NSA/CSS Center for Cryptologic History

History Today: Lifting the Curtain on "No Such Agency"

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On March 11, 1968, Lyndon Baines Johnson occupied the White House, the number one song in the country was Otis Redding's "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay," and the most highly rated late-night TV show was *The Tonight Show* starring Johnny Carson. On that particular night, comedian Orson Bean was guest hosting for Johnny. His last guest that evening was the then-fledgling author David Kahn, who was hawking his 600-plus-page book on the history of cryptology*, The Codebreakers.* The book would become an international bestseller, but Bean stated that cryptology struck him as an esoteric pursuit for "strange birds." Kahn retorted, "Are you kidding? They got 14,000 people down in Washington doing this. It's called the National Security Agency." Thus in one fell swoop Kahn brought two subjects that very few people knew about at the time into the public square.

It will not come as a surprise to anyone reading this that since its inception, both employees and the general public have referred to the National Security Agency as "no such Agency," or "never say anything." Over time these descriptions have become tired and trite, but at base, they are simply a reflection of an ingrained culture that for practical purposes does not wish to draw attention to itself.

Despite its secret mission, NSA is supported by taxpayer dollars; thus, while it works assiduously to avoid undue publicity, it is also ultimately answerable to the American public. Searching US newspapers uncovers literally hundreds of stories that mention the Agency and its work, ranging from innocuous human interest stories to more serious ones involving alleged spying and espionage. Save for a few exceptions, before the 1980s, what you will not find are stories that emanate from the Agency itself.

The modern world was certainly aware of cryptology before David Kahn, but knowledge of the discipline was limited for the most part to practitioners'

guides and children's books. Kahn himself had been introduced to the discipline by Fletcher Pratt's *Secret and Urgent,* an anthology of cryptologic-related stories.

Over time, codemaking and codebreaking became part of the larger culture through decoder rings, radio plays, and cryptologic puzzles. These entities brought cryptology into the public square. After World War I the release of the Zimmerman Telegram, books such as Herbert Yardley's *The American Black Chamber,* and a variety of cryptologic writings by William Friedman provided unprecedented insights into the subject.

The end of World War II brought additional cryptologic issues to light, not the least of which was the controversial cryptologic aspects related to Pearl Harbor. Most of the codebreaking successes of the conflict remained classified, but the postwar hearings on the disaster touched on the role that the discipline played (or did not play) in the run-up to the attack.

The decade of the '50s witnessed the creation of the National Security Agency and the organization's move to Fort Meade, along with the revelations related to the Peterson affair (NSA's first espionage case in the 1950s), the defection of two Agency employees (Martin and Mitchell) to the Soviet Union, and similar scandals that would periodically put the Agency on the pages of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. In addition, the attacks on the USS Liberty and USS Pueblo (both US Navy "Technical Research Ships") in the late 1960s brought unwanted attention to NSA as well. However, despite these developments and disclosures, the Agency's public stance was always the same: "no comment." In 1973, Roy Banner, the Agency General Counsel at the time, told then-Director Gen Lew Allen that he intended to handle Allen's "public relations." Allen's response was telling: "I don't intend to have any."

The advent of the Church/Pike Committees in the mid-1970s made it difficult for Allen to live up to that goal. The robust investigations into the US Intelligence organizations and activities would result in the Agency being brought to task for several of its past operations and activities. A more positive development was the declassification of the cryptologic triumphs during World War II. Many of these successes were vital to the triumph of the Allied cause during the war and were both illuminating and instructive in that they clearly

demonstrated the worth of such operations. Still, the Agency rarely, if ever, took a proactive stance to releasing information about its activities.

A New Phase of History

The end of the Cold War brought profound change to this long-held tradition. For decades, the attitude of Congress toward the work of institutions like NSA was benign neglect. The thinking was that as long as the Free World was under threat from the Soviet menace, save for specific prohibitions, the intelligence community should get the money and resources it needed to do its job and the fewer questions asked about its activities, the better.

The era of the fall of the Berlin Wall changed this dynamic. As theologian Hans Kung noted at the time, "After two world wars, and the collapse of fascism, Nazism, communism and colonialism and the end of the Cold War, humanity has entered a new phase of history." This was certainly the case for the Agency. With the demise of the Soviet Union and related developments, Congress was no longer willing to fund the nation's intelligence operations at previous levels. It was now imperative for entities like NSA to begin ever so slowly and judiciously to justify their existence. The curtain had to be lifted; the question was, how much? Admiral William J. Studeman held NSA's directorship during this tumultuous period and he began to take steps to meet this challenge.

