

Thatcher bugged by her 'closest ally'

THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT is one of the targets of the US National Security Agency communications monitoring operations, despite the remarkable facility with which Britain has provided it at Menwith Hill. In fact, according to published sources and a US intelligence consultant, Menwith — together with other sites in the US, Germany and Italy — is a centre for 'Project Wideband Extraction'. One of the products of wideband extraction, which emerges from banks of machines at the US Army Security Agency's interception station at Vint Hill Farms, near Warrington, Virginia, is the British government's communications around the world.

This was revealed in a secret 1975 congressional report; the Fink Report to the House Committee on Government Operations and Individual Rights, then led by Congresswoman Bella Abzug. A study of NSA reported that:

NSA monitors the traffic of specific countries, including Great Britain, our closest ally. The monitoring of government traffic has been confirmed by a former employee of Vint Hill Farms station. (The station) had a whole bank of machines (and) a whole team of men whose only job was to read and process intercepted British communications.

Paradoxically, the 'secret' Fink report containing these references was published, unattributed and unnoticed, during 1978 hearings on the US's new Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

Project Wideband Extraction, with which Menwith Hill and other NSA stations are connected, started operations at the Vint Hill

Farm station during July 1969. The job, as the name implies, was to extract signals and messages of intelligence interest from a 'wideband' containing hundreds of thousands of other communications. Sometimes these communications would be transmitted around the world by satellite for analysis, after being intercepted. More often, according to US intelligence officials, giant freight aircraft would fly back to the US from Europe and Australia, loaded with reels of magnetic tape to feed into analysing computers.

Menwith Hill, as we reported last week, carries out a great deal of wideband interception and extraction. References to another site for 'wideband' work have also appeared in unclassified US defence appropriations hearings. This is at Gablingen, near Augsburg in Germany, which is the headquarters of the US Army Security Agency's 502d Group, responsible for interception throughout Germany.

Augsburg's role in telephone tapping was inadvertently confirmed by Pentagon lawyers in two recent civil rights cases. An army officer and some US civilians living in Germany, had sued the US Defense Department for unlawful spying on their activities. During the course of the case, the Pentagon produced a short list of units which had the capacity to tap or bug telephone calls in Germany. The 502d ASA Group at Augsburg was included. (In a recent reorganisation the US Army Security Agency has become the Intelligence and Security Command, and Augsburg has become the 66th Intelligence and Security Group HQ.)

According to two former US intelligence of-

ficials, the sites of US tapping operations in Germany are Berlin (where the allied powers can freely tap any phones they like) and Baumholder. The Baumholder station was consolidated in 1972 with all other Army Security Agency operations at Augsburg. Another minor tapping site is in Italy, where NSA is known to have two bases, at Treviso and Brindisi. Some of the submarine cables which cross the Mediterranean basin to the near and middle east can only be reached in this area.

Another site for tapping international phone and telex calls was in Sidi Yahia, near Rabat in Morocco. This base mostly intercepted French signals and cables. It has now closed and moved to Rota in southern Spain. A former analyst for NSA's Naval Security Group, who worked for more than a year at Sidi Yahia, described its operations to us:

In one eight hour shift you would go through perhaps 500-600 pages of telex type sheets ... Once a week I was asked to translate a telephone tap tape ...

He had to watch for and file references to such people as Stokely Carmichael, Robert Mugabe, Holden Roberto, Frelimo ... 'and any British or American diplomats in the area'.

The headquarters of Project Wideband have now been moved to a giant new 'Central Security Operations Station', which NSA has set up at San Antonio, Texas. Over 5,000 servicemen and NSA personnel work full time on analysing intercepts from around the world.

Menwith Hill taps: no official denial

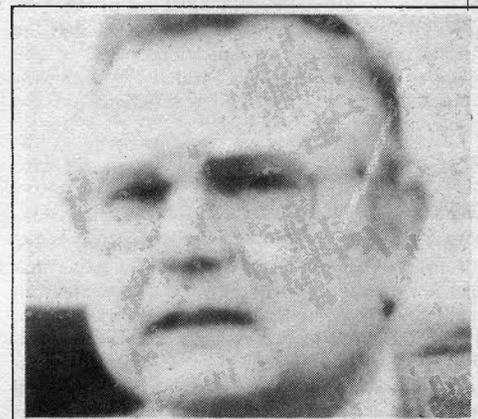
DESPITE SOME CONFUSED reports to the contrary, no British or American government department has denied last week's allegations that the US National Security Agency's Menwith Hill Station in Yorkshire is conducting mass tapping of international telephone and telegraph messages.

The Ministry of Defence — the only department prepared to deal with the issue — has continued to issue only what a spokesman termed a 'curiously specific' and highly 'limited' denial; namely that Menwith Hill was not intercepting transatlantic incoming or outgoing calls, nor was it listening to any domestic calls in the UK.

The accuracy of official comments on communications interception has not, historically, been reliable. But in any case, the Ministry's

comments are virtually a tacit acknowledgement that Menwith Hill can listen in, as we described, to all calls to Europe, transatlantic calls going through Britain, and all telex and telegram traffic. As Bob Cryer MP suggested to the House of Commons last Thursday, the pronouncement (by the Leader of the House of Commons, Norman St John Stevas) that no minister was prepared to comment on the issue conceded the accuracy of the article by default.

The Post Office claimed last week — quite wrongly — that all aspects of interception were covered in the April Home Office White Paper. But they did lift the shutters a little. They now admit to running the high capacity cable that feeds Menwith Hill. But it's a 'private circuit' — and they can't talk about it.



John Vernon Mills, base security officer, ill-temperedly hung around TV crews who filmed Menwith Hill after the *New Statesman* revelations. He told the BBC that he didn't 'wish to dignify the article with a comment'.