



Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World

Trevor Paglen

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Welcome to a top-level clearance world that doesn't *exist*...Now with updated material for the paperback edition.

This is the adventurous, insightful, and often chilling story of a road trip through a shadow nation of state secrets, clandestine military bases, black sites, hidden laboratories, and top-secret agencies that make up what insiders call the "black world."

Here, geographer and provocateur Trevor Paglen knocks on the doors of CIA prisons, stakes out a covert air base in Nevada from a mountaintop 30 miles away, dissects the Defense Department's multibillion dollar "black" budget, and interviews those who live on the edges of these blank spots.

Whether Paglen reports from a hotel room in Vegas, a secret prison in Kabul, or a trailer in Shoshone Indian territory, he is impassioned, rigorous, relentless-and delivers eye-opening details.

Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World Details

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From Reader Review Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World for online ebook

Ian says

"More than fifty years of black spacecraft design has also meant creating a vast bureaucratic, cultural, and social architecture of secrecy and deception. Building secret satellites means creating enormous black budgets, hidden factories and obscure contracts to task their development, ultra classified security compartments to protect the 'product,' and a history of disinformation and outright lying to protect their secrets. 'Overhead assets,' as the National Reconnaissance Office and Pentagon call them, are not only technological marvels but social and cultural things" (Paglen, pg. #105).

"History and geography, it seems to me, cannot be easily separated from one another. The environments we live and work in, from our secret prisons to our universities, are in a very real sense the present past. We live in and among the institutions and spaces that have been bequeathed to us by what came before. But geography is more than the sedimented spaces produced in the recent and distant past. Geography also sculpts the future. The spaces we create place possibilities and constraints on that which is yet to come, because the world of the future must, quite literally, be built upon the spaces we create in the present. To change the future, then, means changing the material space of the present" (Paglen, pg. #280).

Elizabeth says

So far Paglen's research into the "secret" but yet, clearly outlined, areas of operations that undermine democracy is kicking my butt in a good way. I am obsessed with maps and military mapping strategies and the nature of produced and available knowledge as mechanisms of control, so...get on it! Paglen is both a Ph.D in Geography, and a practicing artist-a photographer. The book "invisible" is a pendant piece to this-- lots of important photos.

Valiant Thor says

Trevor Paglen's "Blank Spots on the Map" is a compelling overview of the Black World, or at least what little is known about it, and the historical turning points that led to its creation and unchecked growth.

Paglen offers a unique perspective by viewing the black world through a lense of geography, and results in a remarkably cogent analysis. This book does not contain much in the way of "revelations", but it nevertheless contains some pretty eye-opening information, such as showing how fundamental legal underpinnings of state secrecy were based on lies (United States v. Reynolds).

The book reminded me of John D'Agata's "About a Mountain". Like "Blank Spots...", "About a Mountain" was fascinating and had a few gems of information, but what I felt I got from both books was not information, but understanding. Or, at least, a better understanding.

Paglen's academic credentials and sober approach to the subject provides some welcome gravitas to the study of the Black World. Unlike so many other works on the Black World, Paglen only writes about what he can

prove, which is a severe limitation given the subject matter. While this approach cannot begin to do justice to the true scope or technological advancement of the black world (whatever it may be), it provides a solid baseline for dealing with a topic on which there is often not much on which to hang ones hat.

Perhaps most importantly, Dr. Paglen brings academic rigor and stature to the study of the Black World, which most of the spineless military money-grubbers in academia are more than happy to ignore.

Robert Beveridge says

Trevor Paglen, **Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World** (Dutton, 2009)

The more I think about this book, especially in conjunction with Paglen's previous effort, *Torture Taxi* (which made my favorite reads of 2008 list), the more I think the guy just can't win. The niche he's carved out for himself is one that's destined to scare up dissatisfaction from both sides of this particular fence. The conspiracy theorists are going to hate Paglen's methods of research (which involve, you know, actual research rather than sitting around wearing tinfoil hats), while the skeptics are going to hate the subjects Paglen digs into, which are a conspiracy theorist's wet dream. In short, the guy's pretty much screwed. Which is a crime, because, like *Torture Taxi*, *Blank Spots on the Map* is a lovely little tourguide to parts of the map the United States government would prefer you didn't see. Which is all well and good, I guess, if you're down with the idea of "necessary state secrets" (and what a joke *that* idea is, and always has been), but consider this: Billions upon billions of *your* tax dollars are being funnelled down these black holes. *Billions*. Are you bugged about the vast amounts of money we ship to governments who don't need it every year? (Prime example: Israel.) That's chump change compared to what goes into Langley and just plain vanishes.

