

Security agency stops public access to letters in private library

New York Times News Service

Washington — The National Security Agency (NSA), the nation's largest and most secretive intelligence organization, has directed a private library in Virginia to halt 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., earlier this month, according to library 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 place 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 author James Bamford in his book "The Puzzle Palace," a critical report about the agency that was published last year. The NSA is responsible for devising and keeping secure codes used by the United States, breaking codes used by foreign governments and monitoring worldwide communications.

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

Scholars and civil liberties lawyers, when asked this week 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."

Historians and lawyers said they had never heard of a case in which open research materials mentioned in a published book were later classified secret or removed from circulation. They questioned the NSA's authority to influence the status of documents that were never the property of the government. Officials of the security agency assert that they do have such authority to protect national security information.

While at the Marshall library, NSA

officials told the librarians that visit was part of a systematic effort to track down and, if necessary, remove from circulation research materials about sensitive matters that were used in Mr. Bamford's book, library officials said.

Mr. Bamford is a Massachusetts writer who has a law degree and specializes in investigative research. "The Puzzle Palace," the first book-length account of the security agency's history and activities, accuses the agency of maintaining excessive secrecy and abusing its powers of electronic surveillance by spying on American citizens in the 1970s.

Mr. Bamford said the recent actions would "have a very chilling effect on any historical researcher."

The letters removed from open library shelves were written from 1942

to 1969 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.

The 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 1969, leaving 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 oversees the Marshall library, General Faurer described the

visit by two NSA officials as "part of our continuing review of research materials used by author James Bamford."

The letter also said, "It's obvious we share a common desire that collections of papers not be exploited unreasonably by researchers to expose classified or sensitive information, although this is often difficult to enforce."

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

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