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Top Secret America: The Rise of the New American Security State

by Dana Priest and William M. Arkin

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In *Top Secret America*, authors Dana Priest and William Arkin explore the “intelligence-military-corporate apparatus” that has grown into a sprawling universe of its own since the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. With Priest as primary author and Arkin serving as chief researcher, the two have expanded a four-part series of articles they first published in the *Washington Post* in 2010.

The result is an in-depth account of the enormous complex of organizations and agencies that have emerged in the decade since 9/11 to defend the country from the threat of terrorism. The purpose of the book is to promote debate about whether or not the response from the government is in the best interest of state security or has been conducted at the expense of individual liberties and democratic values. As the authors contend, “Only more transparency and debate will make us safe from terrorism and the challenges faced by the United States.”

The rise of the new American security state, which is the book’s subtitle, is the result of the overwhelming growth of the security industry and its vested interest in perpetuating the cycle of fear that 9/11 engendered. One of the book’s overarching themes is that such growth has not translated into greater security. As evidence, the authors cite cases such as US Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan’s shooting rampage at Fort Hood, Texas, in November 2009, as well as Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab’s failed attempt to ignite an explosive device hidden in his underwear on a flight bound for Detroit, Michigan, in December 2009. In these and other cases, the authors assert that “lack of disciplined focus, not lack of resources,” resulted in the failure of intelligence and security officials to detect the emerging threat. On a larger scale, such a lack of focus led to the colossal intelligence failure of 2011, namely the Arab Spring. The intelligence community’s inability to unearth the “dynamic political change sweeping across the Middle East” left American policymakers completely unprepared to promote acceptable alternatives. That no one is actually in charge should be a cause for concern among policymakers and citizens alike.

Acting on the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, Congress approved and the president signed the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA) in December 2004. The IRTPA established the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and gave its leader responsibility over all intelligence matters. National policymakers viewed this as a necessary measure to rectify the perceived failure of the intelligence community to connect available information from various organizations, to include the CIA and FBI, that might have prevented the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As noted in *Top*

Secret America, the IRTPA failed to give the DNI authority over all intelligence matters, a key distinction that continues to impede the effectiveness of the position. As Priest and Arkin note, the passage of the IRTPA revealed the members of the intelligence community did not want to “give up the power they had over their budgets, personnel, and mission, and neither did the many congressional committees that supervised them and funded them.” It also revealed no one was willing to take on the entrenched interests that have resulted in an intelligence apparatus that, as of 2010, was 250 percent larger than it was on 10 September 2001. The estimated budget is approximately \$80.1 billion for the intelligence community, but it does not include the \$58 billion for the Department of Homeland Security, created in the aftermath of 9/11. As the authors assert, this growth has come “without anyone in government seriously trying to figure out where overlaps and waste were.”

This lack of visibility extends to the controlled access programs (CAPs) run by the CIA as well as the Pentagon’s special access programs (SAPs), which exist to give their respective organizations additional protection against unauthorized disclosure. As the Director of National Intelligence James Clapper stated, “There’s only one entity in the entire universe that has visibility on all SAPs—that’s God.” While the authors note that DOD has the bulk of the access programs, just as it has more than two-thirds of intelligence assets, the authors do not distinguish among the various types of CAPs and SAPs. The authors emphasize the lack of visibility on the vast number of programs and the fact that only a handful of senior government officials known as “Super Users” have access to them, which further compounds the problems the intelligence community faces in information sharing.

An area the book explores is the role of contractors in the intelligence-military-corporate apparatus. Priest and Arkin estimate there are 854,000 Americans with top-secret clearances, 265,000 of whom are contractors. Following 9/11, government officials intended to achieve cost savings by bringing large numbers of contractors into the intelligence and security arenas. Unfortunately for American taxpayers, this turned out to be another miscalculation. The authors note a 2008 study published by ODNI found contractors made up 29 percent of the workforce in the intelligence agencies but cost the equivalent of 49 percent of their personnel budgets. Of further note, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said defense contractors cost him 25 percent more than federal employees. Though Gates vowed to reduce his department’s reliance on private contractors, he was unable to achieve a substantive reduction, and “by the Obama administration’s second year in office, its modest goal was to reduce the number of hired hands by 7 percent over two years.” The reason was simply that contractors had become entrenched in so many aspects of carrying out the mission that “what started as a clever temporary fix has turned into a dependency.”

Another theme of *Top Secret America* is that policymakers are flooded with marginally informative and redundant conclusions, and major challenges exist in processing the enormous volume of intelligence gathered. Data is often

outdated by the time it arrives to the appropriate decisionmaking entity, thus making it essential to develop an efficient processing, exploitation, and dissemination cycle capable of culling the most essential intelligence elements. Unfortunately, the emphasis appears to be on the development of technology and equipment rather than the means that direct such technology to the proper end.

One final theme in *Top Secret America* that warrants consideration by intelligence policymakers is the erosion of civil liberties for the alleged sake of security, a central concern of the authors. Priest and Arkin emphasize this theme repeatedly, contending “people seem not to notice the incremental changes taking place across the country, the eroding of privacy and the tabulation of personal information in government hands.” In spite of claims by advocates of greater security, the authors cite numerous instances of unwarranted surveillance and harassment of innocent individuals and groups at the hands of federal, state, and local officials. Thus, in the authors’ view, it is time to “close the decade-long chapter of fear, to confront the colossal sum of money that could have been saved or better spent, to remember what we are truly defending,” and in so doing usher in a new era of “openness and better security against our enemies.”

At 277 pages, *Top Secret America* flows smoothly across the political and military spectrums and from the national to local levels. For many readers, the book’s strength will be found in the ability of the authors to highlight the defining characteristics of *Top Secret America*, namely “its enormous size, its counterproductive duplication, its internal secrecy, and its old-fashioned, hierarchical structure.” However, in the process of making their point, the authors’ advocacy tends to become redundant and unbalanced. Those in the intelligence, counterterrorism, and homeland security arenas emerge as automatons in a hidden world or a sleepless place that ingests endless volumes of information that, in turn, is presented at acronym-laden, unemotional briefings. The authors contend today’s intelligence-security world has become a living, breathing organism, one that is impossible to control or curtail. While there is a great deal of validity in such claims, there is little or no recognition of successes in the areas the authors attack, nor is there much in the way of recognition of individuals who have performed admirably and worked selflessly in defense of America. The authors could have provided such recognition without diminishing their central themes. Nevertheless, *Top Secret America* does emerge as a powerful story that makes for essential reading for those interested in the shape that America’s future security will take. For America’s policymakers, it does not necessarily provide solutions, but it does provide warnings that should not go unheeded.