# (U) Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

## (U) No Such Agency

(U) These days it takes either a highly specialized or a very brave authorto write about World War II without taking cryptology into account. Thiswas also true to a somewhat lesser extent about many aspects of the ColdWar.

(U) At NSA today, Public Affairs Officers interact with the media andindividual inquirers with something more than "No Comment."

(U) It was not always so. Traditionally, NSA maintained a very low publicprofile, characterized particularly by an aversion to media exposure. Forthe early decades of its existence, most seniors at the Agency argued thatany public discussion of cryptology served only to heighten the securityawareness of target nations, and was to be avoided as much as possible.This was the era when local jokes had it that the initials NSA stood for "NoSuch Agency," or, alternately, "Never Say Anything."

(U) These two peripherally related articles discuss in a general way howcryptologic history "went public," then how the National Security Agencytransformed from "No Such Agency" to "Nothing Sacred Anymore."

### PART I

(U) Cryptology has long been a staple of mathematics departments at manyuniversities and some high schools. The academic field greatly expanded inthe 1960s and 1970s when advances in communications technology and theInternet created increased commercial applications for what had been largelytheory.

(U) Cryptologic history, however, was little studied until the 1980s, due tothe scarcity of source material. The secret war behind the shooting warswas known only to specialists and then only in part. Generally, it wentunappreciated by historians.

(U) Some information about the history of codes and cryptanalysis was, ofcourse, available. The strategic release of the Zimmermann Telegram duringWorld War I, for example, resulted in a small but steady stream ofliterature about codebreaking during the Great War.

(U) In 1931 Herbert O. Yardley, chief of America's first peacetime civilianintelligence

agency in the 1920s, revealed its existence -- and itsaccomplishments -- by publishing a "tell-all" memoir, *The American BlackChamber*. Whatever his morality, Yardley was a good storyteller, and thebook became a best-seller, heightening awareness of cryptanalysis among thegeneral public and target nations alike. (By the way, due to a loophole inthe espionage law, Yardley was not prosecuted for breaking silence. Theloophole has since been plugged.)

(U) Immediately after World War II, Congress began public hearings into thedisaster at Pearl Harbor. In the turmoil between a Republican Congress anda Democratic administration, testimony revealed that the United States hadsolved the Japanese diplomatic code before the war, leading some to suggestthat President Franklin Roosevelt had had prior knowledge of Japaneseintentions but acted irresponsibly. The hearings failed to make aconvincing case for this, but, with the secret about codebreaking now in theopen, they provided fodder for generations of conspiracy theorists.

(U) Five important books in the 1960s and 1970s sparked the modern risingtide of revelations about official cryptology.

(U) A professor and government consultant named Roberta Wohlstetterpublished *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* in 1962. Dr. Wohlstetter'sbook discussed decision-making processes prior to the disaster in Hawaii,including the role of cryptanalysis. The study provided interestinginsights into how government bureaucracies act, and was highly influentialamong scholars; it remained, however, little known to the general public.If it didn't coin the term "noise" (the overwhelming amount of worthlessmaterial hiding valuable nuggets of information), Dr. Wohlstetter's bookpopularized it among academics.

(U) In 1967 David Kahn published *The Codebreakers: the Story of SecretWriting*, a 1,164-page compendium of cryptography and cryptanalysis fromancient times to the "threshold of outer space," as the book's blurbs putit. Kahn, a journalist at New York's Newsday, holds a doctorate in historyfrom Oxford; as a youth, he had read a popular history of codes, *Secret andUrgent* by Fletcher Pratt, which stimulated a lifelong fascination with them.*The Codebreakers* included a lengthy chapter on NSA, compiled from the fewavailable open sources; Kahn's description of the Agency was riddled withinaccuracies, but it was the first major literature on the subject. UnlikeWohlstetter's book, Kahn's tome sold well to the public, despite its massivesize and hefty price.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ NSA seniors, believing as they did that any attention drawn to thesubject was bound to result in a loss of sources, discussed possible ways tominimize what they perceived as damage to American security. In the end,they decided there was nothing to do but ride it out, and merely issuedinstructions to NSA employees and the Service Cryptologic Elements not tocomment on Kahn's book.

