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Vestiges of Communism and Personnel Security

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Abstract. This article illustrates several interpretive difficulties in employing personnel security criteria in the context of national security.

IBPP has published many articles (available in its electronic archives) concerning the interpretive difficulties in employing personnel security criteria. Most saliently, any criterion suffers from the necessary leap required from an individual's status on that criterion to the problematic or desirable behavior that personnel security authorities are trying to prevent or encourage respectively. The "sure-thing" prediction is never a sure thing.

Now, there are many common attributions one might make to explain anything involved in living in a world that is sure-thingless. This might apply to the exact status of an individual on a criterion. Or the exact weights of criteria contributing to a putative sure-thing prediction. In fact, the very human enterprise of creating predictions may be significantly based on inadequacies and peculiarities of sensation, perception, cognition, motivation, emotion, and behavior that render the value of the enterprise not only unknown but even unknowable.

Yet, throughout human history, there have been large numbers of personnel security authorities who are True Believers in the sure-thingness of their criteria and how individuals stack up on them. In the United States (US), Red Scares and McCarthyisms are but two exemplars of how sure-thingness goes wrong.

The Issue is not whether formal membership, informal association, and ideological and intrapsychic activity in pursuits formally or informally labeled as Communist should have been or should be grounds for investigation and analysis. Historical data clearly show that many individuals involved in various combinations of the above worked against the security interests of the US through sabotage, espionage, and agency of influence.

However, not all Communist-tainted individuals worked in this manner, while at least some other non-Communists did. And the psychological dynamics that fueled a relentless quest to identify Communists, the sure-thing identification of Communist with behavior working against the security interests of the US, and the resulting misidentification of some individuals as Communist and as working against the US worked against the security of the US. Out of these dynamics rose the genesis of false positive and false negative errors of personnel security.

The above is a preamble to the notice (Broad, 2002) that new data (Herken, 2002) suggest more strongly than previously that the scientific leader of the US effort to develop "the atom bomb," J. Robert Oppenheimer, was a Communist. It is interesting that the explicator of these data concurrently suggests that Oppenheimer was not engaged in espionage, sabotage, or other problematic behavior against the US. In fact, Herken notes that the personnel security criterion of "Communist" may have become something for Oppenheimer to hide or to feel uncomfortable about. That is, much as an incompetent physician can create iatrogenic insult to the body, personnel security authorities through their

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construction of criteria and management of the security system may have created damage to the body politic. This damage would have been associated with pressures to hide what one should not have had to hide, to seem exploitable in the eyes of hostile intelligence services, and to furnish less than one's best because part of one's psychology was having to address the shadow of discovery and potential exploitation.

A counter to the above analysis is that the Communist label should have been enough to bar anyone from nuclear weapons work, especially with the hindsight that some Communists were committing espionage for the Soviet Union and its allies. A counter to this counter is that personnel security is ultimately about doing the best possible to guard against behavior injurious to one's country, organizations, other people, or oneself. Assuming Oppenheimer might have been a Communist but was not working against the US and assuming his extraordinary demonstrated value to the World War II effort, one might well conclude that misidentifying a Communist as non-Communist might have been in the security interests of the US. (See Broad, W. (September 8, 2002). Book contends chief of A-bomb team was once a communist. The New York Times, p. A26; Herken, G. (2002). Brotherhood of the bomb. Henry Holt; McFarland, S. (1998). Communism as religion. International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 8, 33-48; Sani, F., & Reicher, S. (1991). When consensus fails: An analysis of the schism within the Italian Communist Party (1991). European Journal of Social Psychology, 28, 623-645; Schmitt, D.P., & Winter, D.G. (1998). Measuring the motives of Soviet leadership and Soviet society: Congruence reflected or congruence created? Leadership Quarterly, 9, 293-307.) (Keywords: Communism, Oppenheimer, Personnel Security.)

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