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Trends. Espionage and Sex: A Commentary on Personnel Security Criteria

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses one aspect of sexual orientation – homosexuality - in a security and intelligence context.

Sexuality comprising sexual orientation, gender identity, and various sexual practices can have a powerful effect on behavior and, indeed, can be conceived as behavior. It is for good reason, then, that United States Government (USG) personnel security criteria--bearing on who is deemed worthy of receiving and maintaining access to sensitive information, the opportunity to engage in special activities, and security clearances--have included sex-related items.

USG-led public discourse on personnel security criteria and sexuality, however, has largely focused on the relevance and meaning of only one aspect of sexual orientation: homosexuality. The thread of this discourse has centered on the putative security riskiness of homosexuality based on two statistically oblique rationales. The first is that homosexuality is intrinsically evil, immoral, and indicates poor character. The second is that homosexuals can be blackmailed into violating security rules and regulations.

Each rationale can be countered. The first can be countered by noting that (1) there is a significant body of expert opinion to the contrary and that (2) even if the opinion were accurate, it would be irrelevant without establishing a causal linkage between homosexuality and poor security praxis. The second rationale can be countered by noting that various aspects of many sexual orientations, gender identities, and various sexual practices are blackmailable depending on how the aspects of sexuality are perceived and experienced by the sexual practitioner. It may well be that by frequency count adulterous heterosexual behavior may top the list of blackmailable sexual pursuits--although an hypothesis awaiting more empirical study.

The above should be considered in the context of a recently disclosed espionage case that may involve two male agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation who may have been sexually involved with a woman who may have been a double agent ultimately controlled by the People's Republic of China. The list of agent security improprieties related to her may have included the disclosure of extremely damaging information to the security of the USG and of not strongly attempting to stop any of her actions that might be inimical to USG interests.

It may turn out that the concern for personnel security and sexuality should deal not with a specific sexual orientation as much as with aspects of sexuality that might lead to inappropriate security behavior---e.g., impulsivity, compulsivity, controllability, degree of shame and guilt, and so on. An hypothesis awaiting exploration may be that elements of American Puritanism, conservatism, and religious ideology harbored by security-conscious policymakers may have harmed USG security through fueling a focus largely on one aspect of sexual orientation. Such policymakers would be guilty of what they accuse others--harming security through their sexuality. (See Gade, P. A., Segal, D. R., & Johnson, E. M. (1996). The experience of foreign militaries. In G. Herek & J. Jobe, (Eds.). *Out in force: Sexual orientation and the military*. Worlds of desire. (pp. 106-130). University of Chicago Press; Herek, G.M.

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