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Profile: World Geopolitical and Military Analysis Reporting Group

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World Geopolitical and Military Analysis Reporting Group was a participant or observer in the following events:

October 31, 2001: Senior NSA Official Retires in Protest over Domestic Surveillance

Concerned that NSA post-9/11 surveillance operations violated the US Constitution, a senior NSA official reports on the program to House Intelligence Committee staff (see Before October 31, 2001), then retires. William Binney, a crypto-mathematician, had served in the NSA for 36 years. In 1997 he was made technical director of the World Geopolitical and Military Analysis Reporting Group, a 6000-employee unit that focused on signals intelligence (SIGINT) reporting and analysis. In the last part of his NSA career, Binney focused on dealing with the NSA's problem of information overload, co-founding the Signals Intelligence Automation Research Center (SARC) and leading a 20-member team to develop a data-mining and analysis program called ThinThread. This program made it possible to "correlate data from financial transactions, travel records, Web searches, GPS equipment, and any other 'attributes' that an analyst might find useful," and "could chart relationships among people in real time." Unlike the NSA's existing centralized data processing systems, ThinThread was able to identify useful or useless data as it was collected, reducing the overload problem. However, though it targeted foreign communications, ThinThread also intercepted those of Americans, and "continued documenting signals when a trail crossed into the US." Binney incorporated measures to protect privacy, but NSA lawyers still considered the program too invasive, according to a 2011 article by Jane Mayer based on interviews with Binney and another NSA whistleblower, Thomas Drake. In 1999, NSA Director General Michael Hayden decided to fund a rival program, Trailblazer, which would be developed by defense contractors (see Late 1999). Trailblazer will be abandoned in 2006 as unworkable, after costing $1.2 billion (see January 2006). [NEW YORKER, 5/23/2011; WIRED NEWS, 2/15/2012; DEMOCRACY NOW!, 4/20/2012] In 2002, three NSA whistleblowers—Edward Loomis, J. Kirk Wiebe, and Binney—will ask the Pentagon to investigate the NSA for wasting "millions and millions of dollars" on Trailblazer. [NATION, 3/26/2013]
Post-9/11 NSA Surveillance Expansion - Binney will tell Mayer that, after the 9/11 attacks, his people began coming to him, saying things like: "They're getting billing records on US citizens! They're putting pen registers [call logs] on everyone in the country!" James Bamford will interview Binney in 2012 and write, "At the outset the program recorded 320 million calls a day, [Binney] says, which represented about 73 to 80 percent of the total volume of the agency's worldwide intercepts." Binney has not been personally "read in" to this domestic surveillance program, but some members of his SARC team have, as their knowledge of ThinThread code was needed to set it up. Binney became convinced elements of ThinThread were being used, but without privacy protections, meaning US persons could be targeted. Soon after learning these things, Binney takes his concerns to the House Intelligence Committee (see Before October 31, 2001), and retires on October 31. He will tell Mayer, "I couldn't be an accessory to

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2001)), and retires on October 31. He will tell Mayer, "I couldn't be an accessory to subverting the Constitution." Other sources support Binney's account of this NSA data-mining and monitoring program (see After September 11, 2001, October 11, 2001, After September 11, 2001, Late September, 2001, and October 2001). However, the claim that NSA domestic surveillance was initiated only after, and in response to, 9/11 is contradicted by information indicating that domestic monitoring programs and activities were established and conducted prior to 9/11 (see Late 1999, February 27, 2000, December 2000, February 2001, February 2001, Spring 2001, and July 2001). [NEW YORKER, 5/23/2011; WIRED NEWS, 2/15/2012; DEMOCRACY NOW!, 4/20/2012]

ThinThread 'Would Likely Have Prevented 9/11' - Despite ThinThread's capacity to collect actionable intelligence, Hayden vetoed the idea of deploying the system three weeks before 9/11, in August 2001. According to the Loomis, Wiebe, and Binney, this decision "left the NSA without a system to analyze the trillions of bits of foreign SIGINT flowing over the Internet at warp speed, as ThinThread could do." During the summer of 2001, when "the system was blinking red," according to CIA Director George Tenet, the NSA "failed to detect critical phone and e-mail communications that could have tipped US intelligence to al-Qaeda's plans to attack." [NATION, 3/26/2013]

Entity Tags: Edward Loomis, World Geopolitical and Military Analysis Reporting Group, J. Kirk Wiebe, William Binney, Thomas Drake, House Intelligence Committee, James Bamford, Trailblazer, Jane Mayer, National Security Agency, Signals Intelligence Automation Research Center, Michael Hayden, Thinthread

Timeline Tags: Civil Liberties

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