



NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY  
CENTRAL SECURITY SERVICE  
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[REDACTED] Jeremy) Duffy  
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Re: Pre-Publication Review (PP-23-4453)

Mr. Duffy:

NSA has completed its pre-publication review of your document, "Reflections on an NSA Career" **PP-23-4453**, received in hardcopy. In regards to the submitted documents, we have determined that the document is **PARTIALLY DENIED** for public release as some of the information contained protected and/or classified NSA-related equities. You may use the redacted version or you may remove those sections entirely. Security will contact you regarding handling of classified information.

Nothing in this notice of approval should be construed to indicate that the information you included in your document is factually accurate.

This approval is for the exact information submitted. Any changes will require a new prepublication review, except for the following:

- removing information
- reformatting
- correcting spelling, syntax or other grammatical inaccuracies

Your lifelong prepublication review obligation applies only to NSA- or IC-related information gained solely through your NSA affiliation. Prepublication review is not required for most publicly available information, including all information not related to NSA, the IC, or your specific NSA duties. Official NSA-related information appearing in the public domain should not automatically be considered UNCLASSIFIED and approved for public release unless an authorized disclosure has been made. (e.g. NSA-related information appearing on the NSA.gov or "IC on the Record" Web sites.)

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Public Release Review Team

# Reflections on an NSA Career

*A Mini-book by Jeremy Duffy*

Inside the US's most secretive spy agency, dedicated employees protect our national security interests while suffering a level of toxicity that could send nuclear lizards tap-dancing through downtown Tokyo. Whether granting multi-million-dollar boondoggle contracts or forcing adoption of therapy-inducing tools and processes, employees watched helplessly as posturing and promotion bullets drove decisions instead of collaboration with stakeholders and the literal world-class experts at hand.

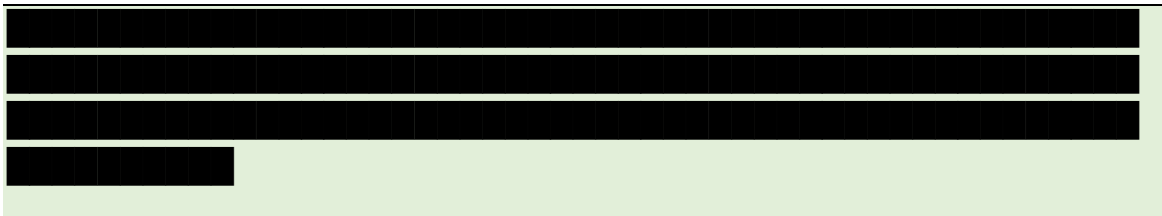
In my book, **Are You Listening – Lessons in waste, abuse, and mismanagement from the agency that doesn't listen**, I explain in detail the NSA failings by managers and execs who, regardless of any supposed good intentions, ultimately built dysfunction by treating the workforce as an adversary instead of an ally.

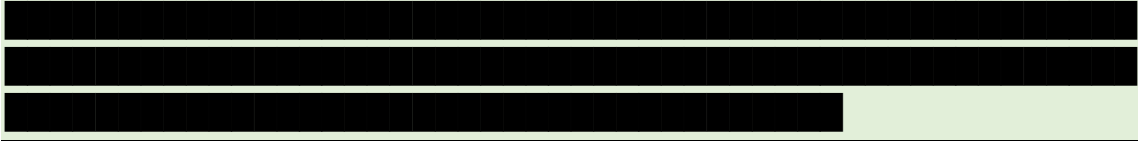
It's a wild insider-view of what it's like behind the veil of national security where public scrutiny (and Congressional oversight) can't reach, but the space and theme of the book couldn't fit all the information I wanted to share. That's why I've split the extra content into this mini-book. Enjoy!

## The Good Stuff

### Providing an outlet

The NSA failed to really harness the power of social tools, but at least we had some. If I had an HR question or problem making the computer do what it was supposed to, I could check with the workforce at large and seek answers and assistance. And, though the NSA could have clamped down on griping and commiserating, they *generally* let us write what we wanted so long as it didn't deviate too far from work-related conversation.



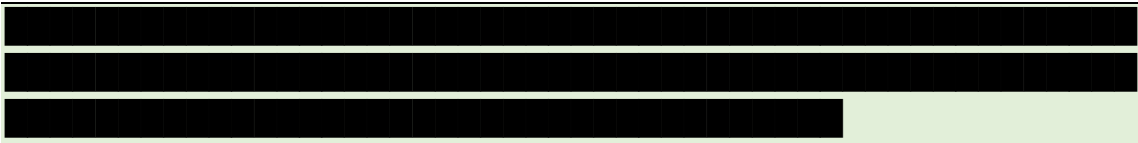


It's smart of an organization to have a watercooler forum where employees can talk, and where managers and execs can *listen*.

