CLASSIFIED TRASH

~~(C)~~ One day, back in the '60's, one of our people was poking about in the residue baside the Arlington Hall incinerator. The incinerator had been a headache for years: the screen at the top of the stack had a habit of burning through and then it would spew partially burned classified COMSEC and SIGINT materials round and about the Post and surrounding neighborhood. Troops would then engage in a giant game of fifty-two pickup. This day, however, the problem was different – the grate at the floor of the incinerator had burnt out and the partially burned material, some the size of the palm of your hand, was intermixed with the ash and slag.

~~(C)~~ There was no way of telling how long the condition had persisted before discovery, so we thought we had better trace the ash to the disposal site to see what else was to be found. The procedure was to wet down the residue for compaction, load it on a dump truck, and haul it away. In the old days it had evidently beem dumped by contractors in abandoned clay pits somewhere in Fairfax County (and we never found them); but the then current practice was to dump it in a large open area on Ft Meyer, South Post, adjacent to Washington Boulevard.

~~(C)~~ Our investigator found that site, alright, and there discovered two mounds of soggy ash and assorted debris each averaging five feet in height, eight to ten feet wide, and extending over 100 yards in length. He poked at random with a sharp stick, and thought disconsolately of our shredding standards. Legible material was everywhere – fragments of superseded codes and keying material, intriguing bits of computer tabluations; whole code words and tiny pieces of text. Most were thumb-size or smaller; but a few were much larger. Other pokers joined him and confirmed that the entire deposit was riddled with the stuff. Some of it had been picked out by the wind and was lodged along the length of the anchor fence separating the Post from the boulevard.

(U) Our begrimed action officer was directed to get rid of it. *All* of it. Being a genius, he did, and at nominal cost. How did he do it?

~~(S)~~ The solution to this problem was most ingenious – a truly admirable example of how a special talent combined with a most fortuitous circumstance eventually allowed us to get all that stuff disposed of. I won't tell you the answer outright: instead, I will try to aggravate you with a very simple problem in analysis of an innocent text system. Innocent text systems are used to send concealed messages in some ordinary literature or correspondence. By about this time, you may suspect that perhaps I have written a secret message here by way of example. That, right, I have! What's here, in fact, is a hidden message which gives you the explanation of the solution we accepted for disposing of that batch of residue. If we ever have to do it that way again, it will be much more difficult for us because the cost of everything has escalated, and I doubt we could afford the particular approach we took that time.

~~(S)~~ If you are really interested in how innocent text systems are constructed, he advised that there are twenty-jillion ways to do it – every one of them different. Some of them may use squares or matrices containing an encoded text with their values represented by the coordinates of each letter. Then those coordinates are buried in the text. About another million ways – a myriad – are available for that last step. In fact, the security of these systems stems mostly from the large variety of methods that can be used and on keeping the method (the logic) secret in each case. Once you know the rules, solution is easy. So now, find my answer above – no clues, except that it's very simple, and one error has been deliberately incorporated, because that is par for the course.