# Code Warriors: NSA's Code Breakers and the Secret Intelligence War Against the Soviet Union

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**Code Warriors: NSA's Code Breakers and the Secret Intelligence War Against the Soviet Union**
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**A sweeping history of the NSA and its codebreaking from its roots in World War II through the end of the Cold War.**

The National Security Agency grew out of the legendary codebreaking programs of World War II that turned the tide of Allied victory by cracking the famed Enigma machine and other seemingly impenetrable German and Japanese codes. But things became murky in the postwar years, when our intelligence community found itself targeting not battlefield enemies, but suspected spies, foreign leaders, and even American citizens. Now Stephen Budiansky--a longtime expert in cryptology--tells the fascinating story of how the NSA came to be, and of its central, often fraught and controversial role in the major events of the Cold War, from the Korean War to the Cuban Missile Crisis to Vietnam and beyond. He also guides us through the fascinating challenges faced by cryptanalysts, and how they broke some of the most complicated codes of the twentieth century. A riveting, essential history of the underbelly of the Cold War.

## Code Warriors: NSA's Code Breakers and the Secret Intelligence War Against the Soviet Union Details

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# From Reader Review Code Warriors: NSA's Code Breakers and the Secret Intelligence War Against the Soviet Union for online ebook

## Walter says

**Secrets! It is a curse that nations need secrets to achieve their national goals.**

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This book explores SIGINT (signal intelligence) in the United States from World War II to the NSA in the Vietnam War... it is limited to what is current state because that information has not been declassified yet.

My mother was a Code Breaker at Arlington Hall during World War II largely because she spoke Slavic languages fluently. It became an obsession with her: she could never let it go after World War II and it greatly influenced my and my siblings childhood. If you know the story of Thimas Nash, you know the story of my mother's life. So I took particular interest in this book because the hype for the book said that it would explore Arlington Hall: it failed in my estimation in this hype BUT it was successful in describing the growth of SIGINT from WWII to the Vietnam War.

Cracking codes is not an easy business as I learned from my mother. Intelligence gathering violates the basic principles of democratic nation's and certainly those of the United States. Yet, without this information, we risk major loss of lives, resources and perhaps the nation itself. As this book more than adequately describes, it is a nasty business. It corrupts the people involved and leads to disputes in what should be collected, how it should be collected, how it should be processed and how the results should be disseminated to people responsible for operations. It invites parochialism and the hiding of failure. Information is power and every bureaucracy wants to have its intelligence. Worst yet, it invites the distribution of intelligence that fits what political leaders want to hear.

And yet, there is hope. There is hope that intelligence can save the nation, that intelligence can prevent the loss of lives and that intelligence can save us.

A good book, very readable and worthwhile to consider for thinking about!

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## Igor Ljubuncic says

Another excellent book by Mr. Stephen.

He is truly the finest (military) historian, and it shows. Stephen also happens to have a strong love for cryptography, and he continues his earlier works here. In fact, you should read his earlier works, which include Battle of Wits, the complete story of WWII codebreaking, as well as Blackett's War, on U-boats and science.

Here, the story picks up where the previous two books ended. Even early on during WWII, the Americans and the British decided that they should extend their espionage and codebreaking efforts against the Soviets.

We get a glimpse of the pioneer efforts, which touch on the Bletchley Park project and legendary Alan Turing, but then we also get introduced to Friedman, Sinkov, Rosen, and other giants of this era.

Then, the Cold War stars in earnest, and the early signal intelligence collections work eventually become the big and powerful organization that is NSA today. It is fascinating reading into its birth and early history, the colorful battles of bureaucracy and politics, the internal scheming, and how different leaders of the agency shaped its future. As always, Stephen weaves a beautiful tale, full of anecdotes, personal stories, and cool factoids. Like the fact IBM charged bazillions for its consultancy services, which isn't at all different from the IT sector today. Or the hundred little ways the Soviets used their (inferior) technology to fight the West, mostly by resorting to ingenuity and tricks that a technologically superior adversary like the USA does not naturally embrace.

Stephen focuses on the history - although the bulk of declassified documents allow him to paint only a partial picture of the 50-60s, with focus on the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the delusions of military and political leaders, and the vital importance of real-time information in the air supremacy battles against the Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviet pilots. Then, of course we also have the Berlin War and the Cuban missiles crises, and how these were difused through smart use of intelligence. In general, the main focus on SIGINT shifts from codebreaking, which soon proven out to be remarkably impossible (even the 50s Soviet ciphers were foolproof), but more around preventing nuclear blunders due to political posturing. WWIII was mostly averted by NSA providing the American leaders with timely information of whether the Soviets had genuine military intentions or they were just bluffing. Cool stuff.