It's not like the skeptics can really keep their voices raised any more, either. Since the hijinks of September 11th, names like Guantanamo Bay, Groom Lake, and the Salt Pit have become cultural markers. There's no more plausible deniability. All Paglen is doing is outlining the geographies, making them easier for the public to see. He goes and looks. He goes and talks to the people that look. And he reports back. It's simple. It's the same formula he used in *Torture Taxi* (I can't remember whether it's explicitly stated, but I got the feeling that this book grew out of that one), and it works just as well here. There's a lot of black-ops history surrounding these sites, some of which (especially regarding Groom Lake) has recently been declassified. Did you know that? Of course not. Who's going to tell you? Trevor Paglen, that's who. And maybe Mike Gravel, if he drops another book any time soon. But don't expect to hear about it on CNN or Fox News. This is information you need to go searching for. Once you do, you may come upon Trevor Paglen, who's got it all wrapped up in a neat, readable little package.

To answer what seem to be some implied criticisms of the book, no, of course there are no answers here. Most of this stuff is still highly classified. What did you expect, the folks in Langley were just going to let Paglen drive up and give him a tour of a top-secret facility? (There's a great bit at the beginning about a guided tour of Groom Lake, however.) But you've always suspected it exists; stealth bombers and jump jets don't suddenly appear out of nowhere. All that can be done now is make the edges a bit clearer. That's what Trevor Paglen does, and he does it well. ****

(In the interests of full disclosure, yes, I know Trevor Paglen; I met him once about a decade ago while he was still in the band Noisegate.)

Tom says

What they're doing that you aren't allowed to know about, or what they're doing, or how much money they're spending, or where it is.

D says

Trevor Paglen is a geographer and photographer whose work concentrates on making the invisible infrastructure of surveillance and military intelligence visible.

Over the past decade, he has taken thousands of photographs of places connected to the so-called “black world” of classified defense activity. [...] He has aimed his lens at a National Security Agency eavesdropping complex in Sugar Grove, West Virginia; a space-surveillance transmitter in Lake Kickapoo, Texas; and a secret C.I.A. prison outside Kabul. (source)

Paglen is an academic geographer by training and *Blank Spots On the Map* is ostensibly a work of geography. The tagline “The Dark Geography of the Pentagon’s Secret World” does much to reassure us of this.

The book investigates black spaces—places rendered inaccessible not through physical limitations like topography or fences—but through social processes such as secrecy and censorship. These are secret military installations, R&D and manufacturing facilities and notorious CIA black sites where torture is conducted.

Unfortunately, *Blank Spots* ultimately fails to deliver on its promise of mapping a “dark geography”. Paglen uses geography fleetingly, mostly as a launching pad for charting the historical, legal and technical contexts within which the black world has taken shape over the past 60 years. This is done well and it’s here where the his exhaustive research skills shine through.

Highlights include an account of a group of people mapping the paths of covert satellites, an exploration of the CIA’s use of the U.S. Postal Service’s mailbox service and Paglen holing himself up in a hotel room overlooking an airfield to record the paths of covert flights.

Christopher says

This book is more than a little bit depressing.

For a start, geography as a field of study is an interesting lens to try and view the "black world" through. After all, even if they are "off-the-books", secret projects and groups still have to be *somewhere*. The idea of learning about secrets by marking out the boundaries that they declared off-limits is definitely interesting. However, this book doesn't stay in this old-school geography mean for long, quickly getting into more

historical and political narratives.

I definitely appreciate the lengths that the author went to to keep the stories and narrative rooted in the real world. When talking about Area 51, the Skunk Works, the CIA, stealth satellites, and Central American death squads it can be very easy to wander into full-on conspiracy-nut territory.

And yet...

The story told here about the black world is fundamentally very disturbing. This is a HUGE amount of space, effort, and money going into efforts that are beyond the review of the people. And it's pretty clear that most of it is beyond the review of pretty much anyone. The potential for abuse is huge and inevitably the abuse is there - not just torture or indefinite detainment or gabbing the wrong suspects. Those could be written off as serving the purpose of the programs (haorribly). But also cut-corners like burning toxic chemicals and getting your construction workers sick, or covering up bad airplane maintenance under a claim of state-secrets. These do nothing to promote the country's security - it's just finding an easy way out to cover for incompetence.

