



Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency from the Cold War Through the Dawn of a New Century

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The National Security Agency is the world's most powerful, most far-reaching espionage. Now with a new afterword describing the security lapses that preceded the attacks of September 11, 2001, **Body of Secrets** takes us to the inner sanctum of America's spy world. In the follow-up to his bestselling *Puzzle Palace*, James Bamford reveals the NSA's hidden role in the most volatile world events of the past, and its desperate scramble to meet the frightening challenges of today and tomorrow.

Here is a scrupulously documented account—much of which is based on unprecedented access to previously undisclosed documents—of the agency's tireless hunt for intelligence on enemies and allies alike. *Body of Secrets* is a riveting analysis of this most clandestine of agencies, a major work of history and investigative journalism.

Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency from the Cold War Through the Dawn of a New Century Details

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From Reader Review Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency from the Cold War Through the Dawn of a New Century for online ebook

Greg Brown says

This was a frustrating book to read at times! Body of Secrets is a strangely two-tone book: the first 60% or so is historical, covering the National Security Agency's involvement in conflicts past. The last 40%, on the other hand, mostly covers the current-day (~2001) agency.

This is partially a practical melding—Bamford wanted to update his picture of the agency due to the long time since he published *The Puzzle Palace*, the first significant look at the NSA published in 1982—but it means the book gets a lot less interesting after the first 350 pages or so.

Quite simply, reading about the internal politics of the agency is far less interesting than studying how they've flitted around in the margins of history, occasionally reaching in to make a big mark but mostly trawling for understanding. Bamford is pretty great at cultivating sources and deploying FOIA requests strategically, so a lot of these accounts are much fuller than I'd seen before: the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the near-sinking of the USS *Liberty* by Israel to cover up war-crimes, etc. Those historical accounts are fascinating, and would be almost five-stars on their own.

But then there comes the accounting for the present day organization. Bamford discovers an obsession with a mountain of factoids, telling us again and again how many acres of computers there are, how much wiring there is, how many miles of roads there are in Crypto City. Quite frankly, it's un-revelatory and boring as hell, and seems to be included simply because Bamford got present-day access from then-Director Hayden.

And as a larger issue, sometimes Bamford's writing is mostly workable, but sometimes falls flat. Could have used some more editing, and a few less metaphorical descriptions. Diagnosis: Thomas-Friedmanitis.

But if you skip over the boring shit, it's a great book if you want to learn more about the Cold War!

Hadrian says

An interesting book - not the tell-all it claims to be, but still quite interesting.

The author does tell a great deal about the NSA, but also about the CIA, and seems to spend a lot of time going off topic. The Liberty incident, which is covered in great detail in the book, relies a great deal on speculation - a bit too much?

Not a bad book - if only the author would stop relying on awful cliched metaphors.

Tim Dodd says

Thoroughly researched and meticulously sourced. Want to know what really happened during some of the pivotal events of the past 80 years? This book is essential reading.

Michael Gajda says

A thick and thorough biography and history of the NSA. There's so much info packed into this tome. And the history and weirdness of it is scary and entertaining at the same time. They were able to listen to the other side of the world in the 60's. Guess what they can do now. And did you know that they have their own secret city...with all the problems and benefits of any other city.

Joe says

An illuminating look behind the curtain at an agency that was unknown for so long. Bamford's history of the NSA reveals so many AMAZING secrets that were classified until shortly before his book was published:

- Eisenhower frequently sent fighter/bomber formations into Soviet airspace to see how far they could get before being detected, and how quickly the Soviet air defenses could react. This provocative action led to aircraft being shot down on several occasions before they could get out of Soviet airspace, and lives were lost. This finally ended when Gary Powers' U-2 was shot down.
- The reason we wanted the UN in New York? To make spying on everyone easier!
- The USS Liberty saw Israelis massacre 150 Egyptian POWs... so the Israelis tried to sink it, fully knowing it was a U.S. gov't ship.

All in all, a very readable, very informative book. Don't let my negative examples above send the wrong message, though: it's not all negative. There are some jaw-dropping achievements and success, too.

A very enjoyable book.

Bernie says

A well written, authentic and carefully researched book on the inner workings of the mysterious and protected workings of the National Security Agency (NSA), probably the most secretive and hidden government organization. So secretive that some jokingly refer to NSA as "no such agency."

Its interesting to note that NSA hires more mathematicians and linguists than other organizations, probably in the world, surely in the USA.

Eugene Miya says

Possibly the best an outsider could do (if behind the times).

Ages ago, when I was a kid, I read David Kahn's Codebreakers. And there was this photo of an elongated A-shaped building and one chapter. Haven't been inside, but have visited the bldgs next to it. Then Jim Bamford writes The Puzzle Palace which is set before 1980 (I can easily tell), and he tries to describes an organization he can't get inside. I was able to take a photo of both just a couple years ago at an NSA history meeting.

