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Mr. Hoover on Polygraph Use—and Another Letter on Its Effectiveness

My attention has been called to an article entitled "FBI Uses Lie Tests in Probe of Leaks at State" by Murrey Marder in the September 3, 1971, issue of The Washington Post and a column, "Extracting the Truth: Tea Leaves or Polygraph Tests?" by Alan Barth on September 7, 1971. Both of these items categorically assert that the FBI used polygraphs during an investigation of alleged "leaks" of confidential information at the Department of State.

These statements by Messrs. Marder and Barth that the FBI used polygraphs in this investigation are totally and completely untrue.

For the information of your readers, the Department of Justice on July 30, 1971, instructed the FBI to conduct a complete investigation, which entailed some interviews at the Department of State, with regard to alleged unauthorized disclosure of classified information as a potential violation of the espionage laws. We immediately instituted an investigation in compliance with the Department of Justice's instructions. However, at no time did the FBI use polygraphs, as alleged, in its investigation.

Surely, it is in the interest of responsible journalism that the basic facts be accurately and honestly reported. This inept handling of information betrays the sincere desire of your readers for a factual knowledge of the news of the day.

J. EDGAR HOOVER,
Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation,
Washington.

The American Polygraph Association takes strong exception to both the tone and content of the article by Alan Barth on the editorial page of The Post on September 7.

We are disappointed that a paper of the stature of The Post saw fit to dignify with publication the compendium of half truths, untruths, and rather sophomoric sarcasm represented by Mr. Barth's article. We are perhaps naive, knowing that The Post has never been a believer in the polygraph but we assert our profound conviction that you should require factual accuracy, even from writers on your opinion pages.

Mr. Barth closes with the comment that a polygraph test is so insulting, so demeaning, and so humiliating, that anyone who would either administer or submit to such an examination is unfit to represent the United States. Despite his assertion that this can be taken for granted, the APA believes that such strong statements should require some modicum of proof. Exactly why a person is humiliated, demeaned, and insulted by being given an opportunity to establish his innocence of serious charges is beyond our comprehension.

Mr. Barth apparently delights in esoteric knowledge of various forms of ordeal but conveniently ignores the fact that it was just because of such methods of soothsaying that the polygraph was developed. We of the APA would rather stake judgment of our veracity upon the objective analysis of a set of polygraph charts than upon the swirl of tea leaves, even when stirred by a person of

such perception and sensitivity as Mr. Barth.

We find ourselves troubled by vicious attacks such as those by Mr. Barth, because nowhere does he set forth a system to replace the one which he is attacking. He apparently is establishing a new constitutional privilege: The right to lie with impunity. Mr. Barth and others of his ilk would bar effective investigation, would bar psychological testing, would bar polygraph examinations and would, in general, bar any means thus far developed for getting at truth in matters of controversy.

It is a fact, for example, that even detractors of polygraph testing concede minimal accuracy of the technique to be in the 70 per cent range. Other scientists of impeccable credentials, which far exceed those of the APA and certainly Mr. Barth, have established accuracy of the technique in the 90 per cent range. With all due modesty the APA believes that this may even exceed the accuracy of journalistic reporting.

The recent statement by the Secretary of State that he believes the polygraph can be effective in clearing the innocent but not in identifying the guilty, though somewhat paradoxical, is acceptable to the APA. We have always believed that the greatest service our members can perform is that of assisting persons who are falsely accused in establishing their innocence.

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