

# NSA Held Able to Break The Codes of 40 Nations

Last of a Series

By Douglas Watson  
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Times have changed since 1929 when Henry L. Stimson, on becoming Secretary of State, abolished the small code-breaking office there that was known as the "black chamber."

Stimson said: "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail."

Nations now routinely spend millions of dollars trying to intercept each other's messages and break each other's codes. In most instances they are limited only by their electronic and computer capabilities.

While the National Security Agency is having increasing difficulty in breaking major nations' top codes, several former U.S. intelligence officials agreed that NSA's capability extends to the codes of at least 40 nations. "I would guess right now we could break every Third World country—everything they have," said one.

The NSA obviously is learning something interesting enough to have as many as 40 generals and admirals check into a motel next to its headquarters at Ft. Meade, Md., when attending conferences, as has happened.

The U.S. government considers practically nothing more secret than its codes, since breaking of them would divulge thousands of other secrets.

All NSA employees are required to promise that they won't discuss the agency's work, not even with their families and not even years after they have stopped working for this nation's code-breaking and code-protecting agency.

NSA employees, who live in large concentrations in such nearby communities as Laurel, Columbia and Mont-

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pelier usually just tell their neighbors they work for the government or at Ft. Meade. "We didn't mind at all when we were confused with NASA," said a former employee.

NSA employees occasionally tell an unconfirmed story about a would-be developer who in trying to estimate how many potential customers his project might have, asked the agency how many employees it had. NSA refused to say. The developer, so the story goes, then called the Soviet embassy and got the information.

In the past the Soviets have had a lot more top-secret information from NSA. At a klieg-lighted Moscow news conference on Sept. 6, 1960, two missing NSA cryptologists denounced the United States and their former employer.

Bernon F. Mitchell and William H. Martin, who had defected while supposedly on vacation, charged then that the American government was breaking the codes of 40 nations. President Eisenhower called the two men "self-confessed traitors."

The Mitchell-Martin defections shocked the U.S. government and shook NSA from top to bottom. The two defectors were suspected of being homosexuals subject to blackmail. The agency fired 26 other alleged sexual deviates.

Three years later an even more serious security breach was discovered when Sgt. 1/C Jack E. Dunlap asphyxiated himself in his yellow Cadillac after realizing

he was under investigation.

"He stole us blind," a well-informed government source said then. Dunlap was found to have sold NSA secrets to the Soviets for \$60,000 paid over several years.

Dunlap worked as a chauffeur and aide to high agency officials from whom he managed to steal top-secret documents and smuggle them past Marine sentries for regular delivery to the Soviet embassy here.

Dunlap's Army salary was only \$5,300. Yet, without NSA becoming aware of it for years, he was able to buy a 30-foot cabin cruiser, high-powered racing boat, two Cadillacs, a Jaguar sports car, to travel to expensive resorts and to maintain a blonde mistress as well as a wife and five children.

The NSA has had other failures. After the North Koreans' capture of the USS Pueblo and shooting down of an EC-121 reconnaissance plane—both of which were eavesdropping for NSA—a special House investigating committee said U.S. intelligence agencies had made no more than a "token effort" to examine the hazards of such missions.

The committee concluded in its 1969 report, "Failure . . . to provide essential and available information to potential consumers in a timely fashion necessarily raises serious questions concerning the effective operation and administration of these agencies."

In 1967 NSA's electronic surveillance efforts got a bloody nose during the Arab-Israeli war when Israeli planes attacked the USS Liberty, killing 34 men and wounding 75 others aboard the electronic ferret ship that was listening 15½ miles off the Egyptian coast and had failed to get a Pentagon message to move farther away from the fighting.

NSA's successes have been less publicized than its failures since a successfully broken code is only an open pipeline of intelligence as long as the code-senders don't know their messages are being intercepted and understood.

David Kahn, author of "The Codebreakers," said recently that NSA "has never read for long, if it has at all, the top (code) systems of major nations. The situation is the same for the code-breaking agencies of all countries."

Kahn added, "Nevertheless, the NSA has scored some coups. One was the eavesdropping by a highly directional satellite of the car-radio telephone mes-



LT. GEN. LEW ALLEN JR.  
... director of NSA



BENSON K. BUFFHAM  
... deputy director

sages between Kremlin big-wigs."

Occasionally NSA surveillance stations pick up uncoded messages of special interest. Dr. Herbert Scoville Jr., a former U.S. intelligence official, said in a paper last year that in 1961, "A woman listening to open radio transmissions within the Soviet Union at a receiver in the eastern Mediterranean heard an advance press release with a three-day embargo announcing that the Russians would resume nuclear testing."

Winslow Peck, a former air force enlisted man who did electronic monitoring for NSA in Turkey and Vietnam, recalled in a 1972 Ramparts magazine article how U.S. eavesdroppers listened to the frantic conversation of a Soviet cosmonaut who couldn't get his parachute to open and slow down his spacecraft during re-entry.

"It was all in Russian, of course, but we taped it and listened to it a couple of times afterward," Peck said.

