

Lie, Cheat, and Steal: The CIA's Disastrous Scientific Legacy

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[Volume 25, no. 3, Killing in the Name Of](#)



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As the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) marks its seventy-fifth anniversary, it has made conspicuous efforts to rebrand itself as a progressive force for scientific and technological change. Facing the retirement of its notoriously “pale, male, and Yale” Baby Boomer cohort, it has awkwardly adopted the language of neurodiversity and intersectionality in an attempt to appeal to the relatively young and tech-savvy Silicon Valley set.¹ Through its in-house venture capital fund In-Q-Tel, it has recently made well-publicized investments in CRISPR-based woolly mammoth resurrection research, information-collecting skin care products, and the synthetic biology firm—and alleged “colossal scam”—Ginkgo Bioworks.²

Under the leadership of noted black site torture overseer Gina Haspel, it has also adopted a tech start-up model via its new “CIA Labs,” which entices would-be innovators with lucrative patent opportunities.³ At the same time, it has made well-publicized donations to makerspaces and science education organizations.⁴ Sympathetic press coverage has cast covert agents not as unaccountable interlopers into publicly funded research, but rather as “spies for planet earth.”⁵ The CIA has even started a podcast.⁶

A brief survey of the Agency’s history, however, suggests that it is one of the last organizations we should expect to provide us with either reliable information or socially beneficial technologies. Since its earliest days, the CIA and the “Intelligence Community” of which it is a part has repeatedly shown a willingness to pursue harmful, illegal, and intentionally misleading research. Indeed, “intelligence” is arguably a misnomer. As author and former CIA agent Ralph McGehee explains, “the CIA is not

an intelligence agency, it's a covert action agency. . . . A part of covert action is disinformation, and the American people, in my estimation, are the primary target audience of the agency's disinformation operation."⁷

CIA's Pre-History of Scientific Disinformation

False scientific claims were the US Intelligence Community's stock-in-trade even before the CIA was officially founded. In 1944, Lieutenant Thomas J. McFadden, head of Morale Operations (MO) for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the CIA's WWII-era precursor), requested funds to employ renowned tropical disease expert Dr. Morton Charles Kahn. Dr. Kahn, wrote McFadden, "has been employed by us to write a number of articles containing pseudoscientific material on tropical diseases."⁸ That year, OSS agents prepared a barrage of forged medical documents reporting outbreaks of leprosy, food poisoning, and grisly deaths following blood transfusions contaminated with animal plasma.⁹ Like all MO undertakings, these were fabrications designed to attack enemy morale by causing panic and confusion.

The audience for this sort of "black propaganda" was not necessarily limited to enemy soldiers. In a subsequent progress report, the MO Branch Chief listed under the heading "Achievements and Commendations" high-profile instances of "comeback"—meaning the appearance of MO fabrications in reputable English-language news services such as the *Associated Press*.¹⁰ In contrast to the more familiar term "blowback," used to refer to the unintended negative consequences of clandestine operations, "comeback" was seen as a positive metric—an indication that the government's lie had been good enough for its own population to "buy" it.

Compared to the death and destruction of the Second World War (WWII), scientific disinformation operations of this sort seemed relatively harmless or even humane. In the wake of Japan's surrender, however, as the WWII-era OSS evolved into the Cold War-era Central Intelligence Agency, the relation between American Intelligence and the scientific community has only become more pathological. Over the course of the Agency's seventy-five-year existence, it has repeatedly enlisted experts not just to lie about scientific atrocities but to commit them.

Operation Paperclip

One of the earliest and most consequential CIA covert actions was its role in Operation Paperclip, a campaign to recruit and whitewash the reputations of over a thousand prominent Nazi scientists. In her authoritative book, *Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program that Brought Nazi Scientists to America*, Annie Jacobsen details the CIA's eagerness to take advantage of these "men who had everything to lose and were, at the same time, uniquely focused on personal gain. In Operation Paperclip, the CIA found a perfect partner in its quest for scientific intelligence. And it was in the CIA that Operation Paperclip found its strongest supporting partner yet."¹¹