For example, planned renovations to a large auditorium resulted in an outcry due to concept art that showed significantly less seating. Instead of leaving the frustrations to fester, an exec involved in the overhaul explained the concept art wasn't to scale and there would actually be more seating than before.

Openly posted content and comments allow managers/execs to descend, deus-ex machina, to address the issues directly. Sometimes simply participating in the conversation is enough while, other times, directly reaching out to involved people to have more focused conversations.

Though the full potential was never realized, NSA social tools not only helped people feel less isolated and ignored, it sometimes led to real and valuable change.



**Time and Schedule**

One of the coolest aspects of working for a secret agency is that if your boss tries to send work home with you, you can literally have them arrested. If you DO work over 40 hours, the time is captured as "Credit" that can be used later to leave early or take entire days off without using your vacation time. Schedules are extremely flexible with most offices not caring how early or late you come in so long as you're around in the "core hours" (between 10am and 2pm).

NSA management is required to have a demonstrable mission need to deny leave requests so it's easy to go to any family event or catch up with your friends who suddenly popped into town for the day. Additionally, you earn sick leave on top of your normal time off and this can be

used when you're sick, when someone in your immediate family is sick, or when any of you have doctor or dental appointments.

This flexibility allowed me to realize one of my most important career priorities – to spend as much time as possible my wife and young children.

### **Opportunities to Travel**

If you have a work role that requires travel, you may have the chance to visit a variety of different cities, states, and countries on the government dime (what a co-worker once referred to as “state-sponsored tourism”).

Just like any business travel, the organization pays for your flights, rental cars, hotel stay, per-diem (daily expense allowance), and so on. I ended up getting to experience several different locations and get paid extra to do it. Not a bad deal!

### **Opportunities to Teach**

The NSA's National Cryptologic University is always on the lookout for adjunct professors. After completing a few classes and clearing a few hurdles, I was certified to teach the Briefing Skills course (a Speech 101 equivalent course).

In this way, I refined my own speaking skills while helping others learn theirs. Something that was quite an interesting challenge in an agency full of people so introverted, that I once had a student hand me a card with instructions if she had a panic attack and passed out during class. Despite that, she and every other student of my classes successfully completed the speeches and reported improve speaking ability by the class's end.

In jobs where we too-often found ourselves bored, underutilized, or working on near-worthless tasks, the Briefing Skills course was a uniquely fulfilling side-gig.

### **Living There**

Visiting California, Alaska, Hawaii, Florida, Canada (and more) was nice, but that didn't mean I had the time or authorization to explore. What about living there instead? ██████████

[REDACTED]

There is no better way to explore a part of the world than to live there and opportunities made available through the Agency made that possible.

## Favorite moments

### ACLU Pizza Palace

Clearly the ACLU isn't a huge fan of the NSA, but that doesn't mean I couldn't be a fan of theirs. When I worked for the Operations Security office, it was my job to teach people OPSEC - which meant teaching them about the dangers of information advantage.

At that time, the ACLU had published a video dramatization online, titled "Pizza Palace", that showed what life might be like if everyone down to the pizza joint on the corner had access to a full data profile on you (address, work details, health information, spending history, etc.). It was perfect.

I located the DC chapter of the ACLU and contacted their director. The man who received my email assured me they have no restrictions on how people use their work, though he confessed to being rather surprised that someone from the NSA would want to share a video that, to a large degree, was a direct criticism of our agency.

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<sup>1</sup> [REDACTED]

I ended up meeting him at a conference later that year and we shared a laugh over it.

### Coffee with a Criminal

“Kevin M [REDACTED] is a famous hacker who was the first ever to get on the FBI’s most-wanted list” ... I used these words often in my OPSEC classes. When I found out he was being hosted at an NSA speaking event, I was excited to see him in person.

His presentation on cellphone hacking was interesting, though he kept nervously saying “you guys probably know this already” to a room of over 200 agency employees who, on average, definitely didn’t “know this already”.

By chance, a co-worker had managed to arrange to meet Kevin for coffee after the talk and invited me to come along. We had a great discussion about computer security issues, I managed to get one of his famous “lockpick business cards”, and I reassured him that his technical expectations of the average NSA employee was *far* too high.

### Motivational Speakers

Early in my career, the NSA arranged a series of motivational speakers to talk to the workforce. One was a lady who did her best, but was one of those “stand up and hug your neighbor, send some love energy to the person next to you” types that probably landed a good number of NSA introverts in therapy.

