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POLYGRAPH: SCIENCE OR SORCERY?

Its usefulness is mostly as a prop

By *Julius (Jay) Wachtel*. Exposing a stunning breach of national security, [Nada Prouty](#), 37, a former FBI and CIA agent, pled guilty this month in D.C. Federal court to nationalization fraud, illegal computer access and conspiracy. Admitted in 1989 on a student visa, the Lebanese immigrant staged a sham marriage and gained permanent residency. In 1997, now-citizen Prouty was hired by the FBI and allegedly started passing top-secret information about Hezbollah to accomplices. A few years later the super-achiever landed in the CIA, an even better place from where to compromise American secrets.

So what's the rub? Prouty sailed through FBI and CIA pre-employment polygraph exams, supposedly the toughest in the universe. In all likelihood she would still be a mole except that her name came up during an investigation of her brother-in-law, Talal Chahine, who allegedly channeled millions of dollars to Lebanese militants.

The history of lie detection is replete with disasters. None seems worse than the case of [Aldrich Ames](#), a CIA agent who got rich by exposing his colleagues to the USSR (Ames' treachery led to the execution of several Soviet citizens who were spying for the U.S.) While pocketing bundles of cash Ames passed two routine CIA polygraphs, and when caught bragged that he had never employed countermeasures.

Ames wasn't lying. In an exhaustive 2001 report, the [National Academy of Sciences](#) concluded that the polygraph is worthless for screening job applicants and employees. It held out a bit more hope when polygraphs are used for investigating specific, known events (i.e., crimes), but cautioned that research that supports this more limited application lacks scientific validity and probably overstates the technique's accuracy.

That's a warning to take to heart. Between 1982 and 1998 forty-two women, mostly prostitutes, were murdered in King County, Washington. Most of their bodies were found in or near the Green River. Suspicion soon fell on [Gary Ridgway](#), a truck painter whom prostitutes accused of rough treatment. Ridgway took and passed a police polygraph. In 2001, improved DNA techniques proved that he was indeed the killer. Ridgway was arrested and plea-bargained to life without parole.

Polygraphs are frequently used to narrow the field of suspects. They are routinely administered to the parents and caregivers of missing and abducted children. Results

are not reassuring. In the 1997 disappearance of [Sabrina Aisenberg](#), local police, who suspected the parents, called polygraph results “inconclusive,” while an ex-FBI polygrapher hired by the defense insisted that it cleared them. A like controversy dogged the investigation of the 1996 murder of [JonBenet Ramsey](#), where police rejected the findings of a renowned polygrapher who insisted that the victim’s mother and father were being truthful. (The Ramseys refused to be tested by the FBI because its profilers told police that the murder was probably an inside job.)

Leery of being led down the wrong path, many savvy investigators shun the polygraph as a “truth machine” but use it as a prop when physical evidence or witnesses are lacking. Refusing to take a polygraph can land one on the short list of suspects. Even better, a few guilty persons get so intimidated by the black box that they shrivel up and confess even before the test begins. It’s a form of legalized coercion that leaves no bruises and may be impossible to challenge in court.

It’s no surprise that shortcuts to finding the truth are hugely popular. As long as we’re willing to dig in our pockets there will always be someone happy to supply all the elixirs we want. We will soon be reporting on other questionable techniques, including cognitive interviews, profiling, investigative hypnosis and the recovery of repressed memories. Stay tuned!