct the computerized device **22** to the remediation server **66**.

As indicated above, the data communications device **26** and user device **22** plays a role in controlling a user device's **22** access to resources **25** in the network **24**. As described below, the policy server **28** works in conjunction with the data communications device **26** and the user device **22** in allowing user device **22** access to the network resources **25**.

FIG. **6** illustrates a flowchart **160** of a procedure performed by the policy server **28** when controlling access to resources **25** in the network **24**.

In step **161**, the policy server **28** receives posture credentials from a data communications device, the posture credentials provided by a computerized device in response to an attempted access by the computerized device, through the data communications device, to a network resource in the network. In one arrangement, the policy server **68** receives the posture credentials as part of a challenge response sequence outlined in steps **162** and **163**.

In step **162**, the policy server **28** receives a challenge response **43** from a data communications device **26**, the challenge response **43** provided by a computerized device **22** in response to an initial request from the data communications device **22**, which is in turn in response to an attempted access by the computerized device **22**, through the data communications device **26**, to a network resource **25** in the network **24**. In one arrangement, the policy server **28** then transmits one or more challenge requests **45** to the posture agent **30** on computerized device **22** via the data communications device **26** to set up secure communications between the posture agent **30** and the policy server **28**.

In step **163**, the policy server **28** transmits, to the computerized device **22**, a posture request **47** for posture credentials from specified posture plug-ins **32** on the computerized device **22**. The policy server **28** may also make one or more requests **49** to authenticate the computerized device **22** or the user of the computerized device **22** via the data communications device.

In step **164**, the policy server **28** analyzing the posture credentials from the computerized device **22** relative to an accepted credential set **46** to generate an access instruction **48**. For example, assume the posture credential information from posture plug-ins **32** indicates that the user device **22** is configured with an anti-virus application from a particular manufacturer. The policy server **28** reviews the accepted credential set **46** to detect the presence (e.g., a listing) of the anti-virus application from the particular manufacturer within the accepted credential set **46**.

In one arrangement, the policy server **28** authenticates an identity of the computerized device **22** to generate an authentication result, as indicated above. The policy server **28** then compares the posture credentials from the computerized device **22** with an accepted credential set to generate a posture validation. The policy server **28** then maps the results of posture validation with the authentication result to generate an access instruction **48**.

In one arrangement, the accepted credential set **46** is configured in an extensible messaging format, such as a Type-Length-Value (TLV) or an extensible markup language (XML) format. The TLV and XML formats are well-defined, application-independent form for representing information or data. With the accepted credential set **46** formatted in the extensible messaging format, as third-party manufacturers include information (e.g., updated software patch information, updated virus information) for inclusion within the accepted credential set **46**, the policy server **28** can, in turn, recognize the information contained within the information regardless of the source (e.g., manufacturer) of the information.

In step **168**, the policy server **28** transmits the network admission or access instruction **48** to the data communications device **26**. The network admission instruction **48** directs the data communications device to either allow some level of network access or deny the computerized device **22** access (e.g., restrict access of the computerized device **22**) to the resources **25** within the network **24**. Assume, for example, that based upon the analysis the policy server **28** detects the presence of, or a listing of, the anti-virus application from the particular manufacturer within the accepted credential set **46**. In such an example, the policy server **28** transmits an access instruction **48** to the data communications device **26** that directs the data communications device **26** to allow communications between the user device **22** and the resources **25** within the network **24**. Assume, however, that based upon the analysis, the policy server **28** fails to detect the presence of, proper configuration, or timely execution of the anti-virus application from the particular manufacturer within the accepted credential set **46**. In such an example, in one arrangement, the policy server **28** transmits a network admission instruction **48** to the data communications device **26** that directs the data communications device **26** to restrict or reject communications from the user device **22** to the resources **25** within the network **24**.

In the above-described arrangement, the policy server **28** detects the real-time security posture or security state of a user device **22** (e.g., as indicated by the posture credentials **32**) prior to providing the user device **22** with access to the network resources **25**. By detecting the real-time security state of the user device **22**, the policy server **28** aids in minimizing "vulnerable" user devices **22** (e.g., user devices **22** that are not configured with anti-virus or up-to-date anti-virus applications) from accessing the network **24**. As such, the policy server **28** aids in minimizing the risk that the network **24** or network resources **25** become "infected" with malware carried by the "vulnerable" user device **22**.

FIG. **6** illustrates additional steps performed by the policy server **28**, prior to transmitting the access instruction **48**, when controlling access to resources **25** in the network **24**.

In step **172**, the policy server **28** establishes a communications session with the computerized device **22**. The policy server **28** establishes the communications session with the computerized device **22** based upon the results of the analysis step **164**, described above.

As indicated above, the policy server **28** analyzes the posture credentials **32** of the computerized device **22** relative to the accepted credential set **46** to generate the access instruction **48** that indicates, to the data communications device **26**, whether to allow or prevent communications between the computerized device **22** and the network resources **25**. In one arrangement, in addition to asking for posture credentials **32**, the policy server may also request the posture agent **30** for the identity of the user of the computer device **22** or the identity of the device itself and authenticate those identities through another sequence of challenge-responses using well-defined authentication methods e.g. EAP-MS-CHAPv2, EAP-GTC.

For example, assume the posture credentials **32** indicate, in part, an identity of the computerized device **22** (e.g., identifies the computerized device **22** as a user device or network administrator device, for example). When the policy server **28** analyzes the posture credentials **32** of the computerized device **22**, the policy server **28** also determines the identity of the computerized device **22**. Assuming the posture credentials **32** identify the computerized device **22** as a user (e.g., as opposed to a network administrator device), the policy server **28** restricts the computerized device's access, via the access instructions **48**, to certain resources **25** within the network **24** (e.g., to public or "non-administrator" resources **25** within the network. In such an arrangement, the policy server **28** provides additional security to the network **24** based not only on the posture of the user device **22**, but also depending on who the user of the device is and/or the device itself, e.g. whether the device is recognized as an organization's asset.

