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Why Uncle Sam's Ears Are Burning

THE PUZZLE PALACE: A Report on America's Most Secret Agency. By James Bamford. Houghton Mifflin. 465 pp. \$16.95

By DAVID WISE

IT MAY COME as a shock, but the National Security Agency has even been listening in on the pay phones at Grand Central Station. "Hello, honey? Yeah, I'm sorry it got so late, but I missed the 6:42, and I went into the Oyster Bar to have a martini, and then . . ."

One can easily imagine conversations like these clacking out in six-ply, multicolored paper on those crypto machines in the basement at Fort Meade, Maryland, being rushed to

DAVID WISE often writes about intelligence. His most recent book is *Spectrum*, a spy novel.

the analysts in W Group, run through Cray-1, NSA's monster computer, and carefully studied for hidden meanings. Have the Russians invented a new code? Should the president be informed through the CRITICOM network? Or is it just another hapless commuter in trouble with his wife?

Of course, he might not be safe from eavesdropping even

inside the Oyster Bar. A few years ago, it was revealed at a congressional hearing that government agents could bug the olive in a martini, hiding a tiny transmitter where the pick-me-up should be. Just don't bite down too hard.

The news about Grand Central is only one small nugget buried in the gold mine that James Bamford's astonishing book on what is correctly subtitled "America's most secret agency." It is also a frightening book, because as Bamford points out, the biggest of America's secret intelligence agencies—with the technology to intrude not only into the pay phone, but the bedroom, the boardroom, and any place it wants to listen—was not even created by law. It was born, swaddled in secrecy, by an executive order signed by President Truman in 1952 that itself remains top secret three decades later.

There has always been a certain ostrich-like, head-in-the-sand quality to NSA's cult of secrecy. Anyone who has read

the newspapers, or books, or watched television since Harry Truman signed that order is certainly aware that NSA makes U.S. codes and breaks the codes of foe and friend, vacuuming electronic signals out of the ether with its overhead satellites, and its dish antennae at listening posts girdling the globe. And most folks who drive along the Baltimore-Washington Parkway have probably noticed the signs for Fort George Gordon Meade, where NSA has been headquar-

tered since the late 1950s. Yet the mere mention of the words COMINT (communications intelligence) or SIGINT (signals intelligence), the twin grist of NSA's mill, sends normally talkative government officials into a kind of prayerful, mystical silence. NSA, which some say stands for No Such Agency, successfully preserved its aura of secrecy.

Until now. There is a marvelous scene in one of the late Peter Sellers' Pink Panther movies in which Sellers, as the bumbling Inspector Clouseau, inadvertently demolishes a magnificent Steinway. "But that's a priceless piano," someone protests.

"Nut eny more," Sellers intones in his mock-Gallic accent.

So it is with NSA's secrecy now that James Bamford, a lawyer turned investigative reporter and writer, has given us *The Puzzle Palace*. NSA will never be the same.

Unlike Peter Sellers, Bamford has not destroyed the grand piano. He has merely shined his brilliant spotlight into some murky, neglected corners of our government. His critics will charge that in the process he has harmed U.S. security; it can be safely assumed that self-appointed patriots will denounce Bamford's daring book. But the Soviets (not to mention our allies, whose communications NSA also intercepts) are well aware that the United States is listening. So are they. Only the American public, which pays for NSA with its taxes, has been kept in the dark.

NSA is a vital agency, but it cannot expect to operate in total, monastic secrecy in a democracy. Nor should it—a point that requires emphasis, because, in the past, at least, NSA has turned its big ear inward and violated the constitutional rights of Americans.

The Puzzle Palace was a book waiting to be written. In 1964, Thomas B. Ross and I included a chapter on NSA in our book, *The Invisible Government*. Three years later, David Kahn, in his comprehensive work, *The Codebreakers*, provided the first detailed account. In the congressional and other investigations that followed Seymour M. Hersh's 1974 revelations of CIA domestic spying, NSA officials for the first time had to testify in public, and the agency came under increased scrutiny. The Senate Intelligence Committee under Frank Church revealed that NSA, with the cooperation of three cable companies, had been reading international cable traffic in and out of the