

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

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Your letter to the President concerning polygraph usage by the Government has been forwarded to this Office for response.

You state in your letter your concern with the Administration's support for a bill which would require polygraph examinations for every individual applying for a Federal Government position. You further note your concern with the accuracy and reliability of polygraph testing in connection with employment screening.

As to your first concern relating to recently introduced legislation requiring polygraph testing of federal applicants, we are unaware of any bill which would require mandatory polygraph testing for such applicants. To our knowledge, the only bill addressing federal government usage of the polygraph is H.R. 5866, the Federal Polygraph Limitation and Anti-Censorship Act of 1984, which has the opposite effect of limiting the use by federal agencies of polygraph examinations. With the exception of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Agency (NSA), this bill would prohibit other federal agencies from requiring federal employees to take polygraph examinations except on a voluntary basis as part of a specific investigation into alleged criminal conduct. The Administration has opposed this bill since it believes that the overwhelming evidence reflected in scientific studies, government surveys and the real-life experience of this and other agencies demonstrates the extraordinary utility of polygraph testing as a screening and investigative tool.

In this respect, the CIA, NSA and certain other agencies with missions similar to that of CIA and NSA use polygraph examinations as part of the employment screening process. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has Government-wide responsibility for this civilian personnel security and suitability program. This authority has been judicially exercised by OPM, as only a limited number of agencies have been granted approval by OPM to use polygraph examinations for such personnel screening purposes. More importantly, there has not been a single complaint filed with or brought to the

attention of OPM during the last nineteen years of polygraph misuse or abuse of the type noted in your letter or which is addressed in the above bill. As OPM has recently stated in commenting on the above bill, in the absence of such abuse, "it would be imprudent to seriously restrict OPM's authority over the most effective tool agencies have to prevent compromise of classified information."

With respect to CIA's own polygraph program, we use the polygraph for a number of different purposes, including the screening of potential applicants for employment. The use of polygraphs for personnel screening purposes is limited to developing information bearing on the security suitability of individuals having access to national security information. No questions are asked that do not bear on such security related information. Polygraph interviews are, in fact, closely monitored and supervised to ensure that the individual is treated fairly and that the focus of the interview is limited to legitimate areas of security interest. All CIA polygraph examiners have a college education and many examiners have post-graduate degrees. CIA polygraphers receive extensive training in polygraphic techniques, psychology and unique CIA methodology. This training also includes briefings by the CIA Office of General Counsel on the constitutional, legal and ethical issues presented by polygraphy. In this respect, CIA conducts polygraph interviews only with the consent of the subject of the interview. No United States person is given a polygraph interview without first reading and signing a written consent form which reminds the subject of his constitutional right against self-incrimination and provides other appropriate warnings.

Over the last 35 years, we have found that with carefully chosen examiners and a thoughtfully structured and controlled program, the polygraph is the most effective tool in protecting the Agency from unsuitable individuals who would clearly pose an unacceptable security risk. Critics of the polygraph often presume that it is a simple mechanical procedure rather than a highly technical professional activity. Much like a physician diagnoses illness through reliance on physical symptoms and professional training, professional polygraphers combine an evaluation of polygraph reactions and professional training. The most important point to make about individuals whose employment is disapproved on the basis of security information developed in the polygraph examination is that the vast majority of these cases are based on information provided voluntarily by the individual during the course of the polygraph. It is almost invariably (over 97 percent of all Agency cases) information from the lips of the subject that leads to security disapprovals and not the tracings on the polygraph itself.

I hope the above will reassure you that the Federal Government utilizes polygraphs in a responsible and carefully controlled manner which is designed to prevent innocent individuals from being unfairly denied employment opportunities.

Sincerely,

Clair E. George  
Director, Office of Legislative Liaison