But then, a mathophille that he is, Stephen also tells us about the concepts of language higher statistics, probabilities, messages in depth, and many other fancy ideas that make this field so engaging. The book has five appendices, each giving you a teaser of the enormous scientific background behind cryptography.

I just wish the book was longer...

Anyway, yet another gem. You can't go wrong with Budiansky. And if you love science and mathematics, you will enjoy this work even more.

Splendidsky.

Igor

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## Byrne says

First half is great. The second half is a catalogue of high-profile disasters and bureaucracy. I guess we need to wait another couple decades for the juicy stuff to get leaked and declassified.

Probably the right policy is: don't bother reading a history of spying unless it was written after everybody involved has wrapped up their deathbed confessions.

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## Jerome says

A dense but nuanced and well-written history of the NSA during the Cold War. Budiansky's gasp of the story is firm and his writing is clear and witty.

Budiansky starts with a look at the state of code breaking from 1943 and ends with the late 1970s, when computer and satellite advances began to dominate. He covers various intelligence successes and failures, the NSA's role and difficulties within the US intelligence community, and the agency's transformation from an academic "Sleepy Hollow" to a more established frontline agency. Budiansky, of course, covers the NSA's aggressive and successful effort against Soviet targets, and shows how heavily NSA efforts were targeted against Berlin, an effort that remained even after the Cold War officially ended. Budiansky is great at covering the human element. At the same time, his work is dispassionate and doesn't romanticize or embellish any of the stories he has to tell. He is also great at explaining the technology in ways that don't bore the reader, and how the NSA's product was utilized (or ignored) by policymakers.

Budiansky contrasts the agency's success at uncovering the state of the Soviet Union's internal affairs with the inefficiency produced by its huge budget and limited oversight. He covers the effect of turf wars and the NSA's struggle to analyze the huge amounts of data it collected. He also discusses the NSA's irregular oversight and details the agency's more controversial episodes, such as SHAMROCK, MINARET, the interception of international telegrams from America, its involvement in the Huston Plan, its surveillance of civil rights leaders, reporters, Muhammad Ali, and members of Congress, and how all of these excesses led to the creation of FISA. Budiansky also describes the cover-up intelligence that disproved the Johnson administration's account of the Tonkin Gulf incident.

NSA's ultimate Cold War achievement, Budiansky argues, was its ability to provide accurate and timely intelligence on the whereabouts of Soviet conventional and nuclear forces, while its greatest failure was apparent in US policymakers' over reliance on SIGINT. Budiansky also notes how NSA often bought into the fiction that SIGINT was information rather than intelligence, and how it often passed on raw SIGINT to policymakers who did not always understand it.

The book's only problems are minor. At one point, during the section on Korea, Budiansky writes that "Truman had become so concerned by intelligence pointing to possible Chinese intervention that on October 15 he flew to Wake Island to personally meet with his commander and discuss the situation." In reality, of course, the entire meeting was basically just a political stunt cooked up by Truman's aides, and one that neither Truman nor his cabinet liked. Neither Truman or MacArthur took the meeting seriously.

A lively, well-researched and interesting work.

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## Feng Ouyang says

This book told a fascinating story about NSA's effort of code breaking. It is not very technical in cryptography. It stresses the human factors in the "code war." Human factors include not only the talents in code design and code breaking but also the spies and defectors that operate beyond the technical arena. What's more, a majority of the code-breaking achievements are credited to the sloppiness and mistakes committed by the communication operators. The book also talks about the evolution of NSA, its bureaucratic organization and its culture conflicts between innovation and secrecy, which are the other human factors. The history of NSA is a complicated story to tell, as it involves many threads and many driving forces in the nation and world during different eras. The book did an excellent job of organizing and presenting the story. It strikes a balance between following the chronological order and the development of a particular thread. It

maintains a neutral tone in recounting the achievements and failures of the NSA, enhancing the readability of the book.

As the subtitle implies, the narrative ends in the 1990s, when the cold war is over. I am sure there are more intriguing stories after that period. Unfortunately, they are not in this book.