He recalled, "Kosygin called him (the cosmonaut) personally. They had a video-phone conversation. Kosygin was crying. He told him he was a hero and that he had made the greatest achievement in Russian history, that they were proud and that he'd be remembered.

"The guy's wife got on, too. They talked for a while. He told her how to handle their affairs and what to do with the kids. It was pretty awful.

"Towards the last few

minutes, he began falling apart, saying, 'I don't want to die, you've got to do something.' Then there was just a scream and he died. I guess he incinerated," Peck said.

Though within the Defense Department, NSA says that 80 per cent of its personnel are civilians. This does not include the thousands of military personnel doing monitoring overseas for the agency. NSA has always been headed by a three-star general or admiral, with the agency's deputy director being a civilian.

Lt. Gen. Lew Allen Jr. (USAF), NSA's present director, assumed command in August, 1973. Allen, 49, is a West Point graduate and former pilot with a Ph.D. in nuclear physics. He has held various scientifically oriented military positions.

NSA's deputy director is Benson K. Buffham, who worked with military electronic surveillance organizations before joining the agency upon its creation 23 years ago.

In the last three or four years there has been "a substantial reduction" in NSA's personnel, according to Ray S. Cline, former head of intelligence for the State Department and an ex-CIA official.

NSA's shrinking number of employees apparently has

the only printed matter it publicly releases—that tells them very little about what they would be doing.

The flyer does mention that the agency's annual Christmas party attracts over 10,000 guests, that its National Cryptologic School trains employees, describes the simple cipher disk invented in 1470 to break codes and portrays the agency's emblem, the American eagle grasping a key in its talons.

The most difficult codes

are "one-time pads." That is, they use an entirely different code formula for each brief message. So, even if a code based on one of a million random number combinations should be broken, only the immediate message will be revealed. The next sentence is likely to be in an entirely different code.

Kahn said in a recent interview, "Probably in common with every other code-breaking agency in the world, NSA is producing qualitatively less and less communications intelligence."

"The reason is that more and more countries are adopting crypto systems that are invulnerable to solution even with the help of computers . . .

"Furthering this trend is the growing difficulty of espionage to help code-breakers. During World War II spies could photograph code books. Today's cipher secrets reside in integrated micro circuits the size of a thumbnail.

"Consequently, NSA reads the codes of fewer and

fewer countries. Those that it does read often demand disproportionate effort," Kahn said.

He added, "It worked for seven years on the systems of one Third World nation until, with the CIA, which subverted a code clerk in Vienna, it finally read a message. The text was a personnel transfer order."

It isn't always necessary to break a code to glean useful intelligence. "If you know that point A is communicating with point B, you may know a lot," said one former U.S. intelligence employee. Such intelligence is called "traffic analysis."

The deluge of information collected by NSA and the other American intelligence agencies has been caused by U.S. policymakers' desire to know what is going on everywhere and the natural bureaucratic tendency to expand, Harry Rositzke, who served with the CIA for 27 years, said recently.

"Washington intelligence became an all-source glut: millions of words daily from foreign radio broadcasts,

been caused by technological improvements that enable it to do more with fewer people, by this nation's narrower strategic interests since withdrawing from Vietnam, and by inflation.

Congress has given the NSA director authority to fire agency employees "whenever he considers that action to be in the interest of the United States." The vulnerability to sudden discharge is added to the tensions of trying to break extremely difficult codes, to maintain secrecy at all times and to work with the realization that no matter how well you do, you will never receive public recognition.

Sometimes the strains show, such as in the past when a couple of NSA wives called this newspaper to complain about what the agency's super-secrecy was doing to their marriages.

They said the divorce rate among NSA employees is high. A former NSA employee said agency personnel have a higher than average suicide rate and NSA is careful to insist that those doing demanding work take regular vacations.

NSA not only recruits through its personnel office and in the armed forces but on many college campuses. For example at the University of Maryland last fall the agency interviewed 42 students and in January interviewed 67 more.

NSA distributes a small flyer to potential recruits—

thousands of embassy and attaché reports, a stream of communication intercepts, cartons of photographs, miles of recorded electronic transmissions—and a handful of agent reports," Rositzke wrote in Foreign Affairs.

Patrick J. McGarvey, author of "CIA—the Myth and the Madness," wrote three years ago, for example, that NSA was spending approximately \$100 million a year to collect tape recordings of "scrambled" Soviet communications.

Once collected, McGarvey said, the incomprehensible Soviet tapes were "merely stored away in vaults at NSA headquarters as NSA mathematicians had not yet devised a formula" for reconstituting the scrambled messages.

Sen. William Proxmire (D-Wis.) estimated that the total annual budget for the U.S. intelligence establishment was \$6.2 billion. Fifty years ago the entire federal budget was \$2.9 billion.

Proxmire asked, "Why can't up to \$1 billion and the

integrity of our foreign policy be saved by selectively cutting back the huge intelligence apparatus now in existence?"

Harry Howe Ransom, a Vanderbilt University professor who has written extensively about the American intelligence establishment, estimates that the total U.S. intelligence budget is \$6 billion.

Does NSA really need to collect all that intelligence and spend an estimated \$1 billion to \$1.2 billion annually?

