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## The Psychology of Secrecy: A Commentary on the Critique of the Codeword Compartment in the CIA

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Title: The Psychology of Secrecy: A Commentary on the Critique of the Codeword Compartment in the CIA

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**Abstract.** This article provides commentary on a segment of an intelligence monograph (formally declassified with redactions) prepared through the Central Intelligence Agency Center for the Study of Intelligence and focused on compartmentation of information.

Compartmentation of information can be conceived as part of an iterative process of protecting information bearing on the security of some political entity. Here political entity may denote a government of a nation-state, representatives of that government, some other traditionally conceived political actor--e.g., terrorist group, non-violent interest group, or humanitarian organization--and, as well, less traditionally conceived political actors. The last construct can comprise any individual, group, or organization--given that any of these function in a zero-sum world of finite resources and infinite need--the sine qua non of politics.

Compartmentation, then, is not something unique to formally constructed intelligence bureaucracies but is characteristic of human psychology. In the case of the individual as social animal, compartmentation can be conceived as at least one step beyond some formal proscription of information availability by that individual from at least one other person.

The formal proscription might involve labeling information as a secret--a secret that the other person otherwise does have access to based on that individual being judged worthy of having such access. However, in at least one specific case, the other person still is judged unworthy of access.

Research on intrapsychic functioning suggests that compartmentation can be operative not only between and among people but within an individual. Here information within the individual that the individual often has access to is blocked from awareness--perhaps through such inferred processes as repression, dissociation, fragmentation of cognitive schemata, and so on.

The above discussion is pertinent in any commentary on the putative effects of secrecy--e.g., compartmentation--on human psychology, because the putative effects are almost always presented in a context assuming that secrecy is something extraneous and even alien to the individual and to social human functioning. In fact, human psychology and secrecy cannot be separated.

With this introduction, let's turn to an intelligence monograph (formally declassified with redactions) prepared through the Central Intelligence Agency's Center for the Study of Intelligence and focused on compartmentation of information. Specifically, the following commentary addresses quotes from a section of the monograph on the "Psychological Aspects" of secrecy.

Quote. "We know that secrecy by its very nature may affect the personality of its practitioners....No wonder.... [that] the codeword compartment [compartmenting through proscribing information beyond a formal classification to the addition of at least one additional designation] has unintended psychological effects." Commentary. If personality describes characteristic modes of thought, emotion,

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motive, and behavior for specific individuals, then secrecy is part of personality, as opposed to something extraneous to it. That the codeword compartment has unintended psychological effects is simultaneously too strong and too weak a statement. It is too strong in that it is unlikely that a compartment always has unintended consequences or--at least--significant unintended consequences. It is too weak in that anything might have unintended effects and this should not be wondrous.

Quote. "For many, the badge with its distinctive letters [codewords] has become a status symbol, and for some the symbol has fused with careerism. Others equating knowledge with power, have become collectors of clearances.... [and]....have lost sight of need-to-know [information going only to people who must have the information to ensure task success]." Commentary. An inference is that it is possible to have an organization wherein all have de facto equal access and also the right to such access for all information. Another inference is that it is possible to have an organization without status symbols, without motivations to seek the highest status possible within the organization, and only with motivations to function in a manner supporting success for organizational missions and tasks. Still another inference is that organizational members can always function according to a need-to-know as opposed to intentional and unintentional personal, social, and political needs. It still remains an empirical task to identify such an organization in the concrete as opposed to the abstract wherein the Good, True, and Beautiful reign.

Quote. "The effect on those without access to a compartment is sometimes adverse." Follow-On Paraphrase. Individuals outside the compartment may believe that their loyalty is being questioned against, or opposed to, those within the compartment. Individuals who believe that they must know everything possible to do their jobs will intentionally try and subvert or outwit the compartment system--including setting up and nurturing alternative information transmission systems. Individuals without access to the compartment may be less likely to express their views--especially views contradicting the so-called prevailing wisdom--in that they realize that they don't have all available information and that they can be efficiently rebutted by others noting that they are not privy to all available information. Commentary. Missing from these well-founded observations is a statement on the interaction of secrecy and information accuracy and the potential adversity of this information. Although there certainly is information that should be very tightly controlled among very small segments within an intelligence bureaucracy, a strong case can be made that secrecy is often negatively correlated with the accuracy of the very information that is being protected. In a world wherein there is a general consensus that much too much information is compartmented, the above adverse effects are probably much more frequent than they need to be.

