A hidden world, growing beyond control

BY DANA PRIEST AND WILLIAM M. ARVIN

The top-secret world the government created in response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, has become so large, so unwieldy and so secretive that no one knows how much money it costs, how many people it employs, how many programs exist within it or exactly how many agencies do the same work.

These are some of the findings of a two-year investigation by The Washington Post that discovered what amounts to an alternative geography of the United States, a Top Secret America hidden from public view and lacking in thorough oversight. After nine years of unprecedented spending and growth, the result is that the system put in place to keep the United States safe is so massive that its effectiveness is impossible to determine.

The investigation’s other findings include:

* Some 1,271 government organizations and 1,931 private companies work on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security and intelligence in about 10,000 locations across the United States.

* An estimated 854,000 people, nearly 1.5 times as many people as live in Washington, D.C., hold top-secret security clearances.

* In Washington and the surrounding area, 93 building complexes for top-secret intelligence work are under construction or have been built since September 2001. Together they occupy the equivalent of almost three Pentagons or 22 U.S. Capitol buildings - about 17 million square feet of space.

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THE REPORTERS

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Investigative reporter Dana Priest has been The Washington Post's intelligence, Pentagon and health-care reporter. She has won numerous awards, including the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for public service for "The Other Walter Reed" and the 2006 Pulitzer for beat reporting for her work on CIA secret prisons and counterterrorism operations overseas. She is author of the 2003 book, "The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace With America's Military, (W.W. Norton).

William M. Arkin

William M. Arkin has been a columnist and reporter with The Washington Post and washingtonpost.com since 1998. He has worked on the subject of government secrecy and national security affairs for more than 30 years. He has authored or co-authored more than a dozen books about the U.S. military and national security.

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