The government has built a national security and intelligence system so big, so complex and so hard to manage, no one really knows if it’s fulfilling its most important purpose: keeping citizens safe.

As the federal government continues to expand its top-secret activities, its search for workers with security clearances is constant.

A hidden world, growing beyond control

by Dana Priest and William M. Arkin

The top-secret world the government created in response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, has become so large, so unwieldy and so secretive that no one knows how much money it costs, how many people it employs, how many programs exist within it or exactly how many agencies do the same work.

These are some of the findings of a two-year investigation by The Washington Post that discovered what amounts to an alternative geography of the United States, a Top Secret America hidden from public view and lacking in thorough oversight. After nine years of unprecedented spending and growth, the result is that the system put in place to keep the United States safe is so massive that its effectiveness is impossible to determine.

The investigation’s other findings include:

\* Some 1,271 government organizations and 1,303 private companies work on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security and intelligence in about 10,000 locations across the United States.

\* An estimated 854,000 people, nearly 1½ times as many people as live in Washington, D.C., hold top-secret security clearances.

\* In Washington and the surrounding area, 31 building complexes for top-secret intelligence work are under construction or have been built since September 2001. Together they occupy the equivalent of almost three Pentagons or 22 U.S. Capitol buildings — about 17 million square feet of space.

\* Many security and intelligence agencies do the same work, creating redundancy and waste. For example, 51 federal organizations and military commands, operating in 15 U.S. cities, track the flow of money to and from terrorist networks.

\* Analysts who make sense of documents and conversations obtained by foreign and domestic spying share their judgment by publishing 50,000 intelligence reports each year — a volume so large that many are routinely ignored.

These are not academic issues: Lack of focus, not lack of resources, was at the heart of the Fort Hood shooting that left 13 dead, as well as the Christmas Day bomb attempt thwarted not by the thousands of analysts employed to find lone terrorists but by an alert airline passenger who saw smoke coming from his seatmate.

They are also issues that greatly concern some of the people in charge of the nation’s security.
"There has been so much growth since 9/11 that getting your arms around that — not just for the DNI [Director of National Intelligence] but for any individual, for the director of the CIA, for the secretary of defense — is a challenge," Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said in an interview with The Post last week.

In the Defense Department, where more than two-thirds of the intelligence programs reside, only a handful of senior officials — called Super Users — have the ability to even know about all the department's activities. But as two of the Super Users indicated in interviews, there is simply no way they can keep up with the nation's most sensitive work.

"I'm not going to live long enough to be briefed on everything" was how one Super User put it. The other recounted that for his initial briefing, he was escorted into a tiny, dark room, seated at a small table and told he couldn't take notes. Program after program began flashing on a screen, he said, until he yelled "Stop!" in frustration.

"I wasn't remembering any of it," he said.

Underscoring the seriousness of these issues are the conclusions of retired Army Lt. Gen. John R. Vines, who was asked last year to review the method for tracking the Defense Department's most sensitive programs. Vines, who once commanded 165,000 troops in Iraq and is familiar with complex problems, was stunned by what he discovered.

"I'm not aware of any agency with the authority, responsibility or a process in place to coordinate all these interagency and commercial activities," he said in an interview. "The complexity of this system defies description."

The result, he added, is that it's impossible to tell whether the country is safer because of all this spending and all these activities. "Because it lacks a synchronizing process, it inevitably results in message disconnect, reduced effectiveness and waste," Vines said. "We consequently can't effectively assess whether it is making us more safe."

The Post's investigation is based on government documents and contracts, job descriptions, property records, corporate and social networking Web sites, additional records, and hundreds of interviews with intelligence, military and corporate officials and former officials. Most requested anonymity either because they are prohibited from speaking publicly or because they said they feared retaliation at work for describing their concerns.

The Post's online database of government organizations and private companies was built entirely on public records. The investigation focused on top-secret work because the amount classified at the secret level is too large to accurately track.

Today's article describes the government's role in this expanding enterprise. Tuesday's article describes the government's dependence on private contractors. Wednesday's is a portrait of one Top Secret America community. On the Web, an extensive, searchable database built by The Post about Top Secret America is available at toposécretamerica.com.

Defense Secretary Gates, in his interview with The Post, said that he does not believe the system has become too big to manage but that getting precise data is sometimes difficult. Singling out the growth of intelligence units in the Defense Department, he said he intends to review those programs for waste. "Nine years after 9/11, it makes a lot of sense to sort of take a look at this and say, 'Okay, we've built tremendous capability, but do we have more than we need?'" he said.

CIA Director Leon Panetta, who was also interviewed by The Post last week, said he's began mapping out a five-year plan for his agency because the levels of spending since 9/11 are not sustainable. "Particularly with these deficits, we're going to hit the wall. I want to be prepared for that," he said. "Frankly, I think everyone in intelligence ought to be doing that."

In an interview before he resigned as the director of national intelligence in May, retired Adm. Dennis C. Blair said he did not believe there was overlap and redundancy in the intelligence world. "Much of what appears to be redundancy is, in fact, providing tailored intelligence for many different customers," he said. Blair also expressed confidence that subordinates told him what he needed to know. "I have visibility on all the important intelligence programs across the community, and there are processes in place to ensure the different intelligence capabilities are working together where they need to," he said.

Weeks later, as he sat in the corner of a ballroom at the Willard Hotel waiting to give a speech, he mused about The Post's findings. "After 9/11, when we decided to attack violent extremism, we did as we so often do in this country," he said. "The attitude was, if it's worth doing, it's probably worth overdoing."

Outside a gated subdivision of mansions in McLean, a lane of cars idles every weekday morning as a new day in Top Secret America gets underway. The drivers wait patiently to turn left, then crawl up a hill and around a bend to a destination that is not on any public map and not announced by any street sign.

Liberty Crossing tries hard to hide from view. But in the winter, leafless trees can't conceal a mountain of cement and windows the size of five Wal-Mart stores stacked on top of one another rising behind a gray stone. One step too close without the right badge, and men in black jump out of nowhere, guns at the ready.

Past the armored guard and the hydraulic steel barriers, at least 1,700 federal employees and 1,300 private contractors work at Liberty Crossing, the nickname for the two headquarters of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and its National Counterterrorism Center. The two share a police force, a canine unit and thousands of parking spaces.

Liberty Crossing is at the center of the
collection of U.S. government agencies and corporate contractors that mushroomed after the 9/11 attacks. But it is not nearly the biggest, the most costly or even the most secretive part of the 9/11 enterprise.

In an Arlington County office building, the lobby directory doesn’t include the Air Force’s mysterious headquarters X QUO's work, but there’s a big “Welcome!” sign in the hallway greeting visitors who know to step off the elevator on the third floor. In Elkridge, Md., a clandestine program hides in a tall concrete structure fitted with false windows to look like a normal office building. In Arnold, Mo., the location is across the street from a Dagron and a Home Depot.

In St. Petersburg, Fla., it’s in a modest brick bungalow in a run-down business park.

Every day across the United States, 894,000 civil servants, military personnel and private contractors with top-secret security clearances are scoured into offices protected by electromagnetic locks, retinal scanners and fortified walls that even dropping equipment cannot penetrate.

This is not exactly President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “military-industrial complex,” which emerged with the Cold War and centered on building nuclear weapons to deter the Soviet Union. This is a national security enterprise with a more amorphous mission: defeating transnational violent extremists.

