

**A GLIMPSE INTO THE
NATIONAL
SECURITY
AGENCY**

A REVIEW OF JAMES BAMFORD'S *THE PUZZLE PALACE*

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In the 1997 film *Good Will Hunting*, the title character turns down a job offer from the National Security Agency because he disapproves of the intelligence agency's operations. Will Hunting is concerned his work with the NSA could result in the death of "people I never had a problem with" simply so the Marines can "install a government that would sell us oil at a good price."¹ Hunting's image of the NSA starkly contrasts with James Bamford's description, and it is likely less well informed.

Bamford's 1983 book, "The Puzzle Palace," provides a thorough description of the NSA's purpose, composition, and history. However, addressing a subject as mammoth as the NSA in one book is never an easy chore, and Bamford's volume struggles with this challenge. The book's organization is unclear, and it lacks a unified theme throughout the text. Instead, each section of "The Puzzle Palace" seems to carry a distinct message. Even Bamford's conclusion clashes with the tone of the rest of his account. Still, "The Puzzle Palace" is a well-documented, very readable narrative providing a rare view into the NSA.

The National Security Agency is a secretive agency, making it difficult to gather information about the organization. As a result, much of the information about the NSA's operation comes from disgruntled former employees or other individuals with some sort of axe to grind. Bamford's attitude also seems slightly biased (he appears to de-emphasize the agency's questionable acts, even when Congressional committees were unsettled), but it is much more credible than the interviews with former war protestors or Soviet defectors available previously.² Even with the slight pro-intelligence slant, "The Puzzle Palace" would only serve to balance the reams of anti-government material already in print.

After a short history of American signal collection and decryption, Bamford begins describing the NSA's structure. Instead of publishing an organizational chart, the author complements a description of the pecking order with a variety of anecdotes. The result not only engages the reader, but also paints an unexpected image of life inside the NSA.

¹ Affleck, Ben, Damon, Matt, and Van Sant, Gus. *Good Will Hunting: A Screenplay*. Hyperion 1997

² Refers to Perry Fellwock who provided an interview to *Ramparts* and the NSA defectors William H. Martin and Bernon F. Mitchell.

Had Will Hunting managed to overcome his distaste for the government, his mathematical acumen would probably have enjoyed a job at the NSA. The agency strives to remain five years ahead of the rest of the field, and it is well stocked with upper-level degrees and at least one consulting Nobel laureate. The educational level found at the NSA even stunned Marshall Carter, one of the agency's directors. He commented about the employees, "The magnitude of their education, of their mental capacity was just overwhelming to me. I made a survey ... when I got there and it was just unbelievable, the number of Ph.D.s that we had at the operating levels – and they weren't sitting around glorying like people do."³

Bamford's description of the agency also echoes the second part of Carter's statement. Bamford describes the attitude among the intellectual minds at NSA as very casual. From photographing the agency's budget next to a four-foot employee to illustrate its monstrous proportion⁴ to the agency's secret fraternity of code breakers called the Dundee Society⁵ the NSA does not fit the stereotypical image of a secret government agency. The agency has somehow managed to develop a work environment that balances the strict security requirements and maintains a creative atmosphere.

Once he has described the workings of NSA offices in Maryland, Bamford discusses agency operations around the world. The scope of the NSA's eavesdropping net and the technology demanded by agency operations are stunning. However, here Bamford seems to delight in showing off his collection of sensitive information. Although some hobbyists might be interested to read detailed descriptions of the antennas located at various NSA bases, there is no legitimate (or even curious) need to know the latitude and longitude of a satellite receptor station in Australia.⁶ The research is good, but sometimes extraneous.

It is in this section of the book Bamford begins revealing the tarnish on the agency's shine. After 250 pages of invincibility, the agency takes its first major hit when the American naval SIGINT fleet takes heavy casualties and is eventually decommissioned. Bamford then segues into the intense, critical

³ Bamford, James. The Puzzle Palace. Penguin 1983. p 153

⁴ *ibid.*, p 109

⁵ *ibid.*, p 154

⁶ *ibid.*, p 267

scrutiny during the 1970s into NSA operations involving the surveillance of U.S. citizens. The agency has weathered even the publicized defection of two mathematicians to the Soviet Union, but Bella Abzug and Congressional committees are another matter entirely.