The CIA's Nazi scientists included the chemist Walter Schieber, who specialized in sarin gas production; the similarly-named Walter Schreiber, former "surgeon general of the Third Reich," who was hired to oversee torture of enemy prisoners of war at the original CIA black site, Camp King; and Friedrich "Fritz" Hoffman, a chemical weapons scientist for the Luftwaffe, whom the CIA sent around the world to scout for new and exotic poisons. It was at Camp King that the Agency made its first foray into high-tech torture and mind-control research, developing what Jacobsen describes as

“ ‘extreme interrogation’ techniques and ‘behavior modification programs’ . . . [including] hypnosis, electric shock, chemicals, and illicit street drugs.”¹²

MK-ULTRA: Domestic and International Terror in the Name of Science

Hiring high-ranking Nazis to test new torture methods on prisoners was only the beginning, however. By 1953, CIA scientists like Schreiber and Sidney Gottlieb—the titular character of Stephen Kinzer’s book, *Poisoner in Chief*—had initiated a sprawling two-decade campaign of reckless human experimentation best known by the codename MK-ULTRA. A quixotic but well-funded hunt for truth serums, brainwashing drugs, and other mind control techniques, MK-ULTRA scientists subjected countless non-consenting and/or otherwise vulnerable people to powerful drugs and interrogation techniques.¹³ In spite of being subject to three separate government investigations, only a small fraction of the total program has been publicly disclosed since the CIA shredded nearly all relevant documents. What little we do know, however, is horrifying.¹⁴

With the help of OSS veteran and federal narcotics detective George Hunter White, Gottlieb maintained a network of domestic and international “safe houses” where he would administer LSD to unwitting and “expendable” subjects such as petty criminals and drug users.¹⁵ Sometimes, Gottlieb’s expendable subjects included other scientists, such as bacteriologist Frank Olson, who was dosed with LSD and allegedly murdered by CIA, supposedly because of fears that he would reveal America’s use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW).¹⁶ The Agency has had more than its share of CBW-use allegations beginning in this period, including the open-air testing of

aerosolized biological agents in New York City and spreading whooping cough on the coast of Florida in 1955.¹⁷

MK-ULTRA research was also conducted at university laboratories, such as those of Harold Wolff and Louis Jolyon West at Cornell Medical College and the University of Oklahoma, or Donald Ewen Cameron at McGill University in Montreal. Between 1957 and 1963, Cameron used CIA money to develop psychological “depatterning” techniques on approximately one hundred patients. These techniques included placing patients in extended drug-induced comas, LSD dosing for months at a time, electro-shock treatments, and forcing patients to listen to recorded messages such as “my mother hates me” played on a loop.¹⁸ A multi-million dollar class action lawsuit against McGill, the Canadian government, and the Royal Victoria Hospital on behalf of Cameron’s victims and their families is currently underway.¹⁹ MK-ULTRA later found a home in existing networks set up by scientific institutions and universities in the USA and Canada.

The Phoenix Program and Beyond

Years after Cameron finished his work, similar experimentation began to take place in Vietnam. In 1966, a team of CIA researchers conducted brutal and sometimes fatal psychological experiments on Viet so-called mental patients. In an attempt to coerce labor out of his supposedly communist-indoctrinated patients, Dr. Lloyd H. Cotter and his colleagues threatened them with electrical shocks.²⁰ Female patients, who proved more resistant, were starved into submission.²¹

Following the shock of the 1968 Tet Offensive, when the US and its South Viet allies sustained heavy losses, the CIA launched the Phoenix Program, a systematic program of torture and assassination against suspected Viet Cong insurgents. Phoenix

dwarfed Cotter's experimentation in both scale and brutality. Between 1968 and 1972, more than eighty thousand "Viet Cong Infrastructure" (VCI)—the euphemism for Viet people accused of communist sympathies—were "neutralized", meaning kidnapped and tortured. About one third were killed.²²

According to author Douglas Valentine, who interviewed a number of CIA insiders about the program, Phoenix was seen as the "silver lining" to America's defeat in Vietnam insofar as it forged a powerful new bureaucratic technology for administering population control through state violence.²³ Along with Operation Igloo White, a sophisticated electronic warfare system consisting of networks of remote sensors on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Phoenix's Viet Cong Infrastructure Information System (VCIIS) achieved a powerful synthesis of computer science and counterinsurgency. With a database of three thousand VCI names stored in an IBM 1401 mainframe, VCIIS inaugurated what Valentine terms our present "era of the computerized blacklist."²⁴