(U) Also in 1967, Ladislas Farago, author of popular military histories,retold the story of the Pacific War from an intelligence perspective in *TheBroken Seal*. Farago included a considerable amount of information aboutcryptologic organization and activity from open sources. His book sold welland served as one of the inspirations for the motion picture *Tora, Tora,Tora*. The film, by the way, unfolding in semidocumentary style, devotedconsiderable screen time to prewar cryptanalytic efforts in addition to afaithful rendition of the Japanese attack on Hawaii.

(U) Up to this point, print discussions of World War II codebreaking hadbeen largely confined to rehashing what little was known about the Americaneffort against the Japanese. Virtually nothing had been released, andtherefore virtually nothing was written, about the extensive Allied effortagainst German systems. It is a tribute to the discretion of the thousandsinvolved in COMINT in the European Theater that the secret had never beendivulged. But this changed in 1974.

(U) In that year, a former officer in the Royal Air Force who wished toimpress the younger generation with how near a thing victory in World War IIhad been and also to pay tribute to wartime cryptologists before theirgeneration passed away, F. W. Winterbotham, wrote *The Ultra Secret*. Thisbook revealed for the first time the very great extent to which British andAmerican cryptanalysts had exploited German codes and ciphers and how theinside information had been used.

(U) Winterbotham's book was flawed, but its influence was enormous. TheBritish government had declined his request to review wartime documents, andhe therefore had to write strictly from memory. Since he had been involvedin distributing COMINT, not preparing it, his description of the productionprocess was somewhat skewed. *The Ultra Secret* also generated a number of"urban legends" about wartime COMINT that persist to this day, but, byrevealing the existence of COMINT in the European war, it stimulated thefurther release of information.

(U) With the "lid off," other British and American participants in wartimeCOMINT began publishing their memoirs, some with and some without theirgovernment's permission. This cottage industry on wartime COMINT put agreat deal of information into the public domain in a fairly short period oftime.

(U) Historians may be argumentative by nature, and heated discussions aboutthe Second World War were and are a common aspect of academic life.However, most historians had assumed by the 1970s that almost all majorfacts about the war were available, and arguments would only revolve aroundwhat those facts meant. With the revelations concerning cryptology,historians recognized they now confronted a completely hidden aspect of thewar that would force them to re-evaluate and re-argue most of the events,personalities, and decisions of the war. Their joy was unconfined.

(U) If anything, historians' interest in wartime COMINT was exceeded by thatof veterans and their families. Here was a source that gave the hithertounknown background of events they had participated in. Many regarded thematerial as a kind of key to help understand more fully the events that hadmade up a significant portion of their lives.

(U) Both historians and veterans actively sought additional releases ofcryptologic information about the war.

(U) Since the United States and Great Britain had worked together underbilateral agreements to exploit Japanese and German systems in World War II,it was necessary to coordinate any new policy on declassification. NSA andGCHQ agreed to a carefully defined program of releases, with U.S. documentsto go to the National Archives, British documents to the Public RecordOffice.

(U) Confronted with millions of pages of documents that potentially could bereleased, and realizing that some of them might still need protection, NSAsought more limited releases at first. The staff of declassificationofficers, a few reemployed annuitants, reviewed and redacted (i.e., blackedout portions still considered sensitive) key prewar and wartime documentsand released them as SRHs -- Special Research Histories -- to the NationalArchives.

(U) Although researchers found the SRHs useful and interesting, thisself-censorship satisfied nobody. Historians wanted originals.Furthermore, changes to declassification policies and the Freedom ofInformation Act (FOIA) in the 1970s required more openness in declassifyingdocuments. Eventually, DIRNSA Admiral Bobby Inman decided to proceed withmore declassification of records from World War II. The processing effortwas expanded.

