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NSA Codebreaking Secrets Revealed: It Wasn't All Magic - The Early Struggle to Automate Cryptanalysis 1930s-1960s - Alan Turing, Vannevar Bush, First Electronic Computers, World War II Codes

U.S. Government, National Security Agency (NSA)

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This fascinating NSA book details the amazing work at the agency in the first decades of computer development. Conventional wisdom about NSA and computers has it, as a retired NSA senior officer once wrote me, "In the early days, NSA and its predecessor organizations drove the computer industry. In the 1960s, we kept pace with it. We started losing ground in the '70s, and in the '80s we struggled to keep up with the industry." True, but underlying this, in each decade the cryptologic organizations experienced a wide range of successes and failures, positives and negatives. If, as slang puts it, "they won some, lost some, and some got rained out," all of this experience is worth serious examination by students of computers, cryptanalysis, and NSA history. It begins in the 1930s as American and British intelligence officials confronted new crypt-analytic and cryptographic challenges, and adapted some intriguing new concepts to their analysis. It carries the story to the flexible and fast systems of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The author follows and links the development of automatic data processing from the critical conceptual work of the 1930s through the practical experiments born of national necessity in the world war to the postwar development and the previously untold story of NSA's postwar computer development. Along the way, he has rescued from obscurity some important successes - and some important failures - in cryptanalytic machinery from World War II. All too often, discussions of NSA's computer development treat only the mainstream, ignoring the problems, failures, dead ends and might-have-beens, in order to concentrate on successes. In the present volume, however, key components of Dr. Burke's story and important for our knowledge are the machines which didn't work or which never had progeny, and why this was so. Just as important are Dr. Burke's cautionary tales about the influence of international and interservice rivalry on plans and procedures. Technical limitations and technical opportunities shaped much of the development of computing equipment, but the story is also replete with instances of man-made barriers and baleful bureaucratic bypaths that wielded great influence during much of this development.

During World War II American cryptanalysts built some of the most sophisticated electronic machines in the world, but the need to address cryptanalytic crises blocked them from creating the general-purpose digital electronic computer.

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