With the information about this mission is classified. That is the reason it is so difficult to gauge the success and identify the problems of Top Secret America, including whether money is being spent wisely. The U.S. intelligence budget is vast, publicly announced last year as $72 billion, 2% the size it was on Sept. 10, 2001.

But the figure doesn’t include many military activities or domestic counterterrorism programs.

At least 20 percent of the government organizations that exist to fend off terrorist threats were established after September 11. Many that existed before the attacks grew to historic proportions as the Bush administration and Congress gave agencies more money than they were capable of responsibly spending.

The Pentagon’s Defense Intelligence Agency, for example, has gone from 7,500 employees in 2000 to 16,500 today. The budget of the National Security Agency, which conducts electronic eavesdropping, doubled. Thirty-five of the Joint Terrorism Task Forces became 106. It was phenomenal growth that began as soon as the attacks ended.

Nine days after the attacks, Congress committed $40 billion beyond what was in the federal budget to fortify domestic defenses and to launch a global offensive against al Qaeda. It followed that up with an additional $35.5 billion in 2002 and $44 billion in 2003. That was only a beginning.

With the quick infusion of money, military and intelligence agencies multiplied. Twenty-four organizations were created by the end of 2001, including the Office of Homeland Security and the Foreign Terrorist Asset Tracking Task Force. In 2002, 37 more were created to track weapons of mass destruction, collect threat tips and coordinate the new focus on counterterrorism. That was followed the next year by 36 new organizations; and 26 after that; and 31 more; and 32 more; and 20 or more each in 2005, 2006, and 2007.

In all, at least 283 organizations have been created or reorganized as a response to 9/11. Each has required more people, and those people have required more administrative and logistic support: phone operators, secretaries, librarians, architects, contractors, construction workers, air-conditioning mechanics, because of where they work, even janitors with top-secret clearances.

With so many more employees, units and organizations, the lines of responsibility began to bud. To remedy this, the recommendation of the bipartisan 9/11 Commission, the George W. Bush administration and Congress decided to create an agency in 2004 to reorganize responsibilities of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) to bring the colossal effort under control.

What was that idea, Washington has its own way.

The first problem was that the law passed by Congress did not give the director clear legal or budgetary authority over intelligence matters, which meant he wouldn’t have power over the individual agencies he was supposed to control.

The second problem. Even before the first director, Ambassador John D. Negroponte, was on the job, the turf battles began. The Defense Department shifted billions of dollars of one budget into and another so that the ODNI could not touch it, according to two senior officials who watched the process. The CIA reclassified some of its most sensitive information to a higher level so the National Counterterrorism Center staff, part of the ODNI, would not be allowed to see it, said former intelligence officers involved.

And then came a problem that continues to this day, which has to do with ODNI’s rapid expansion.

When it opened in the spring of 2005, Negroponte’s office was all of 11 people stuffed into a secure vault with closet-size rooms a block from the White House. A year later, the building agency moved to two floors of another building. In April 2006, it moved into its huge permanent home, Liberty Crossing.

Today, people who work in the intelligence agencies say they remain unclear about what the ODNI is in charge of. To be sure, there has been some progress, especially in intelligence-sharing, information technology and budget reform. The DNI and his managers held interagency meetings every day to promote collaboration.

The last director, Blair, doggedly pursued such nitty-gritty issues as procurement reform, compatible computer networks, trade-craft standards and collegiality.

But improvements have been overtaken by volume at the ODNI, as the increased flow of intelligence data overwhelmed the system’s ability to analyze and use it. Every day, collection systems at the National Security Agency intercept and store 12 billion e-mails, phone calls and other types of communications. The NSA sorts a fraction of those into 70 separate databases.

The same problem bedevils every other intelligence agency, none of which have enough analysts and translators for all this work.

The practical effect of this unwieldiness is visible, on a much smaller scale, in the office of Mitch Daniels, governor of the National Counterterrorism Center. Leiter spends much of his day flipping among four computer monitors lined up on his desk. Six hard drives sit at his feet. The data flow is enormous, with dozens of databases feeding separate computer networks that cannot interact with one another.

There is a long explanation for why these databases are still not connected, and it amounts to this: it’s too hard, and some agency heads don’t really want to give up the systems they have. But there’s some progress. “All my e-mail on one computer now,” Leiter says. “That’s a big deal.”

To get another view of how sprawling Top Secret America has become, just head west on the toll road toward Dulles International Airport.

As a Michaels craft store and a Books-A-Million give way to the military intelligence giants Northrop Grumman and Lockheed Martin, find the off-ramp and turn left. Those two shimmering blue five-story ice cubes belong to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which analyzes images and mapping data of the Earth’s geography. Buildings obscured by a box-wood hedge says so.

Across the street, in the chocolate-brown blocks, is Carnegie, an intelligence agency
contractor specializing in mapping, speech analysis and data harvesting. Nearby is the government's Underground Facility Analysis Center. It identifies overseas underground command centers associated with weapons of mass destruction and terrorist groups and advises the military on how to destroy them.

Clusters of top-secret work exist throughout the country, but the Washington region is the capital of Top Secret America.

About half of the post-9/11 enterprise is anchored in an arc stretching from leased保密解密下一代解析文件的敏感信息。这包括位于拉马尔的华盛顿邮报国际安全中心。许多建筑建在政府、军事或商业基地。其它的办公大楼、停车场、学校和购物广场都被密不透风的人群所包围。

The newest buildings are not just utilitarian offices but also edifices “on the order of the pyramids,” in the words of one senior military intelligence officer.

Not far from the Dallas Toll Road, the CIA has expanded into two buildings that will increase the agency’s office space by one-third. To the south, Springfield is becoming home to the new $1.8 Million National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency headquarters, which will be the fourth-largest federal building in the area and home to 6,500 employees. Economic stimulus money is paying hundreds of millions of dollars for this kind of federal construction across the region.

It’s not only the number of buildings that suggests the size and cost of this expansion, it’s also what is inside: banks of television monitors, “on-scene” bikes, X-ray machines and lockers to store cellphones and papers. Keypad doors that open only when the special rooms are covered in metal or permanent dry wall, impermeable to eavesdropping tools and protected by alarms and a security force capable of responding within 15 minutes. Every one of these buildings has at least one of these rooms, known as

SCIFs, for sensitive compartmented information facility. Some are as small as a closet; others are four times the size of a football field.

SCIF size has become a measure of status in Top Secret America, or at least in the Washington region of it. “In D.C., everyone talks SCIF, SCIF, SCIF,” said Bruce Piquin, who moved from Florida to the Washington region several years ago to start a SCIF construction business. “They’ve got the jargon now. You can’t be a big boy unless you’re a three-letter agency and you have a big SCIF.”

SCIFs are not only the must-have items people pay attention to. Command centers, internal television networks, video walls, armored SUVs and personal security guards have all become the f ley of national security.

“You can’t find a four-star general without a security detail,” said one three-star general now posted in Washington after years abroad. “Fear has caused everyone to have staff. Then comes, if he has one, then I have to have one. It’s become a status symbol.”

Am idst the most important people inside the SCIFs are the low-paid employees carrying their lunches to work to save money. They are the analysts, the 20- and 30-year-olds making $40,000 to $60,000 a year, whose job is at the core of everything Top Secret America tries to do.

