

BookReviews

Chattering about SIGINT

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The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 ignited a rethinking of American intelligence. Once, we had a giant, well-organized enemy that could annihilate us with nuclear weapons, even though it never attacked us directly. Now, we have a tenuous, distributed enemy whose military power is negligible by comparison, but which has attacked us repeatedly. When the attacks succeed, we blame intelligence for our failure to stop them and wonder whether the system built to fight the Soviet Union is right for the new enemy. Should we continue developing expensive looking and listening devices or should we be recruiting and training agents to aid in the fight against terrorism? Understanding this debate requires understanding intelligence—particularly signals intelligence (SIGINT), the intelligence that comes from analyzing the communications of our enemies—and sometimes friends—around the world.

With his first book, *Chatter: Dispatches from the Secret World of Global Eavesdropping*, Patrick Radden Keefe sets out to unravel the mystery surrounding SIGINT. Unfortunately, SIGINT is both complicated and secret, which makes it difficult to write about, and Keefe has given us only a chatty and shallow tour of the subject.

What *Chatter* lacks in depth has been replaced by breadth, devoting chapters to SIGINT's secret culture, misuse, and improprieties. Some of these—spying on the United Nations (UN) in the run-up to the Iraq

War—are contemporary, whereas others—Watergate-era intelligence abuses—are already well documented. Keefe has built his book around the things he has been able to learn and spiced up the account with tales of his investigation. We get the historical, the geographical, and the sensational, sprinkled with a little of the technical and a lot of human interest.

The most relevant chapter, “Go-liath Protests: Making Sense of Signals,” discusses the difficulties of SIGINT and current NSA developments, such as outsourcing translation and patenting intelligence techniques. Although cryptography is mentioned here, along with optical fiber, as a rising obstacle to SIGINT, there is no discussion of the contrast of NSA's newly-public cryptographic activities with its traditional policies.

In explaining his title, Keefe observes that “chatter,” which once meant casual or frivolous conversation, has taken on a sinister new meaning: snippets of conversation among terrorists conspiring to attack the civilized world. He makes no mention of the word's traditional SIGINT usage, “operators' chatter,” which describes procedural and personal messages that often surround official communications. *Chatter* is most valuable as a source of information about the importance, meaning, and location of accompanying official messages. This is symptomatic of an essential truth that Keefe fails to grasp: SIGINT is not so much about individual messages as it is about communications' structure as a whole.

The subtext to Keefe's book is skepticism of the value of SIGINT versus human intelligence. He takes lightly the view that forcing Al Qaeda to rely less on satellite telephones and more on couriers encumbers its operations and reduces its agility. He fails to appreciate that although the time needed to redirect SIGINT systems against new targets is often frustrating, recruiting

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Patrick Radden Keefe, *Chatter: Dispatches from the Secret World of Global Eavesdropping*, Random House, 2005, ISBN:1400060346, 288 pages, US\$24.95.

and training spies to infiltrate a new target is also time consuming.

At his best, Keefe gives us juicy little nuggets about current SIGINT style and activity. At his most charming, he discusses his own experiences as he traveled the world doing his research. Nowhere, however, does he convey the understanding required to contribute intelligently to a discussion of SIGINT's role in contemporary statecraft. □

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