

China spy scare: a new stage in the political warfare in Washington

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Congressional Republicans have seized on reports of Chinese espionage against US nuclear weapons facilities to launch a new round of political attacks on the Clinton administration. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott announced that the Senate Intelligence Committee would begin holding hearings next week on the charges, which surfaced in a March 6 front-page report in the *New York Times*.

Energy Secretary Bill Richardson declared that the information on miniaturization of atomic warheads, allegedly leaked from the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico in 1985, represented a serious breach of national security. But he said the long-term implications of the espionage were still being studied, and he pointed out that the leak took place during the Reagan administration, although it was only discovered in 1995.

The *Times* account was clearly aimed at providing the basis for a major spy scare and inflicting political damage on the White House. The *Times* accused the Clinton administration of impeding the investigation into suspected Chinese espionage at Los Alamos, suggesting it did so out of concern that the probe would cut across its China policy and fuel Republican allegations of illicit contributions from Chinese government sources to the 1996 Democratic election campaign.

Particularly ominous was a passage in the *Times* article quoting a former CIA counterintelligence chief, who declared, "This is going to be just as bad as the Rosenbergs." The implication is that the Chinese-American scientist, Wen Ho Lee, who is the target of the press and FBI campaign, could face the same fate as Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were sent to the electric chair in 1953.

It is certainly possible that there was Chinese intelligence penetration of the US nuclear weapons program. All the major capitalist states conduct intelligence operations against one another, whether they are nominally allies or not, and facilities such as Los Alamos are prime targets.

However, the alleged Chinese spying must be considered within the context of the crisis-ridden state of American politics--all the more so given the sensationalistic way in which the story has been broached in the press, and the obvious coordination between the media and anti-Clinton sources in the FBI and Republican Congress.

The allegations have the earmarks of a further provocation by right-wing elements against the Clinton administration, opening up a new line of attack after the failure of impeachment. At the same time, they reflect the intensifying conflict within US ruling circles over strategic and economic policy towards China. The two issues overlap, since congressional Republicans have made the administration's China policy one of their principal targets.

Last spring both House and Senate Republicans raised an uproar

over the US policy of permitting American satellite companies to have their satellites put into orbit on Chinese rockets, claiming that this practice had allowed the Chinese military to improve the accuracy of missiles which would target US cities. There were dark suggestions that Clinton was guilty of virtual treason, for allegedly trading missile launching permits for campaign contributions, but ultimately the Republicans dropped the issue in favor of the Starr sex witchhunt.

Now the same language reappears in the columns of the *Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, the two newspapers which have done the most to promote the right-wing destabilization campaign against the White House. *Times* columnist William Safire--who as a Nixon speechwriter had nothing but praise for closer US-China ties--proclaimed the alleged Chinese nuclear spying an "American Defeat." Safire implied a direct connection between Chinese campaign contributions to the Democratic campaign in 1996 and the Clinton White House's alleged decision to go slow in investigating Chinese nuclear espionage.

Wall Street Journal columnist George Melloan wrote that it was "too horrible a thought to imagine a president committing what amounts to treason," but ended up urging a renewed drive to impeach Clinton: "Countering national security threats is an American president's most important job. A failure here dwarfs in importance even the lying about Monica, and perhaps Congress should give it at least equally serious attention."

The timing of the *Times* article, which touched off the Washington furor, was itself extraordinary. It came the day after the FBI's first interrogation of Wen Ho Lee, and was clearly coordinated with the federal investigators, who were quoted extensively in the article. The article gave a lengthy account of the alleged espionage conspiracy before any arrests had been made, before anyone had been indicted, and while Lee himself was still working at Los Alamos--he was only fired Monday after the Department of Energy demanded that the University of California, his actual employer, dismiss him.

One of the two writers bylined on the March 6 article was Jeff Gerth, the reporter who penned the original *Times* report on Whitewater in March 1992. Gerth played a major role in distorting the facts and promoting allegations of cover-up and conspiracy over what was nothing more than a failed real estate investment by the Clintons and their then-friends, James and Susan McDougal.

The account of alleged espionage is a collection of unrelated incidents, jumbled together to fan suspicion. These include such innocuous events as the well-publicized 1996 official visit of China's Defense Minister, Gen. Chi Haotian, to Sandia National Laboratory, another US nuclear weapons facility. Other than the fact that the general, like the scientist, is of Chinese ancestry and that Sandia, like

Los Alamos, is in New Mexico, no other connection between these events is even asserted, let alone demonstrated.

The *Times* article admits that FBI investigators--the principal source of the report--did not even have enough evidence to obtain a court-ordered wiretap on Wen Ho Lee, let alone bring criminal charges against him. Although Lee supposedly transferred critical military information to China in 1985, he continued to work at Los Alamos for another fourteen years. Even now government spokesmen admit they lack sufficient evidence to charge Wen Ho Lee with any criminal activity.