A Senate subcommittee that studied the U.S. government's foreign commitments concluded in 1970, "Costly and unnecessary duplication exists among the various U.S. intelligence agencies operating abroad. In at least one situation, two of our agencies were working with competing local agencies of a foreign country."

However, a former high CIA official was quick to defend the job NSA's doing. "You can always find critics—you find most of them in Moscow. Any American who

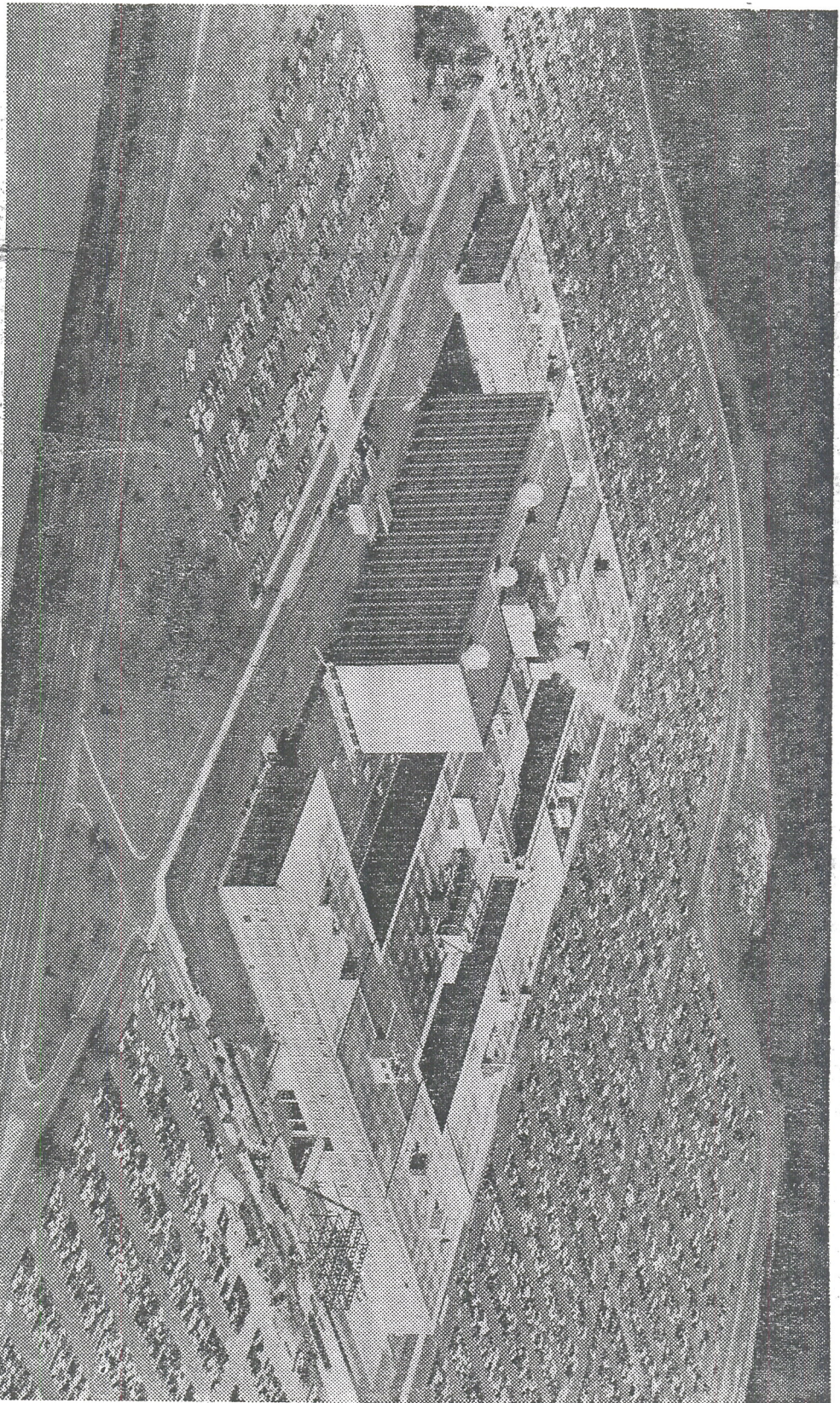
starts attacking NSA doesn't realize its importance."

The congressional committee that investigated the capture of the USS Pueblo and shooting down of the EC-121 reconnaissance plane said, "Reconnaissance activities of this type must continue to be conducted by our government to insure the availability of information essential to our national security interests."

However, the House committee said it was "not convinced that the magnitude of this intelligence activity is completely justified, nor is it persuaded that the many millions of dollars which are expended annually to support the activities of our individual defense intelligence activities . . . are fully and properly utilized."

Cline said, "If you want to know things, NSA's useful. If you don't, it probably isn't."

Ransom said of the estimated total U.S. intelligence budget, "If they're spending \$6 billion, then half of it is wasted. But I'm not sure anyone knows which half."



Aerial view shows administration building of the National Security Agency at Ft. Meade, with Baltimore-Washington Parkway at bottom.

By Ken Fell—The Washington Post