FIG. **6** also illustrates additional steps performed by the policy server **28** based on the results of analyzing the posture credentials from the computerized device **22** to verify the posture of the device **22**.

In step **174**, the policy server **28** transmits a posture notification message to the computerized device **22**. For example, in addition to determining the access instruction **48** that is downloaded to the data communications device **26**, the policy server **28** may also send one or more notification messages to the user device **22** via the data communications device **26**. In one arrangement, the notifications (e.g., notification messages) provide. information regarding success of a network access attempt by the computerized device. Similar to the format of the posture credentials, the notification messages are also configured in an extensible messaging format, such as a Type-Length-Value (TLV) or an extensible markup language (XML) format on the policy server. The TLV and XML formats are well-defined, application-independent form for representing information or data. With the posture notification message formatted in the extensible messaging format, third-party manufacturers of posture plug-ins **32** can recognize the information contained in the notification messages and act on these notifications accordingly.

There are several forms of notification. A posture notification from the policy server **68** may indicate the result of the posture validation check (i.e. that the posture is compliant with security policy or non-compliant). The notification message may contain a text message for display to a user or for logging to a log file. For example, in the case that a user device **22** is non-compliant, the message, transmitted by the policy server **68** may be displayed to the user or written to a log file indicating that the device has been quarantined and needs to be remediated. The notification message may also include a link to a remediation server or the IP address of the remediation server **66** that a user may click on or an application on the user device **22** may process to remediate the user device **22** automatically. Notifications may be processed by the posture agent **30** or the posture agent may forward the notifications to the posture plug-ins **32** via the posture plug-in API.

As indicated above, the data communications device **26** plays a role in controlling a user device's **22** access to resources **25** in the network **24**. Where a posture agent **30** is installed on the user device **22**, the user device **22** works in conjunction with both the data communications device **26** and the policy server **28** in accessing the network resources **25**. There are cases, however, where a posture agent **30** may not be installed on the user device **22**. This may be because the posture agent **30** does not exist for the operating system on the user device **22**. The system **20** allows access instructions to be downloaded from the policy server **28** to a data communications device **26** even if the user device **22** does not have a posture agent **22**.

FIG. **7** illustrates a flowchart **190** of a procedure performed by the system **20** when the computerized device **22** attempts to access resources **25** in the network **24**.

In step **192**, the computerized device **22** transmits a data packet **40** to network resources **25** in the network **24** behind the data communications device **22**. For example, the user device **22** transmits packets **40**, such as a SYN packet to a network resource **25** during a handshaking procedure initiated by the user device **22**.

In step **193**, the data communications device **26** intercepts the packets and, in response, transmits an initial challenge request **42** to the computerized device **22**. In the case where no posture agent **30** is present on the device, the computerized device **22** does not respond to the challenge request **42**.

After attempting several times, in step **193** the data communications device **26** detects a non-responsive state of the computerized device **22** and sends a status message to the policy server **28**. In one arrangement, the status message indicates the IP address and/or MAC address of the non-responsive host (e.g., computerized device **22**). The policy server **28** may maintain a table of computerized devices **22** that do not have a posture agent **30** installed, (e.g. an exception list) along with the allowed access for each device.

In step **194**, the policy server **28** receives the status message from the data communications device **22**, indicating that a user device **22** on the exception list is attempting to gain access to network resources **25**, and transmits an access instruction **48** to the data communications device **26**. In one arrangement, the access instruction is based on the IP address of MAC address of the computerized device **22**.

In step **195**, the data communications device **22** receives and applies the access instruction **48** to the computerized device **22**. The access instruction **48** may permit the user device **22** to access all or a restricted set of network resources **25** in the network **24**. Alternately, the access instruction can deny the computerized device access to the network resources **25**.

If the computerized device **22** is not in the exception list, the policy server **28** may be configured to use other mechanisms available in the network **24** to find out more information about the device. In one arrangement, the policy server **28** may request an audit server that scans for vulnerabilities on computerized devices **22** using mechanisms that do not require a posture agent **30** on the computerized device **22**. Such mechanisms may be slower and less accurate than if a posture agent **30** is installed on the user device **22**, but still provides some information that a policy server **28** can

use, (e.g. operating system type, operating system version) to determine the level of access to apply to the computerized device.

Based on the information returned by the audit server, the policy server **28** applies the appropriate access instruction to the data communications device **26** depending on the level of compliance to security policy. If the user device **22** complies with security policy, in such an example, the policy server **28** transmits an access instruction **48** to the data communications device **26** that directs the data communications device **26** to allow communications between the user device **22** and the resources **25** within the network **24**. Assume in another example, however, that based upon the comparison of the information returned by the audit server with security policy configured on the policy server **28**, the policy server **28** determines that the user device **22** is not compliant. In such an example, in one arrangement, the policy server **28** transmits an access instruction **48** to the data communications device **26** that directs the data communications device **26** to restrict or completely reject communications from the user device **22** to the resources **25** within the network **24**.

In the above-described arrangement, the policy server **28** continues to detect the real-time security posture or security state of a user device prior to providing the user device **22** with access to the network resources **25** even if the user device **22** does not have a posture agent **22** installed. Alternatively, the policy server has a pre-configured list of user devices **22** that are known not to have the posture agent installed and are deemed to present a low risk to the network. By detecting the real-time security state of the user device **22** using alternative mechanisms or through the use of an exception list, the policy server **28** aids in minimizing "vulnerable" user devices **22** from accessing the network **24**. As such, the policy server **28** aids in minimizing the risk that the network **24** or network resources **25** become "infected" with malware carried by the "vulnerable" user device **22**.