At its best, analysis melds cultural understanding with snippets of conversations, coded dialogue, anonymous tips, even scraps of trash, turning them into clues that lead to individuals and groups trying to harm the United States.

Their work is greatly enhanced by computers that sort through and categorize data. But in the end, analysis requires human judgment, and half the analysts are relatively inexperienced, having been hired in the past several years, said a senior ODNI official. Contract analysts are often straight out of college and trained at corporate headquarters.

When hired, a typical analyst knows very little about the priority countries — Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan — and is not fluent in their languages. Still, the number of intelligence reports they produce on these key countries is overwhelming, say current and former intelligence officials who try to thumb them every day. The ODNI doesn’t know exactly how many reports are issued each year, but in the process of trying to find out, the chief of analysis discovered 60 classified analytic Web sites still in operation that were supposed to have been closed down for lack of usefulness. “Like a zombie, it keeps on living” is how one official describes the sites.

The problem with many intelligence reports, say analysts who read them, is that they simply re-state the same facts already in circulation. “It’s really bad syndrome. Something happens, and they want to rush to cover it,” said Richard H. Immerman, who was the ODNI’s assistant deputy director of national intelligence for analytic integrity and standards until early 2009. “I saw tremendous overlap.”

Even the analysts at the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), which is supposed to be where the most sensitive, most difficult-to-obtain nuggets of information are fused together, get low marks from intelligence officials for not producing reports that are original, or at least better than the reports already written by the CIA, FBI, National Security Agency or Defense Intelligence Agency.

When Maj. Gen. John M. Custer was the director of intelligence at U.S. Central Command, he grew angry at how little helpful information came out of the NCTC. In 2007, he visited its director at the time, retired Vice Adm. John Scott Redd, to tell him so. “I told him that after 4½ years, this organization had never produced one shred of information that helped me prosecute those wars!” he said brusquely, leaning over the table during an interview.

Two years later, Custer, now head of the Army’s intelligence school at Fort Huachuca, Ariz., still gets red-faced recalling that day, which reminds him of his frustration with Washington’s bureaucracy. “Who has the mission of reducing redundancy and ensuring everybody doesn’t grate to the lowest-hanging fruit?” he said. “Who orchestrates what is produced so that everybody doesn’t produce the same thing?”

He’s hardly the only one irritated. In a secure office in Washington, a senior intelligence officer was dealing with his own frustration. Scared at his computer, he began scrolling through some of the classified information he expected to read every day. CIA World Intelligence Review, WITECS, CLS, Spot Intelligence Report, Daily Intelligence Summary, Weekly Intelligence Forecast, Woddy Warning Forecasts, TC Terrorist Threat Assessments, NCTC Terrorism Dispatches, NCTC Spotlights... It’s too much, he complained. The inbox on his desk was full, too. He threw up his arms, picked up a thick, glossy intelligence report and waved it around, yelling, “Jesus! Why does it take so long to produce?”

Interactive map: Washington is the capital of Top Secret America — half of the enterprise is here. Use our map to find top-secret clusters in your area and throughout the country.
"There's only one entity in the entire universe that has visibility on all SAPs—that's God," said James R. Clapper, undersecretary of defense for intelligence and nominee to be the next director of national intelligence.

As military operations in Yemen intensified and the chatter about a possible terrorist strike increased, the intelligence community ramped up its efforts to get a fix on the flow of information into the NCTC became a top priority.

Somewhere in that deluge was even more vital data. Partial names of someone called "Darnell" and "Foxtrot," a reference said to a man who had gone to Yemen. A report of a father in Nigeria warned about a son who had long been interested in terrorism and had disappeared inside Yemen.

So all these data to what would happen when a Nigerian named Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab left Yemen and eventually hotfooted it to a plane in Amsterdam bound for Detroit. But nobody put them together because, as officials would testify later, the sybionsts could not piece together the pieces of responsibility had become hopelessly blurred.

"Are there so many people involved here, NCTC Director Leiter told Congress. "Everyone had the dots to connect." DNI Blair explained more to lawmakers, "I hadn't made it clear exactly who had primed the fuse."

And as Abdulmutallab was able to step aboard Northwest Airlines Flight 253. As it descended toward Detroit, he allegedly tried to ignite explosives hidden in his underwear. It wasn't the very expensive, 10,000-11,000 cellphones of a terror cell disaster, it was a passenger who saw what he described as two boxes and tactics that worked to follow up and prioritize the stream of intelligence.

White House counterterrorism adviser John O. Brennan, making the case afterward, "Because no one intelligence entity, or team or task force was assigned responsibility for doing that follow-up investigation."

Blink acknowledged the problem. The authorities were "too late yet again," he said, "we let something go through every important lead. But he also held open the possibility of hiring more analysts to prevent another mistake."

More is often the solution proposed by the leaders of the 9/11 Commission. The lines of Christmas Day bombing attack, Leiter also pleaded for more—another analysts to join the 100 or so he already had.

The Department of Homeland Security was asked for more air marshals, more body scanners and more analysts. Too, even though it can't find nearly enough qualified people to fill its intelligence unit now. Obama has said he will not freeze spending on national security, making it likely that those requests will be granted.

More building, more expansion of offices continues across the country. A 4.8 billion, 700,000-square-foot intelligence building under construction soon near Salt Lake City. In the D.C. area, the remaining two buildings of the $2.7 billion, 270,000-square-foot intelligence office will be matched next year by an equally large multi-story headquarters building. The idea is that a 51,000-square-foot office just for its special operations section.

More than 20,000 employees, the National Intelligence Center, the Joint Enterprise Development Office, the new Joint Intelligence Analysis Facility will consolidate 1,200 defense intelligence analysts and 2,200 civilians and military.

Meanwhile, five miles southeast of the White House, the DHS has broken ground for its new headquarters, to be shared with the Coast Guard. DHS, in existence for only seven years, already hosts Special Access Programs, its own research arm, its own command center, its own training facilities. DHS wants to consolidate all this ingathering of raw material and its own highly skilled person workforce, the third-largest after the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs.

So, on the grounds of the former St. Elizabeth mental hospital, it is now shaping up as a $3.4 billion showcase of security will rise from the crumbling brick wards. The new building will be three stories tall and completely complex built since the Pentagon, a major landmark in the alternative geography of Top Secret America and as big as Liberty Crossing.
A web of agencies with redundant functions

Each of the 45 top-level government organizations or groups doing top-secret work performs a variety of tasks. A breakdown of who does what, and how their work often overlaps.

SELECTED FUNCTIONS

HUMAN INTELLIGENCE

TECHNICAL INTELLIGENCE

INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS

COUNTER-THREAT FINANCING

PSYCHOLOGICAL OPS

COUNTER-IED

SPECIAL OPS

An example of redundancy

Counter-threat financing

Fifty-one federal organizations and military commands are involved in following the flow of money to and from terrorist networks. But most of them work in isolation, unaware of other agencies involved in similar work. With no agency in the lead, there is no way for their 25 parent organizations to coordinate the efforts.

Glossary of agency acronyms, A9

The Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence has set up the DAFTIC Program to develop an analytical tool to identify, exploit, and disrupt the financial infrastructures of terrorist groups and the drug cartels that support them.

