

Dear Mr. Aftergood,

Having had considerable experience with the polygraph (well beyond that which you referred to), I read your very sensible essay in Science with great interest. I offer you a few comments on the topic for whatever interest or use they may have.

Like most junk science that just won't die (graphology, astrology and homeopathy come to mind), because of the usefulness or profit their practitioners enjoy, the polygraph stays with us.

Its most obvious use is as a coercive aid to interrogators, lying somewhere on the scale between the rubber truncheon and the diploma on the wall behind the interrogator's desk. It depends upon the overall coerciveness of the setting — you'll be fired, you won't get the job, you'll be prosecuted, you'll go to prison — and the credulous fear the device inspires.

This is why the Redmond report ventures into the simultaneously ludicrous and sinister reality that citizens' belief in what is untrue must be fostered and strengthened. Rarely admitted, this ~~proposition~~ proposition is of general application for our national security apparatus.

You didn't mention one of the intriguing elements of the interrogations of Dr. Lee which is in fact quite common — the false representation to the subject of the polygraph results. Because interrogations are intended to coerce confessions of one sort or another, interrogators feel

themselves entirely justified in using their coercive means as flexibly as possible to extract them. Consistency regarding the particular technique is not important; inducing anxiety and fear is the point.

Polygraphers are fond of the technique used by psychics called cold reading, as a slightly less dramatic practice than actually lying to the subject about the results. In this sort of cold reading, the interrogator will suggest to the subject that there may be a potential problem, an ambiguous result, to one of the questions and inquire whether the subject knows of anything that might help clear it up, etc, etc.

Your account of the Redmond report — I haven't seen it — shows how another hoary slider is thrown past the public. The polygraph is asserted to have been a useful tool in counterintelligence investigations. This is a nice example of retreating into secret knowledge: we know it works, but it's too secret to explain. To my own knowledge and experience over a thirty year career this statement is a false one. The use of the polygraph (which is inevitably to say, its misuse) has done little more than create confusion, ambiguity and mistakes. I'd love to lay out this case for you, but certainly I cannot — it's a secret, too.

Most people in the intelligence and CI business are well aware of the theoretical and practical failings of the polygraph, but are equally alert to its value in institutional, bureaucratic terms and treasure its use accordingly. This same logic applies to its use in screening potential and current employees, whether of the CIA, NSA, DOE or even of private organizations.

Deciding whether to trust or credit a person is always an uncertain task, and in a variety of situations a bad, lazy or just centurday decision about a person can result not only to serious problems for the organization and its purposes, but to career-damaging blame for the unfortunate decision-maker. Here, the polygraph is a scientific godsend: the bureaucrat accounting for a bad decision, or sometimes for a missed opportunity (the latter is much less often questioned in a bureaucracy) can point to what is considered an unassailably objective, though occasionally and unavoidably fallible, polygraph judgment. All that was at fault was ~~the~~ some practical application of a "scientific" technique, in effect an engineering failure, like those frozen O-rings, or the sandstorms between the Gulf and ~~the~~ Desert One in 1980.

I've seen these bureaucratically-driven flights from accountability operating for years, much to the cost of our intelligence and counterintelligence effectiveness. The US is, so far as I know, the only nation which places such extensive reliance on the polygraph. (The FBI, to its credit in a self-serving sort of way, also rejects the routine use of the polygraph on its own people.) It has gotten us into a lot of trouble.

On the other hand, there have been episodes in which high-level pressures to use or acquire certain persons entirely override pious belief in the polygraph. One instance which made the press is that of the Iranian connection in the Iran-Contra affair.

I wish you well in this particularly important theater of the struggle against pseudoscience: the national security state has many unfair and cruel weapons in its arsenal, but that of junk science is one which can be fought and perhaps defeated by honest and forthright efforts like yours.

Sincerely,
 Aldrich H. Ames
 40087-083
 PO Box 3000
 White Deer PA 17887

PS I should say that all my outgoing mail goes through the CIA - voluntarily - for review, censorship and whatever use it chooses to make of it.