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Uncovering No Such Agency—The Secret Sentry: The Untold History of the National Security Agency

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REVIEW ESSAYS

UNCOVERING NO SUCH AGENCY

John R. Schindler

Aid, Matthew M. *The Secret Sentry: The Untold History of the National Security Agency*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009. 432pp. \$30

The National Security Agency (NSA) has been for decades America's largest, best-funded, and most secretive intelligence service. Since its establishment in 1952 as an independent agency under the Department of Defense (DoD), charged with providing signals intelligence (SIGINT) and information security for the U.S. government, NSA has operated essentially in silence.

The wall of secrecy surrounding nearly all that the agency does has deterred most scholarly inquiry. While it has been generally known that the NSA provides the lion's share of intelligence to the DoD, details have been lacking by design. Before the publication of James Bamford's *The Puzzle Palace* in 1982 there was no monograph available, and that gossipy tome, culled largely from NSA unclassified newsletters, left unanswered most questions about what the agency really does. For historians and anyone wishing to assess NSA's effectiveness as the world's most powerful SIGINT collector and analyst, the knowledge gap has been yawning.

Along comes Matthew Aid, a first-rate researcher who some years ago took upon himself the large task of telling a story that his subtitle describes as "untold." There is a bit of cheek in this, as in the entire Aid enterprise, since the story he tells has already been told in great detail by the NSA itself—specifically, by its Center for Cryptologic History (CCH), which has

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produced hundreds of historical studies, mostly classified, recording and analyzing virtually everything of note that the U.S. Cryptologic System has produced. The cryptologic history publications stand out in the U.S. Intelligence Community for their customarily impeccable honesty about the agency's successes and failures. In recent years, NSA has declassified and released numerous CCH monographs, in whole or in part; in the last five years what is available in the public domain about NSA and its operations has expanded unprecedentedly, and these newly available CCH books and articles are the cornerstone of Aid's work.

That said, the author is to be applauded for his years of digging in archives and tracking down virtually everything published in English about the NSA. No one can fault Aid for lack of thoroughness—his basic history is clear and rings true. If the story he recounts is not exactly untold, it should nevertheless be of high interest to any student of modern military or diplomatic history, and there is plenty of fodder for both lovers and haters of the agency. The reporting is not generally acid etched, and Aid is not attempting especially to disparage the NSA (as Tim Weiner did to the Central Intelligence Agency in his absurdly biased *Legacy of Ashes*, 2007). The NSA saga, as handed down by CCH through Aid to the reader, is meandering and complex.

Upon its foundation, NSA had little access to high-grade Soviet cipher systems, thanks to the compromising in 1948 of a briefly successful program known as BOURBON by the Soviet spy Bill Weisband, who told Moscow about it. Thereafter, NSA spent years and millions of dollars recovering from this setback, slowly and with difficulty. Seldom during the Cold War was NSA able to provide the timely, detailed, and high-grade intelligence on the Soviet Union that American and British SIGINT agencies had gathered on Germany and Japan during World War II. The author admits that this had less to do with NSA's shortcomings than with very good Soviet encryption and communications security, in addition to persistent espionage compromising of U.S. SIGINT programs from the 1940s through the 1980s. What the code breakers achieved, with great effort, was too often undone by traitors.

NSA support to American war fighters presents a similarly mixed bag. Tactical support to deployed units by national-level agencies, which is taken as a given today in Iraq and Afghanistan, hardly existed during the Korean War and was still in its infancy during Vietnam. Aid correctly praises NSA for its outstanding SIGINT support to American soldiers and Marines battling insurgents in Baghdad and Kandahar, but he is otherwise starkly critical of the agency's efforts in recent years. He paints in unduly harsh terms a "lost decade," 1991 to 2001, when the NSA, like so much of the Department of Defense and the intelligence community, struggled for relevance and redefinition after the Cold War victory.

However, that portrayal is charitable and balanced compared to Aid's depiction of NSA's war on terror.

According to *The Secret Sentry*, NSA has become a profound threat to American freedoms and civil liberties that, in its spare time, does SIGINT and information assurance. This would be news to anyone who has worked in the U.S. Cryptologic System since the mid-1970s. The overarching need to protect civil liberties *even at the expense of intelligence collection and production* is hammered into the heads of all junior analysts: "We have a frightful number of lawyers," explained General Mike Hayden, NSA director from 1999 to 2005 (and CIA director from 2005 to 2009) and an impressive leader and manager who is profiled too critically in Aid's work.

In the last chapter the book veers into current events in a polemical fashion that is at odds with the scholarly tone that mostly prevails. There is so little available regarding supersensitive SIGINT counterterrorism operations since 9/11 (the operations are so tightly compartmented that even most NSA analysts know little if anything about them) that any unclassified conclusions seem premature at best.

At bottom, *The Secret Sentry* offers a detailed, if selective, analysis of the NSA and its coverage outside the post-9/11 era, one that is generally fair if not always balanced. Aid seems to want to find fault with the NSA, deeming it throughout its history as either "going deaf" or unable to analyze the information it collects in such abundance, or both—although he frequently offers praise for the agency's many intelligence successes since 1952.

This subtle bias leads to the most curious fact of this curious book. The dog that fails to bark, here, is Aid's own history with the NSA, a salient story that the author fails to disclose, even though it was reported by the *Washington Post* in 2006. Twenty-one years earlier, Matthew Aid, as an Air Force analyst and Russian linguist assigned to an NSA field site in the United Kingdom, was arrested, court-martialed, and convicted of unauthorized possession of classified information and impersonating an officer. Sergeant Aid had been taking top secret code-word materials home with him, which earned him over a year in prison and a dishonorable discharge. When one knows his past, the author's detailed understanding of SIGINT and detectable bias against NSA become less mysterious.

While Aid's disreputable personal history with the National Security Agency does not discredit his scholarship, it does raise questions of agendas and motives. At a minimum, the facts ought to have been disclosed by the author. One wonders why his publisher did not consider such a sensational backstory to have any relevance, particularly for an author professing to reveal hidden truths.

The Secret Sentry is a serviceable and generally readable “biography” of the NSA, written by a determined researcher whose feelings about the agency can be charitably described as complex. Readers, however, would be better served by referring to the original, now declassified, CCH publications from which so much of this book is derived.

On grounds of full disclosure, this reviewer wishes to note that he too served with the National Security Agency for nearly a decade, as an intelligence analyst and counterintelligence officer. During my time of service I had no involvement with the Aid case.