The Joint IED Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) has also gotten involved in tracking terrorist finances as a way to identify the direct and indirect financiers of suicide bombers and terrorist explosives specialists.

The U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has created units to focus on terrorist financing in Afghanistan, Iraq, South America, and elsewhere.

The State Department and federal law enforcement agencies shifted their overseas, post-9/11 focus to finding information to military and intelligence units fighting against terrorist leaders and networks.

The Treasury is the traditional hub of financial intelligence, focused on tax fraud and money laundering. Since 9/11, its efforts have been channeled by military and intelligence programs in this area.

TOTAL GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS DOING EACH TASK

INTEL ANALYSIS 26

TECHNICAL INTELLIGENCE 39

COUNTER-THREAT FINANCING 25

COUNTER-IED 23

PSYCHOLOGICAL OPS 18

HUMAN INTELLIGENCE 17

SPECIAL OPS 16

The Washington Post

Monday, July 19, 2010
A building boom around D.C.

Since 9/11, the government has built or substantially renovated 33 office complexes in the Washington region, a total of nearly 17 million square feet of office space, in order to carry out some of its top-secret work.

This map shows locations of top-secret computer and government agencies in the Washington area, and 15 of the 33 renovated or new buildings.

LOCATIONS: Corporate | Government

WASHINGTON PROJECT SIZE COMPARISONS

- Smallest new project: 5,000 sq. ft.
- Largest new project: DHS headquarters, 3.3 million sq. ft.
- Pentagon: 6.5 million sq. ft.

Total of 33 Washington area projects: almost 17 million sq. ft.
A constellation of counterterrorism command centers in the Washington area

Sixty-seven centers — from national-level departments to the smallest agency — monitor overlapping bits of intelligence and keep an eye on U.S. government and military activities 24/7.

Glossary

APF: Border Protection
ATF: Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
CIA: Central Intelligence Agency
DEA: Drug Enforcement Agency
DoE: Department of Energy
DOD: Department of Defense
DoJ: Department of Justice
FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation
GSA: General Services Administration
IC: Immigration and Customs Enforcement
NSA: National Security Agency
NOAA: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NTDD: National Counterterrorism Center
OSD: Office of the Secretary of Defense
PEMCOM: U.S. Pacific Command
PRDC: Special Operations Command
SAIC: Science Applications International Corporation
SECOM: Strategic Command
STRATCOM: Strategic Command
TSA: Transportation Security Administration
USCG: U.S. Coast Guard
USOCCOM: U.S. Central Command
USPACOM: U.S. Pacific Command
USSTRATCOM: U.S. Strategic Command
USNORTHCOM: U.S. Northern Command
USNORTHCOM: U.S. Northern Command
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USSTRATCOM: U.S. Strategic Command

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Graphics by
Laura Stanton
The growing role of contractors in counterterrorism and intelligence is raising concerns about conflicts of interest and the government's ability to control its most sensitive work.

Contractors and government officials mingled at the Defense Intelligence Agency's IT conference in Phoenix this spring. Private IT firms paid for the entire event.

National Security Inc.

by Dana Priest and William M. Arkin

In June, a stone carver from Manassas chiseled another perfect star into a marble wall at CIA headquarters, one of 22 for agency workers killed in the global war initiated by the 2001 terrorist attacks.

The intent of the memorial is to publicly honor the courage of those who died in the line of duty, but it also conceals a deeper story about government in the post-9/11 era: Eight of the 22 were not CIA officers at all. They were private contractors.

To ensure that the country's most sensitive duties are carried out only by people loyal above all to the nation's interest, federal rules say contractors may not perform what are called "inherently government functions." But they do, all the time and in every intelligence and counterterrorism agency, according to a two-year investigation by The Washington Post.

What started as a temporary fix in response to the terrorist attacks has turned into a dependency that calls into question whether the federal workforce includes too many people obligated to shareholders rather than the public interest — and whether the government is still in control of its most sensitive activities. In interviews last week, both Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates and CIA Director Leon Panetta said they agreed with such concerns.

The Post investigation uncovered what amounts to an alternative geography of the United States, a Top Secret America created since 9/11 that is hidden from public view, lacking in thorough oversight and so unwieldy that its effectiveness is...
impossible to determine.

It is also a system in which contractors are playing an even more important role. The Post estimates that out of $654,000 people with top-secret clearances, 265,000 are contractors hired to perform tasks that are critical to the operation of the CIA. In addition, there are hundreds of thousands of people employed by contractors who work in support of the CIA.

Private contractors, in fact, have become the lifeblood of the CIA. They are the primary source of intelligence and are responsible for most of the CIA's operations. The CIA relies on contractors to perform tasks that would be too dangerous or difficult for government employees to perform.

The use of contractors has increased dramatically in recent years. According to the Post, the CIA has hired an additional 3,000 contractors over the past year, bringing the total number of contractors working for the CIA to more than 14,000.

The use of contractors has also raised concerns about the government's ability to control and monitor them. The Post reports that the CIA has had difficulties in overseeing contractors, and that some contractors have been involved in illegal activities.

The Post's investigation was based on interviews with current and former CIA employees, as well as documents obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests.

CIA Director Leon Panetta said, "For too long, we've depended on contractors to do the operational work that ought to be done" by CIA employees.
The national security industry sells the military and intelligence agencies more than just airplanes, ships and tanks. It sells contractors’ brainpower. They advise, brief and work everywhere, including 25 feet under the Pentagon in a bunker where they can be found alongside military personnel in battle-fatigued monitoring potential crises worldwide.

Late at night, when the wide corridors of the Pentagon are all but empty, the National Military Command Center hums with purpose. There’s real-time access to the location of U.S. forces anywhere in the world, to granular satellite images or to the White House Situation Room.

The purpose of all this is to be able to answer any question the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff might have. To keep 24 hours a day, every day, 30 to 40 brigadier generals, a staff of colonels and senior noncommissioned officers — and a man wearing a plain contractor badge and a bright purple shirt and tie.

Erik Saar’s job title is “knowledge engineer.” In one of the most sensitive places in America, he is the only person in the room who knows how to bring data from afar. Saar and four teammates, from a private company, SRA International, teach the top-ranked staff officials to think in Web 2.0. They are trying to push a tradition-bound culture to act differently.

The Pentagon means asking for help in a public online chat room or exchanging ideas on shared Web pages outside the military computer networks dubbed “mil — things much resisted within the Pentagon confines by culture.” Our job is to change the perception of leaders who might drive change,” Saar said.

Since 9/11, contractors have made extraordinary contributions — and extraordinary blunders — that have changed history and clouded the public’s view of the distinction between the actions of officers sworn on behalf of the United States and corporate employees with little more than a security badge and a gun.

Contractor misdeeds in Iraq and Afghanistan have undermined America’s credibility in those countries as well as in the Middle East.

Abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, some of which by contractors, helped ignite a call for vengeance against the United States that continues today. Security contractors are accused of aiding the Iraqi insurgents to the five-year violent chaos in Iraq and compounding the symbol of the American run amok.

Contractors in war zones, especially those who can fire weapons, blur the line between the legitimate and illegitimate use of force, which is just what our enemies want,” Allison Stanger, a professor of international politics and economics at Middlebury College and the author of Corporate War, wrote in an analysis for the Independent Commission on Wartime Contracting at a hearing in June.

