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Counterintelligence and Insecure Cognitions: The Case of Robert P. Hanssen

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Abstract. This article identifies cognitions harbored as security-philic beliefs by well-meaning policymakers but associated with even greater security vulnerability.

As is the case with public unmaskings of United States (US) citizens who have betrayed their government's trust, the case of Robert P. Hanssen--a counterintelligence expert within the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) who allegedly passed highly classified information to the Soviet Union and later Russia for 15 years--has elicited a wealth of suggestions to prevent such an event from occurring again. However, these suggestions exemplify cognitions as security beliefs that contraindicate security.

For example, one suggestion is to ensure that anyone with access to information being compromised be placed under suspicion and investigated. In this way, the guilty culprit can be more quickly identified. However, it may be quite difficult to know what information is being or has been compromised. What is often known is that certain events are occurring that are hurtful to US security--although even this may not be the case when seemingly positively perceived events have unrecognized negative consequences. The information that would need to be known to cause events hurtful to security--and, thus, achieve the potential status of being compromised--must be generated through a number of assumptions each possessing various error rates that may change through time. Even if the information can be ascertained, the number of individuals who might have access to all or some of it may be too large for effective investigation or even unknowable. Or the information may have been developed independent of the compromised information. Moreover, the buck needs to stop somewhere. This means that, eventually, some individuals must be considered above suspicion. If not, a continuous and poisonous circle of suspicion ever widens without a means for ultimate adjudication. And whether the buck stops somewhere or not, the frequent incomplete and ambiguous status of what needs to be and is known to know becomes a breeding ground for corruption, nepotism, careerism, the acting out of psychodynamic conflict, and the exemplification of bias.

As another example, much has been made of the FBI's culture of trust inhibiting efforts to install " adequate safeguards" against betrayal of trust. However, can an organization be viable and successful when all its members are suspected of treachery? And is it even realistic to assume that--regardless of an official culture of distrust--there would not be trusting alliances between and among at least some individuals as a manifestation of human psychology?

As to "adequate safeguards," the very term seems to imply that there is a way to prevent behavioral manifestations of betrayal of trust. The history of all variants of political organizations would suggest otherwise. If, instead, the term implies some acceptable rate of betrayal, the social psychological sequelae in the public realm of each and every betrayal episode would suggest otherwise.

Still other suggestions seem to indicate a less than optimal understanding of security and intelligence operations. For example, some suggest that counterintelligence information should be more carefully compartmented so that counterintelligence operatives will be less likely to have information that they shouldn't have. However, betrayal of trust can still occur with the information operatives are entitled to

have. Merely decreasing the information that they should have may limit what can be compromised but may also limit how valuable the operatives can be to the US and how successfully they can do their job. Moreover, the very term, "counterintelligence information" suggests that such information can be easily identified and tagged. Yet, the challenge and very dilemma of the counterintelligence operative is that any element of information may have counterintelligence value. This problem is compounded by the phenomenon in which classified information "should really" be unclassified, the converse of this phenomenon, and the fluctuation through time of both phenomena.

Finally, there are suggestions that more funding, people, time, and materiel should be allocated for counterintelligence activities to minimize future threats. Obviously, increased expenditures by themselves may have no security effect or even a deleterious one. As well, with finite funding throughout the US Government, more resources allocated for counterintelligence mean less for other purposes. Even within the counterintelligence world, more for security purposes means less for other aspects of the counterintelligence mission.

A final suggestion, but one not often ventured, is that nothing needs to be fixed. Suggesting otherwise may be necessary even by FBI authorities--for political purposes. But security policymakers might consider accepting that the world is not completely predictable or controllable but may still be the best it can be. (See Birner, L. (1992). Betrayal: A major psychological problem of our times. Psychotherapy Patient, 8, 41-52; Danoff, L. (2000). The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act: Law enforcement's secret weapon. Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law, 28, 213-224; Elangovan, A.R., & Shapiro, D.L. (1998). Betrayal of trust in organizations. Academy of Management Review, 23, 547-566; Jones, W.H., Couch, L., & Scott, S. (1997). Trust and betrayal: The psychology of getting along and getting ahead. In R. Hogan & J.A. Johnson, (Eds.). Handbook of personality psychology. (pp. 465-482). Academic Press; Sarbin, T.R., & Carney, R. (Eds.). (1994). Citizen espionage: Studies in trust and betrayal. Praeger Publishers; Security at the F.B.I. (February 24, 2001). The New York Times, p. A24; United States of America v. Robert Philip Hanssen. Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, Arrest Warrant and Search Warrants. In in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, Alexandria Division.) (Keywords: Counterintelligence, Espionage, Hanssen, Personnel Security, Trust.)