The ending of the book offers an interesting observation. The most significant contribution of the code breakers is not what they found, but what they showed not exist. They showed that during the Copa missile crises the Soviet was not ready to call the bluff. They also showed that in the 1970s and 1980s the Soviet did not mobilize its nuclear force. For the code breaker to fulfill such a role, it must be very reliable in not missing information. And that is, to me, a very impressive accomplishment.

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## Melissa says

Very interesting information that seemed to drag through some sections and did not go in depth enough in others.

I did enjoy learning more about some incidents from my childhood that made much more sense with the information that has since been declassified.

It is a good overall history that has led me to want to read more about some of the incidents.

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## Maria says

National Security Agency became infamous recently because of the leaks of Edward Snowden. If you want to read more about that... this isn't your book. This is a history of the NSA from World War II to the Fall of the Berlin Wall. The problem with classified agencies is that a lot of the history is still classified, except for the huge breaches and black eyes that come to light when they are hacked, their employees defect or some other news crisis arises.

Why I started this book: Cool title, plus the Spy Museum in Washington D.C. was one of my favorites and I was eager to learn more about trade craft, etc.

Why I finished it: Okay, turns out that the NSA has been around longer than I thought. And like most professions they are faced with the quantity vs. quality question. They tried for both, and just for spice added legal and illegal. It was very interesting to learn about their funding of IBM, but it was super frustrating to see their silo-ed information and unaccountability. I want to know how this changed post 9/11... if it changed.

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## Reid says

While informative and interesting on the whole, this book runs into a (retrospectively) obvious challenge with writing a history of the NSA: there's not a lot of public information out there to work with. While Budiansky doesn't come out and admit it, it does seem clear that most of his material is drawn from the NSA's failures during the Cold War because those are the only public NSA records available. You get the

impression reading this book that Russians were far outmatching the American intelligence apparatus, but only because most publicly-known stories about the NSA's activities were, by definition, failures of the agency to keep its own secrets.

That all being said, there are some good explanations of mid-century, pre-digital cryptography here, complete with more technical appendices for those who want them. The anecdotes regarding the lengths American and Soviet spies went to in order to collect and analyze SIGINT alone make the book an enjoyable read.

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## Skuli Saeland says

Þokkalegasta lesning. Tyrfin á köflum þegar Budiansky útskýrir helstu dulkóðanir og leiðir til að brjóta kóðana en hann útskýrir ágætlega brösótta fæðingu NSA, stofnanavæðingu og klúður. Þrátt fyrir að Bandamenn gætu brotið alla helstu kóða Öxulveldanna í Seinni heimsstyrjöldinni reyndust þeir brátt óbrjótanlegir í Kalda stríðinu. Sovétmönnum gekk að mörgu leyti betur gegn tæknilega öflugri andstæðing með njósnurum og árangursríkum gamaldagsaðferðum. Besti árangur njósnastofnana stórveldanna var kannski að sýna forystumönnum ríkja sinna að þrátt fyrir hættuna á kjarnorkustríði væru engin skref tekin til virkja kjarnorkuflaugarnar og þannig minnka óttan við gagnkvæma eyðingu.

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## Dave says

Review originally posted at Book of Bogan

I guess when reading any non-fiction work one needs to consider whether there are any hidden agendas going on behind the scenes, and evaluate the material being presented accordingly. I guess with a book about the classified world of the NSA one can only expect some sort of shenanigans.

Looking at the cover the book promises to be a look at NSA's code breakers and the intelligence war against the Soviet Union. I suppose with a lionising title like that, I should have been wary of the author's point of view.eedless to say, the hand-wringing diatribe against the actions of Edward Snowden at the start of the book does an excellent job of revealing the author as something of an NSA apologist.

Budiansky does a thorough job of tracking the history of the organisation, including its roots in the Second World War's code-breaking efforts against the Japanese and Germans... and a few other countries besides. He then exhaustively covers the - apparently largely unsuccessful efforts at code breaking during the Cold War period.

If you used this book as your sole source of information, you may get the idea that the NSA is a poor little agency who can do no wrong, is beset on all sides by rival agencies, budget problems, technical problems, spies, liberal politicians... Sure there were intelligence failures, but ultimately it was someone else's fault, or a resourcing issue, or a litany of other reasons.

Now I enjoy a good spy story as much as the next person, particularly real stories... but this is far from an interesting tale, and while it may be of interest with a particular interest in the history cryptography, and how the little intelligence agency that could would come to be responsible for some of the most horrendous warrantless wiretapping, and mass surveillance of the American public and the world at large...

