

## MEMORANDUM

To: David Marwell  
From: Jeremy Gunn  
Date: March 6, 1995  
Re: NSA Briefing Paper

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### *Background of the NSA*

*The National Security Agency (NSA), headquartered at Fort Meade, Maryland, is the largest and one of the most secretive agencies within the United States intelligence community. It came into existence in 1952 pursuant to a presidential directive giving it the signals intelligence (SIGINT) responsibilities previously held by the Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA).*

*The NSA's annual budget, which is classified, is generally thought to exceed the combined budgets of all other intelligence agencies (including the CIA, DIA, ONI, INR, G-2, NRO, etc.). Officially, the NSA is a "separately organized agency within the Department of Defense." The Director of the NSA ("DIRNSA") reports directly to the Secretary of Defense. In many ways, however, the NSA is only a quasi-DOD agency that has been known to act somewhat autonomously. There is a military-civilian tension affecting NSA both within and without its offices. A copy of an (unofficial) NSA organizational chart is attached.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>Vice Admiral Laurence H. Frost was DIRNSA from November, 1960 to June, 1962. Lieutenant General (Air Force) Gordon A. Blake was DIRNSA from June, 1962 to June, 1965.

NSA bears the following responsibilities: gathering SIGINT from satellites, radio broadcasts, cables, and military communications; deciphering coded communications from foreign sources; encrypting American communications to prevent deciphering by others; developing new computer systems, decryption devices; and maintaining security of American-government communications. In terms of communications intelligence (COMINT) collection, the NSA collects raw communications information rather than analyzing or interpreting it. In theory, at least, NSA only gathers and filters COMINT before relaying it to other agencies of the government for analysis and interpretation. Although the NSA's procedures and methodology are heavily classified, it is generally believed that it scoops up information from a wide variety of sources, including international telephone calls, cable traffic, radio communications, microwave communications, and electronic emissions. The NSA's computers -- which are probably the most sophisticated in the world -- process the vast amounts of collected data by searching electronically for certain key words or terms from a "watch list" or "target list." If any of the identified terms is used in a communication, such as telephone call from the United States to a foreign country, the computer will flag the use of the term and mark the tape for transcribing. An analyst will then examine the selected communications to determine whether the information should be forwarded to another agency within the intelligence community.

### ***The NSA's Intelligence-Gathering Capabilities in the Early 1960s.***

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Dr. Louis Tordella was the Deputy Director from 1958 to 1974. It is our understanding that Dr. Tordella is now living in Virginia.

As far as we know, the NSA has not publicly disclosed exactly what its intelligence gathering capacities were in the early 1960s. It is generally believed that in 1962 NSA had an operational IBM "supercomputer" called "Stretch" that was a part of its vast "Harvest" computer complex. It is likely that Harvest was able, at least in rudimentary form, to review and process communications by searching its "watch list" or "hit list." Although the U.S. Discovery satellites were obtaining photo-reconnaissance from the early 1960s, it is not clear exactly when NSA was able to collect useful COMINT from space.

### **The NSA and Prior Assassination Investigations**

The Warren Commission did not cite or refer to the NSA. We do know that the NSA communicated with the Warren Commission and, apparently, wrote and reviewed reports for the Commission. The Commission staff found the NSA to be "extremely cooperative." The NSA provided some materials to the Church Committee regarding Lee Harvey Oswald, although it apparently did not have much information. The HSCA corresponded with the NSA about certain questions that it had -- but we know very little about such communications. There is evidence that the NSA did not cooperate in any meaningful way with the HSCA and that it argued that it was exempt from disclosure of its records.

### **JFK Assassination Records at the NSA**

There are five principal questions that need to be considered with

respect to the existence of NSA records related to the JFK assassination: *first*, what kinds of relevant COMINT may NSA have collected prior to the assassination; *second*, what kinds of COMINT did NSA collect in the wake of the assassination; *third*, what JFK-related COMINT is still in existence; *fourth*, how accessible is the COMINT that is still extant; and *finally*, what communications has NSA had with other agencies regarding the assassination (e.g., the Warren Commission, CIA, the HSCA, the White House, etc.).<sup>2</sup> We hope that the briefing by NSA will answer these questions with specificity. Until the briefing, we can only speculate about the types of records that NSA may possess with respect to the questions identified above.<sup>3</sup> The following addresses the types of records that NSA may have.

