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Review of:  
JE Sullivan,  
*Gatekeeper: memoirs of a CIA polygraph examiner,*  
Washington D.C., Potomac Books Inc., 2007, 273 pp.

Polygraphy – the use of a polygraph instrument to assess credibility, popularly known as “lie detection” – was developed along with many other forensic techniques that were widely applied in the United States early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While other techniques gradually became admissible evidence in judicial proceedings, polygraphy struggled for similar treatment. It continues to do so today. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which was and still is a real concern in the judiciary that a “lie detector” threatens the ostensible purpose of courtroom proceedings: a search for the “truth.” However, another factor is in play here also. Polygraphy for forensic purposes is one thing; when used in other environments it attracts controversy and, most importantly, political attention. It is this other application that Sullivan has written about in this book.

Ever since its original employment to protect the government’s atomic energy research programs in the late 1940’s, polygraph testing as a “screening” tool has been the source of controversy, scientific debate and vigorous challenge. At the federal level in the U.S. there have been periodic congressional reviews about every decade. Similar state-level reviews have also been carried out, though these have been confined to the last two decades or so. The most recent high-level review was the widely publicized report on “lie detection” by the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy

of Sciences (1). This was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Energy, largely in response to an FBI investigation in the Wen Ho Lee matter at the Los Alamos laboratory. 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, not only shows 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. One member, however, was apparently determined to ignore “facts” in an effort to attract media attention. That issue notwithstanding, the NRC report clearly and forcefully brought to the forefront a legitimate concern about the use of “lie detection” to screen federal employees, contractors and those seeking employment. There is a real dearth of research on the topic. It is a curious fact that at least 80% of the polygraph testing done in or by federal agencies involves some sort of screening; at least 80% of the research studies done in or supported by federal agencies involves “lie detection” for other, usually forensic, purposes. Such, apparently, is the nature of government bureaucracy. In other words, we don’t have a lot of good, science-based knowledge about polygraph testing for screening purposes. If you’re a reader looking for technical substance on that topic then this book is not for you. However, if your interest lies in understanding why federal agencies are and continue to be the nation’s biggest consumers of the services of polygraph examiners, then Sullivan has quite a bit to tell you. And, if you’re especially interested in the “culture” of the small but influential polygraph examiner community in a very large intelligence agency, in this case, the CIA, Sullivan reveals a lot that heretofore has been largely sub-rosa.

It would serve no purpose to discuss this book by identifying the chapter titles, as they are not descriptive of commonly understood topics. They roughly set out in a somewhat chronological order, the author’s thirty-one 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 and protected areas of government concerns. Reading about these experiences reinforces many of the author’s points. In particular, he shows that polygraph testing is vital to our government processes. To carry out such testing, particularly in certain circumstances, is highly stressful in itself. Some persons excel at doing this; others have great difficulty. To complicate those problems with trying to deal with the vagaries of bureaucratic “politics” is, at times, debilitating for all. To add to all of these concerns, the author flavors his work with an oft stated understanding that the intelligence community operates in a world unique unto itself, sometimes black and white but often grey with vague boundaries and unspecified standards.

Spies and spying are, of course, central to the work of the CIA. Readers with an interest in knowing more about the real story behind some of the most damaging spies, e.g., Aldrich Ames (given an entire chapter), Robert Hansen, Harold Nicholson, as well as others who are less well known, will find it here. 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 pre-publication 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 this book, at least as it concerns polygraph testing, is that the author's view is based on experiences almost always in screening applications. It is likely that such limited exposure is the primary reason why he expresses the view that polygraph testing is "92% art and 8% science." His view does not square with the evidence; nor, is it consistent with the position of those who have taken the time to carry out, publish and digest the research studies which support contemporary 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, albeit limited, 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 typically no available "facts" to link the examinee with an event, and it is difficult to determine the accuracy of the outcomes. This distinction is often not appreciated but it was a major feature in the review by the NRC and, though unstated, it provides the foundation for much of the author's narrative.

Another difference to be kept in mind is that in the intelligence field it is the fear of a false negative (i.e., a spy who evades detection, for example) that nags at examiners in their daily work. They, in their world, can cope with a few false positives but not with another Aldrich Ames, knowing in their heart of hearts that sooner or later it is going to happen. In forensic work, however, the opposite is the case. Avoiding errors on "truthful" persons, at the expense of some "deceptive" persons who go undetected, is not only the motivating force but it is also in line with the general philosophy of the judicial system. How an examiner weighs these two situations, one against the other, provides a backdrop for much of Sullivan's narrative.

The NRC drew two major conclusions from its work: 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 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.

One technical concern which Sullivan discusses that might be of interest to those who practice polygraphy is his focus on how the training and teachings of a person whose name is familiar to all, John E. Reid, dramatically changed for the better the examiner practices in the CIA program. “His ‘Reid test’ eventually replaced Keeler’s R/I test in the Agency,” and the “Reid School became the Harvard of polygraph training facilities. *Truth and Deception: The Polygraph (Lie-Detector) Technique*, the book Reid wrote in collaboration with Fred E. Inbau, is the polygraph examiner’s bible and the number-one reference source about polygraph” (p. 16). Although Sullivan himself was not trained in the Reid program he did attend some of their short courses. These experiences were beneficial. “I felt more confident interpreting charts, constructing tests, and interrogating subjects. Another benefit was that once I began applying what I had learned at Reid and saw that these methods worked, my faith in the polygraph process grew. IRD (The CIA’s Interrogation Research Division) was better because of the Reid training; IRD training was finally emerging from the Dark Ages” (p. 62). On the other hand, Sullivan also notes that this training may have had a down side. The increased confidence of the examiners led to greater certainty of testing outcomes; this, in turn, led to more aggressive post-test questioning of “deceptive” examinees which, given the nature of the workforce who were subjected to the testing, increased complaints about the polygraph testing process. Many of these, though apparently unfounded, nevertheless required some adaptive methods in the testing process. One can easily generalize from these CIA experiences to the external world. Such experiences feed the controversy about polygraphy. There is no doubt that the perceptions of this factor, whether factually founded or not, played a role, albeit not the consequential one, in the passage of anti-polygraph testing legislation in the United States (e.g., the Employee Polygraph Protection Act). Sullivan’s unstated point here is that the examiner community needs continually to be on-guard regarding how it deals with the use of polygraphy in screening environments.

A final point of interest in this volume is something that examiners know but outsiders may not recognize. Polygraph testing outcomes, considered as decisions of “truthfulness” or “deception,” in the screening context are subject to the “so what” effect. It is not the outcome, per se, that is of value; it’s the information that is developed that serves the consumer’s needs. A “lie detector” that merely serves objectively to determine if someone has “told the truth,” even if flawless, would not provide what Sullivan makes clear. The screening environment is structured so that an accurate personal history of the examinee can be constructed. 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, more useful and indeed is the critical element in the process. It is certainly the unstated driver of screening applications of polygraph testing. Polygraph examiners who are able to develop information important to advancing the internal 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.

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## References

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

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