

History of Operations Security

Although the philosophy of protecting sensitive information is not new, the term OPSEC and the establishment of a security program to methodically protect critical and sensitive operations did not exist before 1967. There were deception plans implemented to protect the secrecy of specific U.S. military operations in World War I, World War II, and Korea, but the current OPSEC process evolved from a program developed during the Vietnam War.

Vietnam 1965

The seed which would eventually germinate into a national OPSEC policy was actually planted in 1965 under the name “Purple Dragon”. Purple Dragon was the unclassified code name for a one-time Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) initiated “survey”. This survey addressed retaining the element of surprise for fighter-bomber strikes against North Vietnamese military targets in an operation known as “Rolling Thunder” and for B-52 operations known as “Arc Light”. The methodology used was to consider what information the adversary would need to know in order to thwart the flights and the sources from which the adversary might collect this information.

CINCPAC OPSEC Branch 1967

In April 1967, a new, and as yet unnamed, branch within the Operations Directorate of the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) was established to continue to perform Purple Dragon-type surveys to identify any actual or possible sources that the North Vietnamese might exploit to obtain advance knowledge of U.S. intentions. Once these vulnerabilities were identified, countermeasures were developed to reduce the flow of information. The new branch would continue to use Purple Dragon’s analytic methodology to identify vulnerabilities and assess the extent to which the North Vietnamese were being denied (or obtaining) the sensitive information.

Spread of the OPSEC Concept 1968-73

In 1968, an OPSEC position was established within the Operations Directorate of the JCS, and the first OPSEC conference was held in Washington, D.C. The conference was attended primarily by military and civilian representatives from throughout the Department of Defense (DOD) and one or two other Federal agencies. This was the first formal effort to disseminate the OPSEC concept beyond Southeast Asia. Throughout the Vietnam War, the CINCPAC OPSEC branch distributed its reports, and regularly briefed the JCS and other high-level military commanders and civilian managers within DOD.

Although formalized during Vietnam, the ideas and motivations for protecting sensitive information are as ancient as the history of human conflict. In fact, the U.S. can trace OPSEC practices back to the colonial days and the Revolutionary War. George Washington, our first president, was a known OPSEC practitioner. Then General Washington was quoted as saying, “Even minutiae should have a place in our collection, for things of a seemingly trifling nature, when enjoined with others of a more serious cast, may lead to valuable conclusions”. OPSEC, however, as an organized program based on a defined methodology dates from about 1965.

Establishment within DOD

After the Vietnam War ended in 1973 the JCS adopted the OPSEC instruction developed by the CINCPAC OPSEC branch and published it as JCS Publication 18, "Doctrine for Operations Security". Originally classified, an unclassified version was published the following year. The JCS published the first JCS OPSEC Survey Planning Guide, and distributed this publication within DOD and to other Federal agencies.

The JCS began presenting a series of annual OPSEC conferences for representatives throughout government. Attendees discussed ways to adapt the OPSEC concept developed for combat operations to the peacetime environment. Throughout the late 1970s, the military services established their own OPSEC programs and published implementing directives and regulations. By the end of the decade, they were conducting their own surveys.

Establishment outside DOD

After the Vietnam War, a number of the individuals who had been involved in the development or application of the OPSEC concept were either already working for, or went to work with the National Security Agency (NSA). As a result, NSA played a major role in adapting OPSEC to peacetime operations, and in informally communicating OPSEC concepts to other agencies. Thus, non-DoD agencies began to establish their own programs, and OPSEC was on its way to becoming a national program.

Establishment within DOE

DOE began to assume a role in the peacetime application of OPSEC by participating in the JCS OPSEC conferences and interfacing with other Federal agencies. In 1980, DOE began establishing its own OPSEC program and, by 1983, the Department had the only formal OPSEC program outside DOD. Since that time, DOE has continued to refine and adapt the OPSEC concept to meet the specific needs of its mission.

In 1983, DOE was a member of the Senior Interagency Group for Intelligence (SIG-I), an advisory group of the National Security Council. SIG-I proposed the establishment of a national policy on OPSEC and the formation of a National OPSEC Advisory Committee (NOAC).

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan issued National Security Decision Directive 298 (NSDD-298) that established a national policy and outlined the OPSEC five-step process. Also mandated within NSDD-298, was the establishment of the Interagency OPSEC Support Staff (IOSS). The IOSS mission is to assist in implementing the national-level OPSEC program as directed by the President. The NSDD directs IOSS to provide or facilitate OPSEC training and act as a consultant to Executive departments and agencies required to have OPSEC programs.