The most damning thesis in this book is that Justice Breyer's famous saying that sunshine is the best disinfectant isn't the case with the black world. In the world of the secret government, when illegal secret behavior is revealed, the black world gets to redefine what's legal and change the "white" world to match. NSA warrantless wiretaps are clearly illegal as long as they are secret - when revealed, they are retroactively legalized. Torture? Now OK. Assassination? Sure.

The world of black sites and black programs is huge. I have know and continue to know people who work in the black world. The company I work for is expanding into the black world. I'm sure they'd all try to make a distinction between the "acceptable" black world they work in and the "dirty" black world of Gitmo, Abu Ghraib, Iran-Contra, or the Phoenix Program. But by looking at the sites and the plane flights and the holes in the laws (not to mention the missing satellites), Paglen makes a pretty good case that there is no bright line here - it is all part of a parallel government, military, industry, economy, and society.

Nick Jordan says

Totally emotionally overwhelming book by a 2017 MacArthur Genius Grant winner.

Jerome says

Meh.

Poorly written, the book meanders about looking for a central theme, which is never realized. As for new information the authors promises, there isn't any - he covers the same old material, to which previous researchers laid claim. So, the same question pops up: How did this second-rate book get published?

The niche he's carved out for himself is one that's destined to scare up dissatisfaction from both sides of this particular fence. The conspiracy theorists are going to hate Paglen's methods of research (which involve, you

know, actual research rather than sitting around wearing tinfoil hats), while the skeptics are going to hate the subjects Paglen digs into, which are a conspiracy theorist's wet dream. In short, the guy's pretty much screwed.

This book espouses the viewpoint that the large amount of money expended on "black" programs and activities, because it is not detailed in the budget, undermines the foundations of American democracy. That viewpoint is worth considering, whether one agrees with it or not, and Mr. Paglen offers much information to support his case. However, he overstates his case in various ways, distorts the interpretation of certain facts, and pastes together a collection of unrelated information and anecdotes. This leaves the book less convincing to a knowledgeable reader than it should be. None the less, it's worth reading.

As an example of the problems of the book I'll touch on the work at Groom Lake (Area 51), on the Nevada Test Range, operated as part of Nellis Air Force Base. Mr. Paglen asserts that the work at Groom Lake is so secret that not even the name "Groom Lake" can be used in public. That may have been true many years ago, but isn't now. Indeed, a large amount of information about what goes on at the Area 51 test site is available on the Web, some of it thoughtfully provided by the United States Air Force. I spent a couple of hours browsing this material, and finally I got bored, having learned as much as I cared to know from text, photos, maps, etc. And I note one minor misrepresentation of fact in Mr. Paglen's material on Groom Lake. In two places he asserts that the Soviet aircraft used in Red Flag exercises were "stolen" from the Russians, but that's not how they were acquired. The US gov't got those from countries which had acquired them from the Soviet Union and then decided to use US equipment instead, and happily let us have their unwanted Soviet-built fighter aircraft.

Indeed, there is one truly "black" area at the Nevada Test Range: "Area 19". What goes on there (if anything) is not clear, although there is a lot of mythology about Area 19 on the Web. My personal guess is that Area 19 was intended and prepared for use in projects that never took place, and that the reason nothing can be seen there now is that there's nothing to see. But, of course, I may be wrong about that.

Now, having criticized Mr. Paglen's book, I'll soften my discussion by pointing out that in choosing his examples of "black" programs he faced a nearly insuperable obstacle. There are indeed some programs and activities of the US government that are truly "black", but you won't find references to those in the public domain, and no writer will get the time of day from the government in seeking to find out about them. Those might furnish better material for Mr. Paglen's thesis, but he can't learn about them. The thing all the ones I'm aware of had in common is that they weren't secret to keep Congress or other appropriate people in the US from knowing about them; they were secret to conceal them from foreign military adversaries. None of them and none of their budgets, posed the slightest threat to American democracy. Indeed, most were so small they wouldn't have rated a line in the budget even if they had been unclassified; if something is big and sprawling, it's exceedingly difficult to keep its existence and reason for being from becoming known. In one case, we successfully concealed the existence of a good-sized overseas military installation for several years, to keep the Soviet Union from learning enough about it to attack it successfully, but even in that case the word got out after a while, and we were visited by a Congressional delegation; by now it's ancient history, long since abandoned and demolished, and one can learn a bit about it on the Web (although not much). There may be analogous "black" programs that could pose a threat to US democracy; I have never heard even a rumor of any such, but then I wouldn't have.

