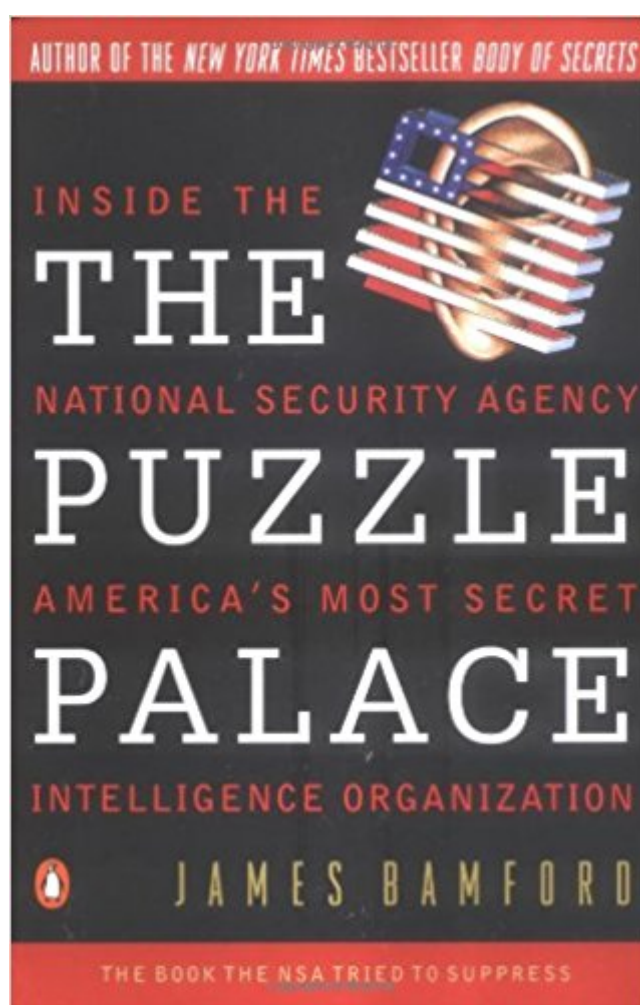


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The Puzzle Palace: Inside The National Security Agency, America's Most Secret Intelligence Organization



Synopsis

In this remarkable tour de force of investigative reporting, James Bamford exposes the inner workings of America's largest, most secretive, and arguably most intrusive intelligence agency. The NSA has long eluded public scrutiny, but *The Puzzle Palace* penetrates its vast network of power and unmasks the people who control it, often with shocking disregard for the law. With detailed information on the NSA's secret role in the Korean Airlines disaster, Iran-Contra, the first Gulf War, and other major world events of the 80s and 90s, this is a brilliant account of the use and abuse of technological espionage.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In 1947, the governments of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand signed a secret treaty in which they agreed to cooperate in matters of signals intelligence. In effect, the governments agreed to pool their geographic and technological assets in order to listen in on the electronic communications of China, the Soviet Union, and other Cold War bad guys--all in the interest of truth, justice, and the American Way, naturally. The thing is, the system apparently catches everything. Government security services, led by the U.S. National Security Agency, screen a large part (and perhaps all) of the voice and data traffic that flows over the global communications network. Fifty years later, the European Union is investigating possible violations of its citizens' privacy rights by the NSA, and the Electronic Privacy Information Center, a public advocacy group, has filed suit against the NSA, alleging that the organization has illegally spied on U.S. citizens. Being a super-secret spy agency and all, it's tough to get a handle on what's really going on at the

NSA. However, James Bamford has done great work in documenting the agency's origins and Cold War exploits in *The Puzzle Palace*. Beginning with the earliest days of cryptography (code-making and code-breaking are large parts of the NSA's mission), Bamford explains how the agency's predecessors helped win World War II by breaking the German Enigma machine and defeating the Japanese Purple cipher. He also documents signals intelligence technology, ranging from the usual collection of spy satellites to a great big antenna in the West Virginia woods that listened to radio signals as they bounced back from the surface of the moon. Bamford backs his serious historical and technical material (this is a carefully researched work of nonfiction) with warnings about how easily the NSA's technology could work against the democracies of the world. Bamford quotes U.S. Senator Frank Church: "If this government ever became a tyranny ... the technological capacity that the intelligence community has given the government could enable it to impose total tyranny, and there would be no way to fight back, because the most careful effort to combine together in resistance to the government ... is within the reach of the government to know." This is scary stuff.