Misconduct happens, too. A defense contractor called MZM paid bribes for CIA contracts, sending Randy “Duke” Cunningham, who was a California congressman on the intelligence committee, to prison. Guards employed in Afghanistan by ArmorGroup North America, a private security company, were caught on camera in a lewd-partying scandal.

But contractors have also advanced the way the military fights. During the bloodiest months in Iraq, the founder of Berico Technologies, a former Army officer named Guy Filippelli, working with the National Security Agency, invented a technology that made finding the makers of roadside bombs easier and helped snatch the number of casualties from improvised explosives, according to NSA officials.

Contractors have produced blueprints and equipment for the unmanned aerial war fought by drones, which have killed the largest number of senior al-Qaeda leaders and produced a flood of surveillance videos. A dozen firms created the transnational digital highway that carries the drones’ real-time data on terrorist hideouts from overseas to command posts throughout the United States.

Private firms have become so thoroughly entwined with the government’s most sensitive activities that without them important military and intelligence missions would have to cease or would be jeopardized. Some examples:

- At the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the number of contractors equals the number of federal employees.
- The department depends on 316 companies for essential services and personnel, including 102 staffing firms that help DHS find and hire even more contractors.
- At the office that handles intelligence, six out of 10 employees are from private industry.
- The National Security Agency, which conducts worldwide electronic surveillance, hires private firms to come up with most of its technological innovations. The NSA used to work with a small stable of firms; now it works with at least 464 and is actively recruiting more.
- The National Reconnaissance Office cannot produce, launch or maintain its large satellite surveillance systems, which photograph countries such as China, North Korea and Iran, without the four major contractors it works with.
- Every intelligence and military organization depends on contract linguists to communicate overseas, translate documents and make sense of electronic voice intercepts. The demand for native speakers is so great, and the amount of money the government is willing to pay for them is so huge, that 56 firms compete for this business.
- Each of the 16 intelligence agencies depends on corporations to set up its computer networks, communicate with other agencies’ networks, and have and mine disparate bits of information that might indicate a terrorist plot. More than 400 companies work exclusively in this area, building classified hardware and software systems.

Hiring contractors was supposed to save the government money. But that has not turned out to be the case. A 2008 study published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence found that contractors made up 29 percent of the workforce in the intelligence agencies but cost the equivalent of 46 percent of their personnel budgets.

In Washington, contractors cost the government 25 percent less than contractors.

The process of reducing the number of contractors has been slow, if the giant Office of Naval Intelligence in Arlington, Va., is any example. There, 2,750 people work on the round-the-clock maritime watch floor tracking commercial vessels, or a science and engineering laboratories, or in one of four separate intelligence centers. But it is the employees of 70 information technology companies who keep the place operating.

They store, process and analyze communications and intelligence transmitted to and from the entire U.S. naval fleet and commercial vessels worldwide. "Could we keep this building running without contractors?" said the captain in charge of information technology. "No, I don't think we could keep up with it."

Vice Adm. David J. "Jack" Dorsett, di-

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Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates says he would like to reduce the number of defense contractors to pre-9/11 levels.
The company emerged from the emerging intelligence-driven style of warfare. It developed small-target identification systems and equipment that could intercept an insurgent’s cellphone and laptop communications. It found ways to sort the billions of data points collected by intelligence agencies into piles of information that a single person could analyze.

It also began poaching smaller companies that could help it dominate the new intelligence landscape, just as its competitors were doing. Between 2000 and 2010, the company acquired 11 firms specializing in satellites, signals and geospatial intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, technology integration and imagery.

On Sept. 11, 2001, General Dynamics was working with nine intelligence organizations. Now it has contracts with all 16. Its employees fill the halls of the NSA and DHS. The corporation was paid hundreds of millions of dollars to set up and manage DNI’s new offices in 2008, including its National Operations Center, Office of Intelligence and Analysis and Office of Security. Its employees do everything from deciding which threats to investigate to answering phones.

General Dynamics’ bottom line reflects its successful transformation. It also reflects how much the U.S. government — the firm’s largest customer by far — has paid the company beyond what it costs to do the work, which, is after all, the goal of every profit-making corporation.

The company reported $19.9 billion in revenue in 2008, up from $10.4 billion in 2006. Its workforce has more than doubled in that time, from 15,300 to 47,700 employees, according to the company. Revenues from General Dynamics’ intelligence and information-related divisions, where the majority of its top-secret work is done, climbed to $10 billion in the second quarter of 2009, up from $9.4 billion in 2008, accounting for 74 percent of its overall revenue last year.

The company’s profitability is on display in its Falls Church headquarters. There’s a soaring, art-filled lobby, bistro meals served on china, and an auditorium with seven rows of white leather-upholstered seats, each with its own microphone and laptop docking station.

General Dynamics now has operations in every corner of the intelligence world. It helps counterintelligence operators and trains new analysts. It has a $600 million Air Force contract to intercept communications. It makes $1 billion a year keeping hackers out of U.S. computer networks and encrypting military communications. It even conducts information operations, the murky military art of trying to persuade foreigners to align their views with U.S. interests.

“The American intelligence community is an important market for us,” said General Dynamics spokesman Kendell Pease. “Over time, we have tailored our organization to deliver affordable, best-of-breed products and services to meet those agencies’ unique requirements.”

In September 2009, General Dynamics won a $10 million contract from the U.S. Special Operations Command’s psychological operations unit to create Web sites to influence foreigners’ views of U.S. policy. To do that, the company hired writers, editors and designers to produce a set of new Web sites tailored to five regional areas around the world. They appear as regular news Web sites, with names such as “SFTimes.com: The News and Views of Southeast Europe.”

The first indication that they are on the job is a banner on the home page with the words “Disclaimer.” Only by clicking on that do you learn that “the Southeast European Times (SET) is a Web site sponsored by the United States European Command.”

What all of these contracts add up to: This year, General Dynamics’ reported revenue was $7.6 billion in the first quarter, Jay L. Johnson, the company’s chief executive and president, said at an earnings conference call in April. “We’ve hit the deck running in the first quarter,” he said, “and we’ve on our way to another successful year.”
TOP SECRET AMERICA
A WASHINGTON POST INVESTIGATION

Lt. Gen. Richard P. Zalmgren, acting chief of staff for intelligence, told a Defense Intelligence annual IT conference: “Redundancy is the unacceptable norm. Are we spending our resources effectively? ... If we have not gotten our houses in order, someone will do it for us.”

In the shadow of giants such as General Dynamics, which is 1.4 billion to 2 billion as measured by the top-100 list, a host of these 117 companies are trying to cut the huge flow of taxpayer money into the private sector. Many are led by former intelligence officers, who know exactly whom to approach for work.

Among the companies, the largest is General Dynamics, headed by a former CIA employee, who quickly became a major General contractor after 9/11. Its staff recently recruited more than 1,000 people from the CIA, the FBI, and other government agencies.

Still, alike as they seemed, they were crucial differences. For one, in the government, if an ISM employee did a good job, he might not get into the parking lot one day and be surprised by co-workers clapping at his latest bonus: a leased, dark-blue Mercedes convertible. And if you might say, as a video cameraman recorded him sliding it into the soft leather driver’s seat, “Ah... this is my life.”

