



The Secret Sentry: The Untold History of the National Security Agency

Matthew M. Aid

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In the first complete history of the National Security Agency, America's most powerful and secretive intelligence organization.

In February 2006, while researching this book, Matthew Aid uncovered a massive and secret document reclassification program—a revelation that made the front page of the *New York Times*. This was only one of the discoveries Aid has made during two decades of research in formerly top-secret documents. In *The Secret Sentry*, Aid provides the first-ever full history of America's largest security apparatus, the National Security Agency.

This comprehensive account traces the growth of the agency from 1945 to the present through critical moments in its history, from the cold war up to its ongoing involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. Aid explores the agency's involvement in the Iraqi weapons intelligence disaster, where evidence that NSA officials called "ambiguous" was used as proof of Iraqi WMD capacity, and details the intense debate within the NSA over its unprecedented role, pressed by the Bush-Cheney administration, in spying on U.S. citizens.

Today, the NSA has become the most important source of intelligence for the U.S. government, providing 60 percent of the president's daily intelligence briefing. While James Bamford's *New York Times* bestseller *The Shadow Factory* covered the NSA since 9/11, *The Secret Sentry* contains new information about every period since World War II. It provides a shadow history of global affairs, from the creation of Israel to the War on Terror.

The Secret Sentry: The Untold History of the National Security Agency Details

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From Reader Review The Secret Sentry: The Untold History of the National Security Agency for online ebook

Cindy says

More like 2.5 stars for the writing (literally "literally" everywhere ugh!), but 3.5-4 stars for the research. I think Aid is interested in different aspects of the NSA (military successes, failures, and minutia) than I was looking for (cryptographic details and successes, cyber-intelligence, combating other spy agencies).

Weirdly I started this book before the Edward Snowden escapades - I got it on a Kindle special and was in the mood for some cryptography and spy stuff. I was in the middle of the book when the leads came out and it felt like the same old NSA story getting rehashed every 5-10 years or so. Read the last chapter (which was written in 2008 or so) and you will feel like you have read a modern commentary on the Snowden leaks.

I'm going to try Simon Singh's The Code Book: The Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography, and James Bandford's The Puzzle Palace: Inside the National Security Agency, America's Most Secret Intelligence Organization.

Robert Sparrenberger says

A look at the NSA up to 2007. This book would benefit greatly from the Snowden fiasco and how he did what he did and what effects that had on the NSA. The book is slow at the beginning with lots of technical talk. It definitely gets better as we move into the 1990s and certainly after 9/11.

An interesting book if you are into this sort of thing. A bit dry for the casual reader.

Jenni says

It is said that the vast majority of intelligence successes are not known, while failures are quick to be seen and pointed out. The Secret Sentry presents some of both in it's survey of the NSA from the beginnings as the Signals Intelligence groups at the end of World War II to the present. The early development of the Agency occupies the first third of the book, while the second third mostly focuses on Vietnam to 2000, and the final third analyzes the NSA's involvement events since 9/11. I enjoyed the book, though there were many stories that I wished had been spent more time on. I appreciated learning more about the history and inside view of the NSA, both of which this book captures well. Note: I received the book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

Doug says

I wanted to know more about 9/11 and the warrantless surveillance program, but it's more an overall history of the NSA. Seems like most intelligence failures are a variation of this event from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, it seems that it's more a function of what a person wants to believe than the collection of faulty

data.

Cao Cao was fleeing from the capital Luoyang after a foiled assassination attempt on Dong Zhuo. . . . [Cao Cao and Chen Gong] arrived in Chenggao and sought to spend the night at the home of Lu Boshe, a sworn brother of Cao Cao's father. Lu Boshe welcomed them warmly and even traveled to a nearby village to procure some good wine to treat the guests. While Lu Boshe was away, however, Cao Cao and Chen Gong overheard sound of knife-sharpening and someone saying, "How about we bind them and kill them?" Believing they had been betrayed, the pair drew their swords and slew the entire household. When they came to the kitchen, however, they found a pig, tied up and ready to be slaughtered.

The murderers immediately fled the house but before long they ran into their host, who was returning with wine. Excusing himself for not staying for the night, Cao Cao hurried past Lu Boshe but soon turned and cut down the old man as well. Chen Gong blamed Cao Cao for killing the innocent man, but Cao Cao replied in his most famous but fictitious quote, "I would rather betray the world than let the world betray me."