FIG. **8** illustrates a more detailed architecture of the computerized device **22**, data communications device **26**, and policy server **28** of the data communications system **20**.

The computerized device **22** includes a controller **201** formed of a memory **202** and a processor **204**. The data communications device **26** includes a controller **205** formed of a memory **206** and a processor **208**. The policy server **28** includes a controller **209** formed of a memory **210** and a processor **212**. A computer program product **200** includes an application or logic instructions that are loaded into the computerized device **22**, data communications device **26**, and policy server **28** to configure the devices **22**, **24**, **26** to operate as part of the data communications system **20**, described above.

The computerized device **22**, in this example, includes an interconnection mechanism **214** such as a data bus and/or other circuitry that interconnects the memory **202** and the processor **204**, and one or more communications interfaces **216**. The communication interface **216** connects with the data communications device **26** via connections **220**.

The memory **202** may be any type of volatile or non-volatile memory or storage system such as computer memory (e.g., random access memory (RAM), read-only memory (ROM), or other electronic memory), disk memory (e.g., hard disk, floppy disk, optical disk and so forth). The memory **202** is encoded with logic instructions (e.g., software code) and/or data that form a posture agent application **230** configured according to embodiments of the invention. In other words, the posture agent application **230** represents software code, instructions and/or data that represent or convey the processing logic steps and operations as explained herein and that reside within memory or storage or within any computer readable medium accessible to the computerized device **22**.

The processor **204** represents any type of circuitry or processing device such as a central processing unit, microprocessor or application-specific integrated circuit that can access the posture agent application **230** encoded within the memory **202** over the interconnection mechanism **214** in order to execute, run, interpret, operate or otherwise perform the posture agent application **230** logic instructions. Doing so forms the posture agent process **232**. In other words, the posture agent process **232** represents one or more portions of the logic instructions of posture agent application **230** while being executed or otherwise performed on, by, or in the processor **204** within the computerized device **22**. The computerized device **22** in FIG. **1** collectively represents either one or both of the posture agent application **230** and the posture agent process **232**.

The data communications device **26**, in this example, includes an interconnection mechanism **232** such as a data bus and/or other circuitry that interconnects the memory **206** and the processor **208**, and one or more communications interfaces **236**. The communication interface **236** connects with the computerized device **22** via connection **220** and with the policy server **38** via connection **222**.

The memory **206** may be any type of volatile or non-volatile memory or storage system such as computer memory (e.g., random access memory (RAM), read-only memory (ROM), or other electronic memory), disk memory (e.g., hard disk, floppy disk, optical disk and so forth). The memory **206** is encoded with logic instructions (e.g., software code) and/or data that form a network access application **238** configured according to embodiments of the invention. In other words, the network access application **238** represents software code, instructions and/or data that represent or convey the processing logic steps and operations as explained herein and that reside within memory or storage or within any computer readable medium accessible to the data communications device **26**.

The processor **208** represents any type of circuitry or processing device such as a central processing unit, microprocessor or application-specific integrated circuit that can access the network access application **238** encoded within the memory **206** over the interconnection mechanism **232** in order to execute, run, interpret, operate or otherwise perform the network access application **238**. Doing so forms the network access process **240**. In other words, the network access process **240** represents one or more portions of the logic instructions of the network access application **238** while being executed or otherwise performed on, by, or in the processor **204** within the data communications device **26**. The data communications device **26** in FIG. **1** collectively represents either one or both of the network access application **238** and the network access process **240**.

The policy server **28**, in this example, includes an interconnection mechanism **242** such as a data bus and/or other circuitry that interconnects the memory **210** and the processor **212**, and one or more communications interfaces **244**. The communication interface **244** connects with the data communications device **26** via connection **222**.

The memory **210** may be any type of volatile or non-volatile memory or storage system such as computer memory (e.g., random access memory (RAM), read-only memory (ROM), or other electronic memory), disk memory (e.g., hard disk, floppy disk, optical disk and so forth). The memory **210** is encoded with logic instructions (e.g., soft-

ware code) and/or data that form a credential analysis application **246** configured according to embodiments of the invention. In other words, the credential analysis application **246** represents software code, instructions and/or data that represent or convey the processing logic steps and operations as explained herein and that reside within memory or storage or within any computer readable medium accessible to the policy server **28**.

The processor **242** represents any type of circuitry or processing device such as a central processing unit, microprocessor or application-specific integrated circuit that can access the credential analysis application **246** encoded within the memory **210** over the interconnection mechanism **242** in order to execute, run, interpret, operate or otherwise perform the credential analysis application **246**. Doing so forms the credential analysis process **248**. In other words, the credential analysis process **248** represents one or more portions of the logic instructions of the credential analysis application **246** while being executed or otherwise performed on, by, or in the processor **212** within the policy server **28**. The policy server **28** in FIG. **1** collectively represents either one or both of the credential analysis application **246** and the credential analysis process **248**.

While this invention has been particularly shown and described with references to preferred embodiments thereof, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that various changes in form and details may be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims. As an example, in one embodiment as described above, the user device **22** transmits the challenge response to the data communications device where the challenge response includes configuration credentials used by the policy server. Such description is given by way of example only. In another arrangement, the challenge response causes the policy server **28** to establish direct communications with the user device **22**, for example via a tunnel over which an EAP session is established to further query the device **22**. The policy server **28** then presents a query to the posture agent **30** of the user device requesting the posture credentials. The posture agent **30** obtains the posture credentials associated with the user device **22** and transmits the posture credential information to the policy server over the communication session. In this manner, the initial challenge request **42** can request limited posture information **32**, and if the policy server **28** deems it necessary, further posture information can be obtained later.