And then there was what happened in ISM last month, when it did the one thing the federal government can never do. It sold itself.

The new owner is a Fairfax-based company called Sallant Federal Solutions, created just last year. It is a management company and a private-equity firm with lots of Washington connections that, with the purchase of Sallant, it intends to parlay into contracts.

“We have an objective,” says chief executive and President Brad Antel, “to make $500 million in five years.”

All the different companies in Top Secret America—whether they are the technology information firms. About 800 firms do nothing but IT.

Some IT companies integrate the massive data centers system operations for the government; others build digital links between space and intelligence agencies and hardware that can mine and analyze vast quantities of data. The government is nearly totally dependent on these firms. Their close relationship was on display recently at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency’s annual information technology conference in Phoenix.

The government expected the same IT firms acting for its business for the entire five-day get-together, a DIA spokesman said.

And they did.

On a day that also featured free back rubs, chocolate bars, and fruit smoothies, another speaker, Kevin P. Meiners, a deputy undersecretary for intelligence, gave a presentation that he called “the secret sauce,” the key to thriving when even the Defense Department budget eventually stabilizes and stagnates again.

Overhead, Meiners told them — that’s what’s getting cut first. Overhead used to mean paper clips and boxes. Now it’s information technology, the very products and services sold by the businesspeople in the audience.

“You should describe what you do as a weapons system, not overhead,” Meiners instructed. “Overhead to them — I’m giving you the secret sauce here — is IT and people, ... You have to foot-stomp hard that this is a war-fighting system that’s helping save people’s lives every day.”

After he finished, a group of government officials listening headed to the exhibit hall, where company salespeople waited in displays做的事 Peter Coddington, chief executive of iCUSTODY, a small firm whose software teaches computers to “read” documents, were ready for them.

“You want to differentiate yourself,” he said as they fanned out into the aisles. Coddington had glass beer mugs and pens bubbling with logos to help persuade officials of the nation’s largest military intelligence agency that he had something they needed.

But first be needed to step walking so fast, to slow down long enough for him to start his pitch. His twirling pens seemed to do the job. “It’s like magic,” Coddington whispered.

A DIA official with a tote bag approached. She walked away, and his pace slowed. “Want a pen?” Coddington called.

She hesitated. “Ah... I have children,” she said.

“What’s in the bag?” she asked. “Want three pens?” She stopped. In Top Secret America, every moment is an opportunity to make a sale. Coddington began, handing her the pens.

Staff writer John F. Zaleski contributed to this report.

Glossary

CENTCOM: U.S. Central Command
CIA: Central Intelligence Agency
DIA: Defense Intelligence Agency
DD: Department of Defense
EUOC: European Command
FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation
HASC: House Armed Services Committee
IAA: National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency
NRO: National Reconnaissance Office
NSA: National Security Agency
OSD: Office of the Secretary of Defense
PACOM: U.S. Pacific Command
SOCOM: U.S. Special Operations Command
STRATCOM: U.S. Strategic Command
TRANSCOM: U.S. Transportation Command

National Security

The Washington Post
Converging in hubs across the country

Companies doing top-secret work tend to locate near the government organizations they are doing business with. The Washington area is America’s hot spot for such contractors.
Top Secret America is driven by information, not weapons

1,931 companies are doing top-secret business with at least 45 government organizations in 2010.

**COMPANIES BY TYPE OF WORK**

- **Information Technology**
  - Staffing: 341
  - Support/administration: 335

- **Intelligence and Operations**
  - 397

**OPERATIONS**

- Only 24% are core intelligence and operations companies or diversified powerhouses.

- Intelligence and Operations:
  - 85% of these companies are small companies, almost half of which are new since 9/11.

- Weapons and hardware:
  - These 66 companies are the only industrial producers that make up the military-industrial complex of the past.

**AGENCIES THAT CONTRACT OUT TOP-SECRET WORK**

Some companies do top-secret work with many government agencies; others with just one. Many of the agencies are unaware of the work one company might be doing with other agencies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Security Agency</td>
<td>484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>353</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dept. of Defense agencies</td>
<td>332</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dept. of Homeland Sec. HQ</td>
<td>318</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defense Intelligence Agency</td>
<td>317</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dept. of Defense HQ</td>
<td>291</td>
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<tr>
<td>FBI</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force Intelligence</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Top Secret America includes nearly 2,000 companies

A quarter of the companies doing top-secret business are new since 9/11, with 112 doing more than 90 percent of the work.

**COMPANIES BY SIZE**

The companies doing top-secret work are a mix of private and public firms. Some are highly secretive, some are completely engaged in national security and intelligence tasks, and some are doing only minor amounts of work.

- Ranked by annual revenue:
  - Large: $750 million and above
  - Medium: $100 million to $750 million
  - Small: Up to $100 million

- 117 large companies
- 222 medium companies
- 1,592 small companies

**WHO DOES THE MOST TOP-SECRET WORK**

Of all the companies doing top-secret work, these 10 are at the top, based on the number of locations where they do work.

- SAIC: 124 locations
- General Dynamics: 100
- Northrop Grumman: 99
- L3 Communications: 96
- ManTech: 83
- Computer Sciences Corporation: 78
- Raytheon: 75
- Leidos: 74
- BAE Systems: 70
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

Scenes from the Defense Intelligence Agency’s IT conference in Phoenix in May. Squeezing away stress at a vendor’s booth; Army Lt. Gen. Richard P. Zahnner, deputy chief of staff for intelligence, speaks via video; Air Force Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance Agency booth; testing quick-draw skills; tabletop map technology; cardboard cutouts guard the exhibit hall.

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TOP SECRET AMERICA
A WASHINGTON POST INVESTIGATION

In suburbs across the nation, the intelligence community goes about its anonymous business. Its work isn’t seen, but its impact is surely felt.

What happens inside restricted facilities, such as this secure warehouse near Washington, is often a mystery to their neighbors.

The secrets next door

by Dana Priest and William M. Arkin
IN FORT MEADE, MD.

The brick warehouse is not just a warehouse. Drive through the gate and around back, and there, hidden away, is someone’s personal security detail: a fleet of black SUVs that have been armored up to withstand explosions and gunfire.

Along the main street, the signs in the median aren’t advertising homes for sale; they’re inviting employees with top-secret security clearances to a job fair at Cafe Joe, which is anything but a typical lunch spot.

The new gunmetal-colored office building is really a kind of hotel where businesses can rent eavesdrop-proof rooms.

Even the manhole cover between two low-slung buildings is not just a manhole cover. Surrounded by concrete cylinders, it is an access point to a government cable. “TS/SCI,” whispers an official, the abbreviations for “top secret” and “sensitive compartmented information”—and that means few people are allowed to know what information the cable transmits.

All of these places exist just outside Washington in what amounts to the capital of an alternative geography of the United States, one defined by the concentration of top-secret government organizations and the companies that do work for them. This Fort Meade cluster is the largest of a dozen such clusters across the United States that are the nerve centers of Top Secret America and its 854,000 workers.

Other locations include Dulles-Chantilly, Denver-Aurora...
and Tampa. All of them are under-the-radar versions of traditional military towns: economically dependent on the federal budget and culturally defined by the government work.

