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## Reading Gentlemen's Mail March 12

“Gentlemen don’t read each other’s mail.” These words, attributed to Secretary of State Henry Stimson, reportedly were associated with the closure in the late 1920s of MI-8 (also known, somewhat infamously, as the “American Black Chamber.”) The outlines of the story are generally familiar to *History Today* readers: after World War I, cryptologist Herbert Yardley led MI-8, a cryptologic organization jointly funded by the US Department of State and the US Army. In its eventual New York City location, MI-8 obtained access to international cables, and MI-8 cryptanalysts broke the encipherment of those cables, making the underlying messages available to US officials. When Stimson found out about MI-8’s activities, he closed the organization down. Ultimately, an embittered Yardley wrote a tell-all book entitled *The American Black Chamber*.



Henry Stimson, Secretary of War

Within the Center for Cryptologic History’s collection resides a transcript of a three-way discussion among early cryptologic pioneers Abraham Sinkov, Solomon Kullback, and Frank Rowlett. As far as we can tell, the occasion appears to have been a panel discussion held on January 12, 1962, as part of the Basic Cryptologic Course (CY-100). This would have been several years before each of the three retired from NSA.

As part of this discussion, Frank Rowlett primarily, but with a notable interjection by Abraham Sinkov, offered insight into Secretary Stimson’s relationship with early cryptology in general, and cryptanalysis in particular. Excerpts (slightly edited for readability) follow:

[Mr. Rowlett] Now, I’m going to go back to Yardley and what he did. After

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some success during World War I—and this was very good success because they produced a lot of worthwhile information—it was decided that Yardley’s Black Chamber would be continued, and they moved up to New York, and under the cover of the Universal Code Compiling Company which was located in one of the old brownstone houses in New York.

They did this cryptanalytic work, and Yardley would come down to Washington about once a week with his decrypts in a little dispatch case and make the rounds in the State Department and G2—who, incidentally, was providing him with this great sum of ten grand a year, you see. The State Department was providing the rest of the funds.

... What brought this to a head was that Yardley was up giving to one of the desks in the State Department, one of the South American desks, some information about the cables that had been sent in and out of Washington by the ambassador, and left copies of these with the desk, and the desk took them in and showed them to Mr. Stimson, and he wondered how foolish could the South American ambassador be to leave copies of [t]his sort of personal, confidential messages with the desk? And when he queried the desk officer about it, the desk officer revealed that this was done by cryptanalysis. And the story goes that Mr. Stimson became furious that we would involve ourselves in such a nefarious undertaking; ‘it’s dishonorable and all that, and therefore we ought to quit this business.’

[Dr. Sinkov] A gentleman doesn’t read somebody else’s mail.

[Mr. Rowlett] And he felt very strongly about it, although I must say that I saw Mr. Stimson about six months before Pearl Harbor when he came down to look at the cryptanalytic effort. He was then Secretary of War, and his attitude was anything but ‘it was dishonorable.’

In 1940, Henry Stimson became the US Secretary of War under President Franklin Roosevelt. In this role, he had a new appreciation for the power of cryptology to support America’s military. Read about Stimson’s role in supporting the eventual exchange of cryptanalytic information between the Americans and the British in CCH’s recent publication of *The First Americans: The 1941 US Codebreaking*

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*Mission to Bletchley's Park*, by Dr. David Sherman. Read it at [insert link from nsa.gov].

In his autobiography, Frank Rowlett amplified a little bit about Stimson's relations with the Signals Intelligence Service.

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