

## BOOK REVIEW

Frank Horvath<sup>1</sup>, Ph.D.

### Review of: *The Lie Detectors—The History of an American Obsession*

**REFERENCE: Alder K. The lie detectors: the history of an American obsession. New York, NY: Free Press, 2007, 321 pp.**

This is the best work that has appeared on Polygraphy in a long while. It's a fascinating historical assessment which, in contrast to the few other similar writings, is a person-focused account of "...the lie detector [which] promised to redeem the innocent, scarify the guilty, and ensure political loyalty..." Alder examines the personalities of the primary historical forefathers, Leonarde Keeler, Dr. John Larson, Dr. William Moulton Marston and, in an understated way, Fred E Inbau, J.D., a familiar name in the legal and forensic science communities.

There are two serious oversights in this work. Each of these is an important prong of the author's position and, in each, the author is on the wrong side of the facts. It is possible that the author was not aware of these, but he should have been.

There were two major schools of thought about polygraph testing. The first held that only the testing examiner can "interpret" the physiological data to determine truthfulness and deception. This approach was represented, not exclusively though, by those who maintained the tradition of Leonarde Keeler, the dominant figure in this book. The second school was that advanced by John E. Reid, the originator of the "Control Question Technique." He maintained that with his approach one could evaluate another examiner's "charts," and offer an objective opinion of an examinee's truthfulness.

Alder ignores this distinction; he implies that the field is unchanged from what it was. But, his coverage ends close to where Polygraphy and the Reid approach as practiced today begins. Alder is an historian and is entitled to his interpretive perspective but readers ought to know that it is wrong.

The second major prong is that the "lie detector" was, and is, a peculiarly American device. Americans, and Americans alone, Alder declares, have been obsessed with the "lie detector." "Only in America was the lie detector used to interrogate criminals and vet employees. Abroad, it was disparaged as a typical American gimmick."

Alder's position on "lie detection" being an American phenomenon might well have been true in the formative years. But it is disappointing that Alder ignores the growth of Polygraphy outside of the United States. In his penultimate chapter titled "Pinkos," Alder states that: "In reality, neither the Soviet Union nor Nazi Germany before it saw any need for the lie detector—as the CIA secretly acknowledged. Totalitarian governments brook no impediment to their control..." Those points are true. However, the situation is dramatically different today. The polygraph has been used in Europe since the 1950s. There are now hundreds of examiners in

Russia and China; there are several instrument manufacturers in both countries. And, polygraph testing is widely used in other countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America.

The truth is that Polygraphy is not just a phenomenon that was fashioned in the unique sociology of American societal transformation. As other countries have learned, Polygraphy as a forensic technique contributes to investigations in ways that, as yet, are not possible with any other method. Those with a serious interest in history and science ought to be honest about this.

The author's oversights make him seem as much a polemicist as an historian. He takes some facts at face value and ignores others. He fails to note that there are equally sound arguments pro and con, and equally credible scientists, on both sides of the issues in Polygraphy. Alder offers his personal views—presented as if they are fully supported by science—in order to mislead or, if not that, to appeal to an audience with only a casual rather than a more serious interest in the topic.

Aside from being based on faulty premises, Alder has much to say about "lie detection," its history and founders. There is plenty of unique material in this book that ought to be of interest to those in Polygraphy and those with an interest in policing and the forensic sciences.

The first seven chapters of Alder's book are devoted to the development of the idea of a "lie detector." Although this section is a bit choppy, Alder does limn out the personalities involved. He shows why the police were interested in this technology and how August Vollmer's promotion of its use came about. In his second section, six chapters long, Alder considers the historical role that Chicago served in Polygraphy and the forensic sciences. Here Inbau, Keeler, and, to some extent, Larson were critical to the nation's first crime laboratory at Northwestern University. Alder reveals how Keeler's flair and personal charm attracted widespread media attention to "lie detection" and thus helped secure funding. Later, in chapter 18, entitled "Frankenstein lives!," the antagonism between Keeler and Larson is revealed for what it was. Though Keeler got much of the credit, his mentor, Larson, who trained Keeler in a moment of weakness as a personal favor to Vollmer, regretted it. He had created a monster. Keeler's death gave Larson, the nation's first cop with a Ph.D., a chance to kill the monster. Larson, of a much more scientific bent than Keeler, wanted to transform the "lie detector" from Keeler's idiosyncratic approach into a scientifically grounded procedure.

In "Box Populi," the last chapter in this book, Alder observes that: "Over the course of the past eighty years, lie detection has been perhaps the most investigated forensic technique." He notes that: "...polygraph experts have urged their colleagues to set rigorous protocols for interrogation and establish licensed training schools. In fact, only cursory standards have been adopted..."

<sup>1</sup>Professor Emeritus, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.

It is unfortunate that Alder is partially correct here. Though the standards today are stronger and more encompassing than in the past, no one can honestly say that enough has been done. The field lost its sense of direction at some point. A careful, informed reading of Alder's book might, just might, redirect those in the field to correct for what ignorance of history has wrought. Everyone in

Polygraphy ought to read this book. Those with only a passing interest there but with a deeper concern for the forensic sciences will also benefit. Hopefully, Alder has done an unintended service. Polygraphy as a scientifically grounded, forensic technique, as originally envisioned by some of the founders prominent in this work, might yet come to pass.