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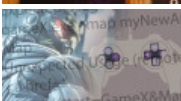
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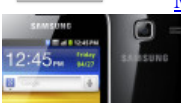
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Former NSA Officials Detail Failures of Agency Programs in Letter to Obama

Follow @dennisf by Dennis Fisher   January 10, 2014 , 1:23 pm

In the weeks and months leading up to 9/11, the National Security Agency had been working on a new information-gathering and analysis system known as THINTHREAD, a system that was built in-house and was meant to replace the uncountable number of stand-alone collection systems and attendant databases the agency had. Its architects believed it had the ability to simplify the agency's collection and analysis tasks, all while protecting the privacy of Americans. But the pilot program was scrapped three weeks before 9/11 and ultimately eliminated in 2002 in favor of a contractor-supplied system that went way over budget and never actually became operational.

The details of the THINTHREAD development and the decision by senior NSA officials eventually to discard it are part of a new memo sent to President Barack Obama by a group of former agency officials, some of whom were directly involved in the system's development. The memo, signed by William Binney, Thomas Drake, Edward Loomis and J. Kirk Wiebe, asks Obama to meet with the former intelligence officers to discuss the recent NSA revelations and the recommendations of the president's own review group on how to fix the agency.

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"Given the closed circle surrounding you, we are allowing for the possibility that the smell from these rotting red herrings has not yet reached you – even though your own Review Group has found, for example, that NSA's bulk collection has thwarted exactly zero terrorist plots," they write in the letter.

"In short, we would like to talk to you about things you might otherwise have no way of knowing, given that our information reflects so poorly on top

NSA management past and present. You and the country are ill served by the reluctance of your national security advisers to give a hearing to former intelligence insiders like us. Your advisers may be too inexperienced to realize that circling the wagons is not going to work this time. This time the truth will out."

Binney is a well-known former NSA official and whistleblower, who, along with Loomis and Wiebe, raised questions about the costs of the TRAILBLAZER program that replaced THINTHREAD. Drake, a former contractor who went to work at NSA on Sept. 11, 2001, also raised questions about TRAILBLAZER and later was charged with mishandling classified documents, charges that were dropped after he pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor.

The THINTHREAD project was led by Binney, Wiebe and Loomis and was designed "for collection and rapid analysis of billions of electronic records relating to targets of intelligence interest", a description that sounds quite a bit like the mass surveillance systems that have been exposed publicly in the last seven months. However, during the development process, they put in a feature that enabled the automatic encryption of any communications of U.S. citizens that were swept up in that collection. That feature would help the agency resolve the problem of needing a warrant in order to legally collect Americans' data.

"Data on U.S. citizens could be decrypted only if a judge approved it after a finding that there was probable cause to believe that the target was connected with terrorism or other crimes. It was also considerably cheaper, easier, and more secure to store such data in encrypted format rather than allow that raw information to remain vulnerable to unauthorized parties in unencrypted form, as NSA chose to do," the letter says.

THINTHREAD cost roughly $3 million to build and get up and running at three NSA sites, but it was put on the shelf in favor of an outside system called TRAILBLAZER that had an initial budget of $3.8 billion.

"In the end, NSA Director Michael Hayden rejected THINTHREAD in favor of a contractor program called TRAILBLAZER, upon which billions of dollars were ultimately squandered and which never became operational. NSA SIGINT (signals intelligence) Director Maureen Baginski announced the Requiem for THINTHRAD to William Binney and Edward Loomis in a private meeting on August 20, 2001, three weeks before 9/11," the letter says.

The former NSA officials say in their letter that TRAILBLAZER was killed in 2006 after not producing any usable components and responsibility for major new intelligence initiatives was moved to the Department of Defense afterward. Drake, who was still at the NSA after Binney, Wiebe and Loomis had resigned after 9/11, said he tried to resurrect THINTHREAD, but to no avail.
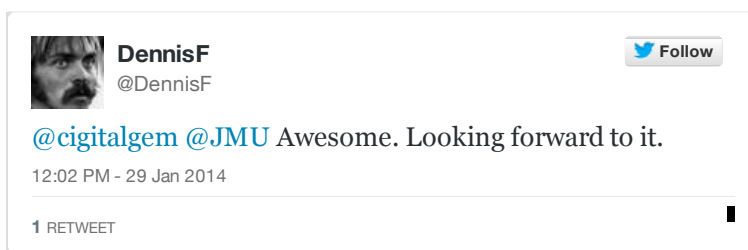
""As I pursued what I was tasked to do, I was surprised and deeply troubled to discover that, with a secret go-ahead from the White House, NSA had unchained itself from the protections of the Fourth Amendment and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978. The vast power of NSA had been unleashed secretly on US citizens through a massive bulk surveillance program called STELLARWIND, a program completely unknown to most if not all of those working at the SIGINT Automatic Research Center. In the weeks after 9/11, 40 to 50 servers began arriving followed quickly by a whole new set of technical people who on September 26, 2001, turned STELLARWIND loose on all of us," Drake said in the letter.

STELLARWIND comprised the collection and analysis of data such as emails, phone calls and other records belonging to Americans. The letter from Binney, Loomis, Wiebe and Drake also details some other claims by intelligence officials that they say are sketchy at best, and encourage Obama to look more closely at the NSA programs and potential abuses.

"As you ponder more recent abuses, we hope you will address the deficiencies of NSA management past and present – those who have been in charge of tens of thousands of patriotic workers doing their best in an agency whose mission is critical to our national security. And we suggest that you might wish to avoid repeating the dodgy rhetoric aimed at "proving" to us all that tragedies like 9/11 cannot be prevented unless we collect every bit and byte of signals intelligence we can," the letter says.

"We are in a position to know that collecting everything makes very little sense from a technical point of view. And, as citizens, we are offended by the callous disregard of the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution we all swore a solemn oath to support and defend against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

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[Dennis Fisher is a journalist with more than 13 years of experience covering information security.](#)

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by Michael Mimoso

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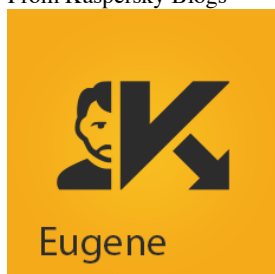
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