

# Secret intelligence, American style

**Body of Secrets: James Bamford**

Century, £20

THIS book, subtitled "How America's NSA and Britain's GCHQ eavesdrop on the World", finally nails the lie that the Echelon spy system doesn't exist. Nicky Hagar, the investigative journalist, did this earlier in *Secret Power* (Craig Potton, 1996), but his almost mindnumbingly boring catalogue of detail never got published outside New Zealand. Here, in more than 700 pages, the story is retold on a bigger more colourful and more public canvas.

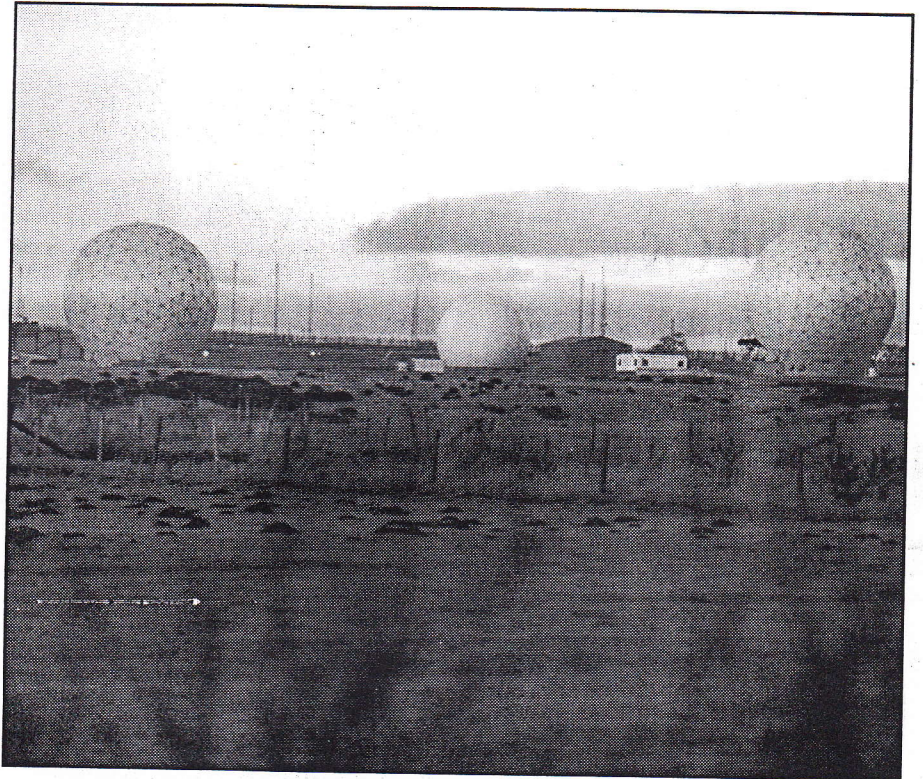
Echelon is the system that now routinely monitors all telephone, fax and e-mail communications, on the basis of key words in a "dictionary" and voice-recognition technology, that are routed through the world's telecommunications satellites. All orchestrated through the UKUSA agreement of 1947 that set up an Anglo-Saxon collaborative network of the United States, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to engage in signals intelligence against the Soviet Union.

Initially devoted almost entirely to Cold War military intelligence, as technological opacity transformed itself by leaps and bounds and, more recently, as the Soviet empire disarticulated, it moved into much broader intelligence gathering against friends as well as foes. It widened the perceived threat from the purely military to encompass the economic and possibly industrial battlefields between nation states.

But the book does far more. It is also a gazetteer and history of the National Security Agency (NSA). The NSA is virtually unknown in the US, let alone outside, yet it is bigger than the CIA and FBI combined. Its annual budget is close to \$4 billion, and it has 63,000 employees. Just one of its dozens of intelligence collection systems can deal with a million inputs in half an hour. All but 6,500 will be automatically filtered out, with 1,000 meeting forwarding criteria. Ten of these are selected by analysts and one report for distribution is produced. Thus hundreds of reports wash around the US intelligence community daily.

There are also a series of marvellous vignettes of American foreign policy in action in Cuba and Vietnam, Iran and Afghanistan. The very process of collection could be hazardous. Gary Powers was shot down over the Soviet Union in his U-2 spy plane in 1960. He was lucky, surviving against all odds and to the enormous disappointment of US intelligence. At sea there was a sharp political contrast in the reaction to the fate of the two NSA ships the *Liberty* and the *Pueblo*.

In May 1967, there was a murderous assault by the Israelis when the *Liberty* was attacked and nearly sunk, with 34 servicemen killed and 171 wounded in an attempt to stop the US



Spy base: the American radar station at Menwith Hill, alleged home of the Echelon system.  
Paul Herrmann/reportdigital

from monitoring the pre-emptive strike against Egypt and the subsequent massacre of captured Egyptian soldiers. The Johnson administration and Congress covered up the entire incident. After all, Johnson was planning to run for president the following year and needed the support of pro-Israeli voters.

Unfortunately for North Korea nine months later, the vote of the Korean-American community was that much less significant. In January 1968, the *Pueblo* was boarded off the North Korean coast by elements of the Korea People's Navy Command. One American serviceman was killed. Eleven months later, after an American apology, the crew was returned to the US. Today, the *Pueblo* is a floating museum in Pyongyang's Taedong river, whose curator, Paek In Ho, was the first man on board in January 1968. North Korea remains a "rogue" state that is serving as a scapegoat to justify National Missile Defence.

What political lesson do we learn from *Body Of Secrets*? When James Bamford gave evidence to the European Parliament's Special Committee on Echelon, he stated clearly that abuse of the system was possible, but currently does not happen. However, James Woolsey, former director of the CIA, wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that the NSA does engage in industrial espionage, but it is only done to stop European and Japanese

companies from bribing their way to contracts at the expense of American companies. While Duncan Campbell, the intelligence analyst, claimed that industrial espionage by the NSA leads to \$10 billion a year of contracts being lost by Japanese and European companies to US corporations.

The European Parliament is currently finalising the report of this Special Committee. Their key conclusion is that, whether you choose to believe Bamford, Woolsey or Campbell, the US must establish an Oversight Committee to guarantee for the future that the system is not abused for either commercial advantage or to violate individual rights of privacy. If that doesn't happen, Europe will have hard choices to make as to its future transatlantic relationship.

But we should not get too paranoid. In 1941, the US had broken the ciphers regarding the bombing of Pearl Harbour, but didn't realise until after the event. More recently, the NSA missed the Indian nuclear test entirely. On their current track record, they will probably discover this review was being written in three or four weeks' time. Meanwhile, James Bamford is probably writing another tome on the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO), a \$7 billion annual operation whose existence is so secret it makes the NSA look positively garrulous.

Glyn Ford