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## China, Los Alamos, and Espionage: Scandal Versus Scam

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**Abstract.** This article presents a discussion of choice points in secondary and tertiary intervention efforts after the discovery that a political entity has been the victim of espionage.

Primary prevention in personnel security and counterintelligence efforts denotes deterring and impeding an adversary's espionage and other successful security initiatives--including those initiatives conceived and effected by one's own personnel in whom one has placed trust. In this context, secondary intervention and tertiary intervention denote efforts to minimize damage and right wrongs after primary prevention has been discovered to have failed. Because primary prevention will inevitably fall short, expertise in secondary and tertiary intervention is vital. Yet the very nature of secondary and tertiary intervention--especially choice points that must be negotiated as to preferred action--affords opportunities for others to belittle this nature and even render it as tantamount to scandal. The recent journalistic accounts of successful espionage effected by representatives of the People's Republic of China (PRC) against the United States' (U.S.) Los Alamos National Laboratory constitute a case in point.

The accounts suggest that--largely through the espionage activities of a Chinese-American computer scientist working at Los Alamos--PRC weapons developers were able to produce sophisticated, miniaturized nuclear warheads that could be launched at multiple targets from a ballistic missile. The accounts also suggest that this production was significantly based on the US's most advanced miniature nuclear warhead. The inference has been that espionage was responsible for the similarity between the Chinese and U.S. warheads and, thus, primary prevention failed. This seems to be a reasonable premise with significant supporting data, even if there could possibly be some disconfirming data as well. However, the accounts go on to describe US secondary and tertiary intervention efforts as if they were woefully inept to the point of scandal.

The accounts suggest that members of the Clinton administration sought to minimize the espionage Issue because the Issue "got in the way" of efforts to effect more constructive and cooperative economic ties between the US and the PRC. This suggestion certainly can be read as if the Clinton administration was willing to sell out the country for a fast buck. However, the Clinton administration, rightly or wrongly, has advocated that economic engagement might eventually bring the PRC around on other Issues including proliferation of weapons and weapons technology of mass destruction, human rights, the rule of law, and even other economic points of contention. Thus, continuation of "constructive engagement" even with successful Chinese espionage--especially in the context that virtually all political entities attempt to spy on each other--may be suspect in its assumptions about the motivations and constraints of Chinese policy behavior, but not immoral and treasonous. This continuation is not prima facie proof of an "all costs" predilection--unless by "all costs" one means staying the course of a policy--hopefully correct--in the face of pressure to the contrary. To drastically change an overall policy just because espionage has been successfully effected would be counter to what secondary and tertiary intervention is supposed to engender--greater security for a political entity.

The accounts suggest that the Chinese espionage at Issue was not aggressively pursued, that arrests were not made, that the U.S. response to espionage was horribly lax. However, how much of this was

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merely prudent secondary and tertiary intervention is left unsaid. Aggressive pursuit and arrests are direct tip-offs that "the jig is up." If an adversary might believe that its target is still unaware--but that target is aware--that target can often begin to minimize damage to itself or even cause some damage against its adversary through disinformation, other deception operations, and so on. Moreover, the target may best learn about further features of the adversary's intelligence apparatus--both technical and human assets. In this case the target would have improved its own personnel security and counterintelligence knowledge.

The accounts suggest that investigators were not able to obtain or develop sufficient evidence to authorize a wiretap on the suspect--impeding the building of a strong criminal case against the most likely espionage suspect. The scandal allegedly is that the evidence should have been obtained regardless in the difficulty of obtaining it. No failures, no realities of situations to the contrary. A more implicit scandal might be that the scandal of wiretapping without sufficient evidence was not effected. If this implicit scandal had been avoided, primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions might have been significantly impeded in the long term by severe and freshly legislated constraints.

The accounts suggest that some recommendations to improve security at Los Alamos were not followed and that others were only followed after unacceptable lead times. The inference is that the espionage at Los Alamos was only an example of an accident ready to happen. However, as with controversies about physical security at U.S. embassies throughout the world, the real question is not about unawareness of security problems or lack of motivation to resolve these problems. The problem is about money: the more money in one's budget goes for security, the less goes for an organization's operational mission. Security authorities are forced to prioritize security needs amidst operational, logistics, and many other requirements related to an organization's *raison d'etre*. A related issue is that a certain degree of information flow and sharing as well as of foreign visitors engaged in intellectual cross-fertilization is necessary for most successful basic and applied scientific pursuits. Priorities as to openness and security must be established as opposed to trying to close off all openness. In fact, excessive secrecy can have its own security vulnerabilities. The bottom line is that primary as well as secondary and tertiary interventions fail, if they unacceptably delimit a mission even when they succeed. And espionage attempts succeed, if they unacceptably delimit a mission even when they fail.