(U) Increased declassification meant more published histories that dealtexclusively with or incorporated COMINT. And ongoing declassification meantcontinuing interaction with scholars and other interested members of thepublic. Several successive NSA directors or deputy directors used thePublic Affairs Office or Center for Cryptologic History as a point ofcontact for this effort.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ The fifth book that heightened awareness of cryptology and helpedshape NSA's public image was James Bamford's *The Puzzle Palace*, published in1982. Bamford was an intrepid researcher who combined information alreadyin the public domain with documents obtained through the FOIA process andwith interviews. His book contained a number of inaccuracies andexaggerations, but provided a generally rounded portrait of the Agency wherenone had previously existed. His book also generated considerable negativecomment in the workforce and ill will toward some of his sources.

(U) One additional large declassification action also captured the attentionof historians, media persons, and the general public, and helped change theway Americans viewed another part of their past.

(U) "VENONA" was a made-up word for a project that exploited espionagecommunications from the USSR. Access to parts of Soviet wartime espionagemessages helped the Federal Bureau of Investigation identify dozens ofAmericans who had spied for the Soviets and was the hidden basis for manyspy cases in the 1940s and 1950s. However, with diminishing returns for theAgency's efforts in the 1980s, the program was terminated and VENONA was putinto storage.

(U) The person who "turned out the lights" on VENONA, as he liked to say,was William P. Crowell, and by 1995 Bill Crowell was NSA's deputy director.Several successive directors had decided NSA must interact more with theoutside, and the D/DIR believed that, like it or not, history constituted 85percent of what NSA could talk about in any unclassified venue. Crowellwanted to declassify VENONA, believing that the positive story would reflectcredit on the Agency; the DCI also believed release of the story wouldbenefit the entire intelligence community. About the same time, NSAreceived a strong appeal on VENONA under the FOIA law. The appeal onlyserved to convince Crowell that it was time to declassify the VENONAtranslations.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ Crowell created a group to expedite release of VENONA, includingdeclassifiers, public affairs officers, attorneys, and historians, centeredin the Office of Policy. Considerable effort was expended in coordinationwith the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other government entities thatmight have equity in the VENONA project.

(U) VENONA was released publicly in a joint NSA-CIA gala ceremony at CIAheadquarters in July 1995. Senator Daniel Moynihan, who had an academicinterest in the VENONA period, was a prominent participant.

(U) Once released, VENONA spurred historians to re-evaluate aspects of earlyCold War history, much as the release of World War II cryptology hadimpelled many reconsiderations of wartime events. Historians andjournalists took VENONA seriously, but an inevitable by-product washeightened awareness of NSA and cryptanalysis.

(U) By the mid- to late 1990s, cryptologic history had taken its placebeside cryptologic mathematics as an academic subject. Ample data were nowavailable, and the continuing declassification program fed hungry andargumentative historians.

**PART 2**

(U) According to a probably apocryphal but possibly true tale, Roy Banner,senior attorney at NSA, approached Director Lew Allen after thecongressional investigations of the 1970s had put NSA on the front pages,and volunteered to handle his public relations. "Bad career move," thedirector was supposed to have replied, "I don't intend to have any."

(U) For most of its existence, NSA successfully maintained a low profile,punctuated by occasional short periods of media notoriety, as when Martinand Mitchell defected in 1960, or with disasters such as the LIBERTYincident in 1967. From the mid-1960s on, even as academics, novelists, andmovie producers increasingly portrayed the Central Intelligence Agency as a"secret government" or as full of rogue agents spinning nefarious plots,news media and fictioneers alike generally ignored NSA. The Agency'smanagement, which believed there was no such thing as good publicity aboutcryptology, was quite content with that.

(U) Stimulated by the revelations of a series of books about cryptology, NSAaccelerated a program of declassification of World War II documents thatgenerated additional interest in the organization and activities. Quiteapart from this public attention, however, NSA in the 1970s took some smallsteps that eventually led to greater interaction with the media and public.

