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## Truth Serum and Terrorism

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**Abstract.** This article describes several epistemological--as opposed to ethical and moral--anxieties in administering drugs to individuals for the purpose of securing truths supporting the United States Government (USG)-declared war against terrorism with global research.

According to the Weekly Intelligence Notes of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), William Webster, has recommended that the USG consider using "truth drugs" to facilitate penetrating al-Qaeda's worldwide network. This drug-philic stance seems to be at least publicly counter to those of the USG Secretary of Defense, the FBI, US law enforcement agencies, and, less assuredly, the CIA. Beyond serious moral and ethical considerations, beyond possibilities of human rights and international law violations, and beyond potential socio-political and psycho-political blowback--including the activation of reciprocal treatment from adversaries and the self-metamorphosis elicited by ego-dystonic behavior that thereby becomes ego-syntonic--one can still be confronted by the simple question of efficacy. In other words, is there a truth serum? Are there truth serums?

Empirical research from the forensic literature seems to answer in the negative. For example, Piper (1993) points out that the barbiturate Amytal may have no privileged status in eliciting accurate recovered memories concerning sexual abuse in cases wherein adults may have been abused as children. Macdonald (1955) concludes that the "serum test" as applied to the "innocent suspect, guilty suspect, and the suspect who claims loss of memory" has been "overrated as an aid to criminal investigation." Gerson and Victoroff (1948) find that sodium amytal narcosis may not be helpful in inducing a confession from soldiers already convicted of antisocial behavior but refusing to acknowledge guilt. In fact, these authors suggest that there may be no such thing as "truth serum."

There are a number of other factors besides such empirical data that also mitigate against the option of truth serum. First, the most meaningful empirical testing must occur in situations wherein the tester and the political authority sanctioning the tester do not know what the truth is and wherein the testee knows that the tester and sanctioning authority does not know the truth. By social psychological necessity, then, there is no incontrovertible truth criterion at the time of testing. Second, a posteriori collection of data supporting the hypothesis that the testee's response is the truth is just that--support of a hypothesis of the truth, not necessarily the truth. Third, there are, indeed, many truths dependent on the meaning of specific situations believed to apply by the testee and often misconstrued and undesired by the tester and tester sanctioner. Fourth, constructive elements of memory virtually guarantee that different truths can be constructed from the same information and that the very conceptions of information to be interpreted are themselves interpretations impelling yet other interpretations in an infinitely iterative sequence. Fifth, the testee may provide information that is believed to be the truth by the testee but is not--because the truth may be unknowable and/or unknown by the testee. Sixth, the tester's assumptions of psychophysiological pathways from the administration of a drug to the testee through the testee's response are quite untested and are at best putative. Of course, if there are no truth serums, such pathways can never be found.

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In conclusion, one of many victories for successful terrorist entities is the eliciting of magical thinking in political leaders and their staffs about scientific and technological fixes to seemingly insoluble problems. In such a context, truth serums may end up in the same league as lie detecting polygraphs and paranormal remote assessments. All may be associated with the truth only through fate, luck, illusory correlation, and situations wherein a target or testee believes that the applied technique must work--viz., the bogus pipeline of social psychology. Such epistemological anxieties coupled with those from moral, ethics, politics, and the law should at best breed extreme ambivalence in taking Mr. Webster up on his recommendation. (See Gerson, M.J., & Victoroff, V.M. (1948). Experimental investigation into the validity of confessions obtained under sodium amytal narcosis. *Journal of Clinical Psychopathology*, 3, 359-375; Macdonald, J.M. (1955). Truth serum. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 46, 259-263; Piper, A. (1993). "Truth serum" and "recovered memories" of sexual abuse: A review of the evidence. *Journal of Psychiatry and Law*, 21, 447-471; Tachibana, M., Suzuki, C., Tsukazaki, N., & Nakae, K. (1977). The Akabori verdict and his forensic psychiatric evaluation. *Japanese Journal of Child Psychiatry*, 18, 11-14; Truth serum gambit. (May 6, 2002). *Weekly Intelligence Notes*, 18(2), 3.)(Keywords: Terrorism, Truth, Truth Serum.)