

China spy scare: The return of the 'yellow peril'

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The spy scare in official Washington, touched off by the release of a congressional report on alleged espionage by China against US nuclear weapons facilities, is both reactionary and dangerous. There is an ominous resonance with the McCarthyite witch-hunt of the 1950s in the sweeping and completely unsubstantiated claims that “our vital national secrets” have been stolen, and the racist scapegoating of Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans as suspects.

The special congressional committee headed by Republican Christopher Cox, an extreme right-winger from Orange County, California, declares in its report that China has been so successful in its nuclear espionage that it is now “on a par” with the United States in nuclear weapons technology. This is a fraud. China has only a rudimentary nuclear capability, developed as a deterrent to the massive US and Soviet arsenals. The country has 20 ICBMs capable of reaching the United States, and even the committee admits in its report that Beijing hopes at best to add another 100 over the next 15 years. This compares to 6,000 American missiles, each of them more accurate and better armed than anything in China's possession.

As for the allegations of espionage, it is well known that the governments of all the major powers are engaged in spying on one another. The investigation into alleged leaks from US weapons laboratories began because American spies in Beijing obtained secret Chinese documents relating to China's nuclear weapons program.

The US government is by far the biggest practitioner of espionage on a world scale, with an acknowledged intelligence budget of \$29 billion—more than China spends on its entire military—and tens of billions more in secret “black” accounts for spying by the Pentagon.

The current campaign over alleged Chinese spying

does not derive from any proven theft of sensitive materials. While banner headlines and saturation television coverage are given to the sensational charges made by the Cox committee, no US intelligence agency has yet concluded that anything has been stolen from Los Alamos or other government weapons labs.

The initial target of the spy witch-hunt, computer scientist Wen Ho Lee, a Taiwanese-American who has worked at Los Alamos for two decades, has not been charged with any crime and has not been arrested. He was fired from his job after the *New York Times* touched off the media frenzy with a report on alleged spying two months ago, but he still lives at his home in Los Alamos and his wife continues to work for the lab.

Press accounts of the alleged spying claim that Lee supplied details of a miniaturized nuclear warhead, the W-88, to China in the 1980s. But according to a commentary published in the *Los Angeles Times*, “details about the W-88, similar to the information in the Chinese document, are contained in half a dozen classified manuals distributed widely within the US government. The manuals have circulated widely inside the DOE, the Pentagon and the Armed services, raising at least the possibility that the leak may have occurred somewhere other than Los Alamos.”

The 1,000 pages of the official report do not contain evidence either of actual spying or of damage to US security interests. As the Washington correspondent of the *Wall Street Journal*—hardly a pro-Chinese source—observed, “for all its heft and gravity, the report actually offers more assertions of Chinese espionage than actual explanation or proof.”

The news article in the *Journal* that accompanied this March 26 column amounts to a point for point rebuttal of the principal allegations in the China spy scare. This article, written by Glenn R. Simpson, is worth quoting

at some length, since it demonstrates the gulf between what is actually known about the Los Alamos case and the sensationalized presentation in the congressional report and in most of the media coverage.

While Wen Ho Lee has been publicly branded a nuclear spy, Simpson writes, “officials here [Los Alamos] and in Washington say they have no evidence he committed espionage.” The alleged downloading of nuclear weapons data to an unsecure personal hard drive is not a crime, nor is it particularly unusual among scientists in Los Alamos, according to the facility's security director Stanley Busboom.

Simpson notes—a fact widely ignored by the media—that “The FBI doesn't deny Mr. Lee and his wife worked for the agency on some trips to China, as Mr. Lee's lawyer has claimed.”

The *Journal* reporter adds: “officials here at Los Alamos aren't sure anything secret was lost at all, whoever was involved. The most vocal doubter is Howard T. Hawkins, a former Air Force colonel who is the No. 2 official in the Los Alamos nonproliferation and international security office. He has made a career of studying the Chinese nuclear arsenal and says he sees no sign of substantial enhancements based on US data. Col. Hawkins is a staunchly conservative Republican with several presidential citations for his contributions to the national defense.”

Another top security official at the Los Alamos lab explained that the investigation into Chinese spying required a redefinition of what espionage is: “Ken Schliffer, a former FBI counterintelligence expert who arrived here last year to head the lab's counterintelligence office, agrees the allegations of Chinese spying don't make much sense in a conventional analysis. But he has a different view of what is going on and says it calls for a new way of thinking about espionage.”

This “new way of thinking” amounts to defining essentially all scientist-to-scientist contact as espionage when one of the scientists is Chinese. Thus the Cox committee report includes as evidence of Chinese spying the attendance of Chinese physicists at scientific symposiums and colloquiums, tourist visits to Los Alamos and other laboratories by Chinese dignitaries—even though escorted by US officials and barred from high-security areas—and invitations to Asian-American and other US scientists to visit China.

The Cox report descends to outright racism when it characterizes all of the 80,000 Chinese students enrolled at American universities as probable spies, along with all 3,000 subsidiaries of Chinese state-owned companies doing business in the United States, and any Chinese citizen—student, academic, civil servant—traveling to the United States on official business.

What is behind the China spy scare? In terms of domestic politics, it is a continuation of the campaign by the extreme right elements in the Republican Party against the Clinton administration, in the wake of the failure of impeachment. For the neo-fascist and John Birch Society types who control the Republican Party in the Orange County suburbs of Los Angeles—Cox's district—the combination of anticommunism and anti-Asian racism is made to order.

Cox has been promoted as a potential statewide Republican candidate in California, and his handling of the bipartisan committee has drawn heavy media praise. There are eerie similarities to the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee, which brought another obscure southern California congressman, Richard Nixon, to national prominence 50 years ago. While Cox seeks to reprise the role of Nixon, the unfortunate Wen Ho Lee could serve as his Alger Hiss—or even his Julius Rosenberg.

The more fundamental and long-term significance of this campaign is its role in preparing American public opinion for a war against the Peoples Republic of China. The readiness with which official Washington has embraced this provocation suggests that there is a substantial constituency within the American state that has concluded a US war with China is inevitable in the next 10 to 20 years, if not sooner.



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