Matt says

This book wasn't exactly what I was expecting. I thought it would be more of a political treatise on the activities of the NSA, but it was almost more of an "agency history." While this was a different focus, I found it very interesting, especially as the author pulled back the curtain on many important events in U.S. history that were affected by SIGINT (signals intelligence) collected by the NSA since its foundation. The author cited many sources, both written and oral, which lends academic weight to what he says. However, the use of sources does not create a ponderous reading style; on the contrary, the writing was engaging and fairly easy to read.

I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who likes reading about history or espionage. Especially in light of how much the NSA is in the news today, I hope more people will read this book and get at least a small glimpse of the work done behind the scenes for the USA.

Anne says

This book reads like an intensely detailed report. I would have welcomed a point of view to put things in context. Without that voice the data is not directed, it's just there. The amount of data is staggering, and this is the unclassified information!

The author puts so much information in front of you that your opinion of the NSA will be supported, no matter what your opinion.

The style of writing only reinforces the report feel of the text. It's as if you were sitting down with the author and he's telling you about his recent research finds.

Given the enormous amount of information the author has, an evaluation of the agency would be expected. But the author really offers none. Yes the good and bad of the agency, its workers, and directors are noted, but I never felt I was getting an analysis of the what the author felt about the agency's contributions or

purpose.

Weavre says

What I learned from the first few dozen pages of this book: I'm more interested in what the NSA is doing now, and what it's been doing in the last ten years or so, than in what was going on in 1959. I *want* to know the history of the NSA. I believe that "secretive" plus "powerful" is a risky combination for any organization in a purportedly free society, and I also believe I can't fully understand who and what the NSA is without understanding its history. I just want, somehow, to absorb that history without having to slog through a thick text chronicling it.

Maybe some talented historian out there would consider writing a rip-roarin' good spy novel that painlessly transmits this history in a vivid setting filled with interesting, well-developed characters, just so I could read that instead? After all, I *did* like *Cryptonomicon*, and it was a lot longer than Aid's history book!

To be fair, I'll skip rating this book, though. I started to give it only one star, but decided that was far more descriptive of my ability to stick with this sort of history text than of the quality of the book itself. For those who like this sort of thing--and I know many of you!--this might be a great history. I'm just not the one to judge it.

Kerri says

I have to agree with what many others have said about this book. For the average citizen who is not in any way associated with the US government, especially the high security divisions like the NSA, it was very hard to get into and stay interested in. I have to give the author loads of credit though for the incredible research and expertise which obviously went into the book. The footnotes alone were impressive! I am not a big reader of non-fiction so I might not be the best person to review a book like this, but it was quite an intense and comprehensive look into the origins of this secret organization.

Todd N says

Artlessly written, but interesting book about the NSA. One gets the impression that the editor had to remove a lot of lines like "I'd tell you but then I'd have to kill you."

This history starts with the code breaking at Bletchey Park and continues all the way through post-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan. The NSA starts out with a handful of people and by the end of the book is the majority of the people (~65% or so) of the entire intelligence community.

Along the way are some amazing revelations about the kind of intelligence the US had access to and used to their advantage, especially in the Korean war and during the SALT I talks. Because I knew nothing about the NSA, everything was new to me and I couldn't tell what were the blockbuster revelations and what was already generally known.

It seems like intelligence failures fall into four main buckets:

1. The information is so secret that it doesn't get to the people who could use it, and something bad happens
2. The secret information is shared or leaked (sometimes by the President, usually by the New York Times), and then the intelligence source dries up immediately
3. Intelligence is correct and in the right hands, but a political dunderhead completely ignores it to serve their own purposes, the main culprits in this book being Rumsfeld and MacArthur.
4. The guy running the NSA is a complete idiot who misallocates resources and kills morale to the point where there is no possibility of getting good intelligence

There are lots of all four scenarios mixed in with spot of very impressive intelligence gathering. I was interested to learn that although we couldn't decipher any Russian communications (because they used a one-time pad) we were able to learn a ton just from traffic analysis. We were also able to decrypt their car phone messages from listening posts in UK, Canada, and US embassies. That is until the information was leaked and the Russians started bombarding these embassies with microwaves to jam their receivers.

