



The Black Chamber

And finally: they're the Black Chamber. They're not so much our sister agency as our psycho ex-girlfriend turned bunny-boiler.

— *The Apocalypse Codex*

Every since the Cambridge Five debacle, contact between the Laundry and its American 'cousins,' the Black Chamber has been severely restricted. The other elements of the UK and USA clandestine intelligence networks share information – sometimes freely, sometimes grudgingly – but the relationship between the Laundry and the Chamber makes liquid nitrogen seem toasty warm and friendly.

History of the Black Chamber

The biggest factor in the occult history of North America was probably smallpox. Infectious diseases brought by European settlers devastated the native population, with fatality figures reaching 80% in some cases. The Native Americans knew an awful lot about the *other* residents of the American continent, and could have warned those settlers about the things that lived deep underground, about the ghoulish tunnels that criss-cross most of the eastern seaboard and about the whispering voices in the dark forests.



They could have warned the settlers to shun certain ill-favoured hills, and what words and sacrifices kept the hungry ghosts in check – but they died shivering and pock-marked.

For most of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, different occult traditions and alien horrors swirled around the fabled American melting pot. The European tradition of witchcraft and traditional sorcery took root in New England, bolstered by emigrant sorcerers fleeing persecution in the Old World. Other waves of immigration brought different folk traditions, which cross-pollinated with native beliefs and forged new bargains with local entities and powers. Magic was largely ungoverned – the American equivalent of the 1864 Monster Control Act was not put into Federal Law until 1938, although individual states had similar mandates from 1830 onwards.

The Original Black Chamber

The present-day Black Chamber can be traced back to the Cipher Bureau founded by Herbert O. Yardley in 1919. It was a joint operation by the US Army and the State Department to preserve the cryptographic expertise built up during the First World War, and aimed at breaking the codes used by other governments (notably the Japanese during the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22).

That first Black Chamber lasted until 1929, when the State Department withdrew its share of the funding, ostensibly because Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson didn't believe in the value of cryptographic research. He was patently lying – when he took over as Secretary of War ten years later, he made extensive use of intercepts and decrypted communications.

Yardley went on to write a book, *The American Black Chamber*, in which he decried Stimson's short-sightedness and exaggerated his own contribution to the Chamber's successes. In fact, Stimson had decided that Yardley lacked the moral fibre for the Chamber's new, more secret mission. In the winter of 1927-28, the State Department carried out a 'strange and secret investigation' into the coastal town of Insmouth. The village was a BLUE HADES breeding

ground and a stronghold of the Esoteric Order of Dagon, and the raid left the State Department in possession of numerous books and artefacts that needed to be decrypted and reverse-engineered, not to mention several hundred surly hybrid prisoners. Most of the Innsmouth prisoners died in captivity, but some proved willing to cooperate and submitted to interrogation. Coupled with the documents translated in 1931 by the Black Chamber, the prisoners revealed the existence not only of a previously unknown hyper-civilisation in the depths of the oceans, but also of a new form of arcane science.

Yardley's Cipher Bureau was based in New York; the reformed Black Chamber moved to Providence, Rhode Island. There, it had easy access to the Innsmouth prisoners and the town itself, but also to the extensive archives at nearby Miskatonic University in Arkham, which rapidly became the Chamber's primary source of new recruits.

One key asset that fell into the Black Chamber's hands in 1932 was the notebook of a Miskatonic student, Walter Gilman. A subsequent investigation of Gilman's background proved that he was related to the inhabitants of Innsmouth, suggesting that some of his discoveries were inspired (consciously or unconsciously) by his inhuman heritage. Gilman was a student of non-Euclidian calculus and quantum physics who identified links between his studies and various occult traditions, and thereby stumbled across elements of the Dee-Turing theorem more than a decade before Alan Turing's own initial thought experiments on the mathematical generation of Dho-Nha curves. Gilman died before he could be recruited, but by 1937, the Chamber had acquired sufficient magical ability to resurrect him from his essential salts – a process that was partially successful.

By that time, of course, the Chamber had already ploughed millions (of 1930s dollars!) into recruiting mathematicians and physicists to weaponise the Gilman papers. The brilliant von Neumann led the charge; delving into Byzantine history, he was able to reconcile the demon-summoning formulae of Theodora with operations in Hilbert space and kicked out *Mathematische Grundlagen der Quantenmechanik* as a by-product.

Stimson continued to serve as director for the Black Chamber until 1939, when he convinced Roosevelt to keep the Black Chamber independent of William 'Wild Bill' Donovan's Office of Strategic Services. He argued that the Chamber should focus on the investigation and suppression of the occult, and that its remit should be entirely domestic. On May 1st, 1939, Roosevelt issued a secret Executive Order, authorising the creation of the Office of Scientific Phenomenological Research (OSPR).

