Dear Mr. Aftergood,

Having had considerable experience with the polygraph (well beyond that which you referred to), I read your very sensible essay in Science with great interest. I offer you a few comments on the topic for whatever interest or use they may have.

Like most junk science that just won't die (graphology, astrology and homeopathy come to mind), because of the usefulness or profit their practitioners enjoy, the polygraph stays with us.

Its most obvious use is as a coercive aid to interrogators, lying somewhere on the scale between the rubber truncheon and the diploma on the wall behind the interrogator's desk. It depends upon the overall context of the setting — you'll be fired, you won't get the job, you'll be prosecuted, you'll go to prison — and the credulous fear the demonic inquisitors.

This is why the Redmond report ventures into the simultaneously ludicrous and sinister reality that citizens' belief in what is untrue must be fostered and strengthened. Rarely admitted, this proposition is of general application for our national security apparatus.

You didn't mention one of the intriguing elements of the interrogations of Dr. Lee, which is in fact quite common — the false representation to the suspect of the polygraph results. Because interrogations are intended to coerce confessions of one sort or another, interrogators feel
Themselves entirely justified in using their coercive means at precisely as possible to extract these. Consistency regarding the particular technique is not important; inducing anxiety and fear is the point.

Polygraphers are fond of the technique used by psychics called cold reading, as a slightly less traumatic practice than actually lying to the subject about the results. In this sort of cold reading, the interrogator will suggest to the subject that there may be a potential problem, an ambiguous result, to one of the questions and inquire whether the subject knows of anything that might help clean it up, etc., etc.

Your account of the Redmond report—I haven't seen it—shows how another honey slider is thrown past the public. The polygraph is asserted to have been a useful tool in counterintelligence investigations. This is a nice example of retreating into secret knowledge: we know it works, but it's too secret to explain. To my own knowledge and experience over a thirty year career this statement is a false one. The use of the polygraph (which is unquestionably say, its misuse) has done little more than create confusion, confusion, and mistakes.

I'd love to lay out this case for you, but certainly I cannot—it's a secret, too.
Most people in the intelligence and
CI business are well aware of the
theoretical and practical failings of the
polygraph, but are equally alert to its
value in institutional, bureaucratic
terms and treasure its use accordingly.
This same logic applies to its use in
screening potential and current employees,
whether of the CIA, NSA, DOE or even of private
organizations.

Deciding whether to trust or credit a
person is always an uncertain task, and
in a variety of situations a bad, lazy
or just unlucky decision about a person
can result not only to serious problems
for the organization and its purposes, but
to career-harming blame for the unfortunate
decision-maker. Here, the polygraph is
a scientific godsend: the bureaucrat
accounts for a bad decision, or sometimes
for a missed opportunity (the latter is much
less often questioned in a bureaucracy) can
point to what is considered an unassailable
objective, though occasionally ad convincingly
fallible, polygraph judgment. All that was
at fault was the poor practical application
of a "scientific" technique, in effect an
engineering failure, like those frozen
O-rings, or the sandstorms between the Gulf
and Desert One in 1980.
I've seen these bureaucracy-driven flights from accountability operating for years, much to the cost of our intelligence and counterintelligence effectiveness. The US is, as far as I know, the only nation which places such extensive reliance on the polygraph. (The FBI, to its credit in a self-serving sort of way, also resists the routine use of the polygraph on its own people.) It has gotten us into a lot of trouble.

On the other hand, there have been episodes in which high-level pressures to use or acquire certain persons entirely override prior belief in the polygraph. One instance which made the press is that of the Pennsauken connection in the Iran-Contra affair.

I wish you well in this particularly important theater of the struggle against pseudoscience: the national security state has many unfair and cruel weapons in its arsenal, but that of pseudoscience is one which can be fought and perhaps defeated by honest and forthright efforts like yours.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

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PS: I should say that all my outgoing mail goes through the CIA—unknowingly—for review, censorship, and whatever else it chooses to do with it.