For example, as described above, the user device **22** includes sets of configuration credentials **32**, also referred to hereinafter as "posture plug-ins". Each posture plug-in **32** indicates a security posture with respect to a particular manufacturer's application (e.g., security status, setting, value, active applications, or other configuration data) of the user device **22** with respect to one or more security vulnerabilities of the device. Such description is by way of example only. In one arrangement plug-ins represent an embodiment for the transmission of configuration information from the operating system and local applications associated with a user device **22** to a posture agent.

What is claimed is:

1. A computer-implemented method to control access to resources in a network by using an intercepting device, a policy server, and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and access instructions, the computer-implemented method comprising:

intercepting, by the intercepting device, one or more messages sent by a computerized device requesting access to one of the resources in the network, the intercepting device comprising a data communications device;

prior to granting the computerized device with the requested access to the network, and in response to intercepting the one or more messages sent by the computerized device, selecting, based on the resources for which access is requested, one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a security posture credential representing a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving the security posture credential, forwarding the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credential relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy; and

applying the redirect access instruction at the intercepting device by operation of one or more computer processors, to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network, in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon successful completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon failure of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a restrict access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable by the intercepting device to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

2. The computer-implemented method of claim **1**, wherein the restrict access instruction is applicable to restrict entry of the communications traffic to the network based upon an address associated with the computerized device.

3. The computer-implemented method of claim **1**, wherein the restrict access instruction is applicable to restrict entry of the communications traffic to the network based upon a communication protocol associated with the computerized device.

4. The computer-implemented method of claim 1, further comprising initiating a secure communication between the policy server and computerized device.

5. The computer-implemented method of claim 1, wherein the restrict access instruction is applicable to restrict entry of the communications traffic to the network based upon an address associated with the computerized device and an address associated with the resources in the network to restrict access to the resources in the network by the computerized device.

6. The computer-implemented method of claim 1, further comprising periodically detecting, receiving and forwarding the security posture credentials, receiving the restrict access instruction, and applying the restrict access instruction based on expiration of a preset time period.

7. The computer-implemented method of claim 1, wherein the security posture credentials include one or more affirmative descriptions of the application or component on the computerized device, wherein the one or more affirmative descriptions associated with the at least one application on the computerized device comprises one or more of, an antivirus software version, an antivirus definition version, a firewall software version, an operating system version, a malware protection software version, an operating system patch version, and an occurrence time of the most recent antivirus scan.

8. The computer-implemented method of claim 1, wherein applying the redirect instruction to direct traffic to the remediation server to reconfigure the computerized device comprises upgrading the computerized device according to the security posture credentials of the computerized device that fail analysis by the policy server relative to the accepted credential set.

9. The computer-implemented method of claim 1, wherein the security posture credentials include one or more affirmative descriptions of the application or component on the computerized device and represents the security state of the computerized device, wherein the security posture credentials do not specify any posture validation result for the computerized device, wherein the redirect access instruction is distinct from the posture validation result, wherein the computerized device, the intercepting device, the policy server, and the remediation server are distinct systems operatively connectable to one another via the network.

10. The computer-implemented method of claim 9, wherein the grant access instruction specifies which network resources the computerized device may access, wherein the security posture credential is collected and transmitted by the posture agent, wherein the redirect access instruction contains a network address of the remediation server as part, not all, of the access instruction, wherein each resource comprises a network resource;

wherein the posture validation result is automatically determined without additional intervention by the intercepting device, without additional intervention by the remediation server, and without additional intervention by the computerized device;

wherein the redirect access instruction is automatically generated without additional intervention by the intercepting device and without additional intervention by the remediation server.

11. The computer-implemented method of claim 10, wherein the one or more messages are automatically intercepted without additional intervention by the policy server and without additional intervention by the remediation server;

wherein the security posture credential is automatically generated without additional intervention by the intercepting device, without additional intervention by the policy server, and without additional intervention by the remediation server;

wherein the access instruction is automatically applied at the intercepting device without additional intervention by the remediation server, without additional intervention by the policy server, and without additional intervention by the computerized device;

wherein the computerized device is automatically reconfigured based on the redirect access instruction, without additional intervention by the intercepting device, without additional intervention by the policy server, and without additional intervention by the computerized device.

12. The computer-implemented method of claim 11, wherein the restrict access instruction is only applied to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network to restrict routing of the communications traffic within the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applied to restrict routing of the communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

13. The computer-implemented method of claim 12, further comprising, prior to establishing a configured network state granting the computerized device with the requested access to the network:

applying the redirect access instruction by transmitting a redirection message to the computerized device in order to redirect traffic from the computerized device destined for resources within the network to the remediation server;

wherein the remediation server is configured to automatically reconfigure the computerized device in order to bring the security posture credentials of the computerized device into compliance with the accepted credential set by performing the one or more remedial actions specified in the redirect access instruction.

14. The computer-implemented method of claim 13, wherein the computer-implemented method further comprises:

responsive to an update to the accepted credential set after the computerized device is granted with access to the resources in the network, transmitting a posture update query by the intercepting device to the computerized device;

receiving, from the posture program, a posture update response to the posture update query;

forwarding the posture update response by the intercepting device to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the posture update response relative to the updated, accepted credential set in order to determine an updated posture validation result for the computerized device and generates an updated access instruction based on the updated posture validation result, wherein the updated access instruction does not include any redirect access instruction; and

receiving, from the policy server, the updated access instruction, whereupon the intercepting device applies the updated access instruction to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network.

15. The computer-implemented method of claim 14, wherein the one or more affirmative descriptions associated with the at least one application on the computerized device includes:

(i) an antivirus software version;
(ii) an antivirus definition version;
(iii) a firewall software version;
(iv) an operating system version;
(v) a malware protection software version;
(vi) an operating system patch version; and
(vii) an occurrence time of the most recent antivirus scan.

