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Intelligence in Public Literature

The Secret Sentry: The Untold History of the National Security Agency

Matthew M. Aid. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009. 309 pp plus acknowledgements, glossary and footnotes. *

Thomas R. Johnson

In 1982, James Bamford published *The Puzzle Palace*. Billed as the first comprehensive account of the history of the National Security Agency (NSA), it badly missed the mark in its facts and was unbalanced in its assessments. But the book made Bamford a media star, and *The Puzzle Palace* became the unchallenged definitive book on NSA. Whenever the subject is NSA, Bamford is trotted out for TV interviews, where he continues his strident criticism of the agency, as if caught in the time warp of the 1970s. *

There has never been a dispassionate academic treatment of the subject—until now, that is. Matthew Aid brings us a far more balanced account, thoroughly researched and heavily footnoted. If Bamford is the poison, Aid is the antidote. (His name is almost eponymous.) Here is the full spectrum of modern American cryptologic operations—its failures and successes. If you are looking for one book on NSA, this is the one to invest in. *

The Good... *

Make no mistake about it. This is a good book. In fact, it is too good. Matthew Aid has dug up some astoundingly sensitive facts, some of which are among the deepest secrets in the cryptologic cupboard. And they did not all come from his assiduous gleaning of documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. Some of his most breathtaking revelations come from confidential interviews.

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This was arguably the most devastating counterintelligence disaster of the entire Cold War, and it has never before come to the attention of the American public.

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Some of these revelations come from media accounts at the time—others come from more confidential interviews.² *

The best part of the book is the first 150 pages. Here, Aid is on very solid ground, relying on FOIAed documents, including my own four-volume history of NSA, much of which was declassified before *Secret Sentry* went to press. He recounts the various famous (and infamous) SIGINT incidents, such as the attack on the *Liberty* during the 1967 Six-Day War, the *Pueblo* incident in 1968, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and many others. His descriptions are accurate and well documented. *

His description of SIGINT in Vietnam is the best section in the book, partly because of the wealth of declassified material, especially former NSA historian Bob Hanyok's declassified books and articles. His conclusion that SIGINT eventually became the best, and almost the only, reliable intelligence in the country is straight on. According to Aid, "By 1967 dependence on SIGINT was so high that an American intelligence officer who served in Vietnam said they were 'getting SIGINT with their orange juice every morning and have now come to expect it everywhere.'" (115) He also underlines the perils of reliance on a single source—analysts lost the art of playing one source against another, and paid the price when the Tet offensive exploded without warning.³ Airborne radio direction finding (ARDF) became the principal targeting tool in the war, overwhelming other sources, and US air strikes plowed up miles of jungle—sometimes to no effect—based on ARDF fixes. Field commanders, never having been exposed to this sensitive source, didn't know how to use it and frittered away countless opportunities. The United States came away from Vietnam without a clear victory, so the inability to properly use intelligence comes in for its rightful share of the blame. Part of that blame comes down to overclassification and compartmentation, as Aid points out. *

The Bad... *

The book takes on an unnecessarily negative cast, as if it is expected that any history of American intelligence will be a negative one. Aid goes through countless pages of SIGINT successes, only to conclude with a negative note: "The overall importance of SIGINT within the US intelligence community continued to decline in the 1970s, particularly with regard to the USSR." (164)

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Later, when discussing SIGINT support to Operation Desert Storm, he

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² When I expressed amazement at the revelations in the book, Aid commented that many of them had come from interviews with former NSA officers "far above your pay grade." I don't know how he found out what my pay grade was. *

³ The lack of a clear warning bell for Tet recalled a similar incident in World War II when SIGINT did not have clearly predictive information about the Ardennes offensive of December 1944, and intelligence officers were not digging for other sources. *

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states that "Iraq's Saddam Hussein caught the US intelligence community by surprise once again." Yet at the end of the paragraph he quotes Gen. Lee Butler of Strategic Air Command as saying "We had the warning from the intelligence community—we refused to acknowledge it." (192) (So which will it be—there was warning, or there was no warning?) And yet again: "Since there have been so few success stories in American intelligence history,..." (168) This follows many pages of success stories, unbroken by any mention of failures and represents the age-old fallacy of presenting conclusions unsupported by fact.

Errors of fact and interpretation inevitably creep into a book like this. He states that the pilot who shot down KAL-007 did not know that he was shooting down a commercial airliner. In fact, the pilot did know, as NSA learned through intercepts. He describes the SIGINT breakthrough of the Vinh Window, which permitted NSA to predict and catalogue traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and thus to forecast North Vietnamese offensives. Having said that, he wrongly states that the Vinh Window had no effect. In fact, it had an enormous effect on strategic war-planning, although the effect on tactical operations might have been negligible.

His discussion about the Tonkin Gulf crisis of 1964 is slightly off the mark, as are all other similar accounts. At least he understands (as few others do) that President Johnson and Secretary McNamara truly believed that US vessels had been attacked in the gulf, and having already warned the North Vietnamese that there would be consequences, felt it necessary to deliver a blow. The administration was hasty—sitting back and waiting for NSA to analyze the data before losing the fighter bombers on Hanoi would have been the prudent course. But the atmosphere of the time dictated haste, and the need for speed almost predetermined the outcome. It was a consequence of constructing a SIGINT system that depended on speed first and accuracy later. That was where the real failure lay.

And the Ugly

The book is skewed toward recent events—a consequence, Aid claims, of his editors wanting something topical, something that would sell. The draft was chopped from 600 pages to 300,⁴ and the period after the fall of the Soviet Union occupies an inordinate amount of space. Further, there are few declassified sources for this portion of the book, and it is based almost entirely on newspaper accounts, which are in turn based on confidential interviews. Many of the interviews are biased, and the last third of the book is badly out of balance. Information cannot be sourced, and reliability is often suspect. The best parts of the book are in the earlier chapters. The later portions are more journalism than scholarship.

A classic failure in this area is his assessment of SIGINT during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. After documenting some of the considerable successes of the cryptologic system, he states that "SIGINT and HUMINT did not

⁴ E-mail to the author from Aid.

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perform particularly well." (195) This assessment appears to have been deduced from confidential interviews from various (mostly military) sources at various command levels, each with a special pleading or an ax to grind. The longer range assessment has yet to be made and cannot be made based on the information available in open sources today.

Postscript

This is the first scholarly treatment of the history of NSA, and 94 pages, or one-fourth of the book, are footnotes. So if you want a pedigree, that is one way to look at its value. He also has an index. There is no bibliography, but none is needed owing to the very detailed footnoting.

Aid is a former Air Force SIGINTer, and his insights and tactile sense for what is true and what is not come partly from his SIGINT experience. He had no classified sources, but with his background he read between lines and came to some remarkably accurate conclusions. This also contributed to the book's balance. Despite occasionally straying into unwarranted negative conclusions, the story is well structured and mostly reliable.

Will the public read this? Will Aid become a media star? Will people come to accept his account? It is the fate of scholars to communicate principally with other scholars, and they rarely break into the realm of the media. Barbara Tuchman, Stephen Ambrose, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. are three who did. We'll see if Aid joins the list.

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