

# The Surveillance-Industrial Complex

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Published: January 9, 2009

“Probably the best place within the entire region to install a listening post is the Indian city of Mumbai,” James Bamford writes in “The Shadow Factory: The Ultra-Secret NSA from 9/11 to the Eavesdropping on America,” his latest book about the all-seeing, all-hearing [National Security Agency](#). Without question, he says, Mumbai, India, “represents the kind of location where the N.S.A. would seek to establish a secret presence.” And such a place, he notes elsewhere in his book, “presents an extremely tempting target for terrorists.”

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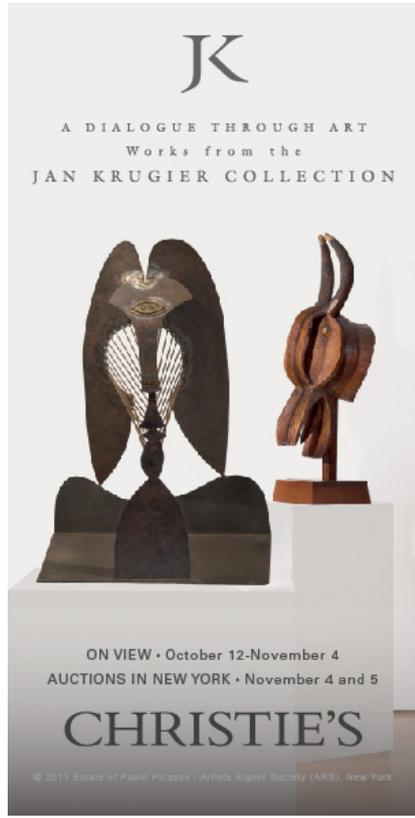


Illustration by Matt Hollister

## THE SHADOW FACTORY The Ultra-Secret NSA From 9/11 to the Eavesdropping on America

By James Bamford  
395 pp. Doubleday. \$27.95

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As it happened, I read those lines at precisely the same time that Mumbai became the scene of a bloody three-day siege that killed more than 170 people and wounded many hundreds. Telecoms were not attacked, and whether there was some symbolic connection between the N.S.A.'s ambitions and the terrorists' targeting is not a question that can be answered definitively here and now or, perhaps, ever. But it's a fair bet that Bamford will find a way to work the bloodbath at the Taj Mahal hotel into the long N.S.A. narrative that he began with "[The Puzzle Palace](#)" in 1982, followed up with "[Body of Secrets](#)" in 2001, and may well continue with paperback updates and further sequels after the present book. These are the kinds of details, or coincidences, that Bamford loves. In "The Shadow Factory" he piles one on top of another — events, addresses, room numbers — in a slapped-together text that often blends facts with speculation to evoke a pervasive atmosphere of conspiracy.

Which is not to say conspiracies do not exist. At its core and at its best, Bamford's book is a schematic diagram tracing the obsessions and excesses of the Bush administration after 9/11, a valuable complement to the accumulating narratives of torture abroad and legalistic sophistry at home. Other writers might conclude, as Bamford does, that "there is now the capacity to make tyranny total in America," without really leading readers to

think they'll be waterboarded someday. It would be hard, however, for those reading this book to believe that their digital identities and electronic communications, of any type over any medium, have not been subject to unreasonable search and seizure, constantly and without warrants or recourse.

But let's go back to India for a moment. Why would Mumbai be such a valuable listening post for the N.S.A.? To understand the answer, and indeed to follow the central argument of the book about just why and how United States government eavesdropping has become so pervasive and invasive, one has to know that a vast majority of the world's communications are now transmitted over fiber-optic cables. In 1988 they carried only 2 percent of international traffic, but by 2000 they carried 80 percent. When microwave transmissions and communications satellites were the medium, messages were relatively easy for the N.S.A. to intercept, en masse and through the open air. But to catch the ever-growing flood of digital data in the bundled strands of fiber that crisscross the planet — voice calls, e-mail, faxes, videos and so much more — you have to tap into the cables directly. Or, better still, you can set up a monitoring operation at the switch, where many different cables come together. Once you have a facility to split off the signals

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without interrupting them, you're plugged in to a mother lode of megabytes — millions going by every few seconds. Mumbai, as it happens, has the central switch for much of Asia and virtually all the cables of the Middle East.