No, wait, you don't get that, because apart from its early swipe at the NSA's critics in the beginning, the author conveniently ends the tale with the fall of the Soviet Union. I get that this is the stated timeframe for the book, but given that it was released in 2016, a more holistic look may have been warranted.

Code Warriors is a problematic book to be sure. One for fans of cryptography, and or those with an interest in history, just remember to keep a critical mind.

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### Daniel Heneghan says

A very detailed history of the signals intelligence portion of the US intelligence apparatus. Abbreviations and a number of different organizations and coded project names can make this a bit of a challenge to get through. Very light on the mathematical aspects of various codes, but that can and should be forgiven for a history book. Quick and interesting read.

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### Peter Mcloughlin says

Covers the history of signal intelligence during the cold war. Mostly the story of one aspect of the national security apparatus the NSA which is a product of the early cold war like much of our defense infrastructure was a part of the US becoming a global superpower. Reasons of state always justify such machinations and in reality we were facing the threat of the cold war turning into WWIII so such a thing was inevitable The book covers the history and growth of this agency which was essential for cold war planners. It is my belief that such institutions conceived out of necessity begin to take on a life of their own that usually goes far beyond their original design. It won us the cold war having an NSA but we paid the price of developing a clandestine state and are paying it now.

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### Luke Paulsen says

Every geek worth the name must have some awareness of World War II's rich code-breaking history-- Enigma, Bletchley Park, and Alan Turing in England, the U.S.'s similar cracking of Japanese codes in the Pacific, and the origin of primitive "computers" as code-breaking aids. It's a classic tale of the triumph of ingenuity creating a massive advantage. In Code Warriors, Stephen Budiansky asks if similar stories can be told about U.S. signals intelligence efforts during the Cold War. It's a promising question-- after all, the Cold War was if anything even more dependent on information, intrigue, and espionage-- but unfortunately, after several hundred pages, the answer turns out to be "No." That's partly because the US agency responsible, the famously secretive and invasive NSA, won't say exactly what it did or didn't do during those years; but it's also because Budiansky doesn't succeed in making the available information into a compelling story.

The most interesting chapters of Code Warriors are the first few-- recapping the World War II code-breaking successes and some initial success breaking Russian diplomatic codes in the late 1940's. After that the narrative gets bogged down in tales of bureaucracy, inter-agency politics, technical frustration, and the occasional embarrassing exposure of NSA secrets. (Edward Snowden, as it turns out, was merely the latest in a long series of traitors who ended up working with the Russians.) The appendices that describe the actual code-breaking process in more detail are decently interesting to those with a bit of math background, like me. But codebreaking is hard-- nearly impossible, if the enemy is doing things right-- and the last chapter reveals

that between 1950 and 1980 the NSA only cracked one major Soviet code, and it still won't say what it was or how it was accomplished.

Otherwise the book mostly chronicles a series of expensive failures, institutional calcification, and the decline of mathematical codebreaking as a major intelligence resource. It's not the riveting techno-spy tale that the title would suggest, and even what story there is falls victim to Budiansky's undisciplined writing. (He often slips into moralizing about the US's and NSA's bad behavior during the Cold War, rather than actually describing what happened and why.) In the end I found Code Warriors to be somewhat informative, but never all that interesting. Too bad.

## Scott Martin says

A solid overview of the early history of US Intelligence efforts against the Soviet Union during the Cold War (would rate this a 3.5, but I don't think this is strong enough for a 4). Budiansky offers a good combination of history and technical overview of US SIGINT (Signals Intelligence) tradecraft. He also offers some interesting insight into the early days of US SIGINT, particularly the first couple of Directors of NSA (DIRNSA), noting their strengths and weaknesses. However, the strength of the work is the earlier days, as more of that information has been declassified. After the 1960s, the work starts to lose a bit of steam, as the detailed information that is the strength of the earlier part of the work is less available. Perhaps in 20-30 years, a new work will offer more information about the later stages of the Cold War and the respective SIGINT capabilities. I think that there are some other works that are a bit stronger about the history of NSA and US SIGINT (see Body of Secrets), but still, this work is a good read and offers the reader some good insight into the early history of US SIGINT.

## Drew says

Certainly a fine piece of work by a talented researcher and writer. That said, it could be called Bureaucracy Warriors with all the time the author spends describing the structure of the various organizations involved. This is really more of a history of the NSA and some of the key players more than an account of tradecraft or would-be espionage. As a result, there are many boring sections describing the pitfalls of policy, and fewer parts with interesting stories of Cold War spy craft.