I want to learn more about the actual NSA trade craft, especially the eavesdropping technology and the decryption methods. There are occasional references to very interesting things like an NSA device attached to a transatlantic cable that was discovered by the Russians and a bunch of NSA bugs in the Chinese equivalent of Air Force One. I would love to know more about these.

The section from 9/11 on is really fascinating and almost scary. I was shocked to learn that that Chalabi guy leaked information about our ability to eavesdrop on Iran, which immediately dried up an important intelligence source that could possibly prevent a war. (We found out because the Iranian that Chalabi leaked to didn't believe him and reported it over a communication line that the NSA intercepted.)

Also fascinating is what is known about the Echelon eavesdropping program that is being used to spy on US citizens without warrants and the very flimsy and contradictory legal reasoning being used to prop it up. I'm sure we will be seeing more of this kind of Keystone Cops meets Philp K. Dick type shenanigans from the NSA in the future. But then again if you have nothing to hide, then there is nothing to be worried about...

Jennifer says

Matthew Aid's book *The Secret Sentry* makes a good companion to Bamberg's histories of the NSA. The focus of this book is on ways the NSA's successes and failures have had an impact on events in the U. S. and the world, so it's more outward-looking than Bamberg's studies. The last couple of chapters--on the war on terror and the role of the NSA going forward--raised this from three to four stars for me. Aid asks some tough questions about the role of SIGINT, or signals intelligence, in a world where electronic noise is ubiquitous and government's encroachment on rights ever-present.

Jerome says

This is a very well-written, intensely detailed, and massively footnoted (95 pages of 'em), history of the National Security Agency (NSA), from its inception up to the book's publication. The earlier parts are more detailed - and less interesting - than I would wish for; but the sections depicting the NSA's role in the second

Iraq war are brilliant.

The author carefully phrases his depictions of how the NSA's intelligence products - especially its signals intelligence (SIGINT) products - were ignored, discounted, and twisted by various Presidents, Secretaries of Defense, etc., to avoid direct criticism of those officials.

Morris says

From the Back:

In February 2006, while researching this book, Matthew Aid uncovered a massive and secret document reclassification program--a revelation that made the front page of the New York Times. This is only one of the discoveries Aid has made during two decades of research in formerly top-secret documents. In *The Secret Sentry*, Aid provides the first-ever full history of America's largest security apparatus, the National Security Agency.

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Today, the NSA has become the most important source of intelligence for the U.S. government, providing 60 percent of the president's daily intelligence briefing. While James Bamford's New York Times bestseller *The Shadow Factory* covered the NSA since 9/11, *The Secret Sentry* contains new information about every period since World War II. It provides a shadow history of global affairs over the last half-century.

My Take:

This book and the National Security agency, I fear, share a common struggle, information overload. Matthew Aid has put in the time and provides an overwhelming amount of information for one volume. Unfortunately, the information is presented with the excitement and enthusiasm that is generally reserved for RTA furniture instructions.

I did learn quite a bit from reading this book, however. Like I said before, there is a lot of information in the book. That information is slanted heavily to conform to the author's political views. Most of the book seems to focus more on the agency's failures than its actual successes. It is also very clear in the later sections of the book that Matthew Aid was strongly against the war in Iraq and the Bush administration in general. This is hardly surprising considering the liberal news agencies he provides commentary to.

Overall, I rate this book as average. It does contain tons of factual information. I just wish that it could have been presented in a more interesting way and also a politically neutral way.

About the Author:

Matthew M. Aid is a leading intelligence historian, expert on the National Security Agency, and regular commentator on intelligence matters for the New York Times, the Financial Times, the National Journal, the Associated Press, CBS News, NPR, and many other media outlets. He lives in Washington, D.C.