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For the moment, at least, the most important switches of all are in the United States, which is still the center of the digital communications universe. Today, even phone calls between neighbors on the far side of the world are broken up into packets that may wind up crossing American territory, albeit at the speed of light, before they get down the block in, say, Baghdad. Before 9/11, the N.S.A. tried with only very limited success to tap into the United States switches. But in the weeks after the attacks on New York and Washington, Air Force Lt. Gen. [Michael V. Hayden](#), then the head of the N.S.A., , “succeeded in gaining the cooperation of nearly all of the nation’s telecommunications giants,” according to Bamford. Could those switches and cables being tapped in the United States be called wires? Yes indeed. And was this being done without warrants? Yes, again. But “warrantless wiretapping” — that phrase connoting scandalous disrespect for American laws and freedoms — doesn’t begin to describe the staggering volume of raw information the cables put at the N.S.A.’s disposal.

The process is the opposite of what “wiretapping” used to mean in the popular imagination: alligator clips on a single wire that got you exactly the phone line you wanted to monitor. The N.S.A.’s approach in effect intercepted just about all communications, then used sophisticated computers and software to sift through the material. And, as with conventional warfare, these big-ticket spying operations were contracted to private companies that put former government employees on their payrolls — what Bamford calls “the surveillance-industrial complex.”

Is all this really necessary to fight the terrorist threat that actually exists? Is it really useful to accumulate watch lists that have half a million names on them? The administration’s core argument, including and especially after The New York Times broke the story of the warrantless program in 2005, is that it is vital to prevent another 9/11. But in a ferocious, detailed attack on Hayden (who is now the director of the [Central Intelligence Agency](#)), Bamford argues that the N.S.A. in 2000 and 2001 had not only the means, but also the actual information necessary to prevent the attacks on New York and Washington. The agency had been monitoring communications out of an [Al Qaeda](#) command center in Yemen, and those had pointed squarely to the presence of two key plotters in California. Yet Hayden at that moment didn’t want to risk any semblance of monitoring people in the United States, even though there was plenty of latitude to tap those two terrorists under the [Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act](#) (FISA).

One of the most disturbing passages in the book explores the paradox that the final meetings among the hijackers before they embarked on their missions took place in Laurel, Md., which is essentially the N.S.A.’s company town. Hayden could have practically observed them “from his eighth-floor window,” Bamford writes; their base was the Valencia Motel, “a shabby truck stop just two miles away from Hayden’s office.” No wonder that in the aftermath of 9/11 Hayden wanted to be seen by the president as vacuuming up all the information in the world, and warrants be damned.

So, have the laws promulgated since the program was exposed, including the one voted for by Senator [Barack Obama](#) last summer, ended the nightmare of pervasive surveillance? Bamford thinks not. Presidential power remains abundant, he says, and “it is the political courage that is in short supply.” Loopholes are easy to maneuver in an atmosphere of hypersecrecy, and what the N.S.A. does not do itself, it may well ask of partner agencies with similar abilities. That was why Bamford was writing about India. It could be one of those partners. Bamford’s sources from India’s intelligence service suggest that the last major obstacle to bugging the switch in Mumbai actually was the state-owned company that ran it But it was privatized earlier this decade, sold to the enormous Indian holding company called the [Tata Group](#), which also owns, among other properties, the Taj Mahal hotel. Probably just a coincidence, but yet another interesting detail.

*Christopher Dickey, Newsweek’s Paris bureau chief, is the author of the forthcoming “Securing the City: Inside America’s Best Counterterrorism Force — The NYPD.”*

A version of this article appeared in print on January 11, 2009, on page BR11 of the New York edition.

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