Security Agency Bars Access to Nonsecret Material, Library Records Show

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WASHINGTON, April 27 - The National Security Agency, the nation's largest top-secret intelligence organization, has directed a private library to withdraw public access to personal letters mentioned in a book critical of the agency, according to library records.

In a visit to the George C. Marshall Research Library in Lexington, Va., early this month, NSA officials, two representatives of the security agency also put a "secret" rubber-stamp on some of the letters, which were written by a former agency official but were never Government property. Library officials said the security agency instructed them to niche the letters, including many without the secrecy stamp, in a vault the library uses to house secret data.

Many of the letters were cited by the book author James Bamford in his book "The Puzzle Palace," a critical report about the NSA and its operation last year. The National Security Agency is responsible for devising and maintaining excessive secrecy and security information.

Removal Termed 'Routine'

Lieut. Gen. Lincoln D. Faurer, director of the agency, defended the removal of the letters from public access, calling it "routine" and part of the agency's responsibility to advise and assist in the protection of N.S.A.-related national security information contained in library collections.

Scholars and civil liberties lawyers, asked about the agency's action, denounced it, in the words of one, "as a new form of censorship."

"Mark H. Lynch, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union, said, "When the Government starts barring the public from seeing unclassified documents in private libraries, it's an extraordinary form of censorship." Lynch said lawyers serving in the NSA had never before been allowed to advise the library on the relevancy or classification of the letters.

A reporter who asked Monday to see several of the Friedman letters mentioned in Mr. Bamford's book, was told by library officials that the specific letters, however, were not subject to secrecy classification because they were part of Mr. Friedman's personal papers. Mr. Friedman died in 1959 and donated his private papers to the Marshall library.

In a letter last month to Marshall S. Carter, a former director of the agency and president of the foundation that operates the Marshall library, General Faurer described the visit by two N.S.A. officials as "part of our continuing review of research materials used by Mr. James Bamford."

The letter also said, "It's obvious we share a common desire that collections of papers may be exploited reasonably by researchers to expose classified or sensitive information, although this is often difficult to enforce."

At the Marshall library, which is on the campus of the Virginia Military Institute, called the agency's action "troublesome" but defended the agency's relationship with the Government. "I feel that our relationship with the Government has been reasonable, practical and helpful," said Fred L. Hadsel, director of the George C. Marshall Research Foundation.

General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff from World War II and later Secretary of State and founder of the European postwar recovery plan that bears his name, was a graduate of V.M.I.

Reagan Executive Order

Mr. Hadsel said the foundation's relationship with the Government "is not and should not be an adversarial relationship," and added: "Collections come from different people under different circumstances and different conditions. We are trying, step by step, to move toward an equitable opening of all our collections."

An executive order on national security information signed by President Reagan last year limited the definition of information subject to designation as secret material "that is owned by, produced by or for, or is under the control of the United States Government." Mr. Hadsel said the library removed the Carter papers from public access last year. He declined to say why. Mr. Bamford, who interviewed Mr. Carter while doing research for his book, said the Carter papers were withdrawn at the request of Mr. Carter after publication of the "Puzzle Palace." Mr. Carter could not be reached for comment today.

Records at the Marshall library show that a number of papers from the Friedman collection were withdrawn from public files at the instruction of the security agency.

A reporter who asked Monday to see several of the Friedman letters mentioned in Mr. Bamford's book was given the relevant files of correspondence. The specific letters, however, were missing; in their place were notices that the documents had been withdrawn for security reasons. In some cases, entire folders had been withdrawn.

For example, Mr. Friedman's correspondence with Boris C. W. Htragel, a European manufacturer of cryptologic equipment, was missing from the collection. In place of the folder was a one-page notice stating that the material had been removed because it contained "security-classified information" and had been designated as For Official Use Only by the security agency.

T he letters contained brief references to some cryptologic work, including one project in 1957 that the agency still considers highly sensitive, according to Mr. Bamford's book, but were never subject to secrecy classification because they were part of Mr. Friedman's private papers. Mr. Friedman died in 1959 and donated his private papers to the Marshall library.

Mr. Bamford said the recent actions were "very chilling" for any historical researcher.

The letters removed from open library files were written from 1942 to 1959 by William F. Friedman, a pioneer in cryptological work in the United States and one of the security agency's top code breakers. They dealt primarily with personal matters, according to library officials.

Library officials said other material used by Mr. Bamford was stamped "secret" by the visiting security agency officials. Library officials said they had no choice but to remove the material from public circulation. "If something is classified, it's classified," one official said. "We have no choice but to remove it."

Other documents removed from the Friedman collection were marked by notices that made no mention of any security agency action. Library officials said these papers were not classified or otherwise officially designated as sensitive by the security agency. "They simply informed us that the papers were sensitive and told us to put them in the vault," a library official said.

Removal Viewed as Pointless

Several scholars said that, apart from any questions of censorship, removal of the papers seemed pointless because the material was published in Mr. Bamford's book. In addition, Mr. Bamford said, he kept copies of all the Friedman letters he used and would make them available to anyone who asked to see them.

"The removal doesn't make any sense from the standpoint of making the papers publicly available," said Samuel R. Gammon, executive director of the American Historical Association.

General Faurer said publication of the information did not matter. "Just because information has been published doesn't mean it shouldn't undergo classification," he said.