

Under the Wire: How the Telegraph Changed Diplomacy

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By David Paull Nickles. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. 272 pages.

Reviewed by Donald P. Steury

In this splendid little book, Nickles describes the advent of the telegraph, the laying of the undersea cables that made it a factor in world politics, and the changes these developments wrought upon Victorian diplomacy. Nickles describes the world of the diplomats, who were unused to sustained labor and unready for the dramatic increase in the pace and scope of diplomacy the telegraph caused in the mid-19th century. Simply to compose a message involved not only writing the text, but encoding and enciphering it, tasks that required considerable mental effort. Add to that the greatly increased volume of incoming communications—all of which had to be deciphered, decoded, and transcribed—and the result was a drastically increased workload for most embassy staffs. One result of the enlarged burden was the transformation of diplomacy from a career that allowed time for the pursuit of other activities to a more than full-time endeavor.

But the telegraph had more important effects than cancelled golf matches. It reduced communication times from weeks or months to less than a day and gave governments the means to issue more frequent instructions and to demand more reports. Public opinion, which hitherto generally had formed long after diplomatic crises were over, became a factor in decisionmaking. Ambassadors, once laws unto themselves, found their freedom of action sharply circumscribed as focal points of diplomacy shifted to foreign ministries. With central authorities in control, the pace of international relations quickened. Questions of war or peace seemingly were decided with emotions at a fever pitch—the days and weeks it had once taken for governments to communicate with each other now were viewed wistfully as lost times of reflection, when alternatives could be explored and tempers cooled.

What really makes this book such a gem is Nickles' nuanced approach to his subject. No technological advance could make up for uncertain governments or incompetent or malicious representatives—one thinks of Joseph P. Kennedy Sr., Franklin D. Roosevelt's anglophobe ambassador to London in 1940, who forecast doom for Great Britain that year. Nor could faster communications compensate for lack of clarity, or hesitancy—although it might exacerbate either. Nickles reminds us of the behavior of British Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey, whose foreboding of what he justly feared would be a catastrophic war caused Great Britain to hang back in the Victorian world's ultimate diplomatic crisis, the events of July 1914, and thereby materially helped to bring about that war. Yet, in this case, speed certainly was not the issue. It

took Vienna more than three weeks to issue an ultimatum to Serbia after the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and war was not declared for another four days.

Technophobia and cost also muted and channeled the telegraph's influence. Electrical pulses may have traveled at the speed of light, but a telegram, sent a letter or number at a time, was hardly instantaneous communication. Texts could be garbled and transmissions bungled. What's more, their cost could be staggering. Nickles records that on 23 November 1866, US Secretary of State William Seward sent his first enciphered telegram, via the trans-Atlantic cable, to France. Seward was horrified to learn the transmission had cost the department \$19,540.50—three times Seward's annual salary. Over the next half-century the cost of such a telegram declined considerably but remained relatively high. Enjoined to frugality by his superiors, on 13 July 1914 Frank Mallett, US vice-consul general in Budapest, reported his warnings of war to Washington in a letter instead of a telegram. The letter arrived in Washington, DC, on 27 July. Austria declared war on Serbia the next day. Finally, one recalls that as recently as 1946, the secretary of state's first reaction to George F. Kennan's famous "long telegram" from Moscow was to chide him over its length and cost.

One could argue that the constraints the new technology placed on an ambassador's freedom of action in the late 19th century were more apparent and annoying than real. Senior diplomats in important posts still had plenty of clout and most governments would think twice before ignoring their advice. Diplomats reacted with horror to disruptions of their routines—this in an era of general great-power peace, when routine was more important than at other times. But they soon recovered, adjusted and coped. Moreover, dramatic improvements in transportation—railroads, steamships, metaled roads and, eventually, motor cars reduced the differences in delivery times between the telegram and the letter. Nickles perhaps pays too much attention to diplomats' anguished bleating, but his arguments are thought-provoking and he never fails to interest.

One sphere in which the telegraph undoubtedly had an impact was intelligence. Hand-carried communications were never impervious to interception. Couriers could be waylaid, diplomatic bags lifted, and wax-seals broken, but they were certainly more difficult to interdict clandestinely. The telegraph, by contrast, opened up vast new vistas. All telegrams traveled over commercially-owned cables. All governments routinely collected copies of telegrams sent from their territory. Most cables traveled through other countries, where they were again vulnerable. During World War I, Germany (its undersea cables cut by the Royal Navy) had to communicate with its embassy in the United States through Sweden over British-owned cables. This subterfuge did not last long. All countries used ciphers and encoding, but, in the 19th century, those in use provided only limited protection. Few countries failed to attempt to take advantage, and many among the European powers were quite successful. One might almost say that the advent of the telegraph was the seminal event in the creation of the modern intelligence service.

Nickles' touch is less sure on this point, but he does not fail to instruct. The example he picks to illustrate is the best possible one, that of the infamous Zimmermann telegram of 1917. This message, sent by German Foreign Minister Artur Zimmermann to Count Bernstorff, the German ambassador to the United States, instructed him to offer Mexico (to which he also was accredited) return of its lost territories if it entered the war on the side of the Central Powers. This was to occur upon the announcement of unrestricted submarine warfare, an event virtually guaranteed to bring the United States into the war. (The Mexican reaction is not recorded but can be imagined.) Zimmermann's missive was sent through the good offices of the US State Department, in an arrangement supposedly reserved for peace negotiations! Like

all other messages sent by US embassies overseas, it was sent over British-controlled cables and—like all other messages—it was deciphered and read by them. It thus came to the attention of the head of Royal Navy signals intelligence, Rear Admiral Sir Reginald "Blinker" Hall. Hall then managed to convey the telegram to the US government in a way that concealed the fact that he was routinely reading all US diplomatic messages. News of the Zimmermann telegram broke on 1 March 1917, one month after the initiation of unrestricted submarine warfare, and had an immediate effect on American public opinion. The United States declared war one month later.

Nickles draws the appropriate security lessons from the Zimmerman episode and highlights Hall's success in deceiving both the US and Imperial German governments about how he obtained the telegram. Nickles concludes with an irony: Zimmermann's telegram was garbled in transmission and the German embassy in Washington had a hard time deciphering it—Hall probably had a better copy. Nickles only implies what is perhaps the largest lesson of all this: that nothing is really all that secret and that everything is ultimately revealed. As Count Bernstorff ruefully concluded in his memoirs, "Nowadays, there is no cipher which is absolutely safe..." Was there ever?

The more things change, the more they remain the same. Change happens, but advocates of this or that technology as the revolutionary basis for change generally make their cases out of ignorance, willful or not. Real change is complex, over-arching, uneven, and more often evolutionary than revolutionary. A function of history is to give us the context and underlying structure to understand the changes and developments that daily shape our lives. With this in mind, readers will find David Nickles' book not just food for thought but a banquet.

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