

U.S. scientists in the 1990s observed that China had made rapid advances in nuclear warhead miniaturization and that the new design closely resembled a U.S. design. The discovery occurred at a time when the United States sought to expand relations with China, and Chinese espionage against U.S. technology targets—especially nuclear weapons data at national laboratories—was receiving widespread publicity in the media. Department of Energy investigators opened an inquiry that focused on individuals who held special top secret clearances for work on nuclear data in the national labs, who dealt with visiting delegations from China, and who had traveled to China between 1984 and 1988. Investigators quickly narrowed their focus to Wen Ho Lee, a Taiwanese-American nuclear weapons specialist at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. These and several other assumptions led investigators to seek Lee's indictment on fifty-nine counts of illegally removing highly classified information from Los Alamos. He ultimately pled guilty to only one count of mishandling a controlled document, was sentenced to time served, and was released in September 2000.

Assumption

China is developing good access to U.S. scientists.

China has an aggressive program to collect information and intelligence from U.S. scientists.

A Taiwanese American would spy for China.

Lee passed secret information.

Wen Ho Lee is the spy.

China could have made rapid advances only with the help of stolen secrets; the Chinese could not have pieced together information from open sources or through sanctioned scientific contacts.

The stolen data was unique to Los Alamos; individuals at other locations were unlikely to have provided the information.

Assessment

Solid. In the post-Cold War environment, the United States was emphasizing the value of developing strategic partnerships with former adversaries.

Solid. The Chinese have developed an extensive network of scientific colleagues and informants to gather data both openly and covertly.

Caveated. Taiwan and China are rivals, and which country to spy for would be influenced by where one's close relatives resided and by past loyalties.

Caveated. The information was not classified information. It was protected as restricted data.

Unsupported. Lee did not have access to the actual information allegedly passed. In fact, the information included revisions made to the design after he lost access to it.

Unsupported. Almost all of the information was in the public domain.

Unsupported. The information could also have been obtained from other labs. It also could have come from 36 other Chinese employees working at the labs or from Russian scientists.