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WASHINGTON TALK

Briefing

AS routinely as the Washington Yellow Pages list pest controllers and plumbers, polygraph services are included, too, as part of a steady capital industry that profits from Republican and Democratic years alike, according to one of the city's deans of lie detection, Walter F. Atwood.

As past president of the American Polygraph Association, Mr. Atwood detected great frustration, but no guarantees of success, in President Reagan's insistance the other day that he would stop unauthorized disclosures of information from his Administration even if it took polygraph tests to do so.

"There's nothing new in that," said Mr. Atwood, who has seen leakers practice by dribble and torrent with each new turn of the city's political tide. He was a veteran of 25 years of Government polygraphy, much of it in the military and intelligence areas, before he opened a private firm.

"It's almost impossible to find many of the leaks these days," he said. "Overheard comments go around this town so fast, and Xerox is one of the worse things that ever happened to secrets."

Mr. Atwood said he had, on occasion, been hired by the Government and had successfully detected a guilty leaker at the sub-Cabinet level. But this usually works well only in a simple situation of "five men in a room" who can be systematically questioned and eliminated as suspects, à la Hercule Poirot, before the leaked information can be fully sucked up like feathers into the city's endless information storm.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Mr. Atwood said that of the 50 reputable polygraph practitioners in Washington, he knew of none who had perfected an antidote service in how to beat a lie detector. The one method he recommended involves no chemicals or breathing exercises: Simply refuse to volunteer for a test, as the law permits.

But the lie detective laughed lightly at that thought. "With the President emphasizing it, you almost have to volunteer," he said.

— Francis X. Clines
Bernard Weinraub