

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Gatekeeper: Memoirs of a CIA Polygraph Examiner*

REFERENCE: Sullivan JF. *Gatekeeper: memoirs of a CIA polygraph examiner*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2007, 273 pp.

Polygraphy—the use of a polygraph instrument to assess credibility, popularly known as “lie detection”—was developed early in the 20th century, primarily as a forensic technique. Polygraphy in that domain is one thing; when used in other environments it attracts controversy and political attention. It is this other application that Sullivan has written about.

Ever since its original employment to protect the government’s atomic energy research programs in the late 1940s, polygraph testing as a “screening” tool has been the source of controversy and vigorous challenge. At the federal level, there have been periodic congressional and other high-level reviews about every decade. The most recent of these was the highly publicized report on “lie detection” by the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences (1). When it released its report in 2003, the NRC did so with the plaint by at least one committee member that “The polygraph never caught a spy.” Sullivan, the author of this book, shows not only that this statement was not true but also says the committee members had been told before releasing their report of specific instances of detected spies. That issue notwithstanding, the NRC report clearly brought to the forefront a legitimate concern about the use of “lie detection” to screen federal employees, contractors, and job applicants. There is a dearth of research on the topic. It’s curious that about 80% of the polygraph testing performed in or by federal agencies involves some sort of screening; at least 80% of the research studies carried out in or supported by federal agencies involves “lie detection” for forensic purposes. Such, apparently, is the nature of government bureaucracy.

In other words, science-based knowledge about polygraph testing for screening purposes is lacking. If you’re looking for technical substance on that topic, then this book isn’t for you. However, if your interest lies in understanding why federal agencies are the nation’s biggest consumers of polygraphic services, then Sullivan has quite a bit to tell you. If you’re also interested in the “culture” of the polygraph examiner community in a large intelligence agency, in this case, the CIA, Sullivan reveals a lot that heretofore has been sub-rosa.

It would serve no purpose to discuss this book by identifying chapter titles, as they are not descriptive of commonly understood topics. They roughly set out, in a somewhat chronological order, the author’s 31 years of work with the CIA, mostly as a polygraph examiner. During that time, he spent “2,011 days overseas on agency business.” Much of this business involved conducting polygraph examinations in the most sensitive areas of government

concerns. Reading about these experiences reinforces the author’s point. Polygraph testing is vital to our government processes. To carry out such testing is highly stressful in itself. Some persons excel at doing this; others have great difficulty. To complicate those problems with the vagaries of bureaucratic “politics” is, at times, debilitating for all. To add to these concerns, the author flavors his work with the common understanding that the intelligence community operates in a world unique unto itself, with vague boundaries and unspecified standards.

Spies and spying are, of course, central to the work of the CIA. The real story behind some of the most damaging spies, e.g., Aldrich Ames (given an entire chapter) and Robert Hansen, is presented. But they are the exception. The routine work environment of the author is at the heart of this book. Most of the material is personal and while it makes for an easy read, it is impossible to know what is unstated, what is being left out, not because the book was subject to prepublication review (it was, but reportedly not much was redacted), but because the author simply wasn’t privy to it.

One significant point to be made about the author’s view is that it is based mostly on experiences in screening applications. Such limited exposure may be the primary reason why he states that polygraph testing is “92% art and 8% science.” His view does not square with the evidence or the position of those who have carried out, published, and digested the research studies which support polygraphy for forensic purposes. In the event that this point is not clear, consider the differences. In forensic uses, there is a known event, usually investigative data, and a way to verify outcomes. In screening applications, the examination questions are event-free (e.g., “Did you ever give classified information to a foreign national?”), there are no available “facts” to link the subject with an event, and it is difficult to determine the accuracy of the outcomes. These distinctions, though unstated, provide the foundation for much of the author’s narrative.

The NRC drew two major conclusions relevant to this review. First, with respect to screening applications, the accuracy of polygraph testing “in distinguishing actual or potential security violators from innocent test takers is insufficient to justify reliance on its use in employee security screening in federal agencies (p. 6).” Second, “Some potential alternatives to the polygraph show promise, but none has yet been shown to outperform the polygraph. None shows any promise of supplanting the polygraph for screening purposes in the near term (p. 8).” This book shows the real-life tension between those two NRC conclusions. Policy in theory is one thing; policy in practice is another. The aphorism “That’s a fine idea in practice; but, it will never work in theory” is pertinent here. How Sullivan and his colleagues practiced their trade, with full awareness of this conflict, is at the heart of his personal commentary. He

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shows that while all screening practices are imperfect and none is as effective as polygraph testing, the limitations in such testing are an ever-present source of daily-life stress of examiners in an agency such as the CIA.

A final point of interest in this volume is something that examiners know but outsiders may not recognize. It is not the test outcome, *per se*, that is of value in screening; it's the information that is developed that serves the consumer's needs. The screening environment requires the construction of an accurate personal history of the examinee. Policy in practice is that there is more than "lie detection" at stake. "So what" if the screened person has not told the truth. What the "truth" is that is being

withheld is more fundamental in the process. This is certainly the unstated driver of screening applications. Polygraph examiners who develop information important to advancing the adjudication process in agencies such as the CIA are, to borrow from Sullivan, the Gatekeepers. It's a squeaky gate though, and it needs attention.

Reference

1. National Research Council. The polygraph and lie detection. Washington, DC: Committee to Review the Scientific Evidence on the Polygraph, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Academies Press, 2003.