16. The computer-implemented method of claim **15**, where applying the redirect instruction to direct traffic to the remediation server to reconfigure the computerized device comprises upgrading the computerized device according to the security posture credential of the computerized device that fails analysis by the policy server relative to the accepted credential set, wherein the computer-implemented method further comprises:

in response to a request from the policy server, re-collecting the posture credential from the posture program; and

forwarding the re-collected posture credential to the policy server, wherein the policy server performs a first reassessment of the re-collected posture credential in order to determine whether the re-collected posture credential indicates the computerized device satisfies updated requirements of the security policy for accessing the resources.

17. The computer-implemented method of claim **16**, further comprising:

receiving a first updated message from the policy server as a result of the first reassessment; and

in respective instances, and responsive to receiving the first updated message:

(i) continuing to forward the network received from the computerized device traffic towards the resources; and

(ii) removing the records on the routing device indicating the computerized device is authorized to access the resources.

18. The computer-implemented method of claim **17**, further comprising:

after a specified validity period expires, re-collecting the posture credential from the posture program;

forwarding the re-collected posture credential to the policy server, wherein the policy server performs a second reassessment of the re-collected posture credential to determine whether the re-collected posture credential indicates the computerized device continues to satisfy requirements of the security policy for accessing the resources.

19. The computer-implemented method of claim **17**, further comprising:

receiving a second updated message from the policy server as a result of the second reassessment; and

in respective instances, and responsive to receiving the second updated message:

(i) continuing to forward the network received from the computerized device traffic towards the resources; and

(ii) removing the records on the routing device indicating the computerized device is authorized to access the computerized resource;

wherein the remediation server hosts resources needed to update the then-current configuration state of the one or more components on the computerized device in order to satisfy the requirements of the security policy;

wherein access to the resources in the network is controlled by using the intercepting device, the policy server, and the remediation server and based on the security posture credential and the redirect access instruction, in order to restrict one or more computerized devices from accessing and infecting one or more other computerized devices in the network with worms and viruses.

20. The computer-implemented method of claim **19**, wherein the computer-implemented method further comprises authenticating a user of the computerized device by the policy server in order to automatically generate an authentication result, without additional intervention by the intercepting device, without additional intervention by the remediation server, and without additional intervention by the computerized device; wherein the grant access instruction is generated by mapping the posture validation result with the authentication result, wherein the policy server is further configured to:

receive identity information of the user; and

determine an access policy based on both the posture validation result and identity information;

wherein the access policy is applied to restrict access to the resources in the network.

21. The computer-implemented method of claim **20**, wherein the network traffic includes a packet encapsulating a Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) synchronize (SYN) connection request and has a source Internet Protocol (IP) address not authorized to access the resources in the records of the resources;

wherein the posture validation result and the identity information are securely transmitted using Extensible Authentication Protocol (EAP), wherein the user is authenticated using a predefined protocol selected from EAP Microsoft Challenge-Handshake Authentication Protocol (EAP-MS-CHAP) and EAP Generic Token Card (EAP-GTC);

wherein the posture plug-in is configurable in an Extensible Markup Language (XML) format;

wherein the traffic redirected to the remediation server comprises Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) traffic.

22. The computer-implemented method of claim **21**, wherein the posture validation result is determined as a result of a predefined sequence of messages transmitted among the computerized device, the intercepting device, and the policy server, the predefined sequence of messages including, ordered from first-in-time to last-in-time:

(i) an access request;
(ii) an initial challenge request;
(iii) a challenge response;
(iv) a subsequent challenge request;
(v) a posture request; and
(vi) a posture response.

23. The computer-implemented method of claim **22**, wherein:

(i) the grant access instruction directs the intercepting device to permit communications between the computerized device and the resources;

(ii) the restrict access instruction in a first instance directs the intercepting device to limit communications between the computerized device and the resources to specified network addresses, protocols, and ports; and

(iii) the restrict access instruction in a second instance directs the intercepting device to reject communications between the computerized device and the resources.

24. The computer-implemented method of claim **23**, wherein additional types of security posture credentials are

obtainable via additional posture plug-ins and without requiring reinstallation of any posture agent on the computerized device;

wherein the posture agent operates as an extensible policy broker that fields posture requests from the policy server and returns security posture credentials to the policy server based on responses from the security posture plugin;

wherein the posture agent further operates as a broker that delivers notifications to the posture plug-ins from the posture server in response to the posture validation result, at least one notification of which indicates the posture validation result, wherein the at least one notification is output for display to the user and written to a log file.

25. The computer-implemented method of claim **24**, wherein the posture validation result comprises a first posture validation result, wherein the policy server is configured to automatically determine a second posture validation result, different from the first posture validation result, that the computerized device is brought into compliance with the accepted credential set;

wherein the second posture validation result is determined without additional intervention by the intercepting device, without additional intervention by the remediation server, and without additional intervention by the computerized device;

wherein the posture plug-in is configured to notify the posture agent of any security posture change of the computerized device, via a posture plug-in application programming interface (API), in order to re-initiate the predefined sequence of messages.

26. The computer-implemented method of claim **25**, wherein the records comprise an exception list, wherein the computerized device comprises a first computerized device, wherein a third computerized device is exempted from providing posture credentials and exempted from undergoing any posture validation, upon determining that the third computerized device is specified on the exception list, wherein the first and second computerized devices are not specified on the exception list, wherein the first, second, and third computerized devices are distinct devices; wherein the predefined sequence of messages is additionally used in order to:

(i) authenticate an identity of the user; and

(ii) authenticate an identity of the computerized device;

wherein the grant access instruction is determined based on the posture validation result, the authenticated identity of the user, and the authenticated identity of the computerized device;

wherein the computer-implemented method further comprises:

maintaining a table of computerized devices, the table comprising, for each computerized device:

(i) an identifier of the respective computerized device;

(ii) a flag specifying whether the respective computerized device has any posture agent installed; and

(iii) a permitted access level for the respective computerized device.