Of the various books Bamford has written, the idea of structuring a book based on systems of the human body is an interesting idea. I've read a number of the other reviews criticisms of this structure. But I seriously doubt that any single person can describe and identify the parts and functions (methods) even if the Director has to. The best quote in Body of Secrets comes from Tammy the editor of the NSA Newsletter in that it's a boring place.

I've seen the Turing Chapter sign Bamford mentions (we couldn't have been visiting at the same time could we?), and non-NSA friends are quoted (I know where these quotes came from). But NSA is probably far from the most secret government agency (I'd don't have a clearance), but what does the reader know of the NRO? It wasn't even declassified until the mid-90s.

The NSA places a emphasis on computers (and are more important to the history and development of computers than most people realize). Jim gets invited back to NSA to give its employees a sense of continuity. And Bamford is the best guy to do this? Go figure. So be satisfied with this book. I think his subsequent ones haven't put the pieces together just yet.

Tech Historian says

Two very separate books.

The problem in reviewing this book is that it really is two separate books. The first, written by James Bamford, consummate investigative reporter tells a wonderful tale of technological daring as he colorfully recounts the history of the NSA with wit, verve and dispassion. Having worked in the black world it's great to see even 1000th of what we did make it into print, however garbled the telling might be.

The second book, written by James Bamford, author with an axe to grind and a point to make, is written in such a histrionic pitch that I thought there was going to be a punch line at the end of the chapter.

Other reviewers have noted these over-the-top attacks (in tone and temperament if not fact) on Israel's attack on the Liberty, but you can read the same venom in his distaste for Bobby Inman, President Eisenhower, and in other places in the book.

It's unfortunate because when we read the "good" James Bamford he's very, very good. But when we read the "bad" James Bamford he sounds like the host of a late night conspiracy radio station.

As Byron said "an author not only exposes his subject but his soul."

Brian says

Now more than ever this book is appropriate. Before you pass any judgement reading about NSA in the papers or watch some crappy CNN expose, you need to read this book first.

I gave a review on "The Puzzle Palace." If you liked that book a lot, then it is doubtful you will like this one. But if you that "Palace" was far to tabloid-ish in its reporting of NSA and the facts just a bit too slippery then you will probably enjoy "Body of Secrets."

I am more of a history buff. And I like reading about spies and especially those very underrated and underappreciated agents that work in the small low-lit rooms, listening to what sounds like gibberish and busting signals. They are the unsung heroes.

"Body of Secrets" still has some controversy in it. Such as the mystery surrounding the USS Liberty and the Israeli government's coverup. But all in all this book presents actual facts. The author was given unprecedented and nearly unfettered access to some inside info about NSA. He was actually able to walk around, poke around and reveal much more than before inside the mazes of those glass buildings on the grounds of Fort Meade, MD. He was given this access and even guided personally by General Michael Hayden who was DIRNSA at the time. (Director of NSA)

The book will satisfy more of your curiosity about the largest organization in the Defense Dept (bigger than the CIA and FBI combined) and give you the best insight to date.

Kirk Lowery says

Be prepared to keep track an incredible array of organization names; the NSA is the archtypical bureaucratic labyrinth. The author relates the history of the NSA from its origins in the 1930s up to 2001 (the book clearly was written and published before 9/11. Now there's a tale I'd like to hear!). Startling revelations: the US communications security during the Vietnam war was completely compromised and made, for example, the bombings by B52s ineffective. The Israeli attack on the NSA intercept ship Liberty during the Six Day War (1967) was no mistake, but was deliberate in order to hide the massacre of surrendered Egyptian soldiers by Israel Defense Forces. The US decided to suppress the evidence, since 1967 was an election year and LBJ didn't want to anger the Jewish community. Of course, the NSA is about cryptology and has had more impact on the development of computers than I had realized. Basically, the NSA's needs drive the rapid technological development we've witnessed over the past 30 years.

There is a competing need for defense and so the need for secrecy and the need for transparency for accountability. The author relates a number of abuses and outright illegalities committed by NSA personnel and directors. NSA officials have often invoked the "trust us" mantra; the problem is that such trust is inevitably abused. So the pendulum of accountability swings back and forth. Who guards the guardians at the NSA? The history of the NSA suggests, "No one."

Nathan says

I had high hopes for this book, due to the uber-interesting subject matter (the NSA) and my interest in security, crypto, government secrecy, etc.

Too damn bad for me. This is one of the most poorly written, poorly edited books I've ever read. Bamford writes comically bad prose; he seems to think wandering off topic is a literary device because he does it chronically and deliberately. His analogies are off the mark almost without exception. A mild example (paraphrasing): "The Internet wraps the Earth like a great ball of tangled yarn." WTF? The Internet and the

Earth are two things, but a ball of tangled yarn is only one thing: yarn.

