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The Psychology of Espionage: Contemporary Commentary

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Abstract. This article provides commentary on some of the common personnel security and counterintelligence criteria employed to minimize espionage within a political organization. The article takes as a point of departure "Security and Motivational Factors in Espionage" by Mr. Terry Thompson in the July 2000 *The Intelligencer*.

Mr. Thompson states that ideology was at one time the primary motivational factor in espionage committed against the United States (US) in events antecedent to and concurrent with the beginnings of the Cold War. However, ideology then receded as a primary motivational factor, while in combinations of money, anger/revenge, ego, the quest for notoriety, ethnicity, risk taking, thrill seeking, an event trigger, and the absence of many positive characteristics increased. In his analysis, Thompson employs ideology as a formal system of political philosophy--e.g, capitalism or communism.

However, ideology can more properly be conceived as also comprising beliefs about all matters of life including those far removed from a political philosophy--especially as the coherency, salience, logic, structure, function, and process of these beliefs may vary widely through time and in terms of their impact on external behavior. Here ideology furnishes the context within which Thompson's other factors operate and interact.

Ideology has an additional meaning as well. In the critical school of social sciences based on hermeneutics and postmodernism, ideology refers to a belief system and specific beliefs that induce false consciousness--e.g., beliefs about the world and one's place in it that perpetuate the degree to which one is exploited by others with more political power. In essence, one is unwittingly complicit in one's exploitation by maintaining such beliefs. To the degree that one becomes conscious of such ideology, one may become even more of a security risk if the authorities controlling one's organization are judged to be the exploiters or complicit in such exploitation. This argument, then, serves as an ideological explanation for the motivational salience that money, anger/envy and Thompson's other factors may possess.

Now, some comments about some of Thompson's other motivational factors. Thompson rightly points out that--as to money--financial problems such as bad credit, significant debt, and bankruptcies may not be the total story. He adds the subfactors of acquisitiveness, greed, and ambition. Thompson here is on the right track but needs to be more explicit. The real issue is not the objective amplitude of debt, solvency, assets, and profit. Instead it is the subjective disparity between what one wants and what one has--and most importantly the psychological pressure that this disparity has on ethical, moral, and instrumental behavior. Mr. Thompson later states that values and attitudes are much less detectable via polygraph than the omission or commission of external behaviors. Yet the polygraph through appropriately crafted questions may be quite able to generate viable hypotheses as to values and attitudes dealing with the meaning of money and the material world in an individual's psychological and social life. In this way, an individual with no objective financial problems may be perceived as quite problematic indeed.

As to ethnicity, Thompson correctly points out that the politics surrounding racial profiling can be an impediment to sound security policy, effective investigation, decisions on security status, and successful legal adjudication. He also rightly points out that the increasing positive value of multiculturalism in the US may be a security threat to the US insofar as it threatens coherent and cohesive national identification--itself a prophylactic against espionage. One possible intervention to help in these areas would be public education that ethnic backgrounds can be both boon and bane to national security dependent on interactions with other individual, group, and organizational characteristics. However, this plea for real political leadership on a controversial issue may be too much to ask in the risk-averse environment that typifies a political leader's career as largely one continual electoral campaign.

Thompson also makes the point that a program bearing on selection for and revocation of security clearances, suitability for sensitive assignments, and special access should focus not on the quest for magic "select-out" and "select-in" factors--each being a silver bullet of pristine and context-independent accuracy--but for requisite combinations of factors. The greater the number of negative factors and the fewer the number of positive ones, the greater the case to deny or revoke a security clearance. The converse also might well apply. However, it would be more correct to add that these factors need to be weighted in two interdependent ways: how significant the factor is for security and for the psychological and social life of the individual being evaluated. A high enough weighting would render the presence or absence of other factors less significant.

In addition, Thompson cites the importance of trigger events--crises or perceived crises mobilizing an individual toward espionage. Some of these events may be beyond the control of organizations--e.g., deaths of loved ones, the end of personal relationships. However, others are the primary responsibility of employing organizations--e.g., the hassles of day-to-day management, insensitive "pass-overs" for promotion and desired assignments, seemingly arbitrary and even demeaning recognition programs. It cannot be exaggerated that optimal management and optimal security go hand in hand.

Finally, Thompson is dead-on with his observations that security cannot be perfect and that social trends in the post-Cold War era may mitigate against serious effort and close reasoning in selection and revocation decisions. One additional social feature is that the omnipresent tension of partialing out from a finite budget between security and operational needs becomes ever easier to resolve toward operations and away from security.

In conclusion, Thompson's article should be required reading for security policymakers and adjudicators. It also should be read by political psychologists and other social scientists who must collect and analyze data and--on an ongoing basis--contribute to the public welfare. (See A social psychologist's advice to a spymaster. (February 7, 1997). IBPP, 1(11); Danoff, L. (2000). The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act: Law enforcement's secret weapon. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 28, 213-224; Henry, F. (1943). Japanese espionage and our psychology for failure. *Proceedings. United States Naval Institute*, 69, 639-641; Herrington, S.A. (1999). *Traitors among us : Inside the spy catchers world*. Presidio Press; Honts, C. R. (1992). Counterintelligence Scope Polygraph (CSP) test found to be poor discriminator. *Forensic Reports*, 5, 215-218; Invasion of the body snatchers as counterespionage threat. (February 21, 1997). IBPP, 1(13); Sarbin, T. R., Carney, R. M., Eoyang, C. (1994). *Citizen espionage: Studies in trust and betrayal*. Westport, CT, USA: Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc; Stone, L.A. (1992). Canonical correlation between security clearance adjudication concerns and later motivational causes for espionage behavior. *Forensic Reports*, 5, 305-316; The psychology of moral judgment: Applications for counterintelligence and personnel security. (November 22-29, 1996). IBPP,

1(4); Thompson, T. (July 2000). *The Intelligencer*, 11(1), 1-9. (Keywords: Counterintelligence, Espionage, Motivation, Personnel Security.)