Considering its mission, the degree of "openness" that the Agency could embrace was limited. However, there were some important aspects of the Agency's work that could be discussed. Due to the copious amount of declassified World War II era material now available, there was increased interest in cryptologic history from both scholars and the general public. Studeman responded to this development by establishing the NSA Center for Cryptologic History, with the aim of assisting the workforce and other interested parties in exploring this rich history.

Admiral Studeman was also the driving force behind the establishment of the National Cryptologic Museum, which gave the Agency a new tool in helping the wider world to understand the importance of cryptology in protecting that nation and the world. In time it would eventually became open to the public. In addition, drawing on the large number of workforce experts in the fields of

mathematics, language, and engineering, robust educational outreach programs were established to engage with schools, universities, and other educational entities. For the first time, the Agency began to inform the world of its contributions to community activities such as blood drives, recycling, and its efforts related to the federal government's Combined Federal Campaign. These subjects at first glance may seem mundane, but coming from the Agency, they were groundbreaking.

Despite these unprecedented initiatives, the Agency was still reluctant to create a full-fledged public affairs entity that would not only be able to respond to legitimate inquiries, but also, when appropriate, continue to promote the positive contributions of the Agency. In his departing letter to the Agency workforce, Studeman summed up this challenge by noting, "NSA will be increasingly visible to the world, and this openness needs to be thoughtfully, yet fearlessly, managed."

Meyer "Mike" Levin

For decades the Agency "public affairs office (PAO)" consisted of a duly appointed individual who would answer any and all inquiries with a polite but firm "no comment." Jim Cavanaugh, a retired Agency Senior who was instrumental in the formulation of the modern NSA Public Affairs Office, remembers:

In the early 1980s when I first served in what was then Q4, the Office of Policy in the Deputy Directorate for Plans and Policy under Jim Devine, the Public Affairs function was vested with the Classification Policy function in Q41, headed then by Meyer "Mike" Levin. Their telephone, 301-688-6524, was referred to in-house as the "Kook Line." This was almost the only NSA number listed in any open service, and was the place where grandmothers in West Virginia, conspiracy theorists in Tennessee, prisoners in Federal lockups and the "tinfoil hat" brigade (the folks who were certain that NSA was bugging their metal tooth fillings, or intruding into their brains), called to get relief from "Big Brother." In those days, on the infrequent occasion when NSA would be named in a story more related to our codemaking and codebreaking missions, and the potential NSA participation in or validation

of what NSA knew and when, calls from legitimate press outlets (given the prominence of the above phone number in public sources) would also come to this line. They were relatively infrequent, unless there was a "loose lips" situation caused by a knowledgeable government source who pointed back to NSA. With relatively few calls, this function, which later came to be known as "Public Affairs," remained a sideline business in the Cryptologic Policy Branch of the Office of Policy.

Years later an employee of what had become by then a more substantive version of the NSA PAO called a local TV station and asked them to consider covering the opening of the Agency's new day care center. The scheduler at the station thought the call was a joke. After some assurances from the requestor that she was on the level, the scheduler asked, "What do you do all day, sit and watch the phone NOT ring?"

The television station employee was simply affirming what most assumed was the case, namely that NSA rarely, if ever, did anything to bring attention, media or otherwise, to itself. Thankfully, in terms of protecting critical information vital to the nation's security, this is and will always be the case. However, there was a discernable change in the late 1990s in the way the Agency related to the outside world.

In the mid-1980s several prominent terrorist attacks put the Agency front and center on the world stage. Again, to quote Cavanaugh:

The posture of "Never Say Anything" was being tested. Sometime after the La Belle Disco incident, the Public Affairs function was elevated to a combined branch level with the Privacy Act, Freedom of Information Act and the Classification Policy functions. Still, there was not much of a presence, and no defined "Public Affairs Officer" for the NSA.

Many pundits and historians who cover and write about the Agency trace the beginning of this cryptologic glasnost period to General Michael Hayden, who became Director of the Agency in 1999. At a speech at American University in February of that year, Hayden noted,

…Our agency benefited in the past from the high wall of security we placed around our activities during the Cold War. However, we've paid a price. The media and the public have some misconceptions about our business. The American people have to trust us and in order for them to trust us they have to know about us…

However, it is worth noting that the first effort to bring outside "Cameras into the Corridors" of the SIGINT City was not brought about by General Hayden but by his predecessor, Lieutenant General Kenneth Minihan. This will be the subject of a *History Today* article next month!