Caroline says

Will you sleep better at night after reading this book? Probably not. If, however, you are willing to exchange your untroubled slumber for a detailed look at the history of the NSA and the struggles and setbacks it has faced in the last 50 years, read on. The chapters are mostly structured around our post-WWII military engagements and foreign crises, and the author discusses the ways that NSA's SIGINT collection contributed to, was not prepared for, grew from, or suffered from, each event, and how the agency evolved as a result. I learned plenty from this book - particularly from the discussions of NSA activity during the Korean and Vietnam wars. It seems, according to Aid, as though NSA faces an almost impossible task in its daily work - he cites a statistic that says NSA, in 1995, was capable of intercepting 1 quadrillion bits of information every three hours, and that today, that figure is higher. That's fairly staggering. Imagine finding actionable and useful information in such a vast amount of data. He presents the challenges of keeping up with constantly evolving modern communications technology, but also the challenges of going backwards and finding ways to work in countries like Afghanistan, for instance, where the enemy/object of your surveillance might be so low-tech as to be completely beneath your radar. In addition, there are the tangles with politicians - those who cut your funding, those who compromise your intelligence sources by making your missions into news, and those who ask you who engage in activities of a dubious ethical nature. Spoiler alert - Donald Rumsfeld does not come across as a Great Hero for Our Times. Speaking of which, about the second half of the book deals with the War on Terror, Iraq, September 11th - our more modern intelligence battles. This part, to me, was the most interesting, likely because it's the era I know best. Heavily footnoted and based on the author's research in the National Security Archive, there's a lot of information in here to sift through. The only part that didn't engage me was the discussion of each of the NSA directors - they're clearly important to the overall timeline, but none really stuck with me.

Jean-Luc says

I started this book *before* Edward Snowden dragged the National Security Agency kicking and screaming into the limelight. Suffice to say this high-level overview of the NSA's record helps to make sense of *some* of this recent news. A very amusing coincidence is the author, Matthew Aid, was discharged for stealing secrets... just like Snowden!

The book starts w/ the US military's intelligence needs during World War 2 and goes all the way to the post-9/11 invasion and occupation of Iraq. The amount of detail is impressive... too impressive sometimes. For example, the recap of the invasion of Iraq is uncomfortable because there was so much I had forgotten about, but here it was superbly and depressingly narrated.

This isn't a perfect book. Acronyms are introduced well after they are first used, and the glossary is woefully inadequate. Whenever there's a discussion of the miracles the NSA performed for the US military, a map or two would've gone a long, long way. Sometimes Aid is a little too credulous. For example, the idea that the US is fighting terrorists in Yemen is laughably naive; in fact, American drones regularly assassinate the Yemeni govt's political opponents because the US intelligence community has no way to check whether a

designated terrorist truly is a terrorist.

James Bamford has investigated and written about the NSA extensively. He reviewed Aid's book in 2009:

Based on the NSA's history of often being on the wrong end of a surprise and a tendency to mistakenly get the country into, rather than out of, wars, it seems to have a rather disastrous cost-benefit ratio. Were it a corporation, it would likely have gone belly-up years ago. The September 11 attacks are a case in point. For more than a year and a half the NSA was eavesdropping on two of the lead hijackers, knowing they had been sent by bin Laden, while they were in the US preparing for the attacks. The terrorists even chose as their command center a motel in Laurel, Maryland, almost within eyesight of the director's office. Yet the agency never once sought an easy-to-obtain FISA warrant to pinpoint their locations, or even informed the CIA or FBI of their presence.

But pulling the plug, or even allowing the lights to dim, seems unlikely given President Obama's hawkish policies in Afghanistan. However, if the war there turns out to be the train wreck many predict, then Obama may decide to take a much closer look at the spy world's most lavish spender. It is a prospect that has some in the Library of Babel very nervous. "It was a great ride while it lasted," said one.

James Bamford

The book ends with a discussion of General Petraeus' "surge" in Iraq. We now know that The Surge didn't work; violence levels dropped because previously mixed neighborhoods had been efficiently and ruthlessly cleansed, not because the US military was kicking ass and taking names. In Afghanistan, the war Obama chose to escalate for no real reason, the Taliban and various warlords own most of the country despite round-the-clock bombing. The NSA, like the CIA, perpetually lacked access to translators and linguists who could make sense of the communications they've intercepted. Unlike @ the CIA, internal NSA reviews rarely brought up this deficiency. It is not clear today if this has improved. If you're curious about the hullabaloo behind Edward Snowden's revelations, you owe it to yourself, and to your country, to start at the beginning.

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Things I learned when reading this book:

- * Female cryptanalysts like Juanita Morris Moody were not unusual. Certainly women played more of a role at the NSA than they did in the CIA or FBI.

- * The NSA could spy on the Cuban govt because RCA International, an American telecom, volunteered details of their Cuban network. Very reminiscent of how the NSA relies on the kindness of telecoms and social media companies to spy on Americans today.