Blank Spots On The Map is a confusing and seemingly random series of chapters that outlines America's multi-billion dollar black budget, and attempts to look at some of the programmes funded by this hidden pot of money. It also looks at the historical origins and influences that led to it.

Reading the introduction, my interest was peaked when the author told me that "not much serious literature about black sites" was available, and that it was time to put this right (in Paglen's lexicon, a "site" is the metaphorical footprint of a black programme = it does not refer exclusively to a physical entity). Since the truth is that *a lot* has been written about the black world and its many "sites", some of it by very talented and serious writers and researchers, I decided to give Paglen the benefit of the doubt and assumed that this book was going to cover a great deal of new territory that would put everyone else to shame.

I can only say that what followed was hugely disappointing, and this remained true to the end of the book.

One of the first chapters is about Paglen sitting in a hotel room in Las Vegas, monitoring Janet flights headed to Groom Lake. I was quite excited to see what new information the author would divulge, but as it turned out he added *nothing* to this very well-known aspect of the black world. The chapter soon became an exercise in tedium as he regurgitated the same prose that has been written about Janet flights by a dozen other people before him. I don't know if his publisher paid for his trip to Vegas, but on the strength of what he wrote, I'd be asking for my money back. Similarly familiar chapters follow, and while there was one illuminating chapter on America's secret satellites and a man who toils to track them, the Vegas chapter acts as a warning: there is not much in this book that you won't find anywhere else. Not much, of course, except numerous tedious geography-based metaphors about black money and black programmes, none of which add anything to your understanding of the black world. Thankfully, even Paglen seems to have given up on metaphor and figurative speech by the second half of the book, and your normal reading experience can resume.

Curiously, Paglen goes to great lengths to decry a political system that allows the black world to exist. Yet not once does he really come out and denounce it; nor does he extol the benefits of some of the black programmes that made America a safer place to be during the Cold War and beyond. It is in this respect a book that is unashamedly one-sided to the point that you have to question why.

Yet the most maddening thing about this book is actually that the author appears to have deluded himself. The text totally undermines his assertion that there is little serious literature about the black world - This book would not exist were it not for other serious literature on the subject! If proof were needed, you'd need only flip to the back of the book and peruse the 281 endnotes, the vast majority of which point to all the other works that Paglen was reliant upon to create his own book. And you have to laugh at the irony of it all when you realise that a book about deception references its own endnotes, but only in a manner that is so obscure that it is unlikely that you'd ever bother to read them (the endnotes are numbered at the back, but not within the text). Indeed, if you are not familiar with the other authors who have written about black programmes, you'll be forgiven for reading the entire book thinking that Paglen has done a pretty good job of getting some serious, original research done. I would say he does a good job of re-telling some stories and adding detail to others, but he falls far short of writing the exposé that was promised.

In my mind, there is also an unanswered question over the quality and depth of Paglen's research. In one chapter alone, he makes key omissions when discussing how black programmes can be hidden from view. In one example, he names a black programme (F-117) but completely fails to mention or acknowledge that key elements of it (basing it at Tonopah, as an example) were hidden from view by using another black programme (CONSTANT PEG), and that there is precedent for the military to use one black programme to hide another. Later in the same chapter, he talks about the declassification of HAVE BLUE, the predecessor to the F-117, as being unusual; it is clear that he has no idea that HAVE BLUE was declassified only because pictures of the aircraft were released into the public domain by accident, and this is a pretty basic omission for a self-proclaimed writer of serious copy. Similarly, beyond mentioning front companies, he makes no effort to really examine the actual mechanics of paying for the maintenance and logistical support required to

run black programmes that have 'gone operational' - a very tangible and interesting facet of the story that is key to hiding such programmes - yet there is information out there on the subject had he looked hard enough for it.

