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Herbert O. Yardley, **The American Black Chamber**, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1931; Reprint Edition, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004.

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      Herbert Yardley provides an informative, sensationalist account of his sixteen-year career as a cryptologist (1913-1929). He first served as head of the U. S. Army's Cryptographic Bureau (MI-8) during World War I. In the 1920s, Yardley continued to lead MI-8, a "private" organization funded by the U. S. Army and the Department of State that at its peak employed 165 cryptanalysts.[1] Although Yardley's story is riveting, it is hard to accept how much of Yardley's account is accurate based on the circumstances surrounding the book's release.

      Yardley became involved with code and cipher work as a clerk in the State Department code room from 1913 to 1917. As he became fascinated with the stories of intrigue from diplomats who reviewed the codes, Yardley wondered, "Were our diplomatic codes safe from prying eyes…Why did America have no bureau for the reading of secret diplomatic code and cipher telegrams of foreign governments?"[2] For four years, Yardley trained himself through reading, researching, and analyzing "…copies of code and cipher communications dispatched by various embassies in Washington" for weaknesses. During this period, Yardley recalled that "Progress was slow…Some [codes] I solved and some I did not. But I was learning a new science, with no beaten path to follow."[3] At the end of this apprenticeship, Yardley submitted a detailed report that outlined the weaknesses of the State Department's code systems. After reviewing the report, Yardley's boss made minor changes to the encryption, which he quickly solved.[4] During this time, Yardley claims to have solved the code used between President Woodrow Wilson and his adjutant, Colonel Edward M. House, although contemporary observers challenged this assertion.[5]

      After transferring to the Army in 1917, Yardley's MI-8 bureau was responsible for recruiting cryptographers, training them, and putting them to work on breaking diplomatic and military codes. The subsection's first mission was to revise the War Department's codes and ciphers. The subsection, "prepared codes, ciphers, tables…for communication with Military Intelligence officers, special agents, Ordnance Department agents, military attaches…" and other high-ranking officials.[6]

      Yardley describes the ideal cryptographer. The "…successful cryptographer requires a type of mind difficult to describe. The work is absolutely foreign to anything

he has ever done. To excel, he not only needs years of experience but great originality and imagination of a particular type." Dubbed "cipher brains," Yardley sought intangible qualities in his analysts that would reveal themselves under the pressure of cracking difficult codes under tremendous pressure.[7] At the end of the Washington Conference in 1921, Yardley ". . . was too ill to get out of bed . . . [for] . . . over a month."[8]

For the intelligence buff, the most intriguing parts of the book will be Yardley's descriptions of how his team analyzed complex codes. Yardley describes German uses for secret inks and wireless intercepts. Yardley also describes extralegal efforts to secure codes through infiltration of foreign embassies in the United States and abroad. Of course, Yardley describes MI-8's successes such as the arrest of two German agents on American soil; Madame Maria de Victorica and Pablo Weberski. While serving as a military observer in Europe in 1918, Yardley noticed some gross security deficiencies at American embassies. He also describes British and French efforts to learn about the successes of American efforts to crack their diplomatic codes.

Yardley's most explosive chapters describe how MI-8 broke the Japanese Foreign Ministry codes in 1919 and the use of deciphered codes by American diplomats during negotiations at the Washington Armaments Conference. Yardley credits his bureau with providing American diplomats with extra weapons in negotiating with their British and Japanese counterparts. He also describes how MI-8 assisted the Paris Peace Conference delegation by deciphering diplomatic dispatches between the participants; eliciting prompt denials from the State Department after the book's release.[9] Yardley's most incendiary claim says he, "…deciphered a telegram which reported an Entente plot to assassinate President Wilson either by administering a slow poison or by giving him influenza in ice." Yardley further claims that, "President Wilson's first sign of illness occurred while he was in Paris, and he was soon to die a lingering death."[10] Wilson's secretary, Joseph Tumulty, denied knowing anything about such a plot.[11]

This book complements memoirs such as Ellis Zacharias's *Secret Missions* (Reprint edition: Naval Institute Press, 2003) and surveys such as Jeffrey Dorwart's history of the Office of Naval Intelligence (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1979). However, knowing that this book was released as an expository tell-all to gain attention and generate income left this reviewer cautious about some of Yardley's claims. For those interested in a factual account of Yardley's life and experiences, see David Kahn's *The Reader of Gentlemen's Mail: Herbert O. Yardley and the Birth of American Codebreaking* (Yale University Press, 2004).[12] In spite of the controversy surrounding the book's release, Yardley was posthumously inducted into the National Security Agency's Hall of Honor.[13]

Overall, *The American Black Chamber* is an entertaining read that describes the evolution of American cryptography from one of its earliest practitioners. Historians, intelligence buffs, and codebreaking professionals will find something of interest in this book.

The Editors
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[1] Yardley, Foreword.
[2] Yardley, 20.
[3] Yardley, 21.
[4] Yardley, 30-31.
[5] For a contemporary critique, see Sam B. Trissel, "Mysteries of the Black Chamber: How Diplomatic Codes Are Stolen and Secret Messages Deciphered," *Los Angeles Times,* 29 November 1931, K3. Trissel claims that, "I was in charge of the code room in the London Embassy and decoded a number of the Wilson-House communications from the code into plain English. But in English they meant nothing at all. That code…was never deciphered for the reason that the English words and sentences…meant just what they said until decoded by Col. House."
[6] Yardley, 41.
[7] Yardley, 120.
[8] Yardley, 318.
[9] "Deny Our Statesmen Read Envoys' Ciphers," New *York Times,* 2 June 1931, 18.
[10] Yardley, 237.
[11] "Army Files Mention 'Plot." But Officials in Washington Deny Knowing of Asserted Murder Plan," *New York Times,* 1 June 1931, 3.
[12] For circumstances surrounding the release of this book, see Kahn, chapter 12.
[13] "Hall of Honor: Herbert O. Yardley (1889-1958). http://www.nsa.gov/honor/honor00006.cfm