Connie P [REDACTED] was memorable mostly for her two-question life advice: “Every day in the morning; you get up, get dressed, grab your things, and go, *but is that somewhere you want to go?* Then at the end of the day, it’s time to go home, *but is that somewhere you want to go?* If the answer to either question is ‘no’, you need a life change.” Simple and brilliant.

*(trigger warning: death)*

Then there was Jaime C [REDACTED] who’d climbed Mt. Everest on three separate occasions. Using expert storytelling, he entertained us with the challenges of “yak-crap soup” and in-fighting over toilet paper squares before talking about failure. On their second climb during a

“summit push”, if their climber hadn’t accepted defeat and turned around, he would have died (and very nearly did). As he told the story, he asked us, “when is quitting the right thing to do?”

I’ve never forgotten the powerful lesson of the consequences you face when being too proud to fail.

## Domestic spying

For what used to be a fairly unknown government agency, the NSA ended up on the front-page pretty frequently during my time there. Being on the inside as it all unfolded was honestly pretty interesting. Let’s cover them chronologically:

### Bush’s Warrantless Wiretapping Scandal

I hadn’t been with the agency for long when the story broke that the NSA was tapping phone calls without warrants. It was sensible to be asked by execs to direct all media inquiries to the proper department, but it was grating in the extreme how frequently they reminded us “how important the mission is” and that we shouldn’t doubt ourselves because “we were cleared by the legal department” - as if any of that was relevant to the issue at hand.

With the vapid internal messaging combined with the fact I’ve never actually worked the “mission” side of the NSA, I didn’t know any more than an average citizen about the situation until the National Geographic special, *Inside the NSA*, was released.

Having been made in cooperation with the agency, I’ll assume that their summary is accurate:

- Adversaries communicate over the same networks as Americans. For us to follow them, we had to follow them into US networks.
- Bush made a secret order to allow NSA to do exactly that, though its legality was called into question.
- In 2008, congress amended the law to allow Bush’s order to continue.



So basically, the NSA broke the law under Presidential directive and then it was decided by the powers that be (Congress) that they would retroactively legalize the activity in order to prevent implication of the various people who overstepped their authority.

Was that the right decision? It depends.

Given how oversaturated TV shows and movies are starring heroes, vigilantes, or rogue government agents who break laws to do the right thing, I think the question of whether we can forgive such transgressions for a sufficiently compelling result has been settled. But, then again... those stories have fictional bad guys *so heinous* and with circumstances *so dire and urgent* that our protagonist is clearly in the right by contrast. Can that be compared to the NSA's standing order spanning questionable "targets" over the course of months or *years*? **Not likely.**

Of perhaps scant comfort, even if it was illegal (and unwarranted), I believe the fears people have about the NSA are generally unfounded (for now)<sup>2</sup>. I certainly never saw any information to the contrary and they'll clearly claim as much if asked, but the NSA has no right to expect us (ordinary citizens or employees) to "just trust them". In the face of such accusations, we are owed an answer.

At the least:

- A clear (and *timely*) answer to the question of "did you break the law?"
- Public accounting of the people responsible and clear consequences for their transgressions (or director-level people willing to take the responsibility on their behalf).
- An appropriate apology, meaningful reparations, and a reasonable measure of reassurance for how we will avoid this type of issue in the future<sup>3</sup>.

What we got instead was:

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<sup>2</sup> Like Batman, they were just side-stepping the rules in our pursuit of Dr. Bad Guy. That doesn't make what we did OK nor does it handle the issue of our *potential* for harm (but more on this later...).

<sup>3</sup> These are the components of apologies in general, but they still apply to organizations.

- Total silence.
- Persecution of the whistleblower who exposed the issue.

This is the first time that I watched the agency fumble a leak response. Here's the second:

## The Summer of Snowden

Sometime in the early summer of 2013, Edward Snowden proclaimed to the world: "The NSA has gone too far!"

The public story was that the prophecies in Orwell's 1984 had arrived! The NSA was spying on every US citizen's phone calls!

Determined to win back public support and defend ourselves from the false and misconstrued accusations, the NSA leapt in to action with all the life and vigor of a month-old, swamp-dredged cadaver. The flaccid and putrid Public Relations effort that followed reassured **no one**: neither NSA employees nor the public.

### Ignore it... it will go away

Governments of the world clutched their pearls condemned our activities despite having similar or more invasive intelligence programs of their own. Members of Congress, even the ones who'd been fully briefed on the program previously, grabbed their banjos and jumped on the blamewagon. And the media happily spun details into scandal with no regard to truth or consequences.

But most culpable of all for the spread of misinformation was the NSA itself. With its PR strategy of "ignore it... maybe it will go away", the public could only assume that every unanswered allegation was true

**Silence in the face of  
controversy sounds  
exactly like confirmation.**