Paglen goes on to speak about using Air Force biographies as a source of information on black programmes as though this idea is not only new (to the reader, at least), but also of his own devising. In reality, researchers have been using biographical data to provide insight into black programmes and operations for a long, long time. Combined with the 'serious' claim at the very beginning and the partially-obscured endnotes at the very end of the book, this claim really made me believe that *Blank Spots On The Map* lacks even a modicum of intellectual honesty. The realisation that Paglen appeared to be misrepresenting himself left me labouring to get to the end of the book.

In summary: if you have not read anything about the black world, then this book would be a good starting point since its greatest achievement is to pull together research from many different texts. If, on the other hand, you have read Emerson, Peebles, Wilcox, Sweetman or any other authors who have written with authority and (as time has shown) accuracy about such programmes, then this book will add very little to your library.

Finally, a message to his editor, if this book had one: you do not use a capital letter after a colon!

David says

poorly written what a waste of time

Jason Morrison says

Paglen takes the reader into a well researched book about the "black world", which is the world behind the government curtain that few people ever see.

I really feel that each chapter of this book could be its own book in and of itself. There were a few chapters that got so detailed that I had a tough time keeping up. Then there were a few chapters that were about topics that just seemed so wrong that it makes you upset thinking that the government would do what it had done to people.

I spent most of the book being amazed at just how little the average citizen really knows about the black world of the government. Really astonishing work from the author at putting some of the pieces of the puzzle together for the book.

Jeffrey Martin says

Strong writing, interesting facts and ideas. He very clearly cared for the project. Unfortunately was not exactly my cup of tea though I did learn a lot, and for that I am thankful.

Resonance says

This was an interesting book. I enjoyed reading it; it was passably well written and it contained some good info. Among the book's drawbacks were the author's 'geography' angle on the 'black world', which he returns to again and again, yet never really delivers on. (It's basically a sort of "Nobody understand geography, they think it's about maps, geography is a much more interesting discipline and if you're trained in it you see things differently, now here's a bunch of geography metaphors about the black world" thing where the author skips the middle step of sharing the insights a geographer would have and making the reader, well, care about them.) Another drawback, endemic to these sorts of works, is that there's just not a lot for people to say -- the folks on the 'inside' are legally bound to silence and the folks on the outside don't know much. There's only so much speculation that's worthwhile and you end up wanting to know a lot more than the book delivers.

Having said that though, Blank Spots On The Map really does do a decent job of framing the issues and dangers of indiscriminate government secrecy, explaining how some things can be discerned behind its veil, and generally challenging people to think about the fact that we spend so many billions of dollars on projects that never see the light of day, protected by secrecy, which -- as the book demonstrates -- is not only a tool used for national security reasons, but all too often is misused to hide wrongdoing and incompetence. The information it does glean for the reader is interesting enough to be worth the reading, and although the author comes off as being a bit of a radical wonk, concerned with government secrecy in principle, it must be said that he raises some good points.

Ra Fe says

My expectations when picking this book up was that it was going to be more of a geography book on the military's dark sites. What Paglen delivered though was a fairly well thought out read on the history and location of some of the key and not so much unknown sites that fit the genre of the Pentagon's dark world.

I found the first half of the book to be incredibly interesting (4 stars), but the second half tough to get through (2 stars).

The author spends a lot of time and real-estate in Nevada and Las Vegas telling the story of Groom Lake. He builds off a quote from Mark Twain ("History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme") when he says "history began to rhyme once again when the Department of Energy and the military began setting off nuclear weapons in the desert. Mushroom clouds lit the skies, and fallout fell like snow. The explosions were called tests but were nonetheless full fledged dress rehearsals for Armageddon, perhaps more. Among the desert's longtime residents, the difference between "nuclear testing" and "nuclear war" was far from self-evident."

There are a number of times we end up deep in the weeds of history and rational of why or how the thought process worked. It is not hard to discern the opinion of the author as he works through the history, players, and actions that moved us from a public budget and story to blank spots on maps and budgets.

He takes the reader on a review of the Iran Contra affair and the comings and goings of the USS Honduras. We then transition to the shipping container prisons in Afghanistan before coming full circle to the return of

the Janet flights from Groom Lake.

I expected more from this book, but am still pleased to have read it and to have it on my book shelf
(figuratively and literally.)

Jaime says

Depressed? Here - read **THIS**...