*First*, the NSA may well have some interesting pre-assassination materials. For example, The KGB station in Mexico City is reported to have cabled Moscow Central on Saturday, September 28, 1963, regarding the visits of Lee Harvey Oswald to the Soviet Consulate during a visit earlier that day. It is also possible that the Cuban embassy may have cabled or telephoned Havana regarding Oswald's visits. Clarence Kelly, while FBI Director, alleged that Oswald threatened to kill President Kennedy in the

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<sup>2</sup>Another obvious question is how cooperative the highly secretive NSA will be in identifying records, making records available, and recognizing security clearances for the review of their records.

<sup>3</sup>Several American military personnel defected to the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc within a few months of the time that Oswald defected, leading some to suggest that Oswald was a possible U.S. intelligence plant into the Soviet Union. Two NSA officials were numbered among these defectors. The NSA presumably has records pertaining to their own defectors and may have also collected information regarding other defectors who, like Oswald, were in possession of sensitive military information.

Cuban embassy and that he may have made similar threats in the Soviet embassy. Director Kelly also believed, based upon his review of the FBI files, that Oswald revealed to the Cubans the CIA's plans to assassinate Fidel Castro. Any NSA intercepts from this period would be of great interest. If NSA intercepted or recorded CIA cables from Mexico City to Langley, it would be very helpful to see those during the period Oswald was there. It is important to learn everything that the NSA collected from Mexico City during this period. There is other possible COMINT that the NSA may have collected with regard to other issues related to the assassination: mafia communications about ongoing CIA plans to assassinate Castro; Ruby's alleged visits to Cuba in 1959 and 1962, and gun running through Dallas in support of anti-Castro Cubans. File topics that would be of particular interest include: Oswald; Ruby; the Fair Play for Cuba Committee; ZRRifle; ALPHA 66 (and other anti-Castro organizations); Operation Mongoose; and the names of joint projects with other agencies.

*Second*, it is probable that, in the immediate wake of the JFK assassination, the NSA went on high alert to determine what communications were emanating from foreign governments with respect to the assassination. After the assassination there were fears that the assassination was a provocation either by the Soviet Union or by Castro. It is thus very likely that a task force would have been established within the NSA to target certain countries for heightened surveillance to determine whether there were any communications that shed light on the assassination. Beyond the immediate wake of the assassination, it is important to know whether the NSA (either at its own initiative or in response to the FBI or CIA), continued to monitor communications that discussed the assassination. The NSA also may have tracked

communications pertaining to M. Jean Souetre, a Frenchman who, as a member of the *Organisation armée secrète*, allegedly attempted to assassinate Charles De Gaulle and who, apparently, was expelled by the U.S. from Fort Worth, Texas, on November 23, 1963.

*Third*, even if the NSA did collect Kennedy assassination material, it is possible that the information was forwarded to other agencies or that it was subsequently destroyed. We need to obtain clear answers with respect to what happened to information that originally was collected and where it is now stored.

*Fourth*, it is always possible that the NSA could say that it possesses vast amounts of material (e.g., shelves of tape recordings) that are unprocessed and that they have no idea whether assassination-related materials are contained therein. Additionally they might report that their records identification system is not readily capable of identifying assassination-related materials. We should be prepared to suggest that they should run their tapes through their computer systems to see if there are any "hits." We can expect that they would receive such a proposal with disfavor.

*Fifth*, it will be very useful to know what communications NSA had with other government agencies about the assassination. Such communications will likely give us good information about what other agencies believed NSA's capacity to be and what role NSA played in previous investigations.

### ***NSA Compliance with the JFK Act***

*The NSA traditionally has been reluctant to release any information related to its sources, methods, or records. This general reluctance is exemplified by the handful of NSA-generated documents that have been provided to the JFK Collection. According to Steve Tilley, the NSA has not sent any records directly to him. NARA records reveal that none of the NSA's HSCA-referred material has been reviewed and returned to the Archives.*

*Intelligence services are notoriously unenthusiastic about disclosing information about their decryption capacity. In the hypothetical case that the NSA intercepted the KGB's Mexico City communications with Moscow Central, the NSA may wish to keep secret the fact that it was (or was not) actually able to break the Soviet code. Thus, again hypothetically, the NSA may be reluctant even to acknowledge that it has JFK-related materials because the very fact that it does (or does not) have such records discloses a decryption secret. Ultimately the Review Board will need to be prepared to confront such issues.*

*Questions for NSA did NSA process unencrypted communications.*

*Is NSA withholding any information from the Review Board based upon any statute, executive order, or directive of any sort. If so, which ones/how many?*

*Does NSA have any difficulty recognizing ARRB clearances?*