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NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY

The National Security Agency – is the US’s largest and most secretive spy agency. It is bigger than the CIA and FBI combined. It operates the world’s largest computer system for listening in on radio, telephone, fax and e-mail conversations.

Through its station at Pine Gap in Central Australia, it used to listen to Osama bin Laden ring his mother each week on his satellite phone. The Clinton Administration tracked him down in 1998 and almost killed him. Suddenly he realized that all the rumours of the NSA’s skills were true. He has since had find other ways of communicating with her. There are many books written on the CIA and FBI but hardly any on the NSA. NSA also stands for “No Such Agency”.

The NSA is 48 km out from Washington DC on the road to Baltimore, Maryland. It is in the Fort Meade military installation. It is rarely mentioned on road maps. It has a media officer but she does not give interviews. It does not publicise its telephone number.

The installation has its own police, shopping malls and sports complexes. The NSA’s 38,000 staff are sworn to a lifetime of secrecy. It has a budget of about US\$ 40 billion. It scoops up about 500 million hours of electronic communications traffic per day.

The NSA grew out of the communications revolution in World War II. Before the war virtually all intelligence was “human intelligence” (humint) – the activities of humans spying on others. Spies in the skies were used in the 19th century, when people were sent in hot-air balloons over enemy lines to assess the enemy’s strength.

By the early 20th century, fighting formations were now so large and operating over such large distances that signals had to relayed electronically. These could be heard by both one’s own side and the enemy. In the 1930s, progress was made in encrypting military messages.

One of the great stories of World War II was the British decoding of German messages. The Germans used a coding machine “enigma” and the talented staff, running into thousands at Bletchley Park just outside London, decoded the German radio traffic. “Ultra”, the decoded material, was then relayed to Churchill and a few senior military leaders.

It was one of the best-kept secrets of the war. None of the thousands of staff revealed anything of their work until the embargo began to be eased 30 years later. Like the NSA staff, they were sworn to secrecy.



“Electronic intelligence” (“elint”) was obviously a major way of protecting national security. The Allied arrangement was formalized in 1947 by an agreement between US and UK intelligence agencies (which was not reported to politicians at the time for fear they would blab).

The British created the Government Communications HQ at Cheltenham, Gloucestershire as their top-secret facility for monitoring radio traffic.

Australia is part of the 1947 agreement. It is a minor player by comparison, with the Defence Signals Directorate as the Australian end of the secret Allied network.

But its work is important. For example, just prior to the formal Indonesian invasion of East Timor in December 1975 there may have been Indonesian secretly troops operating inside the Portuguese colony. They may have been spotted by Australian journalists staying at Balibo. The journalists were killed in still unexplained circumstances. It is possible that Australian intelligence officers heard the Indonesians military discuss the deaths of the journalists and so they may know what really happened at Balibo.

Australia’s other vital role in the US intelligence effort is making land available for US spy bases. The facilities at Pine Gap are among the most important for the US anywhere in the world.

NSA was formally created in 1952. No formal announcement was made at the time. It began as it has continued – shrouded in secrecy. It built upon the US’s own skilful spying on Japanese messages in the war.

NSA’s sophisticated computers scan messages looking for key words. It also takes satellite photographs. It can read car number plates from the skies. Its admirers in the Cold War boasted that it could hear a Soviet commissar in Moscow telephoning his mistress in the Crimea.

Much of what is known about NSA has come from the exposes in the 1970s about the misuse of intelligence agencies at the time of the Nixon Administration. Nixon was bogged down in an unpopular war in Vietnam and he abused the powers of the intelligence agencies to track down anti-war protest.

A current controversy concerns the failures in intelligence gathering. If NSA (and the other agencies were so smart) how come they did not stop September 11? In fact, they had all the information they needed – it is just they had not processed it in time. A similar problem arose with the December 7 1941 Pearl Harbour attack – the US had detected the key messages but did not decode them until 1944.

If there is one thing worse than not having enough intelligence - it is having too much.

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