--David Wall

"There have been glimpses inside the NSA before, but until now no one has published a comprehensive and detailed report on the agency. . . Mr. Bamford has emerged with everything except the combination to the director's safe." — The New York Times Book Review

Some reviewers have expressed dissatisfaction with the sometimes ponderous way the book moves, and some have complained that the book is out of date. This is not a John le Carre thriller; it does move slowly. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have its usefulness. And it is right up there with today's headlines. Reading this book can help people understand the evolution of the organization. Unlike when it was written and until the advent of the Internet, it really was shrouded in secrecy. Bamford helped to lift that shroud. To get a sharp contrast with this book, one only has to go to the NSA website, where just about everything is spelled out in black and white. When we consider that people as far removed as the leaders of Germany and Indonesia appear shocked by the 2013 revelations that NSA is spying on them, we can conclude either that they have never read this book or that they have and don't want to tell their citizens about it. In short, as Bamford points out, one or more members of the "5 Eyes Only" group has been spying on mass communications ever since the transatlantic cables were first laid, more than a century ago. Another valuable part of this history is the laying to rest of some myths of WWII communications. Bamford's book is a good counterweight to books and articles emphasizing the Enigma device. I recall one author claiming

that Roosevelt "knew" the Japanese were going to attack Pearl Harbor and "let" it happen. Bamford supplies the more complex, nuanced story of how the communications failed due to human error, not to any "conspiracy." The afterword contains the story of Geoffrey Arthur Prime, which is the closest we get to a Le Carre style spy story. Prime was carrying on his work while the 1974 Le Carre novel, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* was being written. See pages 502-532 in the paperback edition I have. Perhaps NSA should assign someone to read spy novels. There is one major problem with this edition, but it doesn't seem to be the author's fault. The blurb on the back of the book claims that the book includes "information on the NSA's secret role" in "major world events of the 1980s and 1990s." The afterword ends with 1982. There's nothing after that: No "Korean Airlines disaster [Sept 1, 1983], Iran-Contra [1986], [nor] the Gulf War [1990-91]." Readers counting on the book to cover these topics should complain to Penguin Books.

"The Puzzle Palace" came highly recommended by other readers. A glance at the inside covers reveals 25 reprintings and a solid bio for the author. I found "PP" to be a virtual whirlwind of facts, names, dates, comings and goings, changes of command, anecdotes and many military/governmental acronyms. (There is even a 6-page glossary of these!). Mr. Bamford's work is well researched and well documented. In the acknowledgements, he admits to filing a "torrent" of Freedom of Information Act requests. I can well imagine! He supports his effort with 80 pages of notes, so what is written here must be authentic. That is the good news. The bad news is that for this reader, "The Puzzle Palace" simply did not work. Perhaps I missed the story somewhere in the plethora of facts. Perhaps the facts themselves were intended to be the story. This reader had hoped for some juice, some "inside information". Apart from the horrendous 1967 Israeli attack on the USS LIBERTY, and some Cold War incidents, there were precious few. I believe "PP" will appeal to those well versed in the Beltway Scene, since they can "connect the dots" better than I. Those already possessing a knowledge of the intelligence game should also enjoy. A 5 star rating is appropriate for these 2 groups. For the rest of us, some rating stars must be subtracted. If we gave "A"s for effort alone, Mr. Bamford would deserve one. For results, a Gentleman's "C" is more appropriate

The author is right on. I did this in the Army in the 1960's. Can't believe he gave out this information about us.

"The Puzzle Palace" should be required reading for devotees of investigative reporting. James

Bamford's 1982 classic is an eye-opening exploration of the National Security Agency -- the NSA. The book is impressive not just for its breadth, but also its depth. Bamford describes the origins of the super-secret agency during the first World War, and takes the reader through all key events and personnel into the early years of the Reagan administration. In parts the book is completely engrossing. The author's descriptions of double agents and defectors are fascinating -- true-life spy stories with all of the sordid details laid bare. The thoroughness of Bamford's reporting, though, can also be a challenge to the reader, at least to me. Some chapters are so dense with names, dates and acronyms that I had a hard time retaining the key points. At times it felt like I was reading a dictionary or an encyclopedia. Bamford also engages in a bit of sanctimonious finger-wagging towards the end of the book, using his literary pulpit to warn us all against the dangers of letting such a large and powerful agency run amok with so much eavesdropping technology at its disposal. That said, if you're looking for an iconic book on 20th-century history, "The Puzzle Palace" should be on your shelf. It's not the lightest reading out there. But it's a worthwhile read for anyone who has an interest in the shadowy world of the NSA.

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