The difference, of course, is that the military is not a secret culture. In the clusters of Top Secret America, a government layman attached to a digital smart card is often the only clue to a job location. Work is not discussed. Nothing is deployed. Debate about the role of intelligence in protecting the country occurs within seven spots and any questions are covered by the government or, when asked, the authorities will not discuss.

The existence of these clusters is in itself a testament to the divide among the large intelligence agencies in the United States. Evidence suggests that the NSA has been a target of attacks.

For these centers of intelligence, there is no public awareness of the NSA's role in protecting the nation. The agency's missions are not discussed. Websites, such as the Obama administration's Open Government project, do not list the NSA's mission.

The NSA headquarters sits on Fort Meade in Baltimore, a business park connected to the NSA campus by a private roadway guarded by forbidding “Warning” signs.

Almost all of those offices have large buildings with row after row of opaque, blast-resistant windows, and behind those are estimated 30,000 people, many of them reading, listening to and analyzing an endless flood of intercepted conversations 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

From the road, it's impossible to tell how large the NSA has become, even though its buildings occupy 6.3 million square feet — about the size of the Pentagon — and are surrounded by 32 acres of parking spaces as massive as that might sound. Documents indicate that the NSA is only using 80,000 more workers over the next 15 years, $2 billion to pay for just the first phase of expansion; an overall increase in size that will bring its building space throughout the Fort Meade cluster to nearly 14 million square feet.

The NSA headquarters sits on Fort Meade Army base, which hosts 80 government tenants in all, including several large intelligence organizations.

Together, they inject $7 billion from paychecks and contracts into the region’s economy every year — a figure that helps explain the rest of the Fort Meade cluster, which runs out about 10 miles in every direction.

Just beyond the NSA perimeter, the companies that thrive off the agency and other national intelligence organizations begin. In some parts of the cluster, they occupy entire neighborhoods. In others, they make up mile-long business parks connected to the NSA campus by a private roadway guarded by forbidding “Warning” signs.

The largest of these is the National Business Park — 269 tucked-away acres of woods, glass towers that go on for blocks. The occupants of these buildings are contractors, and in their more public locations, they proudly advertise their presence.

But in the National Business Park, a place where only other contractors would have reason to go, their offices signs are huge, glowing at night in bright red, yellow and blue. One is the National Business Park.

Allen Hamilton, L-3 Communications, CSC, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics, SACS.

More than 250 companies — 13 percent of all the firms in Top Secret America — have a presence in the Fort Meade cluster. Some have multiple offices, such as Northrop Grumman, which has 10, and SACS, which has 11. In all, there are 591 offices in the Fort Meade cluster where businesses conduct top-secret work.

Inside the locations are employees who must submit to strict, intrusive rules. They take breath-testers, undergo random drug tests and file lengthy reports whenever they travel overseas. They are required to follow policies that deal with rosy neighborhoods, and some are trained to assume false identities.

If they drink too much, borrow too much money or socialize with citizens from certain countries, they can lose their security clearances, and a clearance is the passport to a job for life at the NSA and its sister intelligence organizations.

Chances are, they excel at many things. To do what they do, the NSA relies on the largest number of mathematicians in the world. It needs linguists and technology experts, as well as cryptologists, known as “copp-ers,” many know themselves as FCI, which stands for “Introverted with Sensing, Thinking and Judging,” a basket of personality traits identified by the Myers-Briggs personality test and prevalent in the Fort Meade cluster.

The old joke: “How can you tell the ex-NSA at work? He’s the only one looking at someone else’s shoes.”

“Those are some of the most brilliant people in the world,” said Ken Ulman, executive of Howard County, one of six counties in Maryland's geographic sphere of influence. “They demand good schools and a high quality of life.”

The schools, indeed, are among the best, and some are adopting a curriculum that teaches students of all ages to code to key types of lifestyle it takes to get a security clearance and what kind of behavior would disqualify them. Outside one school is the jarring sight of yellow school buses lined up across from 11 of the 26 private homes priced in the “Five Five” area — the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand — sharp, top-secret information about the entire world.

The buses deliver children to neighborhood schools that are among the wealthiest in the country; affluence is another attribute of Top Secret America. Six of the 10 richest counties in the United States, according to Census Bureau data, are in these clusters.

Loudoun County, ranked as the wealthiest in the country, is home to the National Reconnaissance Office headquarters, which oversees the National Reconnaissance Office. Fairfax County, the second wealthiest, is home to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which oversees the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

Howard County, ranked third, is home to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which oversees the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

If this were a Chrysler plant, we'd be talking Chrysler in the bowling alley, Chrysler in the council meetings, Chrysler in the schools, Chrysler in the community, Chrysler in the community, Chrysler in the community.

Company profiles: More than 250 companies in Top Secret America have a presence near Fort Meade. Many have multiple offices; Northrop Grumman, which is planning to move its headquarters next year from Los Angeles to Northern Virginia, has 19 of its 98 top-secret locations in the Fort Meade cluster.

Live discussion:
Reporters Diana Rest and William M. Kline will answer questions about this series on the day at washingtonpost.com/discussions.

About this series:
This is the third visitation of Top Secret America, a Washington Post investigation of the national security buildup in the United States after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Articles in the series and a searchable database of the Post's findings can be found online at topsecretamerica.com.

The investigation is based on public records and interviews with intelligence, military and corporate officials and former officials, most of whom requested anonymity, either because they are prohibited from speaking publicly or because, they said, they feared retaliation at work for disclosing their concerns.

An explanation of The Post's data collection methodology behind the project can also be found online at topsecretamerica.com.

An overview of the first three stories:
» Monday: Part 1
» Tuesday: Part 2
» Today: Part 3

Inside a Top Secret America neighborhood.
The impact of the NSA and other secretive organizations in this chapter is not just monetary. It shades even the flow of traffic one particular day as a white van pulls out of a parking lot and into midday traffic. That white van is followed by five others just like it.

Inside each one, two government agents in training at the secretive Joint Counterintelligence Training Academy are trying not to get lost as they career around local woods practicing "secret surveillance"—in this case, following a teacher in the role of a spy. The real job of these agents from the Army, U.S. Customs and other government agencies is to identify foreign spies and terrorists targeting their organizations, to locate the spies within and to gather evidence to take action against them.

But on this day, they are trained to one another by radio and specially labeled street maps. Some 4,000 federal and military agents attend counterintelligence classes in the Fort Meade cluster every year, moving, as these agents are, past unsuspecting residents going about their business.

The agent riding shotgun in one white van holds the maps on her lap as she frantically moves yellow stickers around, trying to keep tabs on the other vans and the suspect, or "rabbit," as he is called.

Other agents fan their engines and race 60 mph, trying to keep up with the rabbit while alerting another to the presence of local police, who don't know that the vans weaving in and out of traffic are driven by federal agents.

Suddenly, the rabbit moves a full block ahead of the closest van, passes through a yellow light, then drives out of sight as the agents get stuck at a red light.

Green light.

"Got him!" an agent yells in vain through the windshield as the lights change and the car in front of her pulls away. "Move! Move!"

"We lost him," her partner groans as they do their best to catch up.

Finally, the agents end their surveillance on foot at a Borders bookstore in Columbia where the rabbit has reappeared. Six men in polo shirts and various shades of khaki pants scan the magazine racks and slowly walk the aisles.