World War II

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While OPSR analysts and counter-occult specialists provided support to the OSS agents in the field during World War II, the Black Chamber never deployed any of its officers overseas, as mandated by the Executive Order limiting it to domestic operations. As the scale of the Nazi occult threat became apparent, however, the OPSR began experimenting with methods for communications and control. Its researchers pioneered the use of Rosen-Waite psychic teleoperation and automatic writing so that the OPSR could operate agent overseas from its base in Rhode Island, and it began making extensive use of geas controls. The OPSR sent its first non-human agent – a bound succubus – overseas in 1942. By the end of the war it had more than two dozen non-human or partly-human agent and had perfected the casting of Class 3 compulsion magics to maximise the target's flexibility of thought while still maintaining complete control over their actions.

In 1943, Stimson (still on the board of directors for the OPSR, but now Secretary for War) feared that the Manhattan Project to build a nuclear weapon was progressing too slowly, and that the Nazis would complete Project JOTUNHEIM before the Allies had their bomb. With deep regrets, he directed the OPSR to begin work on its own summoning rites. Doing so required human sacrifices. The OPSR began experimenting on interned prisoners. Initially, these experiments were restricted to the last of the Innsmouth prisoners, but when these ran out, they started using interned German and Japanese citizens. A secret tribunal held in January of 1944 determined that the laws regarding treatment of prisoners only applied to humans, and that non-humans and entities that were clearly no longer human did not qualify. OPSR's Project PROVIDENCE aimed at creating a shortcut to an atomic weapon – instead of meddling around with chain reactions, neutron guns and explosive lens, you just open a Gate to a high-energy dimension and loose seething nuclear chaos upon the Earth.

Fortunately – mercifully – the Red Army rolled into Berlin before PROVIDENCE became necessary.

The Post-War Years

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The OPSR snaffled up as many German physicists, mathematicians and philosophers as it could lay its hands on in the chaotic post-war years. The Nazi necromancers who took part in the Wannsee Invocation were off-limits even to the United States, and those captured were executed following a series of brief, but thorough military trials. Still, covert agents visited the graveyards in the winter of 1946 and collected essential salts and samples of grave dirt for future consultation.



The OPSR advised Secretary of State Marshall during the secret talks at Potsdam, where the victorious Allied powers discussed developments of occult weapons since the 1907 Hague Conference, and agreed that no government would pursue the summoning of godlike entities or large-scale Gate openings, nor would mass-possession or reality-degradation weapons be permissible in civilised warfare. This left an opening for the OPSR to capitalise on its growing expertise in binding, coupled with its newly-acquired Gate-opening techniques, to bind extradimensional entities to its service in situ. Instead of illegally invoking a potent exonome, they could attempt to penetrate its home dimension and bind it there.

Co-operation with the Laundry and the other UKUSA Pact members greatly benefited the Black Chamber. The Laundry had the beginnings of computational demonology and much more experience in field necromancy and counter-possession techniques.

The horrors of the Atrocity Archives convinced the governments of all the Allies that the use of occult weapons could not be permitted. At least a thermonuclear war would be over quickly and the extinction of all human life on Earth would be clean and thorough. A hot war using occult weapons could doom all humanity to a literal eternity of

suffering. While hawkish elements in the Chamber argued that the Soviets were almost certain to renege on the secret agreements banning occult weapons, both the Laundry and the Black Chamber agreed that restricting and containing the use of magic was the safest option.

Where the Dark Commissioners of the OPSR and the Laundry's Mahogany Row differed was in their attitude towards BLUE HADES and the other older civilisations and powers. The Laundry's senior figures argued for a conservative, cautious approach, fearing the repercussions of angering more powerful entities. The Chamber responded that firstly, it had already dealt with several cults and even BLUE HADES incursions in the United States without any trouble; secondly, that nothing could be taken off the table and that it reserved the right to take whatever actions were necessary to protect the United States, and thirdly and most importantly, if they didn't go for it, then the Soviets would certainly try.

The Chamber expanded hugely in the post-war years, becoming ever more secretive and insular. Some of the Laundry's senior figures began muttering darkly about the dangers of corruption, and worried that their counterparts in the Black Chamber were a little too enthusiastic about certain passages in the *Necronomicon*. The lure of power is hard to resist. The Laundry had had its troubles with faustian bargains and corrupt wizards centuries ago, and dealt with them through the Black Assizes. The Black Chamber's sorcerers were far more powerful thanks to Computational Demonology, but no wiser than those medieval apprentices who were dragged before the secret star chamber.

The Chamber disengaged from the Laundry after the Cambridge Five scandal in the 1960s. The Chamber blamed the Laundry for leaking GREY CADAVER and other occult information-gathering data to a Soviet spy; the Laundry accused the Black Chamber of skirting the edges of both the Benthic Treaty and the post-war non-proliferation agreements with projects like JENNIFER MORGUE and the alleged PLUTO KOBOLD contacts. It was a messy break-up. Crockery got thrown, and things were said that cannot be unsaid.

Rise of the Nazgûl

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The details are still murky, and not even the dead are able to talk about it, but there was a very nasty night of the long knives among the upper echelons of the Chamber in 1974. Several high-level officers got purged, and others went on the run (they didn't get far, contrary to certain rumours about ex-Chamber officers hanging out in Belize or Monaco). The Chamber re-organised in 1975, adopting the moniker of the Operational Phenomenology Agency.