(U) In 1979 the director of the Smithsonian Museum of American History askedNSA's director, Admiral Bobby Ray Inman, for assistance in preparing anexhibition of cipher machines. Inman responded positively, and authorizedlending items from World War II, including a German ENIGMA machine and aU.S. SIGABA (carefully modified to remove some still secret workings). Thetwo directors opened the exhibit on 26 February 1981. A few years later,NSA lent the Smithsonian the last remaining cryptanalytic bombe from WorldWar II, arguably the crown jewel of NSA's artifact collection.

(U) The Smithsonian exhibits were an important first step in educating thepublic about the crucial and beneficial role of cryptology in Americanhistory.

(U) In addition to the modest declassification program discussed in Part 1,the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) caused releases of information aboutcryptology or NSA. In 1966, in response to public fears that theclassification system was being used to hide government misconduct ormistakes, Congress passed the FOIA law, which empowered citizens to requestdocuments or other information, classified or not, from governmentorganizations. The government organization involved had to release therequested materials or justify nonrelease on specific grounds, "protectionof intelligence sources or methods" being one.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ NSA released some documents to FOIA requesters, mostly dealingwith administrative matters, but in the early days was generally successfulin forestalling release of sensitive material on national security grounds.However, FOIA requesters had the right

of administrative appeal and alsocould take the government to court if their request were refused.Increasingly, courts became less willing to accept a blanket statement of"national security" as a reason for denying release of material. But, eventhough courts sided more often than before with plaintiffs, the burden ofproof was still on the requester to justify why material should be released.

(U) With the end of the Cold War and the demise of America's primaryadversary came a widespread feeling in the public and among some ingovernment that much of the secrecy that had shrouded defense andintelligence matters was no longer necessary. While some things would stillrequire protection, this trend of thought went, American taxpayers deservedto see what they got for their money. This trend culminated in ExecutiveOrder 12958, issued by President Bill Clinton on April 17, 1995. This EOmandated review of all nonexempt documents 25 years old or older; release ofthese documents would be automatic if they were not reviewed. The EO alsoreversed the philosophy behind releases: the burden of proof was now on thegovernment to justify keeping a document classified, and the grounds forexemption were narrowly defined.

(U) In response to the executive order and the new orientation, NSA'sArchives and Records Center, working with private industry, designed anautomated system for support of document review. This resulted in a"declassification factory," which began operations in 1998, and which putNSA in the lead in the intelligence community in reviewing its documentholdings.

(U) A succession of directors beginning with Admiral William O. Studeman inthe early 1990s made decisions to become more involved with the surroundingcommunity. With the end of the Cold War there was less justification forthe traditional low profile, and, in fact, some benefits might be obtainedby a more visible public presence in the changed atmosphere.

(U) The Agency's leadership realized that NSA was one of the largestemployers in central Maryland and that the organization and its employeeswere significant consumers of county or state services as well as heavycontributors to them. Studeman made some public speeches, unusual if notunprecedented for a DIRNSA, and had NSA officials interact with theBaltimore-Washington Parkway Chamber of Commerce or state and countyagencies.

(U) The leadership decided other public activities would benefit NSAdirectly or indirectly. For example, NSA had a stake in ensuring excellencein mathematics instruction, since it would expect to recruit heavily in thatdiscipline for years to come. The Agency therefore undertook initiatives tofoster good teaching in local schools and universities, and to provideinstructional resources.

(U) Although a more advanced public posture still made many inside the

fenceuncomfortable, NSA's anonymity, once breached, could not be restored.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ In November 1965 DIRNSA Marshall Carter named a part-time NSAliaison officer with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs.In December 1966 the title was changed, the position became full time, andthe incumbent was placed on the director's staff. In July 1973 anothertitle change created the Agency's "Public Affairs Officer"; by the end ofthe year, the PAO was resubordinated from the director's office to thePolicy staff.

(U) Today's Public Affairs Office began as a desk-level operation in theFOIA Office in the late 1980s, then was raised to a two-person team in theOffice of Information Policy. The PAO maintained a strictly reactiveposture, and it was understood that its purpose was to make mediarepresentatives go away -- with a smile, if possible, but to go away!

