

## BOOKS &amp; ARTS

# From spies to servers

Fastidious history chronicles how a suburb of Washington DC became home to the Internet.

## Internet Alley: High Technology in Tysons Corner, 1945-2005

by Paul E. Ceruzzi

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### Joel Shurkin

For a brief, unhappy time, I worked in the American intelligence community in the suburbs west of Washington DC in northern Virginia. The area was littered with clusters of office buildings, many with no names on the side. It was, and still is perhaps, the largest accretion of mediocre architecture and spies on the planet.

Lifts went to floors that did not exist on the lobby directories. Many had unmarked windowless offices within offices, Sensitive Compartmentalized Information Facilities equipped with secure telephones, computers, shredders and copiers. Men and women scurried to and fro, tucking their identification badges in their shirt pockets when they left the buildings for lunch. Colours told how high your security clearance was. I was advised never to go to the same restaurant on a regular schedule lest I be followed. Followed by whom, I have no idea. Expensive cars filled the parking lots. I fantasized that in my next life I would be the Lexus dealer in Tyson's Corner.

The area, west of the Potomac river, is one of the fastest growing, best educated and richest in the United States. It is a giant suburb that feeds mostly off the federal government. The Central Intelligence Agency headquarters is there in Langley, the National Reconnaissance Office is in Chantilly, and scores of military think-tanks, labs and large unmarked subsidiaries of the Department of Homeland Security are scattered around.

The region is also the home of the Internet, as Paul E. Ceruzzi, curator of the National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, emphasizes in the title of his new history of the area. How it got that way is the subject of *Internet Alley*. In a nutshell: gigantic quantities of government money.

Much of the growth, Ceruzzi explains, originated from the cold war and the government's attempt to move as many strategic targets out of range of the Soviet A-bombs that would surely target the US capital. The centre of this activity was Tysons Corner — once dairy farmland that real-estate speculators bought and subdivided. After the Second World War, developers convinced the government to move many of its



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Non-descript blocks at Tysons Corner, northern Virginia, are the historic home of US high-tech.

operations research centres there, soon to be followed by other defence contractors. Pleasant suburbs, such as the planned community of Reston, housed the workers. The area was late to the party: the government had already built substantial science centres across the Potomac in Maryland, including facilities for the National Institutes of Health, the National Bureau of Standards and later NASA.

In 1964, came the Beltway, the highway that circles Washington DC, triggering commercial development at the exits. Dulles International Airport, opened in 1962, added to the mix. Technology companies doing government business set up shop on or near the airport's access road, putting them close to the capital, the Pentagon and the airport.

The Internet grew up almost incidentally. ARPANET, the Defense Department's inter-computer system, morphed into the National Science Foundation's network and finally the Internet. At one time in the 1990s, 70% of domestic Internet traffic went through the parking garage of a non-descript building in Tysons Corner. By 1998, five of the 13 root servers of the Internet were in the Washington DC area, three of them in the same office park in Herndon, including the server with the master directory. Northern Virginia also became the home to enterprises such as AOL and MCI because of their proximity to the Internet infrastructure.

In March 2000, the Internet bubble burst

and many commercial firms went belly up. The main economy of Internet Alley, meanwhile, suffered little. As Ceruzzi points out, most of the firms in northern Virginia, unlike those in Silicon Valley, were not famous for risk or innovation and had only one customer: the government, which is generally not affected by such market vicissitudes. Ceruzzi chronicles the evolution of Internet Alley astutely and accurately, if sometimes too fastidiously. Weird then that such a book has no index (a grave offence), even if, happily, it is illustrated.

When 9/11 struck, the federal spigot became a power hose. Much of the spending is in the 'black budget', the classified part of the federal budget. But the cars in the parking lot are fancier than ever and Tysons Corner has one of the most up-scale shopping centres in the United States, home to the first Apple retail store.

Yet, the whole place could disappear, Ceruzzi reveals. As a commercial concentration in the suburbs — what urban planners call an 'edge city' — Tysons Corner may be doomed. You can't walk anywhere in an edge city, so if you want urban amenities, you move elsewhere. People who want peace and quiet are decamping farther out and away from Tysons Corner. And the commute is terrible. ■

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