

Operation Christmas

We unwrap the miraculous logistics behind the most wonderful time of the year.

LET'S BE HONEST: THERE IS no jolly old elf with flying reindeer who slides down chimneys and leaves gifts for every good little Christian boy and girl on Earth. That's ridiculous. ¶ But then, where do the presents come from? ¶ Here's our theory: There is, in fact, a nonsupernatural Santa. It's a transnational corporation with one mission-critical fulfillment goal: Every kid who celebrates the holiday gets a toy on Christmas eve. ¶ WIRED spoke with business process consultants, surveillance experts, shipping pros, and a former Navy SEAL to piece together the basic outlines of the operation—focusing, for purposes of this exposé, on points of service in the continental US. From command and control at the North Pole to secret manufacturing facilities in China and Eastern Europe, from the Pacific shipping lanes to the deployment of domestic-access operatives, Santa owns the silent night. With NSA surveillance tech, they see you when you're sleeping, and they know when you're awake. They know when you've been bad or good—thanks to algorithms that make Google look like Pong. You better not shout. You better not cry. Operation Santa is coming to town. —Gregory Mone

COMMAND AND CONTROL Why the North Pole? Originally, isolation. The old manufacturing facilities are still there for emergencies. Also, like everyone in the information business, Santa runs space-saving, stackable blade servers. Keeping them cool usually means enormous energy bills—Santa just opens the windows.

MANUFACTURING Santa works with all the big toymakers—after all, Mattel and Hasbro plan their entire year around Christmas. That lets the organization demand—and get—input into design. Over the course of six months, 30.6 million toys, dolls, and other knockoff items are made in low-cost Chinese factories. Santa sources production to numerous firms to mask the scope of the operation.

FUNDING The operation's annual budget exceeds \$27 billion. Luckily, Santa has secret deals with the major Hollywood studios. In the past 25 years, Christmas-themed films have made more than \$1.7 billion, and Santa gets points off the gross. But the real revenue source: several multibillion-dollar hedge funds with an average return of 20 percent.

SHIPPING BY SEA In the months leading up to C-Day, eight massive ships, each carrying 6,625 containers (with 640 toys per container), make their way from ports in China to Long Beach, California, and Tacoma, Washington. It all happens early to absorb delays due to customs, tariffs, and homeland security.

SHIPPING FROM CHINA TO TACOMA

TO



Infoporn

Santa Project Timeline (2008)

■ C-2007 ■ C-2008 ■ C-2009

C-DAY

JANUARY 2008

FEBRUARY

MARCH

APRIL

9 · 11 · 13 · 15 · 17 · 19 · 21 · 23 · 25 · 27 · 29 · 31 | 1 · 3 · 5 · 7 · 9 · 11 · 13 · 15 · 17 · 19 · 21 · 23 · 25 · 27 · 29 · 31 | 1 · 3 · 5 · 7 · 9 · 11 · 13 · 15 · 17 · 19 · 21 · 23 · 25 · 27 · 29 · 31 | 1 · 3 · 5 · 7 · 9 · 11 · 13 · 15 · 17 · 19 · 21 · 23 · 25 · 27 · 29 · 31

