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Pembroke College, University of Oxford  
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**Stephen Budiansky, *Code Warriors:***

***NSA's Codebreakers and the Secret Intelligence War Against the Soviet Union.***

Published by: PenguinRandomHouse, August 2017, Pb. 390pp, \$17. ISBN 9780804170970

Book Review by Alan Judd  
March 2018

This is a well-written and accessible account of the NSA (National Security Agency – America's equivalent of GCHQ) from its formation in 1952 until modern times. It is not, of course, fully comprehensive, partly because it focuses on the Cold War code-breaking competition with the Soviet Union, becoming understandably less detailed as it approaches the modern period, and partly because no account of such a vast endeavour could ever hope to encompass everything.

Nevertheless, it helpfully summarises America's pre-NSA history in signals intelligence (sigint) before and during the second world war, including the origins of the UK-USA sigint exchange in wartime collaboration against German and Japanese ciphers. This was and is the beating heart of the so-called special relationship, a closeness that has survived political ructions such as Suez, counter-espionage failures such as Britain's Cambridge spies and America's Pelton and Walker scandals and, most recently, the Snowden revelations. Of the latter, Budiansky writes, 'no single incident in the NSA's sixty-one year history came close to bringing so many of its most secret activities into the harsh glare of public scrutiny or so shook public confidence in the agency's mission'.

This touches on one of the major themes he identifies in the NSA's history, the dangerous ease with which a proper concern for secrecy can tiptoe into the realm of obsession. One form this took was over-classification – in the 1950s even historical materials such as codes used during the American Civil War were classified secret – while another involved repeatedly keeping from the public NSA secrets that the main enemy, the Soviet Union, was known to have discovered. The NSA's motive in this, Budiansky reckons, was often 'to hide behind the shield of national security its own blunders, scandals and bureaucratic miscalculations.' Another manifestation was a misplaced reliance on the polygraph despite evidence that liars performed better.

By the mid-1960s a presidential advisory board had already noted the NSA's tendency to become 'ingrown and defensive', hoarding information that should have been circulated and analysed in the context of other (including overt) information. This tendency encouraged Nixon and Kissinger to treat the NSA as a tool of the White House, insisting that any intercepts mentioning them should be marked NODIS – Not for Distribution. It also facilitated cover-ups for analytic failures, over-reactions and security breaches during the Vietnam War.

Another major theme is the deleterious effects of infighting and rivalry not only internally but within the wider US intelligence community. This was evident as early as the first world war but was most damaging in the

second when the US Army and Navy seemed more concerned to maintain control of their own duplicated sigint functions than to ensure their government got the intelligence it paid for. Despite a 1946 agreement to coordinate, on deciphering an important message each service would ‘immediately rush to the White House...in an effort to impress the Chief Executive’ rather than share it with the other, which would often have improved the overall product.

There was also another factor, observed by a visiting British liaison officer: anti-Semitism. ‘The dislike of Jews prevalent in the US Navy is a factor to be considered,’ he reported, ‘as nearly all the leading Army cryptographers are Jews.’ Truman hoped that his 1952 founding of the NSA would eradicate faction-fighting but bureaucratic viruses are hardy and, with some mutations, replicated themselves for years within NSA culture.

Linked with this was the decades-long insistence on separating product from analysis and analysis from translation. This was dangerously self-defeating, as Budiansky points out, citing an example from the wartime Bletchley Park of how raw product requires context and analysis in order to be fully understood and exploited. Bletchley’s first clue to the location of the German V2 rocket experiments came through the decryption of a routine Enigma message reporting the posting of a junior Luftwaffe NCO. Informed translation and analysis unearthed earlier information that he worked on radio guidance systems.

It would be misleading, however, to give the impression that Budiansky’s account of the NSA focuses only on blunders and failures. He gives full credit to the barely credible cryptographic achievements of the organisation and to some of the brilliant minds it nurtured. When early successes against Russian cipher systems were negated by traitors within the NSA’s own ranks – often through resentment at lack of advancement – the organisation achieved almost as much by astute traffic analysis and the examination of what we would now call big data. Also, its rivalries and conflicts need to be seen within the context of the US governmental system as a whole, which encourages departmental competition. Overall, while identifying major institutional failures such as its self-defeating determination to ‘get everything’ it could pluck from the ether, foreign or domestic, and its reluctance to analyse reports, Budiansky rightly argues that it got the big thing right: it made nuclear reassurance and the peaceful end of the Cold War possible – ‘the greatest victory was not getting the world blown up along the way.’

Naturally, it would be intriguing to hear more about modern cryptographic developments and, arguably, Budiansky might have developed a theme he touches on frequently – the role of agents (humint) in facilitating access to sigint and cipher systems when you cannot break the ciphers themselves. That apart, this is as good an account of that arcane world as outsiders are likely to get, neatly concluded by a quote from Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth 1’s spymaster: ‘knowledge,’ he wrote, ‘is never too dear.’

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*Alan Judd is a novelist and biographer who wrote, *The Quest for C*, the authorised biography of the founder of MI6. His latest novel, *Deep Blue*, is published by Simon & Schuster.*

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