

When America's enemies are busy plotting against it, someone is listening in on their private telephone conversations and intercepting their communications.

The National Security Agency is the largest and most sophisticated espionage agency in the world. It is so massive that it occupies its own small city between Baltimore and Washington, DC. It is so sophisticated that it can eavesdrop on practically any telephone conversation taking place at any time in any location in the world. It can read almost any communication in the world, be it by fax, e-mail or text messaging. And it has a case file... on you.

*The World's Largest, Most
Sophisticated and Most
Secretive Spy Agency!* **Inside**
**The National
Security Agency**

Aviva Sternfeld

The vice president of a large corporation strolls into his finely-appointed office in an expensive building in lower Manhattan. He settles back in his leather armchair and begins to peruse the documents waiting for him on his large solid-oak desk. He turns to his computer and types a sensitive e-mail message to a colleague in India. He is comfortable in the knowledge that only the recipient will read this inside information that must not reach other ears or eyes. After all, who can read private e-mails?

And besides, who would even know that this communication is being sent?

A Jewish mother has been battling her troublesome teenage son for months. Only *Hashem* knows the fear, confusion and heart-break she has been suffering. But today's insolence topped everything. She dare not permit this to continue one day longer. The mother picks up the telephone and finally dials the number that has been flashing before her eyes during the day and haunting her restless sleep at night: the emergency *chinuch* hotline.

The woman is politely put in contact with a professional and she unburdens her heart with shocking frankness. She cannot see her listener and is confident that no words she utters will go any further. After all, the ads that called out to her from the newspapers and magazines had proclaimed in unmistakable words: "100% Confidential—Guaranteed!"

And besides, who would even know this telephone conversation was taking place?

Unsettling though this may be, the fact is that both the corporate vice president and the desperate Jewish housewife are very mistaken. Someone is perfectly aware of their e-mails and telephone conversations, and it is perfectly possible for that someone to have read or listened to their entire communication. That someone is a massive supercomputer in a secretive federal office that stores and then scans a copy of the



You speak and we hear.

communication. The computer is looking for signs of activity that may be of interest to the US intelligence community.

That's right. The US government maintains an agency that snoops on all communications among Americans as well as foreigners.

Meet the National Security Agency (NSA), the largest and most sophisticated espionage agency in the world. It is so large that it occupies hundreds of acres on a campus halfway between Baltimore and Washington DC. The NSA is capable of hearing virtually every telephone call, fax, e-mail or other electronic communication that takes place anywhere in the world.

While other spy agencies rely on humans in the field to collect data, often risking their lives to snoop on an enemy from behind enemy lines, the NSA relies on technology. It maintains a comprehensive network of spy satellites, supercomputers and gigantic antennae whose very existence is top-secret.

In fact, the NSA is the most secretive spy agency in the world. For many years, the average American was not even aware that the agency existed. It was a long-standing joke that NSA stood for "No Such Agency." NSA employees joked among themselves that the name stood for "Never Say Anything."

To demonstrate just how confidential the agency is: A number of former CIA directors have published books about their experiences, the CIA in general and the operations they were involved in. No such publication

has ever come out from any former employee of the NSA.

The director of the NSA rules over his employees with an iron fist. He can fire anyone at whim, with no explanation. The NSA is also infamous for its zero tolerance of disloyalty. Every NSA employee who started up with the agency regretted it deeply.

It is not by chance that this agency is so secretive. Much of what goes on behind the closed doors of the NSA is highly controversial, and sometimes in the past has been downright illegal.

Some people tell themselves, "So what if someone at the NSA is listening to me? So they can hear what I am saying. That's fine with me, as long as they are also listening to Ahmed and Abdul." Many agree with that sentiment. But there are plenty of people who do not take this eavesdropping calmly.

There is good reason for people to be concerned about their government listening in to the private conversations of its law-abiding citizens. It is well known that former presidents, such as Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, used the NSA to target their personal and political opponents. And the recent scandals involving the Obama administration have raised nightmares for many Americans about "Big Brother" monitoring them.

Let's take a glimpse through the cracks and see what goes on inside this secret agency.

Forerunner of the NSA

Although the NSA was not created until 1952, the US was already involved in communications eavesdropping as far back as 1919.

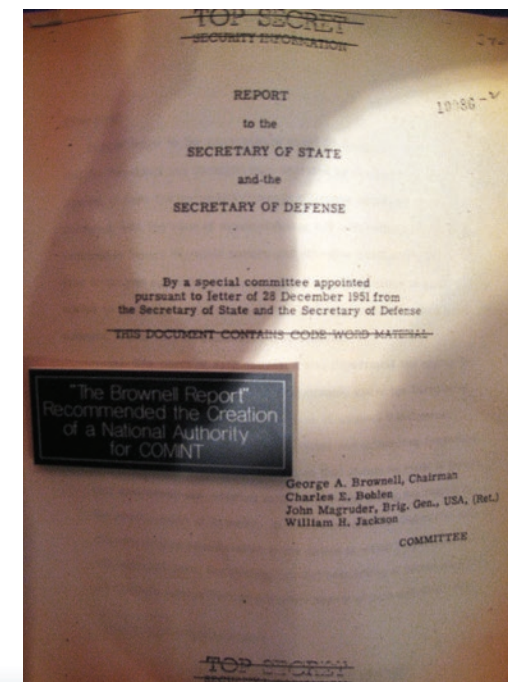
The world was becoming more technologically sophisticated. The telephone had largely superseded the telegraph as the primary means of long-distance communication. This placed the US government on its guard, since there was no longer a reliable means of intercepting enemy communications and knowing what

potential adversaries were planning.

World War I had just ended and the military censorship that had checked every outgoing and incoming telegram had been lifted. The army's MI-8 (Military Intelligence Section 8) had a special unit that deciphered all communications between foreign governments. That information was once again flowing freely and there was no way for US officials to keep track of what was going in and out.

High-level meetings were held in government offices to discuss the matter. The top brass of the army recommended that the government retain some sort of eavesdropping capability. As a result, the so-called "Black Chamber" was formed. Taking its name from a medieval English agency that secretly opened private mail, this agency checked every telegram that entered or left America. It also worked on decrypting foreign codes to be able to read encrypted cables sent by foreign officials. The messages in these cables might tip off American officials about activities planned against them.

The Black Chamber never numbered



Cover page of the recommendation sent to President Roosevelt after the Pearl Harbor attack to create the National Security Agency.