Follow-On Paraphrase of Other Adverse Effects. Some individuals conflate the sensitivity of information with its accuracy--so that compartmented information will be believed more than other kinds of information. Some individuals conflate the importance of information with its sensitivity--so that the most important information can become overprescribed to the detriment of a task or mission. Some individuals use compartmented information to provide greater credibility for a preconceived argument or opinion, even if that information is not the best to support that argument or opinion. Commentary. These are all well-founded observations. However, it is clear and empirically founded that a myriad of cognitive heuristics that are incompatible with threat assessment and other intelligence tasks characterize human functioning regardless of a formal compartmentation system. In other words, if not compartmentation, other formal or de facto policies and other aspects of organizational, social, and personal culture would be associated with the analogous observations.

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Additional Commentary. Here are some additional psychological hypotheses bearing on formal systems of secrecy--e.g., compartmentation--and meriting theoretical and empirical analysis. (1) Formal systems of secrecy may help activate magical thinking associated with individuals with greater susceptibility for or cognitive makers of schizophrenia. This would have detrimental consequences for intelligence analysis and response sets associated with accepting or not accepting such analysis. (It is most instructive that a common psychiatric delusion is one of spying. As de Boucard et al. (1970) note, "Constant surveillance and specific questioning about [their delusional individuals among the employees of agencies closely connected with national defense] activities or attitudes became easily commingled with the confused thinking of these patients." (2) Formal systems of secrecy may help activate narcissism and extreme sense of entitlement in certain individuals. This could increase the likelihood of security violations, common non-security related criminal behaviors, and even espionage among these individuals. (3) Formal systems of secrecy can be exploited to cast unwarranted aspersions on professional competitors and on others who stand in the way of inappropriate behavior on one's part. (4) Formal systems of secrecy can induce a sense of group and organizational identification, misplaced loyalty, compliance, and other psychological pressures that are recipes for collection, analysis, and policy disaster. In fact, as Kelly & McKillop (1996) imply, revealing or not revealing secrets can have disturbing consequences such as being rejected by and alienated by others. (5) Formal systems of secrecy can too easily be employed for covering up mistakes and embarrassing behaviors. (6) Formal systems of secrecy might make it more difficult to keep secrets! For example, Lane & Wegner (1995) have found that keeping secrets enhances the cognitive accessibility and intrusiveness of the secret within the secret-holder. (7) Formal systems of secrecy may induce a higher probability of believing in conspiracies than might otherwise be warranted (cf. Zonis & Joseph, 1994). (8) Formal systems of secrecy may be subverted through sexual functioning not only because many sexual proclivities are contraindicated by intelligence bureaucracies but because the very psychology of secrecy may be significantly developed through a disparity between early sexual functioning and social expectations (cf. Banerji, 1932).

A closing hypothesis is that the psychology of secrecy can impede policy changes induced by articles about the psychology of secrecy. (See Banerji, M. (1932). Psychology of secrets. *Indian Journal of Psychology*, 7, 41-57; Critique of the codeword compartment in the CIA. (March 1977). Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency. TR/IM 77-02J, TCS 4530-77. (Declassified and Redacted.); de Boucard, D., Bourgeois, M., & Favarel-Garrigues, B. (1970). The delusion of espionage, professional illness? *Annales Medico-Psychologiques*, 2Psychological Bulletin, 120, 450-465; Lane, J.D., & Wegner, D.M. (1995). The cognitive consequences of secrecy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 237-253; Sjoberg, G., Vaughan, T.R., & Williams, N. (1984). Bureaucracy as a moral Issue. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 20, 441-453; Wegner, D.M., Lane, J.D., & Dimitri, S. (1994). The allure of secret relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66, 286-300; Zonis, M., & Joseph, C.M. (1994). Conspiracy thinking in the Middle East. *Political Psychology*, 15, 443-459.) (Keywords: Intelligence, Secrecy.)