

Article Published by The National Archives with Input from Matthew Aid

In response to a declassification request by the National Security Archive, the secretive National Security Agency has declassified large portions of a four-part “top-secret Umbra” study, *American Cryptology during the Cold War*. Despite major redactions, this history discloses much new information about the agency’s history and the role of SIGINT and communications intelligence (COMINT) during the Cold War. Researched and written by NSA historian Thomas Johnson, it provides a frank assessment of the history of the Agency and its forerunners, warts-and-all.

According to National Security Archive visiting fellow Matthew Aid (author of the *The Secret Sentry: The Top Secret History of the National Security Agency*), Johnson’s study shows “refreshing openness and honesty, acknowledging both the NSA’s impressive successes and abject failures during the Cold War.” Another striking feature of Johnson’s study is the candor with which it discusses the fractious and damaging relationships between the agencies which make up the U.S. government’s intelligence establishment. Among the successes and failures disclosed by Johnson’s history are:

- After the end of World War II, with Soviet codes still unbreakable, the U.S. Army and Navy SIGINT organizations had relatively little to listen to. Johnson’s history reveals that as of mid-1946, the most productive source available to the U.S. Army SIGINT organization was French communications, which accounted for half of the finished reporting going to intelligence consumers in Washington.
- SIGINT coverage of the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China by the Air Force Security Agency (an NSA predecessor) during the early 1950s was so bad that a senior CIA official referred to this period as “the dark ages for communications intelligence.”
- The discovery of high-level Soviet spies operating inside the Australian government in 1947 led the U.S. to cut off Australian access to classified U.S. government information, which was not resumed until two years later in 1949. Full SIGINT cooperation with Australia did not resume until 1953; according to Johnson, the Australian-American intelligence rift “had a deleterious affect on early U.S. SIGINT efforts against the Peoples Republic of China.”
- During the 1950s, relations between senior officials at the CIA and NSA were at times so bad that they impeded cooperation between the two agencies. The CIA deliberately cut NSA out of the famous Berlin Tunnel operation (1954-1956), with NSA’s director, General Ralph Canine, finding out about the operation from the *New York Times* after the Soviets discovered the Tunnel in April 1956.
- By the early 1960s, the NSA was beginning to encounter information overload as more and more intercepted messages were stored in huge warehouses of magnetic tapes. According to Johnson, “the volume of unprocessed ... tape was becoming difficult to manage technically and was embarrassing politically.”

- The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was a major strategic intelligence failure for NSA. SIGINT provided no warning of the presence of Soviet nuclear-armed intermediate and medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba prior to their discovery by U-2 reconnaissance aircraft; according to Johnson, this “marked the most significant failure of SIGINT to warn national leaders since World War II.”
- In April 1975, as the North Vietnamese military prepared for the final offensive to capture the beleaguered South Vietnamese capital of Saigon, ambassador Graham Martin refused to believe SIGINT reporting which clearly indicated that the offensive was about to commence, arguing that the intercepts were a “deception.” He believed that North Vietnamese wanted a coalition government, not military victory. The offensive began on April 26, 1975. Three days later, Saigon fell.
- Even though the 1970s was a period of lower budgets and dramatic personnel reductions for NSA, it regained some degree of access to Soviet encrypted communications during the late 1970s. A sentence that the Agency did not delete hints at this and other major cryptanalytic successes “Even with decreased money, cryptology was yielding the best information that it had produced since World War II.”
- Ten days before the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on 28 December 1979, U.S. intelligence agencies provided “specific warning” of the invasion. The post-mortems evaluating intelligence estimates of the Soviet invasion “were unanimous in describing [them] as an intelligence success.”
- During the 1960s and early 1970s, the NSA officials who ran the Agency’s domestic watch-list/eavesdropping program (Minaret) disguised the origin of their reports because they “seemed to understand that the operation was disreputable if not outright illegal.”