27. The computer-implemented method of claim **1**, wherein the posture validation result is determined without additional intervention by the intercepting device, without additional intervention by the remediation server, and without additional intervention by the computerized device, wherein the redirect access instruction is generated without additional intervention by the intercepting device and without additional intervention by the remediation server.

28. The computer-implemented method of claim **1**, wherein the security posture credential includes one or more affirmative descriptions of the application or component on the computerized device and represents the security state of the computerized device, wherein the security posture credential does not specify the posture validation result for the computerized device.

29. A data communications device to control access to resources in a network by operating, as an intercepting device, in conjunction with a policy server and a remediation server, and based on security posture credentials and access instructions, the data communications device comprising:

at least one communications interface;

a controller; and

an interconnection mechanism coupling the at least one communications interface and the controller;

wherein the controller is configured to:

intercept a request for access sent from a computerized device, through the data communications device, to a network resource in the network;

prior to granting the computerized device with the requested access to the network resource, and in response to intercepting the request for access, select, based on the resources for which access is requested, one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a security posture credential representing a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving, from one or more of the plurality of security posture plug-ins, the security posture credential, forward the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credential relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy; and

apply the redirect access instruction at the intercepting device to network communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network; and

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon successful completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant

access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon failure of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a restrict access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable by the intercepting device to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

30. The data communications device of claim **29**, wherein the access instruction is applicable to restrict entry of the communications traffic to the network based, at least in part, upon an address associated with the computerized device.

31. The data communications device of claim **29**, wherein the access instruction is applicable to restrict entry of the communications traffic to the network based, at least in part, upon a communication protocol associated with the computerized device.

32. The data communication device of claim **29**, wherein the controller is configured to initiate a secure communication between the policy server and computerized device prior to the computerized device communicating the security posture credentials.

33. The data communication device of claim **29**, wherein the restrict access instruction is applicable to restrict entry of the communications traffic to the network based upon an address associated with the computerized device and an address associated with the resources in the network to restrict access to the resources in the network by the computerized device.

34. The data communication device of claim **29**, wherein the controller is configured to periodically perform the steps of detecting, receiving and forwarding the security posture credentials, receiving the restrict access instruction, and applying the restrict access instruction based on expiration of a preset time period.

35. The data communications device of claim **29**, wherein the security posture credentials include one or more affirmative descriptions of the application or component on the computerized device, wherein the one or more affirmative descriptions associated with the at least one application on the computerized device comprises one or more of, an antivirus software version, an antivirus definition version, a firewall software version, an operating system version, a malware protection software version, an operating system patch version, and an occurrence time of the most recent antivirus scan.

36. A non-transitory computer-readable medium including computer program logic encoded thereon that, when performed on a controller in a data communications device having a coupling to at least one communications interface, performs an operation to control access to resources in a network by the data communications device acting, as an intercepting device, in conjunction with a policy server and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and access instructions, the operation comprising:

intercepting, by the intercepting device, an attempted access sent from a computerized device, through the data communications device, to a network resource in the network;

prior to granting the computerized device with the requested access to the network resource, and in response to intercepting the attempted access, selecting, based on the resources for which access is requested, one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a security posture credential representing a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving, from one or more of the plurality of security posture plug-ins, the security posture credential, forwarding the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credentials relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy; and

applying the redirect access instruction at the intercepting device by operation of one or more computer processors when executing the computer program logic, to network communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network; and

wherein upon determining that the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon successful completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon failure of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a restrict access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable by the intercepting device to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

37. A computer-implemented method to control access to computing resources in a network, by using a routing device, a policy server, and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and remediation attributes, the computer-implemented method comprising:

receiving, by the routing device connected to the network, from a computing device connected to the network, network traffic directed to a computing resource available over the network;

in response, collecting, from a posture program, a security posture credential indicating a current configuration state of one or more components on the computing device, wherein the posture program comprises at least

one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computing device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computing device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computing device;

forwarding the security posture credential collected from the computing device to the policy server by operation of one or more computer processors, wherein the policy server performs an initial evaluation of the security posture credential of the computing device in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computing device satisfies requirements of a security policy for accessing the computing resource;

upon receiving a message from the policy server indicating that the security posture credential does not satisfy requirements of the security policy, redirecting access by:

forwarding one or more remediation attributes to the remediation server to update, based on the one or more remediation attributes, the then current configuration state of the one or more components on the computing device in order to satisfy the requirements of the security policy; and

forwarding network traffic from the computing resource towards the remediation server without granting access to the computing resource in the network; and

upon receiving a message from the policy server indicating that the security posture credential satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon receiving a message from the remediation server indicating that the then current configuration state was successfully updated, granting access by:

forwarding network traffic received from the computing device towards the computing resource; and

updating records on the routing device in order to indicate the computing device is authorized to access the computing resource;

wherein upon receiving a message from the remediation server indicating that the then current configuration state was not successfully updated, the routing device limits or denies access to the computing resource without limiting or denying any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

38. The computer-implemented method of claim **37**, further comprising:

in response to a request from the policy server, re-collecting the posture credential from the posture program;

forwarding the re-collected posture credential to the policy server, wherein the policy server performs a reassessment of the re-collected posture credential to determine whether the re-collected posture credential indicates the computing device satisfies updated requirements of the security policy for accessing the computing resource;

receiving an updated message from the policy server; and

either continuing to forward the network received from the computing device traffic towards the computing resource or removing the records on the routing device indicating the computing device is authorized to access the computing resource.

