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Grover Cleveland Backster Jr – The Passing of a True Pioneer

“The difference between ordinary and extraordinary is that little extra.”
– James “Jimmy” Johnson, American Football Coach, Player & Broadcaster

“In 100 years, who, if anybody, will know your name?” We have probably all been asked that question at some point in our lives, and the honest answer for me is, quite simply, nobody is going to know who I was. While that is true for the vast majority of us in this big world, I do not believe the same can be said for Grover Cleveland Backster, Jr, or, as most of us knew him, Cleve. Cleve is undeniably one of the greatest icons of our profession, and for that reason we take this opportunity to reflect upon, celebrate and honor the life of one of our most accomplished members.

Cleve gave more than that “little extra” that makes men extraordinary. There is nobody in the polygraph community whom he has not impacted in some way, and he will continue to do so for decades to come. Cleve gave more

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than 50 years of his life to polygraph, training hundreds of examiners who later passed those teachings down to multiple generations of examiners. He was not formally trained as a psychologist or psychophysiologicalist, but that did not prevent him from great success in the field of applied forensic psychophysiological detection of deception. Cleve studied polygraph intensively, and his observations and experimentation in real field cases resulted in his recognition of the need for standardization and utilization of principles and practices that increase the accuracy and value of polygraph, and he worked tirelessly to impart that attitude to others.

That is not to say there have been no disagreements along the way. It is no secret that there has been a healthy tension in the polygraph community as we move from a tradition-based to a more science-based approach to polygraph. That tension is typical of any evolving field that begins with a model in which practitioners simply imitate or abide by the declarations of recognized experts in their fields. At times, the interpretation of the tension is, however, unfortunate. Cleve once told me that those who disagreed with him should wait until he died before criticizing him. I chuckled when he said it, and in response he chuckled too. I think now I better understand what he meant though.

Several years ago I sat in on one of Cleve's presentations on what he called his Exploratory Test. It was then that I began to realize and appreciate more fully that Cleve was clearly a man ahead of his time. Today you can take estimated error rates and do fancy (or not so fancy) statistical analysis to demonstrate that the larger the number of issues (relevant questions) appearing in a single test, the greater the probability of an error (particularly, a false positive). Thus, the scientifically responsible method known as "successive hurdles" is now the standard. Cleve may or may not have been able to compute the probabilities (I never asked), but he had so much experience and knew polygraph so well that he did not have to make the calculations to realize that examiners generally should not make final decisions based on the results of an exploratory (multiple-issue) test. We might say he knew that "intuitively," but I think that it is a word that diminishes the fact that Cleve came to his conclusion (and testing process) based on an evaluation of real data. The same can be said of how he developed numerical scoring and even the concept of "psychological set".

As is the case with anybody who has done so much in any field, there is reason for skepticism regarding some of Cleve's teachings. For example, data seems to support that symptomatic (or outside issue) questions do not do

what they were intended to do. That is acceptable. What is important as we remember Cleve's life and his accomplishments is that he was willing to take risks – and that is what true leaders do. What would polygraph look like today if Cleve had taken no risks, choosing to remain silent rather than sharing his thoughts and findings? Nobody can be right about everything, but even those teachings that do not pass the test of scientific scrutiny tell a lot about the man behind them.

Why did Cleve put so much effort into cataloging and standardizing the techniques he taught? It certainly was not for fame and fortune. After all, the polygraph community is barely a dot on the population graph. He must have seen a purpose in what he did – a purpose that was greater than his legacy. Even a cursory look at Cleve's life reveals he was a patriot. Moreover, he believed in justness and fairness, and he knew that in some circumstances expertise in polygraph was necessary to see justice prevail in the lives of many individuals who otherwise had little hope. Why else would anybody put so much effort into developing a tool designed to separate truth from falsehood, and why else would anybody put so much effort into training others to this work?

I said I think I better understand Cleve's comments regarding the postponement of criticism of any of his teachings, and I mention that here for others to contemplate. To me, what stands out about Cleve is that he was a man looking out for those of us with our "boots on the ground". That is, he was interested in theory and experimentation, but that interest was motivated by a desire to be more effective in the field. In all he did, he never lost sight of the purpose of polygraph. Let's examine the issue of a "psychological set" for example. While it has been criticized as being an incomplete model of the psychological construct it seeks to explain, it again emphasizes Cleve's insight regarding the CQT.

If you boil it all down, his point with the concept of psychological set was simply that the truthful and deceptive react to CQs and RQs differently, and they do so in a highly predictable fashion – a fact that has been demonstrated time and again in many different studies, in many different labs, and by many different investigators. Despite the use of terms that may have inadvertently confused some in the scientific community, Cleve had a firm grasp of many facets of applied polygraph science long before there was an emphasis on science.

On behalf of the board of directors, we hope you will take the time to read all of this special edition honoring Cleve Backster and his many contributions.

He has certainly earned his place as a luminary in the field; his work helped to build the foundation on which we stand today. There is no doubt that his vision, leadership and many decades of giving for the betterment of the profession will continue to influence our work for generations of examiners to come.

Let me close with a poem often wrongly attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson or Ralph Waldo Emerson. I believe it summarizes the sentiments of those who knew Cleve and his work in the field of polygraph science. He truly did achieve success, and for his many accomplishments, he will be remembered for a long, long time to come.

He has achieved success who has lived well,
laughed often and loved much;
who has enjoyed the trust of pure women,
the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children;
who has filled his niche and accomplished his task;
who has left the world better than he found it,
whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem, or a rescued soul;
who has never lacked appreciation of earth's beauty
or failed to express it;
who has always looked for the best in others
and given them the best he had;
whose life was an inspiration;
whose memory is a benediction.
– Author unknown

Grover Cleveland Backster, Jr., may he rest in peace. He is and will be greatly missed, but his passion for truth will certainly live on; that is a fire that even death itself cannot quench.