GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

CIA and the Polygraph

by John F. Sullivan

For as long as the polygraph has been a part of the US Government's security apparatus, it has been an object of controversy and criticism. It is used in the Intelligence Community (IC) and by federal and state law enforcement entities. The controversy focuses on the lack of scientific evidence as to the polygraph's validity, and the criticism is rooted in the claims of those who believe they were treated unjustly during polygraph tests. The absence of a viable appeals process has exacerbated both the criticism and controversy.

The primary role of the polygraph in the IC has been as a part of the applicant screening process, and was most often the deciding factor as to whether or not a security clearance was granted. One can pass a polygraph test and still be denied employment, due to medical, psychological, or other factors, but getting a clearance without successfully completing the polygraph process is extremely rare.

Within the CIA, there is a much more expanded role for the polygraph. Included in that role is to support the clandestine service (CS) in its operations. That support consists of verifying the *bona fides* of recruited agents as well as the accuracy of the information they provide. The polygraph is also used as an interrogation aid in the debriefing of prisoners, defectors, and walk-ins offering supposedly valuable information. Other venues for the CIA polygraph are as a tool in internal investigations to resolve allegations made against employees, as part of periodic re-investigations of employees, and the screening of contract employees. The polygraph also has a prophylactic role in that in many instances, knowing that there would be a polygraph in their future, employees have refrained from misconduct; or so many have told me.

Because 99% of my polygraph experience is with the CIA, this article addresses the various roles of the polygraph in that agency.

A Little History

Historically, polygraph tests were used by law enforcement in connection with a specific crime. In considering the use of the polygraph, CIA decided that it needed to address a broader range of issues. To that end, in late 1947, G. Cleveland (Cleve) Backster, a former Army intelligence interrogator, was hired to come up with a test addressing lifestyle as well as counterintelligence issues. Lifestyle issues involved criminal activity, blackmail, drug use, homosexuality, alcohol problems, and involvement with communism. Among the counterintelligence issues addressed were the mishandling and unauthorized disclosure of classified information, contacts with foreign nationals, and unauthorized contacts with foreign intelligence services. Once a standard test was in place, Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter, the then Director of Central Intelligence, authorized polygraph use on a voluntary and experimental basis.

The CIA's expanded application of the polygraph was contrary to polygraph practices espoused by the American Polygraph Association (APA) in that it diluted the process' validity. The Agency's program diverged from the mainstream of polygraph practice. Agency examiners were discouraged from joining the APA or participating in APA sponsored seminars, workshops, or conferences.

During the first year of use at CIA, more than 100 employees lost their clearances as a result of information developed during their polygraph tests. In the process, the polygraph became an integral part of the CIA security apparatus. It didn't take long for the word to get out that volunteering to take a polygraph test might not be a good idea, and the pool of volunteers began to dry up. At some point, the testing of employees who volunteered to take polygraph tests expanded to the testing of applicants for CIA employment.

During my initial interview in 1968 with Mr. Bill Osborne, the then chief of the Office of Security (OS) Interrogation Research Division (IRD), as the Polygraph Division (PD) was formerly called. He told me that 92% of applicants who took polygraph examinations "passed" or completed their tests and were offered positions. He also said that of the 8% who were denied employment, 92% were a direct result of polygraph-derived information. Mr. Osborne also noted that no applicant or employee had been denied

employment or lost a clearance unless he or she admitted to disqualifying information, and closed out the interview by telling me, "We believe that it is better for 10 dishonest people to get through the process than to accuse an honest person of being dishonest."

The Early Years

Having demonstrated its utility with its early tests, and gained a modicum of acceptance in so doing, a proposal was made in 1951 to use the polygraph as part of the validation process of operational assets. To do this, the OS had to recruit examiners who spoke a foreign language, and to that end, examiners were recruited from the Directorate of Plans (DP).[1] As useful as the polygraph had been up until that point, it became more so in the operational arena.

A defining moment for the Agency's DP polygraph program came during the Korean War, when polygraph examiners uncovered and neutralized a large double agent operation. The South Koreans had been sending teams of agents into North Korea to gather intelligence. When a new CIA chief arrived in Seoul in 1951, he ordered that returning members of these teams, as well as others involved in the operation, be polygraphed. It turned out that the the Chinese had co-opted the operation, and many agents had been killed or doubled. One of the results of this success was that over the next several years there was a dramatic increase in the use of the polygraph in clandestine agent operations. To handle this increased workload, examiners were assigned overseas and teams of examiners would make periodic trips abroad to handle an overload of cases.

For the next two decades, there were few changes in the CIA polygraph program. There was no related research on methods or equipment.

