**Umbra Gamma Zarf**

*(Above Top Secret to you, pal.)*

_Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency, From the Cold War Through the Dawn of a New Century_

By James Bamford

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*Thomas Blanton*

By noon on September 11, as the Pentagon and what remained of the World Trade Center smoldered, local TV stations in Washington began scrolling across their screens a list of “closed” schools and federal agencies. A professor at George Washington University remembers seeing “National Security Agency” on that list, and nearly jumping out of his chair. “NSA should have been working double-time that day, not going on liberal leave!” he told me that evening. James Bamford’s important new portrait of the NSA, _Body of Secrets_, explains why.

Bamford describes the NSA as the largest and most powerful intelligence agency in the world, with an annual budget of $7 billion (and rising) and a work force of about 38,000 people (more than the CIA and FBI combined). Another 25,000 people work in the Central Security Services, which staffs the NSA’s listening posts around the world. Until the activity was exposed in the 1970s, the NSA routinely collected copies of every single international telegram to or from the United States. Today, the agency attempts to intercept all international conversations of interest to U.S. national security decision-makers, whether the parties are human or machines, or whether the media is radio, cell phone, e-mail, or something more exotic. As recently as 1998, Bamford reports, NSA officials showed off to foreign intelligence officials by playing them tapes of Osama bin Laden chatting with his mother by satellite phone.

Bamford burst on the national scene in 1982 when he published the first book-length exposé of the agency, _The Puzzle Palace_, which became a major best-seller and brought the wrath of the NSA and the Justice Department down on the author. Among the many investigative coups reported in the book were the author’s discovery of an almost complete series of the agency’s employee newsletter and unearthing of detailed letters in the private papers of several of its founders. The government, citing damage to national security and violations of the “espionage act,” threatened to sue Bamford for two specific documents it wanted to reclassify as secret, and sent security details to confiscate the various private collections that Bamford had mined.

With _Body of Secrets_, the NSA took a completely different approach, thanks in part to new leadership. Just before taking office as the agency’s director in 1999, Lt. Gen. Michael Hayden saw the movie thriller _Enemy of the State_, in which purported NSA satellites track the protagonist on Washington streets in real time and senior NSA officials run death squads. Although Hayden told Bamford the movie was an “affront to truthfulness,” he also said, “Making secrecy and power the bogeymen of political culture, that’s not a bad society.” Early in his tenure, Hayden commissioned insider and outsider critiques of the agency, all of which heavily criticized its culture of secrecy. Its “historic insularity” and “the ‘Super Secret NSA’ image . . . [are] no longer useful to Agency needs,” concluded one report.

Under Hayden, the agency granted Bamford hours of face time with top officials, gave him guided tours of its headquarters in Fort Meade, declassified hundreds of pages of documents for him, and then threw a book release party for _Body of Se-
secrets, where Bamford signed autographs for four hours.

This sea change in the agency’s attitude toward public scrutiny turns out to be very much in its interest, judging by the different tones of Bamford’s two books. Puzzle Palace was classic exposé journalism, warning of the Orwellian ramifications of the NSA’s technical capabilities, and using a quotation from George Orwell’s 1984 as its lead epigram. Body of Secrets retains large parts of the earlier prose (whole sentences and even paragraphs), but its new material and overall structure almost adopt the NSA’s voice. For example, one of the book’s epigrams is the “intercept operator’s motto”: “In God we trust, all others we monitor.” Among the other epigrams are quotes from former and current directors about the need for public oversight and trust.

Bamford laughed when I asked him about the NSA’s spin management: “If somebody wants to manipulate me by giving me lots of documents and tours of their secret offices and so forth, then I’m happy to be manipulated.” In fact, while the agency may have gotten what it wanted—a more favorable portrait—Bamford also got what he wanted, more access and many more details and facts.

The largest chunk of new material—on the Vietnam War—illustrates both the upside and downside of Bamford’s new access. He gives extraordinary new details of the signals intelligence contest in Southeast Asia, including a minute-by-minute account of the final hours of the war, during which the “largest compromise of highly secret coding equipment and materials in U.S. history” occurred. But this focus on communications security (keeping the enemy from reading U.S. traffic) as the “Achilles heel” of the war effort seems somewhat misplaced. Bamford quotes an NSA document complaining that its intercepts were going to waste because “U.S. personnel with the ability to read Vietnamese texts were in short supply, and people competent to deal with spoken Vietnamese, with very few exceptions, were not to be found.” I suspect that similar shortages of linguists existed on the communist side, and that, just maybe, signals intercepts were not so crucial to the outcome of the war.

The most controversial section of the book covers the 1967 Israeli attack on the U.S.S. Liberty, a floating listening post stationed off the coast of the Sinai, that resulted in the deaths of 34 U.S. sailors. Israeli critics have blasted Bamford’s conclusion that Israel deliberately attacked the ship in order to cover up massacres of Egyptian prisoners by Israeli soldiers that were taking place nearby. Among other things, Bamford’s critics argue that the massacres did not take place and that the attack on the ship was a case of mistaken identity. Bamford has rebutted the criticism vigorously, and to my lights he is ahead on points: He cites numerous published accounts of the massacres that appeared in major newspapers and breaks new ground by demonstrating that the NSA’s top leadership and internal investigators firmly believed the attack on the Liberty was deliberate and that the Israelis lied to cover it up. That is news by any definition.

Bamford’s final chapter, titled “Brain,” details the NSA’s historic and hidden role in pushing the envelope on computer technology and supercomputing. He cheerfully reports that there are two questions he couldn’t resolve during his three years of work on the book—how well the NSA is doing on breaking codes despite the widespread use of encryption technology, and whether the agency has made any progress on master-