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Trends. Pinning the Tail on the Donkey: A Legacy of the Legacy Codes

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The ongoing saga of alleged spy Wan Ho Lee continues to illustrate how United States (US) domestic politics can harm national security. Allegations of misappropriating information about a miniaturized nuclear warhead, neutron weapons, and now the "legacy codes"--computer codes approximating how virtually the entire U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal--seem to be effected more in the context of domestic partisan warfare than in confronting foreign threats.

Since the story broke that a Taiwanese-born U.S. citizen was alleged to have spied against the US and for the People's Republic of China, representatives of both major U.S. political parties have largely engaged in the quest for partisan blame. Democrats have been repeating that the spying was initiated during a Republican administration, Republicans that the Democrats "blew" the investigation. Now Republicans have triumphantly claimed additional espionage on the Democrat's watch.

The party in power--the President and team--seems to be on the short end of the stick in such matters. If it very effectively and promptly uncovers espionage, it is damned because the espionage occurred at all. If it misses treasonous activity, the party can only be safe if the activity is never uncovered, not uncovered for many years, turned around on the opposition party, or somehow attributed to some other entity in a manner that fosters a bilateral front and homogeneous response. If it publicly divulges salient matters of an espionage activity, it risks divulging sensitive methods and sources. Also, letting the adversary know that it knows what the adversary knows and has done constrains action and gives an advantage to that adversary. Moreover, attempting to publicly nonrespond or to engage in some sort of strategic deception against the adversary about the espionage and its consequences can too easily be exploited by domestic political adversaries as withholding information from U.S. citizens--even lying to them. All of the above concerns can be exploited by political renegades within each party as well.


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