- * The Gulf of Tonkin incident is described in much, much more detail than in *Legacy of Ashes*, but the takeaway is the same: LBJ was a bloodthirsty maniac, and the Vietnam War was entirely unnecessary.

- * Of course lost the Vietnam War, but whereas the CIA learned and felt nothing, the NSA took this defeat very, very hard.

- * The NSA detected the final North Vietnamese offensive, the one the CIA said wasn't coming. NSA staff

and equipment were captured.

* The NSA intercepted a warning to Noriega from someone in DC that a US invasion of Panama was imminent. Neither the CIA nor FBI investigated.

* Of course we know the basics of the Tiananmen Square massacre: the Chinese military brutally crushed student protesters. Did you know elements of the Chinese army sided w/ the protesters and fought to protect them?

* Ronald Reagan consistently gave away the NSA's secrets. Presidents disclosed CIA secrets for political gain all the time, but Reagan's disrespect for the NSA, an agency much better regarded than the CIA, was unusual.

* The NSA knew a major anti-American campaign was about to begin in Beirut, but the CIA suppressed those warnings. All attacks were successful with massive CIA and US Marine casualties.

* Most people don't remember that the 9/11 attacks were premature: because the hijackers hit the towers before 9am, most of the people working in the WTC hadn't yet arrived for work. The vast majority of NSA employees, the very people tasked with making sense of *WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON!!*, were locked out of the NSA's campus because no one knew whether the NSA was a target.

* In Afghanistan, rather than using American troops, the CIA hired Pashtun mercenaries to chase Osama bin Laden in Tora Bora. They avoided engagement at any cost, and the Bush Administration believed the CIA's insistence that the mercenaries were on our side, despite a lack of evidence. Thus, bin Laden escaped capture.

* The NSA had trouble during the invasion and early occupation of Iraq because the Iraqi communications infrastructure was low-tech to non-existent.

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Final words, a quick excerpt from the Iraq war:

Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of the SIGINT collectors, the vast majority of the foreign fighters managed to successfully evade the U.S. Army units deployed along the border. An army battalion commander stationed on the border in 2003 recalled that they "weren't sneaking across; they were just driving across, because in Arab countries it's easy to get false passports and stuff." Once inside Iraq, most of them made their way to Ramadi, in rebellious al-Anbar Province, which became the key way station for foreign fighters on their way into the heart of Iraq. In Ramadi, they were trained, equipped, given false identification papers, and sent on their first missions. The few foreign fighters who were captured were dedicated - but not very bright. One day, during the summer of 2003, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Arnold, a battalion commander stationed on the Syrian border, was shown the passport of a person seeking to enter Iraq. "I think he was from the Sudan or something like that - and under 'Reason for Traveling,' it said, 'Jihad.' That's how dumb these guys were."

Matthew M. Aid

The passage is meant to be entertaining, but it illustrates the conundrum of the NSA's success: by weeding

out all the bad guys who are easy to identify/track/find we are left w/ bad guys whose identities we don't know, whose actions we can't follow, and who may very well be in the United States launching their next attack. As I wrote above, it's important for Americans to read this book, but it's far more important for our politicians to know how to interpret what the NSA tells them.

Eric says

I feel like I'm in a no-win situation with books like this. I find something that I'm interested in, maybe read a long article about one specific event or person, and then get excited about learning more. Suddenly, I see a robust book on that topic, and I dive in. And sure enough, it's not that interesting. I don't know if it's the writing (this, as many are, is information regurgitated with no story whatsoever), or the fact that magazines and/or newspapers that don't sell anymore have to pick literally the single most interesting thing about whatever they're writing about, but the books never capture my imagination like the article or smaller piece that originally piqued it. This book was certainly not bad, and it's very thorough and specific, but it was just sort of blah. It also didn't do a very good job highlighting what makes intelligence a success or a failure. I feel like if I pulled out the descriptions of how the NSA performed in various situations the way Aid describes them, and read them in a vacuum, I'd have no chance at knowing whether something went well or poorly. In fact I feel like I'd guess the opposite based on how he described the events.

At least I had good timing when I read this. I'm not really a political person but the NSA's spotty and (seemingly) largely irrelevant history as portrayed in this book certainly colors my judgment of present-day events.
