

## COMMENTARY

# Fear of Chinese ‘non-traditional collectors’ strikes again

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FEBRUARY 15, 2018 5:45 PM

<http://www.atimes.com/fear-chinese-non-traditional-collectors-strikes/>

**A**t a recent US Senate hearing, Christopher Wray, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was asked how China conducts spying in the United States. “With non-traditional collectors,” he said.

Lest anyone think Wray had discovered something new and novel, he hadn’t.

His answer draws from a history of institutional racial bias against Chinese-Americans in the FBI since the inception of the agency founded by J Edgar Hoover.

During the hysteria in the late 1990s when Dr. Wen Ho Lee, a scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, was accused of spying for China, so-called FBI sinologists – meaning they were supposed to be experts on China – explained to the American public that China did not spy by traditional means. “They spy by grains of sand.”

At the FBI, “grains of sand” was shorthand for all ethnic Chinese living in the US. The alleged conflicted loyalty between the motherland and adopted homeland leads each grain to collect and send every conceivable tidbit of useful information back to Beijing.

The speculation was that some super-duper computer in the basement of some ministry programmed with powerful artificial intelligence would crunch these random submissions, and out would come the designs for America’s latest top-secret weaponry.

Grains of sand now non-traditional collectors

This is patently ludicrous, of course. But this deeply rooted bias within the FBI gives cover for racial profiling of Chinese-Americans. Wray, with a smirk, wink and a nod, had simply

upgraded “grains of sand” as “non-traditional collectors.”

Wray’s testimony came out of the US Senate Intelligence Committee open hearing on global threats and national security. Six heads of agencies in charge of protecting national security were summoned to testify – the most familiar being the Central Intelligence Agency and the FBI.

Unlike their counterparts in the House of Representatives, this Senate committee and its hearing were class acts. Members of the committee were civil, courteous and respectful to one another and to the witnesses.

But despite a collegial air of non-partisanship, the class act was defiled by the xenophobia of Republican Senator Marco Rubio. When it was his turn to question the panel, he began with a diatribe that China represented the biggest threat to the US.

Marco Rubio’s xenophobia

Then he asked Wray how the FBI monitors the many Chinese students studying in the US. Wray’s verbatim response was as follows.

“The use of non-traditional collectors, especially in the academic setting – whether it’s professors, scientists, students – we see in almost every field office that the FBI has around the country.

“It’s not just in major cities. It’s in small ones as well, it’s across basically every discipline. And I think the level of naiveté on the part of the academic sector about this creates its own issues.”

In Wray’s view, the problem is pervasive, and he suggested that the solution

required a societal response, which I interpret to mean that every American has a duty to keep an eye out for the Chinese in the US.

A few years after the Wen Ho Lee fiasco – Dr. Lee was put in solitary confinement without charge for 10 months and then released with an apology from the embarrassed presiding judge – the British Broadcasting Corp asked the special agent in charge of the FBI’s Silicon Valley field office about Chinese espionage. He said something to the effect that he had to watch some hundred thousand Chinese professionals running around the valley, and they were all potential spies.

More recently, the FBI broke a door down early one morning and charged into the home of Professor Xi Xiaoxin and arrested him for spying for China. Much to the embarrassment of the FBI, the head of the physics department at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, who is a US citizen, had been “caught” exercising normal international academic exchanges of information belonging in the public domain.

The FBI simply did not have the knowhow to judge the technical content of the e-mails they were spying on. But if their suspect was Chinese – US citizen or not – then presumption of guilt without due process was justified.

So long as the FBI is soaked in racial bias against the Chinese, its director is a perfect foil for the likes of Rubio or any politician with an ax to grind against China. They can confidently make baseless accusations and won’t be challenged.

Fortunately, Rubio seemed to be the exception among his fellow members of the Senate Intelligence Committee. Other members in their questions expressed serious concerns on more concrete issues such as opioid overdoses, cybersecurity and Russian interference in the US election process.

National debt seen as top security threat

Dan Coats, director of national intelligence, made the opening remarks on behalf of the entire panel of witnesses. He declared that the actual and greatest threat to US security was

the national debt, now exceeding US\$20 trillion. In other words, if the dollar collapses, everything else will not be worth worrying about.

Democratic Senator Jack Reed asserted that technologically China is way ahead of the US in quantum computing and artificial intelligence. Senator Mark Warner, another Democrat, pointed out that the total Chinese investment in those fields was less than the cost of one advanced fighter plane,

Indeed, Senator Warner observed that while the US is investing heavily in the best weapons of the 20th century, America’s rivals are investing for the 21st century.

Perhaps Warner had in mind the 2019 fiscal budget President Donald Trump has proposed to Congress. The largest increment of the budget increase was allocated to defense, in part to render the world’s deadliest weapons even more powerful.

The New York Times has projected that Trump’s budget would add another \$7 trillion to the national debt over a 10-year period. Given the sentiment at the hearing, increasing the national debt and thus endangering national security seemed wrongly headed.

It’s time for cooler heads to re-evaluate the madness of Americans competing with themselves for more advanced weapons. If the US instead stops considering China as an adversary, it can spend less on defense and thus strengthen its financial balance sheet and step away from the debt precipice.

It’s important to be reminded that after World War II, many students from Hong Kong and Taiwan and later from mainland China came to the US and elected to remain. Their contribution to US technology and the nation’s economy far exceeded the expectation based on their numbers.

To convey the xenophobic bias that students from China are not to be trusted and welcomed is to hurt US national interest through stupidity of Americans’ own making.

In conclusion, it makes no sense to raise the military budget and increase the national debt so as to put national security at far greater risk

than perceived threats based on xenophobia. If we Americans find ways to get along with China, we will find common ground and actually be more secure.

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