Open Codes

The question of "open codes" is an interesting one. The codes provide minimal security in most cases, but, caught without a cryptosystem, individuals still seek to protect their messages. We recently read of two interesting varieties of open codes.

The first was composed by the commander in chief himself, President Abraham Lincoln:

> Hq. Armies of the U.S., City Point, Va. 8:30 a.m., April 3, 1865
> TINKER, War Department: A. Lincoln its in fume a in hymn to start I army treating there possible if of cut too forward pushing is He so all Richmond aunt confide is Andy evacuated Petersburg reports Grant morning this Washington Secretary of War BECKWITH

The "decryption process," of course, is to ignore the ostensible address and signature, then read the telegram backwards, concentrating on the sounds rather than the actual words. This format resembled a transposition cipher actually in use by the Union Army; normally, important words were given substitutes from a codebook, then the word order was scrambled.

The second example of an open code was detected by the Office of Censorship just after the United States declared war on Germany in 1917:

PRESIDENT'S EMBARGO RULING SHOULD HAVE IMMEDIATE NOTICE.

GRAVE SITUATION AFFECTING INTERNATIONAL LAW.

STATEMENT FORESHADOWS RUIN OF MANY NEUTRALS.

YELLOW JOURNALS UNIFYING NATIONAL EXCITEMENT IMMENSELY.

The code in this case was the initial letter of each word:

P.....E.....R.....S.....H.....I.....N.....G

S.....A.....I.....L.....S   F.....R.....O.....M   N.....Y   J.....U.....N.....E   I.

Whatever the merits of the open code in this instance, Pershing actually sailed from New York on 28 May.

[Sources: David Kahn, *The Codebreakers*; *The Friedman Legacy: A Tribute to William and Elizebeth Friedman*, Center for Cryptologic History, 1992.]