Inside Top Secret America

By Lindsay Beyerstein
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In July, the *Washington Post* published the Top Secret America project — a sweeping portrait of America's heavily privatized military-corporate-intelligence establishment. Lead reporter Dana Priest calls it the "vast and hidden apparatus of the war on terror."

Priest, who has won two Pulitzer Prizes, described the project as the most challenging investigation of her career. She teamed up with national security journalist William Arkin and a team of about 20 *Post* staffers to create an "alternative geography" of a hidden world that has exploded since the attacks of 9/11. At last count, the official U.S. intelligence budget stood at $75 billion — more than two and a half times what it was on September 10, 2001.

The remarkable three-part series (I, II, III) and its intricate multimedia Web site attracted some initial praise, but just as quickly seemed to drop off the map. This article is an attempt to revisit some of the Priest and Arkin's most shocking discoveries.

Top Secret America is based on hundreds of interviews with government officials, contractors and independent experts; satellite imagery; government contracts; property records; promotional materials from contractors; photo reconnaissance of suspected intelligence facilities, and more.

To give a sense of the physical layout of Top Secret America, Priest and Arkin plotted government and corporate secret locations on a map.

The reporters also compiled their data in the searchable Top Secret America database (TSA). They found 1,931 intelligence contracting firms doing work classified as "top secret," for 1,271 government organizations at over 10,000 sites around the country. 533 of the contracting firms were founded after the 9/11 attacks.

About 110 contractors do about 90 percent of the top-secret work. The biggest of the big are household words: Booz Allen Hamilton, L-3 Communications, CSC, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics, and SAIC.

The TSA database doesn't include firms that only do merely "secret" work because the reporters found too many to count.

Contractors make up nearly 30 percent of the workforce of America's intelligence agencies. At the Department of Homeland Security the ratio of contractors to staffers is 50-50. The *Post* estimates that of the 854,000 people with top-secret clearances, 265,000 are contractors.

The U.S. has become utterly dependent on contractors for basic national security and

intelligence functions. The National Reconnaissance Office literally couldn't launch satellites without contractors. Contractors do everything from recruiting spies to interrogating detainees to processing civil forfeitures in the war on drugs.

CIA director Leon Panetta admitted to the *Post* that dependence on contractors is a liability because the main duty of corporations "is to their shareholders, and that does present an inherent conflict." As [Jeremy Scahill](#) pointed out in the *Nation*, these reservations didn't stop Panetta from approving a new [$100 million contract](#) with the scandal-plagued private security contractor formerly known as Blackwater.

Over 300 recruiting firms known as "body shops" specialize in hooking the federal government up with private contractors. Industry insiders told the Post they could charge [nearly $50,000](#) per placement.

The higher the security clearance, the more money a contractor makes. Ironically many of these contractors are retired intelligence officers supplementing their federal pensions by moonlighting for the government. The Bush administration justified massive outsourcing by claiming that contractors were ultimately cheaper than federal employees. However, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates admitted to the *Post* that federal workers cost the government about [25 percent less](#) than contractors.

The series briefly alludes to some high-profile misconduct by contractors including detainee torture at CIA black sites, Blackwater's civilian-shooting spree, MZM's bribes to a Republican member of the House Intelligence Committee for CIA contracts, and the "lewd-partying scandal" that engulfed ArmorGroup guards at the U.S. embassy compound in Kabul. The ArmorGroup guards were the national security geniuses who were busted with photographs they took of themselves taking vodka shots from their comrades' butt cracks.

Contractors have permeated every sphere of intelligence from aircraft and satellite operations to human intelligence to information technology. Contractors do things you'd assume would be the exclusive preserve of government agents. The TSA database lists 18 government organizations contracting with 37 private companies to conduct [psychological operations](#); 16 government organizations using 50 companies for ["special military operations"](#) (e.g., SWAT teams and unconventional warfare); and 14 government organizations contracting with 50 companies for top-secret [conventional military operations](#).

Top-secret projects aren't the exclusive preserve of familiar players like the CIA, the Pentagon, the NSA, and the FBI, either. You might be surprised to learn that the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Labor, and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service also do some [top-secret](#) work.

Thirty-two government organizations employ 36 different companies for [counter-drug operations](#). Many of the entries include links to the contractors' Web sites. "To you, it means not only more bang for your buck – but better bang," says the self-proclaimed "trim, nimble" [J.R. Mannes Defense Services Corp.](#) of its own performance. J.R. Mannes is listed as a counter-drug contractor in the TSA database, but its Web site reads more like that of an elite escort service. The ["Let's Partner"](#) tab of its Web site promises: "You'll be hard-pressed to find another resource whose principals and board members have deeper experience or more impressive credentials in the art." All this prowess results in "smoother and more successful outcomes on every level of assignment for you and your clients."

Perhaps the most alarming conclusion of the Top Secret America project is that nobody really knows if any of this is making us any safer. "[The system] has become so large, so unwieldy and so secretive that no one knows how much money it costs, how many people it employs, how many programs exist within it or exactly how many agencies do the same work," the authors conclude.

The sheer scope of intelligence activity has exploded beyond anyone's ability to keep track of the search, let alone interpret the vast amount of data that the enterprise churns out every day. One senior official confessed to the *Post*, "I'm not going to live long enough to be briefed on everything." Disturbingly, this guy is one of only a handful of so-called "Super Users" at the Department of Defense who are supposed to know all the department's activities.

The *Post* found that a large number of agencies were investigating the same questions. Defenders of the system say that a certain amount of redundancy is a feature, not a bug. "The architects of the U.S. intelligence system wanted different eyes to look at the same data from diverse perspectives because they wanted to avoid another surprise attack like Pearl Harbor," former deputy assistant secretary of defense Tom Mahnken wrote in response to the TSA project. His critique would be more convincing if the various agencies talked to each other. Generally speaking, they don't. The *Post* found that many agencies can't even communicate internally.

There's too much information coming in and not enough experienced people to interpret it and synthesize it. The NSA intercepts 1.7 billion e-mails, phone calls and other types of communications every day and divides some percentage of these between 70 different databases. The same problem repeats itself in every intelligence-gathering organization.

The *Post* reports that at least 263 intelligence organizations have been created or reorganized in response to 9/11. The Bush administration created the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) to keep track of the massive undertaking in 2004. Unfortunately ODNI hasn't been very successful, in part because the agency has no legal or budgetary control over the agencies it supposedly supervising. The CIA has been known to thwart ODNI by simply classifying reports as too secret for ODNI to see.

It's not like Congress is minding the store, either. In 2004, the 9/11 Commission unanimously pronounced Congressional oversight of intelligence to be "dysfunctional." In 2010, a followup report by the co-chairs of the commission concluded that while some progress had been made, congressional oversight of intelligence and homeland security remained an "unworkable" system and a "jurisdictional melee."

What's remarkable about the Top Secret America project is not so much the conclusions — it should come as no surprise that the U.S. spends billions of dollars on a bureaucratic under-supervised intelligence apparatus that enriches private contractors without necessarily making the country safer. What's remarkable is the thoroughness with which these claims are documented.

Arguably, in attempting to represent the state of such a complex system Top Secret America recreates the information overload in microcosm. The end product is so big and so dense that it's hard to take it all in. Initially, senior intelligence officials made some weak attempts to push back against Top Secret America, particularly against what they called the "myth" that contractors perform inherently governmental functions. They didn't take issue

with the *Post*'s claims about what contractors do, they quibbled about the definition of "inherently governmental."

In the end, the intelcrats let the conclusions of the series stand more or less unchallenged. Some may even be grateful. Priest and Arkin probably taught them a lot about their own business.

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