While the primary focus during this period was on applicant and operational testing, there was one other type of test employed, the Specific Issue Polygraph (SIP). This test was used when an allegation of misconduct was made against an employee. On these occasions, the accused employee was offered the opportunity to take a polygraph test to resolve the allegation.[2]

A Time of Change

Contained in the agreement that all applicants sign prior to being tested is a clause advising the applicant that as an employee, they would be subject to periodic polygraph testing. Although authorized, periodic testing was rarely done. Operations and communications officers returning from overseas assignments were occasionally tested as they were seen as at greater risk for recruitment approaches.

In 1975, a policy of periodic retesting was formalized and called the Reinvestigation Polygraph Program (RIP). The main obstacle in establishing this program was an argument over the questions to be asked. One faction wanted lifestyle issues covered; the other, only counterintelligence questions. The latter faction prevailed, and since 1976, the RIP, using only counterintelligence questions, has been an integral part of the CIA's polygraph program.

Employees were subject to testing at five-year intervals, but due to manpower issues, maintaining that schedule for all employees was not possible. The pool of employees who had been on duty for more than five years was huge, and growing every year. Selection of those to undergo RIP testing was done randomly, and many employees went through their entire career having taken only their entering on duty (EOD) test.

As was the case in the operational and applicant venues, the polygraph proved its utility in the RIP arena. The biggest "take" from the RIP tests were admissions of mishandling and making unauthorized disclosures of classified information. In 1977, an employee, during her RIP test, admitted to passing classified information to a foreign intelligence service member. This was the first employee to ever admit to espionage during a polygraph test.[3]

Often, something bad must happen before change occurs. That was how it was with the IRD's Industrial Polygraph Program. Prior to 1977, contractors working on Agency programs were polygraphed on a catch-as-catch-can basis. The Boyce-Lee case changed that. Christopher John Boyce was a clerk

---

1. The Directorate of Plans (DP) is an early name for the clandestine service, later called the Directorate of Operations and then the National Clandestine Service, the CIA organization that recruits and manages clandestine agents.

2. Of seven SIPs about which I have personal and specific knowledge, four were used to resolve allegations of homosexuality, one of child molestation, one of embezzlement, and one of theft. Five confessions were obtained and one individual was exonerated. Another individual refused to take a polygraph test, and was given a medical retirement. Two of the individuals who underwent SIPs committed suicide.

3. Over FBI protests, the employee, who has never been named publically, was allowed to retire.

at the aerospace giant TRW. In January 1977, Boyce and his cohort, Dalton Lee, were arrested for passing classified information to the Soviets. Boyce would pass the information to Lee, who would travel to the Russian Embassy in Mexico City and turn the information over to the Russian handler. This case exposed the vulnerability of our industrial contractors, and as a result, an Industrial Branch was created in IRD to handle contractor polygraph examinations.[4]

In November 1977, William Kampiles stole the highly classified manual on the KH-11 satellite and sold it to the Soviets. Unfortunately for Kampiles, the Russian to whom he sold the manual was one of ours. Kampiles was arrested in 1978 and sentenced to 40 years in prison.[5] The upshot of this incident was the creation of a three-year probationary period for new employees. At the conclusion of the probationary period, a background investigation would be done, as well as a polygraph test that included both lifestyle and counterintelligence questions. Each question was prefaced with the phrase: "Since entering on duty, have you ……?"

In every aspect of CIA's polygraph testing — applicant, reinvestigation, probationary, industrial, operational, and specific issue — significant admissions have been obtained, to wit:

- Catching double agents is the Holy Grail for a CIA polygraph examiner, and in 1979 a CIA examiner caught a Czech double agent who had not only been working with the FBI for four years, but also had been trained to beat the polygraph. He and two of his colleagues were declared *persona non grata* and deported from the US. At the time, Czech intelligence was the only service that trained its agents to beat the polygraph.

- CIA operations officer Edward Lee Howard was fired in 1983 after admitting to drug use and criminal activity during his RIP test. He subsequently defected to the Soviet Union.

- In 1985, during a routine RIP test, and after five days of testing and interrogation, Sharon Scranage confessed to engaging in espionage for Ghana and was sent to prison.

- During his applicant test in 1993, former New York State Trooper David Harding admitted falsifying evidence in a murder case. He was sentenced to prison.

- During his 1996 probationary test, an employee admitted to participating in a bank robbery between the time he passed his EOD test and entered on duty. He, too, was sent to prison.

In the operational arena, numerous double agents have been uncovered, phantom operations and fabricators exposed, and information affecting national policy decisions verified.

