

HERBERT YARDLEY — HAS THE STORY CHANGED? September 28



Herbert Yardley. The inscription is to Edna Ramsaier, a Black Chamber employee who became Yardley's second wife.

The story of Herbert O. Yardley is quite well known. In sum, he wrote a tell-all book called *The American Black Chamber* in 1931 against the wishes of his former employer, the United States government. Yardley was no typical government employee — in fact, he ran the Cipher Bureau, aka Black Chamber, a joint US Army/State Department codebreaking organization covertly based in New York City. Anything he wrote in this book, therefore, could have been quite damaging. Not surprisingly, his book became an international best seller, prompting some nations to change their codes because of claimed U.S. successes against them. Yardley was never charged with a crime for publishing this work because no law preventing it was in the books — technically, what he did was not illegal.

The CCH, with assistance from the NSA Archives, recently came across some comments Yardley made about the book as it was coming out. In a June 6, 1931 message to Lincoln Foster of *The Living Age* magazine,* Yardley called it “inconceivable” that US officials would ever deny that his organization had existed (the government, not surprisingly, claimed that there never was a Black Chamber). To prove his point, Yardley even offered to provide to Foster the archive number of the official memorandum from the Secretary of War in 1919 standing up his organization. He then goes on in great detail to describe his organizations budget, locations, etc.**

The next part of his letter to Foster is somewhat of a head scratcher. In writing his book, he “felt no hesitancy” in revealing the secrets of his organization to the outside world. Yet, he also revealed that he was offered twice as much money as the government paid him to work for a foreign power to run its own black

chamber and train its personnel.*** What is head scratching is that he turned the offer down because he had moral qualms against harming the United States by working for another country. Apparently, he had no moral qualms about writing a tell-all book which would essentially do the same thing.

Finally, it has been widely assumed that Yardley was anti-technology. Supposedly, his resistance to change was one of the reasons his Black Chamber was abolished in 1929. He preferred the old ways of breaking codes, e.g., pen and pencil, over machine-generated ciphers (the famous German Enigma machine is the best example of one). A more technology friendly organization, the Signal Intelligence Service, headed by William Friedman, who had a strong scientific background, replaced his Black Chamber in 1930.

Yet Yardley's final paragraph to Foster makes him seem more technology-friendly. He said it was "utterly ridiculous" for the U.S. government to depend on the old ways of encrypting messages. He then went on to say that a "machine cipher" would solve all US communications security problems, making its secret dispatches "absolutely indecipherable." He also thought these machines would be relatively inexpensive. Finally, he opined that they, if adopted, would make organizations such as his obsolete. More fatalistically, it would mean, he wrote, the end of cryptography as a science.

So, has the story about Yardley changed? As noted, he saw nothing wrong with writing a tell-all book revealing American secrets, but felt it wrong to work for a foreign power against the United States. This logic is curious, if not dubious. As for his views on machine-generated ciphers, it may be significant that this letter was written two years after he was replaced by Friedman. Perhaps he had a change of heart. We may never know. Herbert O. Yardley remains a fascinating cryptologic character.

*This is probably *Littell's Living Age*, a weekly magazine.

**Yardley, in his letter, also claimed that his Black Chamber was forced to change New York City locations once because a foreign power (NFI) had rifled its files. CCH had never heard this story before.

***CCH had never heard that Yardley was offered a job by another power at this time, and can only speculate about the truth of the claim. A decade later, he was hired by China and then by Canada to lead a “black chamber.” These countries, however, were seeking to draw on his reputed cryptanalytic skills, not get him to spill secrets about current American operations.

502 caption: a portrait photograph of Herbert Yardley.