

THE RATIONALE FOR NSA'S BOTTOMLESS PIT OF DATA: HACKERS

In his must-read report on the bottomless data pit containing the NSA is building in Utah, James Bamford described the public explanations NSA Deputy Director Chris Inglis made when he broke ground on the facility.

[NSA deputy director Chris Inglis] arrived in Bluffdale at the site of the future data center, a flat, unpaved runway on a little-used part of Camp Williams, a National Guard training site. There, in a white tent set up for the occasion, Inglis joined Harvey Davis, the agency's associate director for installations and logistics, and Utah senator Orrin Hatch, along with a few generals and politicians in a surreal ceremony. Standing in an odd wooden sandbox and holding gold-painted shovels, they made awkward jabs at the sand and thus officially broke ground on what the local media had simply dubbed "the spy center." Hoping for some details on what was about to be built, reporters turned to one of the invited guests, Lane Beattie of the Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce. Did he have any idea of the purpose behind the new facility in his backyard? "Absolutely not," he said with a self-conscious half laugh. "Nor do I want them spying on me."

For his part, Inglis simply engaged in a bit of double-talk, emphasizing the least threatening aspect of the center: "It's a state-of-the-art facility designed to support the intelligence community in its mission to, in turn, enable and protect the nation's cybersecurity." While cybersecurity will

certainly be among the areas focused on in Bluffdale, what is collected, how it's collected, and what is done with the material are far more important issues. Battling hackers makes for a nice cover—it's easy to explain, and who could be against it? [my emphasis]

Inglis used hackers as cover for a spying facility that would collect and decrypt “all forms of communication, including the complete contents of private emails, cell phone calls, and Google searches, as well as all sorts of personal data trails—parking receipts, travel itineraries, bookstore purchases, and other digital ‘pocket litter’.” That is, Inglis used the threat of hackers to cover up for the fact that the government was spying on everyone.

Mind you, this was back in January 2011—before Anonymous threatened to take the Toobz down at a time when a key Anonymous hacker was being run by the FBI. Indeed, Inglis used hackers as his excuse for collecting massive amounts of data on everyone in the thick of the WikiLeaks excitement.

Nevertheless, Bamford describes Inglis publicly misleading about the centrality of hackers in the purpose of the bottomless pit when in fact the purpose is far broader. Particularly given the FBI's recently exposed role running hackers, Inglis' “double-talk” raises real questions about all the fear-mongering about hackers.