Out with the Old – In with the New

By the late 1970s, it became apparent that the in-house training of polygraph examiners was inadequate to meet the increasing demands. To address this issue, PD examiner candidates were sent to the John Reid and Associates polygraph school in Chicago for training. This outsourcing of examiner training led to participation in off-site seminars on the polygraph, an increase in studies of human behavior as it related to the polygraph, and a more academic approach to polygraph uses.

No more than four examiners at a time could be sent out for training, which was inadequate to meet demand. In 1984, CIA created its own polygraph school to replace its previous five-week, unstructured, one-on-one training program. CIA's polygraph course, certified by the American Polygraph Association, lasted nine months and was very structured and intensive. The graduates were the best trained examiners in the history of CIA's polygraph program and viewed

4. See Robert Lindsey, *The Falcon and the Snowman: A True Story of Friendship and Espionage* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 1979).
5. On December 16, 1996, Kampiles was released from prison.

as professional polygraph examiners, as opposed to being simply security officers who happened to be assigned to PD.

This new breed of examiners obtained admissions at a never before seen rate, but there was a price to pay. Complaints about polygraph testing skyrocketed. Single session polygraph tests became the exception to the rule and what had been skepticism about the polygraph morphed into open hostility. Polygraph tests, which had been perceived as mere inconveniences, were being seen as inquisitions.

CIA examiners were being told, "If you aren't getting complaints, you aren't doing your job," and "Everyone who comes in here is lying. It is our job to find out how much." More and more subjects were being called deceptive, with no admissions, and in the late 1980s, seven examiners were fired for rigging their tests to make sure their subjects passed.

With the Aldrich (Rick) Ames case, it got worse. In February 1994, CIA operations officer Ames was arrested for passing classified information to the Russians. While working for the Russians, he passed two polygraph tests, conducted by three graduates of CIA's school. Post Ames, the PD lost control of its school, additional levels of quality control were put in place, and the two examiners who had tested Ames were reassigned. The media excoriated the polygraph, PD morale descended even further, and there was a perception that the PD would not survive another miss on the scale of the Ames fiasco. CIA polygraphs were forever changed.

The New Polygraph

Polygraph Division management, and many of the examiners, became almost paranoid about making a bad call on another subject. Single session favorable determinations became rare. "Inconclusive" became the call of choice. One of PD's branch managers dictated that "Every subject, regardless of how good the charts are, will be brought back for additional testing." A senior CIA officer was quoted in *Newsweek*, saying, "They [the Polygraph Division] are treating us all like criminals."

PD was under constant attack, and a "circle the wagons," "us against them" attitude ensued. In that environment, polygraph subjects and their sponsors would no longer be given the results of their polygraph tests. This would give the examiners immunity from complaints, limit appeals, and take some of the pressure off them. Today, it is more difficult for unsuitable candidates and/or malefactors to get through the polygraph process, and that is because an honest subject has no better chance than a dishonest subject of getting through the process. Honest subjects who did not get through the process were seen callously as collateral damage and a cost of doing business. Several have sued CIA over polygraph results.

A properly conducted polygraph test remains a valid, effective, and proven security screening technique. The polygraph test is usually the first interaction an applicant has with a CIA security officer. In too many cases applicants leave a polygraph session with a less than favorable impression. Polygraph testing is the most time consuming aspect of security processing and is unnecessarily long, resulting in suitable candidates refusing to wait for the resolution of their tests and taking other employment. Most importantly, when an honest polygraph subject fails to complete his or her polygraph test, the subject can draw two conclusions: either the instrument doesn't work or the examiner doesn't know what he is doing. In either case, the polygraph process' credibility suffers.

Ironically, as use increased, so did the number of false positives, complaints, and the number of subjects who were denied clearances without having made an admission. Polygraph lost much of its credibility, making it less effective. Over-reliance on the polygraph, while perhaps cost-effective from the government's perspective, has negative aspects from the perspective of fairness, ethics, and potential liability.

Readings for Instructors

The National Academy of Sciences and National Research Council, *The Polygraph and Lie Detection* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences Press, 2003).

Reid, John and Fred Inbau. *Truth and Deception: The Polygraph (Lie-Detector) Technique*, (Baltimore, MD: Williams & Wilkins, 1977). This is the bible of polygraphy and essential reading.

Sullivan, John F. *Of Spies and Lies, A CIA Lie Detector Remembers Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

Sullivan, John F. *GATEKEEPER: Memoirs of a CIA Polygraph Examiner* (Washington, DC: Potomac Press, 2007).

Additionally, much information on the polygraph can be found online at *http://www.antipolygraph.org*.

John F. Sullivan was a polygraph examiner with the CIA from 1968 to 1999. Since retiring in 1999, he has written two books about the use of the polygraph in the CIA, lectured extensively, and served as a consultant and expert witness in law suits involving polygraph issues.