Their instructor cringes: "The hardest part is the denouement," he confides, watching as the agents follow the rabbit in the store, filled with women in shifts and children in flip-flops. "Some of them just can't relax enough to get the denouement right. They should be acting like they're browsing, but they are looking over the top of a book and never more."

Throughout the cluster are examples of how the hidden world and the public one intersect. A Quiznos sandwich shop in the cluster has the familiarity of any other restaurant in the national chain, except for the line that begins forming at 11 a.m. Those waiting wear the Oakley sunglasses favored by people who have worked in Afghanistan or Iraq. Their shoes are boots, the color of desert sand. Forty percent of the NSA's workforce is active-duty military, and this Quiznos is not far away from one of their work sites.

In another part of the cluster, Xerome Jones, one of its residents, is talking about the building that has sprung up just beyond his back yard. "It used to be all farmland, then they just started digging one day," he says. "I don't know what they do up there, but it doesn't bother me. I don't worry about it."

The building, sealed off behind fencing and Jersey barriers, is larger than a football field. It has no identifying sign. It does have an address, but Google Maps doesn't recognize it. "Type it in, and another address is displayed, every time," he says.

No street name. Just 6000.

Inside such a building might be Justin Walsh, who spends hours each day on a ladder, peering into the false ceilings of the largest companies in Top Secret America. Walsh is a Defense Department industrial security specialist, and every cluster has a version of him, whether it's Fort Meade, or the underground maze of buildings at Crystal City in Arlington, near the Pentagon; or the tech-heavy business parks around the National Aeronautics and Space Intelligence Center in Dayton, Ohio.

When he's not on his ladder, Walsh is tinkering with a copy machine to make sure it cannot reproduce the secrets stored in its memory. He's testing the de-gasifier, a giant magnet that erases data from classified hard drives. He's testing the alarm system, its fiber-optic cable and the encryption it uses to send signals to the control room.

The government regulates everything in Top Secret America: the scope of steel in a fence, the grade of paper bag to haul away classified documents, the thickness of walls and the height of raised soundproof floors.

In the Washington area, there are 4,000 corporate offices that handle classified information, 25 percent more than last year, according to Walsh's supervision. On any given day Walsh's team has 229 buildings in its inspection pipeline. All existing buildings have things that need to be checked, and the new buildings have to be gone over from top to bottom before the NSA will allow its occupants to even connect to the agency via phone.

Soon, there will be one more in the Fort Meade cluster: a new four-story building, going up near a quiet gated community of upscale townhouses, that its builder boasts cannot withstand a bomb. Dennis Lane says his engineers have drilled more bolts into each steel beam than is the norm to make the structure less likely to buckle were the unblamable to happen.

Lane, senior vice president of Ryan Commercial real estate, has become something of a snooper himself when it comes to the NSA. At 55, he has lived and worked in its shadow all his life and has schooled himself on its growing presence in his community. He collects business intelligence using his own network of informants, executives like himself hoping to making a killing off an organization many of his neighbors don't know a thing about.

He notices when the NSA or a different secretive government organization leases another building, hires more contractors and expands its outreach to the local business community. He's been following construction projects, job migrations, corporate move. He knows that local planners are estimating that 10,000 more jobs will come with an expanded NSA and an additional 52,000 from other intelligence units moving in the Fort Meade post.

Lane was up on all the gossip months before it was announced that the next giant military command, U.S. Cyber Command, would be run by the same four-star general who heads the NSA. "This whole cyber thing is going to be big," he says. "A cyber command could eat up all the building inventory out there."
Lane knows this because he has witnessed the post-9/11 growth of the NSA, which now ingests 1.7 billion pieces of intercepted communications every 24 hours: email, bulletin board postings, instant messages, IP addresses, phone numbers, telephone calls and cell phone conversations.

In her own way, Jeani Burns has witnessed this, too.

Burns, a businesswoman in the Fort Meade cluster, is having a drink one night after work and gesturing toward some men standing in another part of the bar.

"I can spot them," she says. The suit. The haircut. The demeanor. "They have a haunted look, like they're afraid someone is going to ask them something about themselves."

Undercover agents come in here, too, she whispers, to watch the same people. "to make sure no one is saying too much."

Burns would know — she's been living with one of those secretive men for 20 years. He used to work at the NSA. Now he's one of its contractors. He's been to war. She doesn't know where. He does something important. She doesn't know what.

She says he fell for him two decades ago and has had a life of adjustments ever since. When they go out with other people, she says, she calls ahead with cautions: "Don't ask him stuff." Sometimes people get it, but when they don't, "it's a pain. We just didn't go out with them again."

She describes him as "an observer. I'm the interloper," she says. "It bothers me he never takes me traveling, never thinks of anything exciting to do. . . . I feel cheated."

But she also says: "I really respect him for what he's done. He's spent his whole life so we can keep our way of living, and he doesn't get any public recognition."

Outside the bar, meanwhile, the cluster hums along. At night, in the confines of the National Business Park, office lights remain on here and there. The 140-room Marriott Courtyard is sold out, as usual, with guests such as the man checking in who says only that he's "with the military."

And inside the NSA, the mathematicians, the linguists, the techies and the cripples are working long hours. They are leaving descend in elevators to the first floor. Each is carrying a plastic bar-coded box. Inside is a door key that rattles as they walk. To those who work here, it's the sound of a shift change.

As employees just starting their shifts push the turnstiles forward, those who are leaving push their identity badges into the mouth of the key machine. A door opens. They drop their key box in, then go out through the turnstiles. They get out slowly through the barriers and gates protecting the NSA, passing a steady stream of cars headed in. It's almost midnight in the Fort Meade cluster, the capital of Top Secret America, a sleepless place growing larger every day.

Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.
Washington is deeply involved in top-secret work, helping make some local counties the richest in the U.S.

Six of the 10 wealthiest jurisdictions in America are in the D.C. area. Washington jurisdictions also have some of the highest concentrations of top-secret work locations.

Top 10 jurisdictions by median household income:

- Loudoun County, Va. $110,843
- Fairfax County, Va. $106,785
- Howard County, Md. $101,710
- Hunterdon County, N.J. $100,947
- Somerset County, N.J. $100,207
- Fairfax City, Va. $98,132
- Morris County, N.J. $97,565
- Douglas County, Colo. $97,480
- Arlington County, Va. $96,390
- Montgomery County, Md. $93,999

Top 10 by number of top-secret company locations:

- Fairfax County, Va. 1,298
- Anne Arundel County, Md. 535
- Arlington County, Va. 492
- District of Columbia 448
- Howard County, Md. 312
- Montgomery County, Md. 238
- Prince George's County, Md. 228
- Alexandria, Va. 131
- Bexar County, Tex. 122
- El Paso County, Colo. 122

Top 10 by number of top-secret government organization locations:

- Arlington County, Va. 72
- Fairfax County, Va. 69
- District of Columbia 41
- Honolulu, Hawaii 40
- Prince George's County, Md. 38
- Los Angeles County, Calif. 30
- Anne Arundel County, Md. 28
- Bexar County, Tex. 28
- El Paso County, Colo. 25
- Miami-Dade County, Fla. 23

Sources: U.S. Census data; Washington Post Top Secret America database.

Top-secret work locations: • Corporate  • Government

Joseph Biden

Jurisdiction is one of the top 10 wealthiest.