The substance of the book is also poorly synthesized and structured. I don't need to know the boring personal details of boring technocrats. I don't need to know the dimensions of Fort Meade office buildings or the throughput of various fiber-optic switches. I need to know interesting things like what the NSA has been up to all these years and why. That exists in this book, but it's hidden, and prying it loose from twisted wreckage of Bamford's writing is one of the more frustrating literary adventures I've embarked on.

Erik says

The beginning of the book was entertaining and told some stories I hadn't heard before. However, I came to realize this book is so politically biased that I stopped reading it. The bias casts doubt on the credibility of the whole work for me. Content is not cited, making it difficult to fact check. The author makes many statements about what people were thinking and the motivation for their actions without supporting the claims. Had to stop reading it 10% of the way through. Perhaps the rest of the book is better.

ZaibatsuRandom says

Lies, innuendo, rumor, speculation.

The book started well and sounded good until more and more speculation and opinion started working its way into the history. When the author started reporting as fact things that I know from my own research are purely fictional.

It's a good story and I'm sure there are some great facts and real research, but too much opinion in the guise of information makes it eye-roll worthy. If you're looking for a straight and narrow story about the history of the NSA, you won't get it here. Plodding in many places and racing off on completely unrelated tangents in others.

There's a full chapter on 9/11 with all the details (and some rumors and speculation as well as editorializing) that makes almost no sense in the book, just a reason to throw jabs at George W. Bush.

I wouldn't recommend it.

Ralph says

After reading "The Puzzle Palace," James Bamford's opus about the NSA (National Security Agency), I thought I would never find anything to compare to it...until I came across "Body of Secrets." Not unexpectedly, it is also by James Bamford, who seems to have carved out his own little niche in chronicling the life and times of America's super-secret electronic spy agency.

In examining all the facets, all the nooks and crannies, even the obscure and well-hidden ones, Bamford approached the Agency as if it were a living organism, which when you come to think of it is not that difficult a stretch...with computing power measured in terms of acres, it probably is only a matter of time before the NSA develops both sentience and self-awareness, as in "The Forbin Project" or television's "Person of Interest," and then wonders about all the parasitic creatures around it. In the chapter entitled "Memory," Bamford looks at the history of the agency, its re-invention after America too hastily dismantled its signal intelligence following the Great War. In other chapters, Bamford examines the Agency's sweat,

nerves, fists, eyes, muscle, heart, soul, spine, etc., using incidents and personal histories to illustrate those aspects of the Agency that best be understood as being those anthropomorphic analogues.

The completeness of the book is demonstrated not just in the answers Bamford provided for the questions I held, but the very many number of times he answered questions I would have never thought to ask. As the NSA (though not yet known by that name) picked up the pieces left after WW1, helped to shorted WW2, and entered the fractal mirror house of the Cold War, the Agency leaves behind rather simplistic notions of good and evil, and begins reflecting the complexity of the world upon which it spied and the nation it was supposed to serve. If there is one important thing I learned from this book, it is that no matter how much the NSA seeks to cloak itself in secrecy, to insulate it and its staff from the morass of politics and cultural concerns, it will always reflect the concerns and fears and biases of the society that runs and maintains it, which, for me, certainly goes a long way toward explaining many of the NSA's problems.

The book carries the NSA to 2001, the first year of the 21st Century, and the final chapter ("Afterword") is devoted almost entirely to the events of September 11th. For me, it was the most difficult chapter to read, for time has done little to lessen the impact of that day on me. While some people seem to have followed the advice of CAIR operatives to "get over it," I find myself still haunted by the images I saw that Tuesday morning; the farther we get from September 11th, the closer most people seem to get to September 10th, but for me that day is, as the Doctor might say, a fixed point in time...it's always there. Yet, for all the emotion, stirred up by that last chapter, it was an important one in understanding the course of the Agency into the future. I suspect that Bamford, also, might have been touched by the events of that day, but perhaps in a different way, for there are times in the reportage when his mask seems to slip and we see something more (or less) than an astute journalist and analyst.

For those who have a cryptological bent, each chapter (except the last) begins with a block of code, such as Chapter 3, which contains the line: JFKH WRXSHN WRLFGJN USKH FXZHQNLFYX OZL NJYFI, ENXTNL. Like all other examples, these are taken from various issues of the NSA's newsletter, but reveal no national secrets. This one translates as: LAST MINUTE MIRACLE JUST ANOTHER DAY (YAWN) FOR ELWAY, DENVER. While they are fun to translate, there is always something of a let-down when the apparently exotic devolves into the mundane.

