

The Origin of “Q” and “L” Clearances

The need for security clearances became an issue at the end of World War II when the Manhattan Project was transferred to a new entity, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). Thousands of civilians were going to be hired, and the newly drafted Atomic Energy Act of 1947 required controls over access to restricted data and nuclear materials.

Col. Charles H. Banks, an intelligence officer under General Leslie Groves, proposed a formal security questionnaire to be used for all applicants. It asked relevant questions about loyalty, personal history, etc., which were used to determine a person’s suitability for a security clearance. The questionnaire was known as the Personnel Security Questionnaire or PSQ (as it has been known until just recently).

Because of the rush to hire people for the AEC, another of Groves’ security officers at Los Alamos during the war, Thomas O. Jones, was hired to implement the personnel security program. Jones wrote a regulation that established three types of clearances based on the individual’s need for access to restricted data. As was the trend of the day, single letters of the alphabet were used. Jones took the “P,” “S,” and “Q” from the Personnel Security Questionnaire form and used those letters for the three levels. “P” was for employees having no access to restricted data or security exclusion areas, “S” was for frequent visitors to AEC facilities who would not have access to restricted data, and “Q” was for those with access to restricted data and security exclusion areas.

It was the “Q” that required a full FBI background check. Interestingly, the military implemented an “M” clearance for non-civilian personnel who needed access to restricted data, and the AEC had the right to review “M” clearances to ensure that comparable standards were being used.

Today the “P” and “S” clearances no longer exist, although today’s “L,” which is now common across the government, probably comes close to the original “S” clearance.

According to Earnest Wagner of K-H classifications, the “L” designation was the invention of the U.S. Navy’s Admiral Rickover. When the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Lab was added to the agency, Rickover didn’t want to comply with all the requirements for the AEC “Q” authorization. Therefore, the “L,” which stands for “limited access authorization,” was adopted. It originally applied only to Naval Nuclear information classified as confidential for research and development purposes.