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# Hope Springs Eternal: The Psychology of Deception

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**Abstract:** The author considers the idea of detecting deception, noted difficulties in doing so, and questions whether additional funding applied to detecting deception in the context of terrorism would be effective. The author refers to the efforts of the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) specifically.

The United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) has recently issued a report on the intelligence authorization act for the 2004 fiscal year that recommends, "an expanded research effort directed at methods for....detecting deception." Of special note are "research activities relating to the development of new techniques in the behavioral, psychological, or physiological assessment of individuals" that may serve to create "alternatives to the polygraph as a security evaluation tool for the U.S. Government." The report also mandates "a written report identifying the research most likely to advance the understanding of the use of such assessment of individuals in security evaluations" by March 2004.

However—as noted and reinforced by two significant studies in 1983 (Office of Technology Assessment) and 2002 (National Academy of Sciences)—the same significant difficulties have been noted in demonstrating the reliability and validity of behavioral and life sciences applications to detecting deception. These difficulties include the application's purpose—e.g., mass screening for suitability versus individual screening for liability and perpetration; the extremely low base rate of proscribed misbehavior and inferred character traits; the challenge of demonstrating low false negative and false positive rates; the complexity of the phenomenological, physiological, and behavioral aspects of deception; and even philosophy of science issues concerning the nature of the whole detection-of-deception enterprise.

Will the projected effort—if authorized with allocated funds—shed new light on the quest for truth? Or will it be yet another venture that merely demonstrates a terror management heuristic combating the realization of a world that may be more uncontrollable and unpredictable than one would like? (See Authorizing appropriations for Fiscal Year 2004 for intelligence and intelligence-related activities of the United States Government, the Community Management Account, and the Central Intelligence Agency Retirement and Disability System, and for other purposes. Senate Report. (1st session, 108-44.); Levine, T. R., Park, H. S., & McCornack, S. A. (1999). Accuracy in detecting truths and lies: Documenting the "veracity effect." *Communication Monographs*, 66, 125-144; National Research Council. (2003). *The polygraph and lie detection*. Committee to review the scientific evidence on the polygraph. Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. (October 2003). Washington, D.C.: The National Academy Press; Saxe, L., & Ben-Shakhar, G. (1999). Admissibility of polygraph tests: The application of scientific standards post- Daubert. *Psychology, Public Policy, & Law*, 5, 203-223; Scientific validity of polygraph testing: A research review and evaluation-A technical memorandum. (1983). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, OTA-TM-H-15.) (Keywords: American Government, Deception, SSCI)