If you are truly interested in how the US gathers signal intelligence, how things stay secret (or don't), and all the triumphs and tragedies of the NSA and its many code-gnomes, then you have to get this book. Though it follows "The Puzzle Palace" in publication, it is a stand-alone book, but once you read it, you might be motivated to also read "The Puzzle Palace," as well as Bamford's third book, "The Shadow Factory."

James Bray says

This is a very accurately and intensely researched well-written book. It is probably more interesting to me personally as I served in the ASA (Army Security Agency) which manned field listening stations for the NSA. I've read this book twice and learned almost everything about what we were doing and why from reading it; we never discussed anything even between ourselves about work, and even then we only knew the mechanics of the particular equipment we worked with and virtually nothing about what happened at higher levels. The NSA gets a bad rap in the movies alluding that it runs 'black ops' etc. but this is pure fiction. The NSA mission is entirely passive: signal interception and analysis. I think Bamford did a very good job of describing the organization and its history. There is also a NOVA documentary "The Spy Palace" that is heavily based on this book and it is excellent.

<http://movies.netflix.com/WiMovie/701...>

(less)

Sam-Omar Hall says

No-nonsense, fact-filled, fascinating history of the NSA.

What is the NSA? The agency that's been reading the world's mail, so to speak, for decades.

Bamford got amazing access. This book is now a decade or more old, but still an amazing and important read.

Along with Weiner's history of the CIA and Scahill's *Dirty Wars*, this is essential reading on the U.S.A.'s secret infrastructure - much of which faces little or no oversight while spending billions and billions of dollars.

Michael says

Took me a while to get through the book. The subject is fascinating but occasionally the details are only tangentially related. I enjoyed reading it and there are a lot of good stories in there, perhaps if some of the fat was trimmed and the stories organized a little better.

One especially interesting/disturbing section of the book described how the Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted an excuse to invade Cuba. So they presented a plan to President Kennedy to stage terrorist attacks in the US and blame Cuba. This is no conspiracy theory and doesn't it sound similar to something that happened a few years back. Makes you think.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

Body of Secrets is a fascinating history of the Cold War as viewed through the lens of cryptography, as well as a time capsule of the foremost US intelligence agency in a pre-9/11 mindset.

As any decent history of World War 2 notes, codebreaking played a key role in winning that war. As the battlelines of the Cold War firmed up along the Iron Curtain, the frontiers of space and science, and brushfire wars across the third world, the National Security Agency formed to manage a secret army of cryptographers, linguists, and analysts, among more abstruse specializations. Bamford tells a thrilling story of very dangerous missions in the 50s and 60s, like penetration of Soviet air defense systems by RB-47 and U-2 spyplanes, along with spy ships like the *USS Liberty* and *Pueblo*, and outposts manned in the most unforgiving locations on Earth.

Bamford blends this tales with accounts of bureaucratic warfare for budgets, over secrets, and the covert power of the agency to listen in on the communications of Americans and nominal allies. A secret army is expensive, and even with its massive budget for technology and analysis, the NSA failed to provide the President with necessary analysis in time to forestall disaster, or to manage complex negotiations. Even in the 1980s, the NSA was listening in on every international phone call, with the FISA courts the only real protection of American communications. And morale and organization seems to be a recurring problem, with feuding deputy directors holding the real power below political appointees, and a human resource system

that has trouble acquiring and holding onto the baroque specialists needed for the job.

Bamford keeps it breezy, talking about SIGINT and cryptography in layman friendly metaphors. And of course, this is a book before 9/11 changed the US intelligence community, and before the internet changed everything else. The leaks revealed by NSA contractor Edward Snowden show an agency more powerful than ever before, yet we seem at the mercy of botnets and lone wolves. Still, the Cold War history is solid, and includes original research revealing some of the tensest moments in that conflict. It's impossible not to be impressed by the NSA, but Bamford is not seduced by his subject.

Dustin says

Given the time and political climate during which I read this, it'd be easy to understand why I picked it up. But it wouldn't be accurate. I read this because it had a detailed description of Operation Northwoods. You'll have to look it up. No spoilers here.

The first two thirds of the book are really good. There's a lot of great detail concerning the birth and evolution of the NSA, with plenty of entertaining and troubling stories. I came away having learned a lot of new things, and that's always a positive for me. But, when you get towards the end, it falls way off. The information is suddenly very dated, and you receive details about things that just don't seem important compared to how the book begins and progresses. And if you take into account the recent fuss created over the NSA spying on non combative US citizens, and the abuse of power from two presidential administrations not covered in this book, the last three chapters are basically throw aways. It's obviously not the authors fault that he published when he did, because how in the hell was he supposed to know how drastically the world, and the NSA, was about to change. It's not a bad book.

Sue says

I enjoy this author. An interesting look inside the NSA. No matter how you feel about the organization, its comforting to know there are a lot of someone's behind the scenes keeping the country safe. It can go very wrong if individuals and the representatives WE elect don't keep tabs.