Other aspects of the alleged Chinese spy scandal raise questions. Lee is described as a computer scientist--i.e., not a physicist or engineer--and therefore less likely to be able to contribute information on the miniaturization of atomic warheads, which is essentially a question of engineering technique. Much of what he allegedly passed on to Chinese associates, according to a report on NBC News, is routinely discussed at international symposia with scientists from many countries. Other reports say that much of this supposedly sensitive information can be downloaded from the Internet.

The spy allegations come in the midst of growing conflict between the US and China. Relations between Washington and Beijing have undergone a profound transformation in recent years. For two decades after the Nixon-Kissinger rapprochement with China, American imperialism maintained a strategic alliance with the Beijing Stalinist regime, directed against the Soviet Union and, more broadly, against any revolutionary developments in the former colonial countries.

The Pentagon had close relations with its Chinese counterparts, and the CIA worked with China in arming and training counterrevolutionary movements in Angola and elsewhere in Africa. The alleged 1985 transfer of weapons technology to China, if it occurred, would have been assistance to an American ally which was targeting its nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union.

With the collapse of Stalinist political rule in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and then the breakup of the USSR in 1991, American-Chinese relations began to change, as Washington came to view China increasingly as a major, if not the most important, potential challenger to US hegemony, both in Asia and globally.

Added to this are the growing economic conflicts with China, a country with the second largest export surplus in its bilateral trade with the United States, over \$58 billion in 1998. US exporters complain bitterly that much of the Chinese market is closed to them. At the same time, the vast size of the Chinese market means that the limited opening to US penetration has given American big business a huge stake in US-Chinese relations.

The Clinton administration has been torn by conflicts, both internally, within the executive branch, and between the White House and Congress, over how to handle economic and political-military disputes with China. Clinton campaigned against Bush in 1992 with demagogic attacks on Bush's support to the Beijing rulers who staged the Tiananmen Square massacre, but once in office, he dropped any linkage between US-China trade and Chinese human rights abuses.

The issue of US satellite launches on Chinese rockets led to an open split within the administration between the Commerce Department and White House, on one side, seeking to promote US business interests in China, and the Pentagon and State Department, on the other, viewing China primarily as a military and strategic threat.

The economic crisis which erupted in Asia in the summer of 1997 has exacerbated tensions between Washington and Beijing. The Chinese government has supported the US-imposed bailouts of

Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea, and propped up the Hong Kong dollar, the only currency in the region which has not plunged against the US dollar.

At the same time China has sought to insulate itself from the spreading currency and financial collapse, maintaining the Chinese yuan as an inconvertible currency and curtailing the liberalization of financial markets. Most important, Beijing has slowed the dismantling of state-owned industries, for fear that displaced workers will not be absorbed into the private sector, which is no longer growing so rapidly, and that social unrest will become uncontrollable.

A series of incidents has taken place in the last month, sharpening the tensions between the US and China:

February 22 -- The Clinton administration barred the latest satellite deal, in which Hughes Space & Communications was to sell a \$450 million satellite to a Singapore-based company, to be launched on a Chinese rocket, to supply mobile telephone services for eastern Asia.

February 23 -- US Deputy Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers visited Beijing for talks on the Asian financial crisis, after Chinese authorities allowed several major provincial financial institutions to collapse and default on their debts to overseas creditors.

February 26 -- The US State Department issued its annual report on human rights, focusing on the Chinese government's jailing of political dissidents.

February 26 -- The US Senate passed a resolution, 99-0, calling on the Clinton administration to introduce a resolution condemning China's human rights record at an upcoming Geneva conference.

March 1 -- US Secretary of State Madeline Albright, during a visit to Beijing, clashed with her Chinese counterpart Jiang Jianxuan over issues ranging from the satellite permit to a proposed US anti-missile defense system for Japan and Taiwan.

March 3-4 -- US Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky met with Chinese trade officials in Beijing, to discuss a Chinese bid to enter the World Trade Organization. She told them they would have to make extensive trade concessions to win approval from the administration and the US Congress.

The proposed missile defense system for Taiwan is a particularly flagrant US provocation. Both Beijing and Washington acknowledge Taiwan as part of China. From the standpoint of international law, US missiles on Taiwan would have the same legal standing as Chinese missiles stationed in Hawaii or Puerto Rico.

The American press treats China's outrage at missiles on Taiwan as irrational, or as proof of Chinese plans to launch a nuclear strike on the island. But in 1962 the Kennedy administration went to the brink of nuclear war to force removal of the missiles from Cuba, an island 90 miles away from US soil--i.e., as close as Taiwan is to China.

The spy scare is certain to exacerbate tensions between the United States and China, at the same time as it provides raw material for the internecine struggle within the ruling circles in Washington.



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