The accounts suggest that Clinton administration senior aides took a skeptical view of the evidence of Chinese espionage and its significance as if such a reaction was inherently suspect. In actuality political decision-making occurs in a welter of ongoing, seemingly continuous indicators of threat. If all were taken seriously and without skepticism, damage to the decision-makers and what they represent would surely occur through disinformation and through the shut-down of essential missions and operations. Effective secondary and tertiary intervention depend on a judicious appraisal--involving skepticism--of the huge number of incoming warnings concerning threat.

The accounts suggest that at least one Executive Branch official was ordered by other such officials not to divulge espionage details with members of the U.S. Congress so that Congressional critics of the Clinton administration's policies would not have additional "ammunition." Given that there are formal procedures to report on even the most sensitive information to at least some Congressional members, this suggestion does border on the scandalous. However, effective secondary and tertiary--and even primary--interventions are not necessarily compromised if the information in question was sincerely judged so suspect by the "other officials" so as not to be of significant security value. In this case the decision not to divulge it would appropriately support ongoing U.S. policy towards the PRC. The scandal might be in needlessly divulging it.

The accounts suggest that a "Team A-Team B" exercise on the data suggesting espionage was conducted. As with past U.S. team exercises comprising different groups of people assessing the same data to evaluate Soviet nuclear weapons capabilities, a team of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers apparently were charged to reassess data previously assessed by representatives of the Department of Energy (DOE). Apparently, there was disagreement, with the CIA team taking the position that espionage did occur but in a less damaging fashion. There was also disagreement among representatives from these two agencies and those of the U.S. National Security Council. However, the disagreement has been taken as *prima facie* evidence of scandal--that two expert organizations can't agree. In another context, scandal could equally be ascribed to two expert agencies agree. What's remarkable is that accounts have nowhere pointed out that--as with most any complex social phenomenon--even the Chinese may not be sure what happened: many, if not all, political actors do not have perfect awareness of their own motivations nor perfect perception and attributional processes towards the phenomenon of causality. Thus, a significant shortfall in secondary and tertiary intervention is not the only interpretation of disagreement.

A scandal that has not yet been mentioned is the typical aftermath of alleged scandal--especially when terrorism and/or espionage is at issue. Panels and committees are activated. Reports are issued. Tomes about the alleged scandal abound. Lesson learned disseminated. Organizationally, there is often the punishment of the innocent, the transfer of the guilty, and the promotion of the uninvolved. But does a more effective mechanism exist to deal with future threat? Rarely. Against the last threat? More often.

A conclusion that might be inferred from all the above--except the last paragraph--is that there is no scandal and that intimations of such exemplify a scam. Yes, there may well have been a significant security incident--the successful espionage by a Chinese agent or agents. But on a stage on which virtually all the players engage in espionage with varying degrees of sophistication at various times, successful espionage is inevitable. To wax eloquently and emotionally that "it never should have happened" misses the point. In the almost timeless group tango of espionage one might control the "who," "where," "when," and "how" but not the "if." (See Albini, J.L., & Anderson, J. (1998). Whatever happened to the KGB? *International Journal of International and Counterintelligence*, 11, 26-56; Bowman, M.E. (1995). Prosecuting spies: An uneasy alliance of security, ethics, and law. *Defense Intelligence Journal*, 4, 57-81; Clarke, D.L. (1998). Israel's economic espionage in the United States. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 27, 20-35; Hulnick, A.S. (1995). The Ames case: HOW could it happen? *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 8, 133-154; Richelson, J.T. (1996). High flyin' spies. *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 52, 48-54; Risen, J., & Gerth, J. (March 6, 1999). China stole nuclear secrets from Los Alamos, U.S. officials say. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Schmitt, E. (March 11, 1999). Albright defends policies on China as G.O.P. attacks. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Espionage, Los Alamos, People's Republic of China.)