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Trends. Racism, Racial Profiling, and Espionage: Wen Ho Lee as Victim?

Editor

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According to The New York Times, the former head of counterintelligence at Los Alamos National Laboratory has suggested racist overtones in the identification of Wen Ho Lee--a Taiwan-born scientist--as a prime (even the only) suspect in an espionage investigation at Los Alamos. The suggestion is based on the contention that other Los Alamos personnel who are not of Asian ancestry and who manifested at least some similar problematic behaviors--e.g., meeting with various representatives of the People's Republic of China--were not seriously considered as suspects. Moreover, other sources of suspects besides Los Alamos--viz., civilian contractors and the Department of Defense--were allegedly ignored or discounted.

Assuming the allegations that suggest racism are correct, one must not instinctively jettison racial factors in personnel security and counterintelligence matters. The fact is that such factors may have significant interpretive value in specific situations for specific people. (For example, a Caucasian from Iowa might be a likely suspect in committing espionage for a hostile nation-state, at least partially because the individual is not congruent with the primary racial characteristics of that nation-state. Or a self-perception of one's race can lead to a susceptibility for espionage regardless of what that race may be.) On the other hand, a problem does lie in developing intelligence policy and decisions based on stereotypes.