

**design****Courier, Dispatched**

How the U.S. State Department put the kibosh on the typewriter font.

By Tom Vanderbilt

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In late January, [an announcement from the U.S. State Department](#) generated certain chatter along the generally indiscernible diplomatic-typographic axis. This was the news that as of Feb 1, the department was ditching Courier New 12 as its official font-in-residence and taking up with Times New Roman 14. Courier 12 had been put to pasture after several decades of honorable service, like an aging, elegant diplomat whose crisp, cream-colored linen suit and genteel demeanor now seem winningly old-fashioned. Times New Roman 14, as the State Department put it, "takes up almost exactly the same area on the page as Courier New 12, while offering a crisper, cleaner, more modern look."

Courier New 12, created in 1955 by IBM, is perhaps the most recognizable typeface of the 20th century—a visual symbol of typewritten bureaucratic anonymity, the widespread dissemination of information (and a classification of documents), stark factuality, and streamlined efficiency. Designed by Howard "Bud" Kettler, a small-town printer and typographer hired by the company to create typefaces for its products, it became the country's reigning typewriter font almost immediately—not only because of IBM's dominance in the industry but because IBM failed to take a proprietary stake in the font. Soon adopted by other typewriter makers, Courier was an early version of shareware.

Compared to previous typewriter fonts, Courier looked streamlined, rational, efficient, a move away from the "Antique" past—the perfect face for IBM. With its "modern, progressive look," Courier exemplified the "trend toward the long, low and extended in an age of ranch houses and stretched-out cars," according to one ad. Kettler was a natural, innovative typographer, as one co-worker recounted: "One thing he did that no other font designer did was to rotate the mock-up page a full 180 degrees. I asked him why he did that. His answer was that he wanted to make sure that no one character stood out." In its prototype phase, Courier was called Messenger. But as Kettler later said in an interview, "A letter can be just an ordinary messenger, or it can be the courier, which radiates dignity, prestige, and stability."

Kettler was successful in his mission. By the 1960s, Courier had become the herald of all stripes of dignified officialdom; indeed, it is still de rigueur for filing certain types of legal documents. It is not surprising, as Rick Poyner points out, that Courier should play a starring role in Errol Morris' recent documentary *The Fog of War* about former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Anyone who has done Freedom of Information Act research will inevitably find black marker lines obscuring lines of Courier type.

But today, its design principles are little more than phantom limbs: Like any other typeface, it is whisked from the digital ether without regard for its original use. On the one hand, Courier New is the voice of raw clarity and transparency. It can be absorbed quickly, with little relative effort, which is why it is still the preferred font for screenplay drafts (many film festivals require copies of scripts in Courier 12). On the other hand, precisely because it has become the visual connoter of the kind of government doings executed by McNamara and his ilk, it has come to serve as blunt shorthand for secrecy or for the chilling revelation brought to light. Witness the appearance of Courier (or similar typewriter fonts) in places like the film poster for [Costa-Gavras' Z](#), or the "X" in *The X-Files*, or any number of History

Channel documentaries dealing with espionage.

What is most remarkable of all, of course, is that a typewriter font is still being used at all in a post-typewriter age. In technical terms, Courier New, like all typewriter fonts, is a "monospaced" typeface: Each letter takes up the same amount of space on a line, essential for tabular uniformity as well as, say, replacing an "i" with a "w" during the correcting process (no longer an issue, of course). In the early days of computer printing, courier made the jump simply because of its dominance as the official typewriter font. (One would not expect a visual style built up over a half-century to be eroded overnight, with legal documents suddenly flowering with Palatino or bristling with Big Caslon.) For most of America (and for many fledgling typographers), Courier was the only font they had had access to in their daily lives. In the PC age, it still stands as some kind of ur-font, nervously invoked as default when something goes awry, such as, "Font not found, substituting Courier." In the 1990s, moreover, typographers who were now working in a thoroughly digital medium began crafting rigorous homages to typewriter fonts (e.g., "Trixie"). Rather than functional necessity, these were created as joyful pastiche, possessing a nostalgic, analog power, as well as visual freshness, in a world of frivolous, overexposed LaserWriter fonts (e.g., the dreaded [Comic Sans](#)).

Oddly enough, though, the State Department's "more modern" Courier successor, Times New Roman, actually predates the font by more than two decades. Times New Roman was created by the esteemed British typographer Stanley Morison for the *Times* of London in 1932. Sir Cyril Burt, in his 1959 work *A Psychological Study of Typography*, described Times New Roman as "a twentieth century type, equal in merit ... to those of the classical designers of the best periods." As a newspaper font, it was intended to fit more articles and more ads onto costly newsprint while still retaining maximum legibility.

According to Jonathan Hoefler, a New York typographer, the State Department is wrong when it says that Times New Roman 14 "takes up almost exactly the same area on the page as Courier New 12." In fact, it takes up *much less* space, as he showed me in a comparative sampling. It should be stressed, too, that the State Department is not simply switching type styles but point size. This, as Stanley Morison argued, does not necessarily engender further clarity, however: The larger the type, the fewer letters the eye can absorb at once; the eye has to work more to read than it would at a smaller (but not too small) font. Times New Roman 14 may take up less space than Courier 12, but it is a rather large font. (As Hoefler notes, 14 point is generally reserved for children's books.) Will U.S. diplomacy improve as the visual signal-to-noise ratio along the chain of affairs of state is reduced, or will ambassadors actually suffer from eye-strain as they absorb the larger characters of official correspondence? History, by the way, from Charlemagne to Hitler, shows that government edicts in favor of standardized typefaces are often one of the first steps in creating an empire: Is there something that the State Department isn't telling us?

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