"Intelligence-driven" Global War on Terror: Newly Released NSA "WARgram Documents" Used to Build "Global Surveillance Infrastructure"

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Newly released internal NSA missives from the early days of the Iraq war show how quickly the agency's priorities shifted from providing wartime intelligence to coalition troops to being a "pervasive" part of the "intelligence-driven" global war on terror.

The documents, which have surfaced for the first time, outline how the NSA asked its employees for "unprecedented degrees of cooperation" to set up the global surveillance infrastructure revealed by Edward Snowden with the stated aim of combating terrorism worldwide.

The documents, called WARgrams, were newsletter-style messages sent in 2003 and 2004 by then-NSA Director Michael Hayden to what seems to be a large contingent of NSA employees. (Motherboard has reached out to the NSA to learn more about who, exactly, received the WARgrams.)

The first WARgram pitched Operation Iraqi Freedom as "an intense attack of relatively short duration intended to overwhelm the Iraqi ability to respond." It was sent sometime in the days or weeks leading up to the March 20, 2003 start of the war. Hayden wrote WARgrams were "designed to keep us all 'in the loop' with the latest developments during the campaign."

At least 68 WARgrams followed that first one. The documents were released last month in response to a 2008 Freedom of Information Act Request and were published online Tuesday on Government Attic, a repository of FOIA-ed federal documents. Prior to the release of these documents, WARgrams had never been publicly acknowledged by the NSA. WARgrams are referenced in one document released in Edward Snowden's stash of files, but are not included in any of those dumps.

Many of the documents are misdated as having come from 1998, but the events detailed in them correspond with and explicitly mention various events in the Iraq War, such as the April 2003 toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square, Baghdad. "Watching a statue of Saddam being destroyed and its head rolling down the street brings with it a certain sense of accomplishment," Hayden wrote.

WARgrams 7, 8, and 9 describe the role of NSA agents embedded with American soldiers

and are keen to show the NSA's ability to serve as the eyes and ears of coalition troops. Hayden discusses using intelligence as a "force multiplier" on the battlefield. These wartime, on-the-ground operations continued for several dozen WARgrams, which span from early 2003 to fall of that year. Other early WARgrams discuss the role NSA encryption was playing in safely communicating messages on the battlefield, mental health programs available for overworked NSA agents, and the portrayal of the war in the US media.

"We approached the war with Iraq as a corporate activity—with [US intelligence] linked in planning and executing. The results are stunning," Hayden wrote in WARgram 24.

WARgram 27 included this dispatch from an embedded NSA agent:

> "Daily life is Spartan. The hours are long. We're hot. We're dirty. Some of us smell pretty bad. There is no water for showers today. Chicken is being served for chow—again. I've asked team members if they'd rather be doing what they are doing or working another job in a nicer place. All agreed they'd rather be here."

The NSA set up something called the "Iraq Battle Bridge," the details of which are largely redacted and which has never been publicly discussed by any NSA leaders. In unredacted portions of the WARgrams, Hayden describes it as a plan to make parts of the NSA's 24/7 surveillance operations center—called the National Security Operations Center—available to those involved in fighting the war. Announced in WARgram 6, Hayden said it was a plan to "exercise command and control over the global cryptologic system for Operation IRAQI FREEDOM."

But as the war moved on, he decided to "transition" Iraq Battle Bridge into "Phase IV," which Hayden called the "post-hostility period."

"The lessons we learned from the Iraq Battle Bridge will help shape and inform our response to the next crisis," he wrote in WARgram 37, published sometime in April 2003. By WARgram 58, which was released in early 2004, Hayden began to demand "unprecedented cooperation" and "innovation" from NSA agents in what was expected to be "pervasive" surveillance exercises around the world.

In that missive, Hayden's emphasis changed from one of battlefield support to one of increasing surveillance both abroad and in the United States. "Because the Operations Against al Qa'ida Senior Leadership [sic] will be an intelligence-driven operation, we will become a pervasive and integral part of the fight," he wrote.

"The successful conclusion of this planned offensive will make our country safer by severely degrading al Qa'ida's ability to reconstitute/and conduct future operations," he added. "I expect unprecedented degrees of cooperation and innovation in all we do to support this critical effort."

In WARgram 61, titled "Confronting the Current Threat to the Homeland," he noted that NSA surveillance was absolutely necessary to prevent an imminent al-Qaeda attack planned for

before the 2004 presidential election for which "preparations … are almost complete."

"While U.S. and Allied facilities and citizens around the world remain tempting targets for a great number of terrorist groups and movements, the current threat to the Homeland is indeed real, and the clock is ticking," he wrote. "Our response is not an exercise about the future security of the nation, it's about doing all we can right now to protect our homes and loved ones from another round of massive attacks. We must not fail."

We know from Snowden's documents, of course, that the NSA's "innovation" in surveillance techniques extended far beyond suspected terrorists. These WARgrams show the early expansion of the US's surveillance apparatus, which was enabled by the 2001 passage of the PATRIOT Act. Section 215 of that law allowed the bulk collection of American communications.

Being an intelligence agency, the NSA was of course involved in surveillance prior to 2004. Documents leaked by Snowden show that NSA surveillance was integral in the initial decision to invade Iraq. Similarly, WARgrams was just one of many internal newsletters, emails, and memos that were distributed widely and spoke in frank terms of the NSA's wartime goings-on. For example, SIDToday, a classified newsletter leaked by Snowden once noted that "SIGINT support to the US Mission to the United Nations has enabled and continues to enable the diplomatic campaign against Iraq."

At times, the WARgrams released by the NSA related the relatively mundane slog of war. At others, it telegraphs the fact that the main role of the agency was slowly shifting to the one revealed by Snowden.

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