39. The computer-implemented method of claim **37**, wherein the network traffic includes a packet encapsulating a TCP SYN connection request and has a source IP address not authorized to access the computing resource in the records of the computing resource.

40. The computer-implemented method of claim **37**, further comprising:

after a specified validity period expires, re-collecting the posture credential from the posture program;

forwarding the re-collected posture credential to the policy server, wherein the policy server performs a reassessment of the re-collected posture credential to determine whether the re-collected posture credential indicates the computing device continues to satisfy requirements of the security policy for accessing the computing resource;

receiving an updated message from the policy server; and

either continuing to forward the network received from the computing device traffic towards the computing resource or removing the records on the routing device indicating the computing device is authorized to access the computing resource.

41. The computer-implemented method of claim **37**, wherein the posture credential indicates one or more of an antivirus software version, an antivirus definition version, a firewall software version, an operating system version, a malware protection software version, an operating system patch version, and an occurrence time of the most recent antivirus scan.

42. The computer-implemented method of claim **37**, further comprising authenticating a user of the computing device.

43. The computer-implemented method of claim **37**, wherein the remediation server hosts one or more resources needed to update the then current configuration state of the one or more components on the computing device to satisfy the requirements of the security policy.

44. A non-transitory computer-readable medium containing a program which, when executed, performs an operation to control access to computing resources in a network, by using a routing device, a policy server, and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and remediation attributes, the operation comprising:

receiving, by the routing device connected to the network, from a computing device connected to the network, network traffic directed to a computing resource available over the network;

in response, collecting, from a posture program, security posture credential indicating a current configuration state of one or more components on the computing device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computing device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computing device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computing device;

forwarding the security posture credential collected from the computing device to the policy server by operation of one or more computer processors when executing the program, wherein the policy server performs an initial evaluation of the security posture credential of the computing device in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computing device satisfies requirements of a security policy for accessing the computing resource;

upon receiving a message from the policy server indicating that the security posture credential does not satisfy requirements of the security policy, redirecting access by:

forwarding one or more remediation attributes to the remediation server to update, based on the one or more remediation attributes, the then current configuration state of the one or more components on the

computing device in order to satisfy the requirements of the security policy; and

forwarding network traffic from the computing resource towards the remediation server without granting access to the computing resource in the network; and

upon receiving a message from the policy server indicating that the security posture credential satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon receiving a message from the remediation server indicating that the then current configuration state was successfully updated, granting access by:

forwarding network traffic received from the computing device towards the computing resource; and

updating records on the routing device in order to indicate the computing device is authorized to access the computing resource;

wherein upon receiving a message from the remediation server indicating that the then current configuration state was not successfully updated, the routing device limits or denies access to the computing resource without limiting or denying any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

45. A routing device to control access to computing resources in a network, by operating in conjunction with a policy server and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and remediation attributes, the routing device comprising:

one or more computer processors;

a memory containing a program which, when executed by the one or more computer processors, performs an operation comprising:

receiving, by the routing device connected to the network, from a computing device connected to the network, network traffic directed to a computing resource available over the network;

in response, collecting, from a posture program, a security posture credential indicating a current configuration state of one or more components on the computing device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computing device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computing device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computing device;

forwarding the security posture credential collected from the computing device to the policy server, wherein the policy server performs an initial evaluation of the security posture credential of the computing device in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computing device satisfies requirements of a security policy for accessing the computing resource;

upon receiving a message from the policy server indicating that the security posture credential does not satisfy requirements of the security policy, redirecting access by:

forwarding one or more remediation attributes to the remediation server to update, based on the one or more remediation attributes, the then current configuration state of the one or more components on the computing device in order to satisfy the requirements of the security policy; and

forwarding network traffic from the computing resource towards the remediation server without granting access to the computing resource in the network; and

upon receiving a message from the policy server indicating that the security posture credential satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon receiving a message from the remediation server indicating that the then current configuration state was successfully updated, granting access by:

forwarding network traffic received from the computing device towards the computing resource; and

updating records on the routing device in order to indicate the computing device is authorized to access the computing resource;

wherein upon receiving a message from the remediation server indicating that the then current configuration state was not successfully updated, the routing device limits or denies access to the computing resource without limiting or denying any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

46. A computer-implemented method to control access to resources in a network by using an intercepting device, a policy server, and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and redirect access instructions, the computer-implemented method comprising:

intercepting, by the intercepting device, one or more messages sent by a computerized device requesting access to one of the resources in the network, the intercepting device comprising a data communications device;

selecting, based on the resources for which access is requested, one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a security posture credential, wherein the security posture credential includes one or more affirmative descriptions of the application or component on the computerized device and represents a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving the security posture credential, forwarding the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credentials relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy; and

applying the redirect access instruction at the intercepting device by operation of one or more computer processors, to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network, in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon successful completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon failure of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a restrict access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

47. A non-transitory computer-readable medium containing a program which, when executed, performs an operation to control access to resources in a network by using an intercepting device, a policy server, and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and access instructions, the operation comprising:

intercepting, by the intercepting device, one or more messages sent by a computerized device requesting access to one of the resources in the network, the intercepting device comprising a data communications device;

prior to granting the computerized device with the requested access to the network, and in response to intercepting the one or more messages sent by the computerized device, selecting, based on the resources for which access is requested one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a security posture credential, wherein the security posture credential includes one or more affirmative descriptions of the application or component on the computerized device and represents a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving the security posture credential, forwarding the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credentials relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device in compliance with the security policy; and

applying the redirect access instruction at the intercepting device by operation of one or more computer processors when executing the program, to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon successful completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon failure of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a restrict access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

