NSA MANAGERS MODIFIED OR SUPRESSED STUDIES ON THINTHREAD AND TRAILBLAZER

As bmaz reported while I was looking at flowers in Northern MI, POGO liberated via FOIA the Inspector General report central to the Thomas Drake case.

While much of the report is redacted (except for, perhaps unsurprisingly, a number of comments about limitations to ThinThread that have been decontextualized by redactions), a few interesting details remain. First, the management control program (see PDF 48) was not included in the scope of the review; it appears that privacy protections were not a significant part of the review (even while this article claims they were included in the investigation). That's interesting because both do show up in Siobhan Gorman's reporting. Further, the government was trying to withhold Drake's own materials that might not have related to the substance of the initial IG complaint (and it destroyed a notebook Drake had submitted). While all that is very vague and now mooted by the plea deal in the case, it suggests the government tried hard to prevent Drake from providing evidence of further problems with Trailblazer beyond those laid out—and endorsed—in the IG complaint.

I'm much more interested, however, in a claim **not** made in Gorman's reporting that is left unredacted in the IG Report: that NSA management modified or suppressed studies on the program. As a threshold matter, Michael Hayden and his buddies seem to have been cognitively unaware at times of where DOD's IG cited the initial Hotline complaint that launched this investigation (the report cites the complaint on

PDF 5 and PDF 11; on PDF 122, the IG Report notes NSA management's conflation of the complaint with the report results specifically with regard to claims about cost) and where it confirmed that complaint. Yet the extensive discussion of test results starting on PDF 21 make it clear the investigation examined test results in detail. Furthermore, this IG response to Management complaints on PDF 123 make it clear that the IG confirmed the complaint that management fiddled with studies.

> (C) Management Comments. NSA management comments also questions [sic] the Executive Summary's statement that "NSA modified or suppressed studies and [redacted] and stated that the audit report did not identify where the information was obtained.
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> (C) Audit Response. We have documented information to support this statement; however, because of fear of reprisal, we agreed to keep the sources anonymous.

In other words, not only did the IG confirm the tests showed ThinThread performed better than Trailblazer, but it appears to confirm that NSA management tried to hide that fact.

While Gorman's reporting doesn't say the studies were suppressed, she did report on the existence and results of those studies.

> In what intelligence experts describe as rigorous testing of ThinThread in 1998, the project succeeded at each task with high marks. For example, its ability to sort through massive amounts of data to find threat-related communications far surpassed the existing system, sources said. It also was able to rapidly separate and encrypt U.S.-related communications to ensure privacy.
>
> [snip]
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> A number of independent studies,

> including a classified 2004 report from
> the Pentagon's inspector-general, in
> addition to the successful pilot tests,
> found that the program provided
> "superior processing, filtering and
> protection of U.S. citizens, and
> discovery of important and previously
> unknown targets," said an intelligence
> official familiar with the program who
> described the reports to The Sun. The
> Pentagon report concluded that
> ThinThread's ability to sort through
> data in 2001 was far superior to that of
> another NSA system in place in 2004, and
> that the program should be launched and
> enhanced.

NSA management's apparent suppression of studies showing ThinThread's better performance is all the more interesting given the reference—on PDF 48—of an earlier NSA Inspector General report concluding that Trailblazer had had "improperly based contract cost increases, non-conformance in the management of the Statement of Work, and excessive labor rates for contractor personnel." In other words, SAIC—which implemented Trailblazer and had close ties to Michael Hayden's aides—was bilking the federal government at the same time as Hayden and others were apparently suppressing studies showing that SAIC's solution was not the most effective solution.

Our Intelligence Industrial Complex in action!

The evidence that NSA management was suppressing studies that showed ThinThread performed better than Trailblazer adds one more wrinkle to the government's attempt to prosecute Thomas Drake. The IG clearly worried that revealing who made this complaint would lead to retaliation from NSA management. Yet, as it turns out, one of the documents for which Drake was charged was titled, "Trial and Testing," suggesting it pertained to such testing issues.

I guess the IG had reason to worry after all.