

China spying charges denounced as racist frame-up

Martin McLaughlin
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In an interview with the *Washington Post* published Tuesday, the former chief of counterintelligence at the Los Alamos National Laboratory denounced the claims of espionage leveled against a former scientist there as a case “built on thin air” that targeted Wen Ho Lee because he was of Asian ancestry.

In his first public comments about the case, Robert S. Vrooman said there was “not one shred of evidence” against the Taiwanese-American scientist, who was fired from Los Alamos for allegedly breaching security regulations. No criminal charges have been brought against Wen Ho Lee, although Energy Department officials have said he may be prosecuted for transferring sensitive data from a secure computer to the desktop PC in his laboratory office, an action which is commonplace among scientists at the lab.

Vrooman, a long-time CIA official who later moved to Los Alamos, retired in March 1998 but still works as a consultant for the nuclear facility. Last week Energy Secretary Bill Richardson recommended disciplinary action against Vroom, another security official, Terry Craig, and Sig Hecker, former director of the lab. Vrooman said he had been targeted for disciplinary action because of his criticism of the investigation.

The handling of the Lee case was openly racist, according to Vrooman. Without any evidence that Lee had provided classified information to Chinese officials, the Energy Department's investigation focused on Lee's trips to China during the 1980s, when he made two visits as part of normal scientific exchanges.

Dozens of US nuclear physicists made similar visits during that period, Vrooman said, but only Lee was targeted as a suspect. “It can be said at this time that Mr. Lee's ethnicity was a major factor,” he told the *Post*. “Caucasians at Los Alamos who went to the same institute and visited the same people—I counted 13 of them—were left out of the investigation.”

Both Craig and Vrooman said there is no evidence to suggest that Los Alamos was the source of nuclear secrets allegedly stolen by China. Vrooman said that details of the W-88, the most advanced miniaturized nuclear warhead in the US arsenal, were distributed to at least 548 e-mail addresses within the Pentagon, the National Guard and various defense contractors. This information could have been passed on to China from any of these locations.

It was not even clear that any secret nuclear weapons information was actually transferred to the Chinese government illegally, Vrooman added. He had disagreed with Notra Trulock, the head of counterintelligence for the Energy Department, when he suggested in 1995 that China had stolen the design of the W-88.

According to press reports last March, Trulock's conclusion was based on the work of CIA spies in Beijing who obtained a Chinese document showing the explosive yield and external dimensions of the US warhead. Vrooman asked, “If I give you the exterior dimensions of my home, could you recreate the floor plan?”

“I have been an outspoken critic of the flawed investigation that identified Mr. Lee as the prime suspect in this case,” Vrooman told the *Post*. “I do not agree with Mr. Trulock or with the secretary of energy that the information obtained by the Chinese came from the Department of Energy. I consider disciplinary action against me to be retaliation for opposing them on this issue.”

Vrooman said that Energy Department officials involved in the spy probe had unethical relations with the media, “as evidenced by the trial and conviction by rumor” of Dr. Lee. He said that he had spoken out because of his concern for the future of Los Alamos. “I don't want to see it destroyed based on false allegations,” he said.

Reports issued by the CIA, the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and the Senate Governmental Affairs

Committee reached conclusions similar to those voiced by Vrooman, casting doubt either on the claim of Chinese spying at Los Alamos in particular, or the claim that there was any theft of nuclear secrets at all. But these reports have been buried in the media, while massive publicity was given to the report of a special House committee which suggested that virtually all contacts between Chinese citizens and American scientists constitute espionage.

Particular attention should be given to the role of the *New York Times*, which served as a conduit both for the House Committee chairman, right-wing Republican Christopher Cox of California, and for Notra Trulock of Energy Department counterintelligence. It was the *Times* that first identified Wen Ho Lee as an espionage suspect, triggering a media campaign which led the Energy Department to fire the Taiwanese-American scientist on a relatively trivial charge of failing to file required reports.

The *Times* touched off the first round of “Chinese spying” hysteria last year, with reports that were seized on by congressional Republicans as proof that the Clinton White House had traded atomic secrets for campaign contributions. Nothing eventually came of these allegations, except a Pulitzer Prize for the *Times* writers, headed by Jeff Gerth. The same team returned to the Chinese spying theme a year later with the report that cost Wen Ho Lee his job.

Two issues are intermingled in the “China spying” affair. The issue was initially raised as part of the right-wing campaign of political destabilization against the Clinton White House, which culminated in the failed impeachment. The spy scare continues to be used as a weapon by the administration's enemies, but also by those forces, within and outside the administration, who seek to whip up anti-Chinese sentiment and prepare American public opinion for new US military adventures in Asia.



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