48. A routing device to control access to computing resources in a network, by operating in conjunction with a policy server and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and access instructions, the routing device comprising:

one or more computer processors;

a memory containing a program which, when executed by the one or more computer processors, performs an operation comprising:

intercepting one or more messages sent by a computerized device requesting access to one of the resources in the network;

selecting, based on the resources for which access is requested, one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a security posture credential, wherein the security posture credential includes one or more affirmative descriptions of the application or component on the computerized device and represents a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving the security posture credential, forwarding the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credential relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions to be performed for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy; and

applying the redirect access instruction to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the net-

work, in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon successful completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant access instruction applicable by the routing device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon failure of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a restrict access instruction applicable by the routing device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

49. A computer-implemented method to control access to resources in a network by using an intercepting device, a policy server, and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and access instructions, the computer-implemented method comprising:

intercepting, by the intercepting device, one or more messages sent by a computerized device requesting access to one of the resources in the network, the intercepting device comprising a data communications device;

selecting, based on the resources for which access is requested, one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a corresponding security posture credential representing a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving the security posture credential, forwarding the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credential relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy; and

applying the redirect access instruction at the intercepting device by operation of one or more computer processors, to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network, in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon successful completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon failure of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a restrict access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network;

wherein responsive to an update to the accepted credential set after the computerized device is granted with access to the resources in the network, the intercepting device transmits a posture update query to the computerized device and forwards a posture update response from the posture program to the policy server.

50. A non-transitory computer-readable medium containing a program which, when executed, performs an operation to control access to resources in a network by using an intercepting device, a policy server, and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and access instructions, the operation comprising:

intercepting, by the intercepting device, one or more messages sent by a computerized device requesting access to one of the resources in the network, the intercepting device comprising a data communications device;

selecting, based on the resources for which access is requested, one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a security posture credential representing a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving the security posture credential, forwarding the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credential relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy; and

applying the redirect access instruction at the intercepting device by operation of one or more computer processors when executing the program, to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network, in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon successful completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon failure of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a restrict access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network;

wherein responsive to an update to the accepted credential set after the computerized device is granted with access to the resources in the network, the intercepting device transmits a posture update query to the computerized device and forwards a posture update response from the posture program to the policy server.

51. A routing device to control access to computing resources in a network, by operating in conjunction with a policy server and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and access instructions, the routing device comprising:

one or more computer processors;

a memory containing a program which, when executed by the one or more computer processors, performs an operation comprising:

intercepting one or more messages sent by a computerized device requesting access to one of the resources in the network;

selecting, based on the resources for which access is requested, one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a security posture credential representing a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving the security posture credential, forwarding the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credential relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy; and

applying the redirect access instruction to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon determining that the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon successful completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant access instruction applicable by the routing device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon failure of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a restrict access instruction applicable by the routing device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network;

wherein responsive to an update to the accepted credential set after the computerized device is granted with access to the resources in the network, the routing device transmits a posture update query to the computerized device and forwards a posture update response from the posture program to the policy server.

52. A computer-implemented method to control access to resources in a network by using an intercepting device, a policy server, and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials, and access instructions, the computer-implemented method comprising:

intercepting, by the intercepting device, one or more messages sent by a computerized device requesting access to one of the resources in the network, the intercepting device comprising a data communications device;

selecting, based on the resources for which access is requested, one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a security posture credential representing a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving the security posture credential, forwarding the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credentials relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy; and

applying the redirect access instruction at the intercepting device by operation of one or more computer processors, to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network, in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant access instruction applicable by the intercepting device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein responsive to an update to the accepted credential set after the computerized device is granted with access to the resources in the network, the intercepting device transmits a posture update query to the computerized device and forwards a posture update response from the posture program to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the posture update response relative to the updated credential set in order to determine an updated posture validation result for the computerized device and generates a restrict access instruction based on the updated posture validation result, wherein the restrict access instruction is applicable by the intercepting device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

53. A routing device to control access to computing resources in a network, by operating in conjunction with a policy server and a remediation server and based on security posture credentials and access instructions, the routing device comprising:

one or more computer processors;

a memory containing a program which, when executed by the one or more computer processors, performs an operation comprising:

intercepting one or more messages sent by a computerized device requesting access to one of the resources in the network;

selecting, based on the resources for which access is requested, one or more challenge requests to provide to a posture program, whereupon the posture program evaluates a current security state of an application or component of the computing device in order to generate a security posture credential representing a current security state of the computerized device, wherein the posture program comprises at least one of: (i) a posture agent executing on the computerized device; (ii) a posture plug-in executing on the computerized device; and (iii) an audit server operatively connected to the computerized device;

subsequent to receiving the security posture credential, forwarding the security posture credential to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the security posture credential relative to an accepted credential set representing requirements of a security policy for accessing the resources, in order to determine a posture validation result indicating whether the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device does not satisfy the requirements of the security policy, the policy server generates a redirect access instruction specifying one or more remedial actions for the remediation server to perform in order to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy; and

applying the redirect access instruction to communications traffic originating from the computerized device and destined for resources within the network, in order to grant the computerized device with access to the remediation server without including access to the resources in the network;

wherein upon determining the posture validation result indicates that the computerized device satisfies the requirements of the security policy, or upon completion of the one or more remedial actions to bring the computerized device into compliance with the security policy, the policy server generates a grant access instruction applicable by the routing device to grant the computerized device with access to the resources in the network;

wherein responsive to an update to the accepted credential set after the computerized device is granted with access to the resources in the network, the routing device transmits a posture update query to the computerized device and forwards a posture update response from the posture program to the policy server, whereupon the policy server analyzes the posture update response relative to the updated credential set in order to determine an updated posture validation result for the computerized device and generates a restrict access instruction based on the updated posture validation result, wherein the restrict access instruction is applicable by the routing device to limit or deny access to the resources in the network, wherein the restrict access instruction is not applicable to restrict routing of any communications traffic destined for locations outside the network.

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