DELIVERY

NAUGHTY/NICE MONITORING BEGINS

TOY MANUFACTURING BEGINS

1ST TOY SHIPMENT

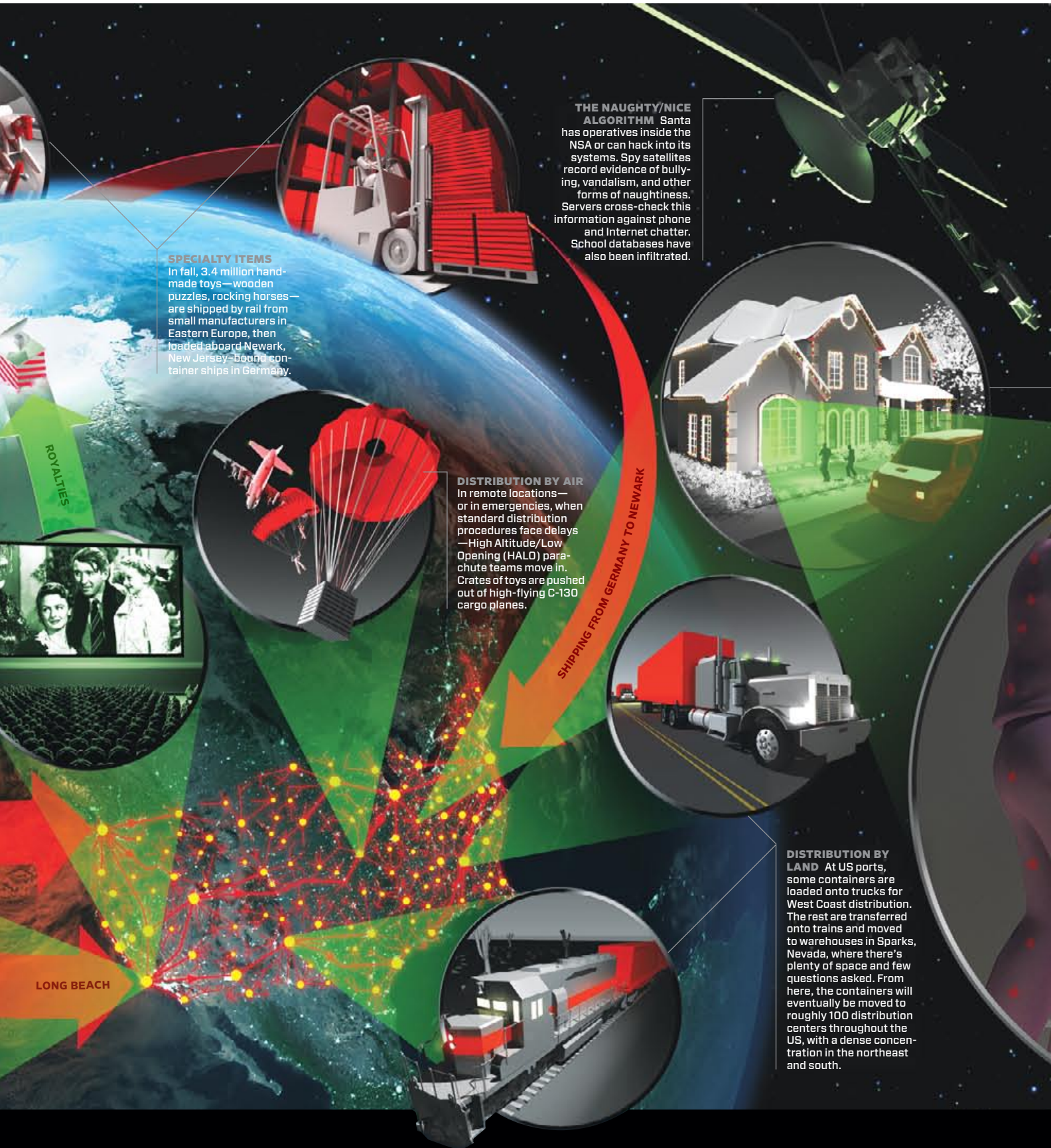
2ND TOY SHIPMENT

PLANNING MEETINGS WITH HOLLYWOOD

PLANNING MEETINGS WITH TOY COMPANIES

HELPER TEAMS ARRIVE

PERSONNEL EVALUATIONS



SPECIALTY ITEMS
 In fall, 3.4 million hand-made toys—wooden puzzles, rocking horses—are shipped by rail from small manufacturers in Eastern Europe, then loaded aboard Newark, New Jersey-bound container ships in Germany.

THE NAUGHTY/NICE ALGORITHM Santa has operatives inside the NSA or can hack into its systems. Spy satellites record evidence of bullying, vandalism, and other forms of naughtiness. Servers cross-check this information against phone and Internet chatter. School databases have also been infiltrated.

DISTRIBUTION BY AIR
 In remote locations—or in emergencies, when standard distribution procedures face delays—High Altitude/Low Opening (HALO) parachute teams move in. Crates of toys are pushed out of high-flying C-130 cargo planes.

DISTRIBUTION BY LAND At US ports, some containers are loaded onto trucks for West Coast distribution. The rest are transferred onto trains and moved to warehouses in Sparks, Nevada, where there's plenty of space and few questions asked. From here, the containers will eventually be moved to roughly 100 distribution centers throughout the US, with a dense concentration in the northeast and south.

MAY			JUNE			JULY			AUGUST			
1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	1-3-5-7-9-11-13-15-17-19-21-23-25-27-29-31	
3RD TOY SHIPMENT			4TH TOY SHIPMENT			5TH TOY SHIPMENT			6TH TOY SHIPMENT			7TH T
AT DISTRIBUTION CENTERS		SCHOOL STUDENT DATABASE INFORMATION RETRIEVAL		NEW TECHNOLOGY EVALUATION			NEGOTIATIONS WITH CHINESE FACTORIES			CLEAR		
NAUGHTY/NICE OFF-SITE			SOFTWARE READINESS MEETING			HOME INFILTRATION TRAINING						

Christmas Eve: Home Invasion

APPROACH Heavy Equipment/Light Package Emergent Response (Helper) units deliver the toys. These special-ops agents are trained for home ingress/egress. Team leaders get naughty/nice lists downloaded to their PDAs at 2300 hours, C-Day minus one. About 80,000 mobile command centers—each staffed by four agents—use jamming systems to knock out cellular communication in their target neighborhoods and temporarily cut phone and Internet lines.

ENTRY Each command center supports 15 two-person Helper teams. The infiltrators, outfitted with night-vision goggles, tote a variety of gifts. Given the three-hour window to complete all deliveries, Helpers have an average of 5 minutes to get in and out. Most homes take less time; those with alarms take more. Approaching the tree, one operative scans the gifts already in place with a terahertz-wave device to avoid duplicates. The other Helper places an appropriate toy. Very naughty kids get a Zune.

EXIT The Helpers' objective is to leave a gift for each deserving child, but never at the expense of being discovered. If encountered, children and adults alike are distracted with a cookie, gassed with a mild hypnagogic/hallucinogenic agent, and given a hypnotic suggestion that "it was all a dream." Obviously, casualties are totally unacceptable. If a team has to evacuate in a hurry, they fling a couple of iTunes gift cards under the tree as they bug out.



By the Numbers



Of 56.5 million US kids under age 13, at least 75 percent celebrate Christmas. Eighty percent of those are rated *nice*. That's **34 MILLION GIFTS**.

2.7 MILLION PEOPLE, roughly equivalent to the population of Arkansas, are required to deliver the gifts on time.



3,148 PER SEC

The rate at which Helpers deliver gifts nationwide



Throughout the supply chain, Santa requires 68 million cubic feet of storage for those 34 million gifts. That's **4.76 CHRYSLER BUILDINGS**.

ANNUAL COST
\$27.5
BILLION