This section of “The Puzzle Palace” demonstrates Bamford’s sympathies better than any other portion of the book. Bamford highlights the facts that defend the actions of the intelligence community. He points out deliberate CIA decisions to extricate itself from operations outside of its charter. Bamford is critical of J. Edgar Hoover’s reluctance to continue FBI bug-planting break ins at embassies without approval from the president and the attorney general. And when the topic turns toward NSA involvement in these operations, Bamford shrugs it off, pointing out the NSA’s lack of charter or legal restraints.

Bamford points out the success of these operations that included NSA participation. The National Security Agency helped the FBI track drug traffickers, break up booking operations, and keep an eye on war protesters and domestic terrorists. Division group head Frank Raven commented at the end of the agency’s efforts to track drug forces, “we did some very nice drug busts ... we demonstrated that we could follow drug transactions and drug dealers. We could do it quite economically – it wasn’t a high-budget item ... NSA could really have cleaned up the drug business.”⁷

At this point in his narrative, Bamford seems content with the NSA’s unregulated status. He is highly critical of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act that tried to provide the NSA with operation guidelines. He points out that the new Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, which must approve NS surveillance, grants approval more liberally than the interagency panel that previously reviewed surveillance proposals.

After short, almost superficial, discussions of NSA leaks and the agency’s partnership with the United Kingdom, Bamford becomes momentarily critical of the NSA. As research in the field of cryptography increases, the National Security Agency faces a new set of problems. Previously the agency had a monopoly on cryptography research, but this is no longer the case. As commercial cryptography becomes more complex, decryption becomes a greater challenge.

The NSA has considered radical means to correct this problem. Bobby Ray Inman, a recent NSA director, commented “that he would like to see the NSA receive the same authority over cryptography that the Department of Energy enjoys over research into atomic energy. Such authority would grant to NSA absolute ‘born classified’ control over all research in any way related to cryptology.”⁸

Bamford critically describes NSA attempts to stop academic research in areas the agency deems critical to national security. The agency has tried to prevent citizens from pursuing invention of cipher machines and attempted to persuade the National Science Foundation to give the NSA exclusive control of NSF grant money in cryptography fields.

Bamford concludes that the problem is significant and as the agency searches for a solution it will be drawn further from the shadows of secrecy it has created over so many years. The agency has, for example, begun offering its own grants for cryptography research in hopes of maintaining some form of control over the academic field.⁹

Bamford closes his volume by discussing the legal gap where the National Security Agency operates. Where he previously tolerated the NSA’s broad abilities, the last two pages of his text demand a “revolution” in the law to accompany the recent revolutions in technology. Bamford warns “like an ever-widening sinkhole, NSA’s surveillance technology will continue to expand, quietly pulling in more and more communications and gradually eliminating more and more privacy.”¹⁰ He even dubs the agency’s SIGINT efforts as “technotyranny.”

It is unclear exactly what motivates Bamford’s negative summation since the rest of the text seems to illustrate the amazing success of the nation’s largest intelligence agency. Despite the lack of legal restraints, Americans do not hear the NSA breathing on the other end of every phone conversation. The agency has maintained a high-caliber staff, encouraged major technological advances, and provided support for federal intelligence operations as well as domestic law enforcement.

⁷ *ibid.*, p 336

⁸ *ibid.*, p 451

⁹ *ibid.*, p 456

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p 476

Bamford describes a useful tool that has, in general, managed to avoid abusing its broad freedoms. In 1991 the inspector general of the department of defense conducted the first comprehensive inspection of the NSA. The inspection did find problems – in management and efficiency. The report included addressed such issues as poor estimation of manpower needs, poor management of overtime and travel, and an overly-layered budget.¹¹ The innocuous nature of the findings indicates the National Security Agency has been a good steward of the trust granted to it for so many years.

Bamford’s research is impressive, but it grows increasingly out of date. “The Puzzle Palace” includes few events more recent than the mid 1970s. After the book was published, the National Security Agency was the subject of presidential directives in both 1984 and 1988, and a 1986 law made the NSA a combat support agency of the Department of Defense.¹² The 1983 edition of the book includes a new afterword, but the chapter simply tells a few spy stories and repeats large amounts of information from the rest of the book.

Bamford’s work does provide an interesting, useful glimpse into the National Security Agency, and the book is a commendable piece of work. However, it is 15 years old, and without a new edition, a big segment of the agency’s story is still untold.

¹¹ Final Report on the Verification Inspection of the National Security Agency. February 13, 1996

¹² National Security Agency document. “About NSA.” <http://www.nsa.gov:8080/about/> (22 Oct. 1998)