

10-13-2000

Trends. Psychologies of Personnel Security and Counterintelligence Failure: Racism, Satisficing, and Wen Ho Lee

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Recommended Citation

Editor (2000) "Trends. Psychologies of Personnel Security and Counterintelligence Failure: Racism, Satisficing, and Wen Ho Lee," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 13 , Article 5. Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol9/iss13/5>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Trends. Psychologies of Personnel Security and Counterintelligence Failure: Racism, Satisficing, and Wen Ho Lee

Author: Editor

Volume: 9

Issue: 13

Date: 2000-10-13

Keywords: Espionage, Personnel Security, Racism, Satisficing, Wen Ho Lee

The United States Attorney General, Janet Reno, has announced that she will attempt to make public a classified report that is critical of the investigation, prosecution, and overall handling of Mr. Wen Ho Lee, a former computer scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Mr. Lee--amidst suspicions that he had engaged in espionage and treason--had been facing 59 felony counts concerning his handling of classified information but finally pled guilty to a single count of mishandling nuclear secrets.

The most significant response to Ms. Reno's announcement is that now it may become clearer whether racism and racial profiling were key factors in focusing suspicion of espionage and treason on Mr. Lee, as opposed to others who had access to similar kinds of information. Yet it may be more likely that another psychological phenomenon--satisficing--may be a key factor alone or in combination with racist and racial ones.

Satisficing--a construct developed by Herbert Simon--denotes a perspective that generates courses of action that are good enough as opposed to the best. Functionally, "good enough" becomes the best. Why should people behave in this fashion? They can then face a smaller number of requirements to complete a task. They can then face a smaller number of alternatives to evaluate and from which to choose. They can then face less effort in ordering and retesting alternative solutions. They can then face a simpler evaluation model--perhaps just employing a cut-off threshold. Moreover, in times of extreme stress, competing demands of professional and personal lives, fatigue, ambiguous and incomplete information, deadlines, and various psychological limitations, they can then face less guilt (and even feel great) about what is in essence a muddling through though hyper-simplification of the world.

Demonization of security and intelligence bureaucrats, operatives, and functionaries as racists may be warranted. Or as clinical paranoids-who form a baneful and tragic influence in the history of counterintelligence. However, something even more human may be crucial--adapting to more than human, even inhuman, demands through considering a less than human world. (See Gigerenzer, G., & Goldstein, D. G. (1996). Reasoning the fast and frugal way: Models of bounded rationality. *Psychological Review*, 103, 650-669; Rossmore, D. (1989). Leader/consultant dilemmas: The primary barrier to satisficing. *Consultation: An International Journal*, 8, 3-24; Simon, H. A. (1976). *Administrative behavior: A study of decision-making processes in administrative organization* 3rd Ed. Free Press; Sterngold, J. (October 6, 2000). Reno says she'll seek release of U.S. study on Los Alamos. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Stolte, J. F. (1994). The context of satisficing in vignette research. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 134, 727-733; Van Witteloostuijn, A. (1988). Maximising and satisficing opposite or equivalent concepts? *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 9, 289-313; Wise, D. (1992). *Molehunt: The secret search for traitors that shattered the CIA*. Random House.) (Keywords: Espionage, Personnel Security, Racism, Satisficing, Wen Ho Lee.)