(U) Discussions of a more active media policy began under Admiral McConnell,relating to some of the issues discussed above. However, initially it wasfelt that while NSA was becoming more involved with the community, as acorporation it was not ready to engage in additional openness with themedia. Two programs of the mid-1990s forced NSA into a more open stance.Ironically, both originated with NSA itself.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ The opening of the National Cryptologic Museum in December 1993forced NSA to interact directly with the public and the media. The PAOconfronted unforeseen questions such as how to allow photography on Agencygrounds. Once the media discovered the museum -- the first major mentionwas a tongue-in-cheek piece in the Washington Post in early 1994 under thetitle "Only Sleuths Can Find This Museum" -- inquiries from other mediaincreased exponentially. Each wanted something different, perhaps somethingmore, than their competitors.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ The second issue that forced NSA into a more public stance was theClipper Chip. Dealing with public cryptography of increasing strength, NSAbecame a proponent of clipper chip -- the chip was a computer encryptionsystem in which the key for decryption would be filed in "escrow" and wouldbe obtainable by law enforcement authorities only if their evidence wassufficient to convince a judge to issue a warrant. This proposition raisedthe suspicions and hackles of many segments of the public as a challenge toprivacy rights; NSA became a participant, and ultimate loser, in thenational debate that ensued.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ When Air Force general Kenneth Minihan succeeded Admiral McConnellas DIRNSA, the new director recognized a need to find positive stories aboutthe Agency that could be presented publicly. The museum was fodder for manyarticles and broadcasts, but additional stories were released aboutactivities, such as technical research, that could be told without harm tooperations. The trend was continued, even accelerated, under General Haydenuntil the terrorist events of September 2001.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ In late 1996 the director, after nearly two years of discussion,agreed to one of the long-standing media requests for cooperation in adocumentary television program about the Agency -- for the first time toinclude videotaping inside NSA buildings. The Public Affairs Officeconvened a working group to assist in facilitating the project. The groupgently reworked a draft script submitted by the filmmaker, helping toeliminate some of its tendencies toward science fiction and inject realityabout NSA in it. The production crew worked at NSA in April 1997, tapingprimarily in the museum (which was an unclassified, public area anyway) butalso inside the headquarters building and on the campus under carefullycontrolled circumstances.

~~(U//FOUO)~~ The resultant documentary program, aired on the Discovery Channel,while not entirely free of error or sensational claims, presented agenerally fair and balanced view of NSA. It had immediate positive impact-- and continues to do so, since educational channels usually rerun theirprogramming into eternity.

(U) NSA had in small, incremental steps -- some of its own choosing, someforced on it by circumstances -- moved from an organization with anexceptionally low profile in the 1980s to one that was a "household name" inthe 1990s.

(U) Public interaction had some desired effects on NSA's image, but therewas a down side as well. Since NSA was now "newsworthy," media oftendevoted space or time to real or speculative information about NSA andSIGINT, revealing more than Agency personnel would have liked. Also,perhaps because of the novelty factor, academics, novelists, and movieproducers increasingly portrayed NSA as a danger to the privacy rights ofAmericans, or as full of rogue agents spinning nefarious plots, the way theyhad once treated CIA.

(U) Even though major public events such as the Discovery Channel programcame later in the decade, what epitomized NSA's public emergence for many inthe workforce was the installation in March 1991 of a sign at the highwayentrance to NSA's headquarters building. The buildings had been visiblefrom the highway since the 1960s, and those who wanted to know the Agency'slocation, whether for good or ill, could pinpoint it easily, but no explicitidentification had ever been erected. Given this previously prevailingculture of anonymity, the placement of a highly visible roadside signboardwas a surprise, even a shock, to many employees.

(U) But there it was. A big block with a plaque, a blue background and thelegend "National Security Agency." Not you-know-what.

[David A. Hatch, Center for Cryptologic History, 972-2893s, dahatch@nsa]

Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

Content Owner: Feedback
Web POC: Feedback

Last Modified: by nsr
Last Reviewed: December 30, 2002
Next Review: 365 days