From the Cold War to the War On Terror

With the fall of the Soviet Union and the beginning of America's invasions of the Middle East, the CIA further modernized its practices of "targeted killing"—a euphemism for assassination, which is still nominally illegal—with heavy investments in remote-controlled drone warfare. Beginning under George W. Bush, and peaking during the Obama administration, the role of drone operator or "targeter" became "the fastest career track in the agency, involving fully 20 percent of all CIA analysts," according to journalist Andrew Cockburn.²⁵ One of the Agency's earliest targeted killings via drone was launched in Afghanistan in February 2002 against a "tall man" thought to be Osama Bin Laden. It ended up killing three innocent villagers who had been gathering scrap metal left by previous American air strikes.²⁶

Nine years later, still in pursuit of Bin Laden, the CIA infamously staged a fake hepatitis vaccination program in Pakistan. What they were actually doing was collecting DNA samples without informed consent in an attempt to track down Bin Laden's family members.²⁷ Parabon NanoLabs, a company co-founded by ex-CIA officer Steven Armentrout, used a similar genetic-genealogical method to locate the Golden State Killer in 2016. Parabon subsequently faced backlash from ethicists, privacy experts, and genealogists, who feared the abuse of genetic profiling, especially against vulnerable populations like immigrant detainees and asylum seekers whose genetic materials the US government has been collecting since 2019.²⁸ Parabon has also claimed that their proprietary phenotyping technique, Snapshot, can generate virtual mugshots of suspects based on their DNA samples, in spite of "a storm of criticism" from geneticists.²⁹

"I was the CIA director. We lied, we cheated, we stole."

—Mike Pompeo

As with In-Q-Tel and CIA Labs, the case of Parabon illustrates the way in which CIA projects metastasize from covert state action to proprietary industrial applications, dodging democratic accountability at every step. As Valentine warns in his 2017 book, *The CIA as Organized Crime*:

Control of scientific information is a means of controlling our ideas and assumptions about things. Just as the CIA is at the forefront of propaganda on the Internet, its science and technology division is at the forefront of shaping the industries that run the world. The CIA is at the forefront of drone and weapons technology—any kind of

technological advancements that only serve and enrich the ruling class. The CIA is at the forefront of that research and development, and that goes for the Internet, too.³⁰

Disclosures from whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning, former CIA contractor Edward Snowden, and Wikileaks' s Julian Assange—whom the CIA reportedly plotted to assassinate in 2017—bear out such claims about the deep imbrication of capital and covert action into our modern information infrastructure. As Alan McLeod recently reported in the *Monthly Review*, Meta—formerly known as Facebook—relies on dozens of ostensibly “ex-CIA” employees to develop its content and data security policies.³¹ The same goes for Google.³² With these companies currently commanding a de facto monopoly over most people' s access to online information and social networking, not to mention—with the exception of the weapons industry—the job market for computer science and engineering, it is worth remembering that, in the words of Valentine, “science for the CIA means better ways to kill and control people.”³³

How to Respond?

Recent polls found that around 52 percent of Americans think that the CIA is doing a good job. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration, by contrast, each scored around 36 percent.³⁴ Whether this surprisingly positive public sentiment is due to widespread ignorance, indifference, or support for the CIA' s dubious history, it is crucial to spread awareness of the CIA' s malign influence, as well as the security–intelligence complex at large. It is equally important for scientists, engineers, and other would–be recruits of covert agencies to organize and build the political solidarity needed to avoid getting co–opted into ongoing projects of capital accumulation and imperial domination.

Perhaps as a symptom of America's broader imperial decline, the CIA seems to be undergoing an identity crisis. Officers have given press interviews describing their struggles with mental health, which a more frank analysis might identify as a repressed but justified sense of guilt regarding their chosen profession.³⁵ Bizarre sideshows like the recent panic over "Havana Syndrome"—wherein agents reported concussion-like symptoms supposedly caused by directed energy weapons—elicited journalistic coddling and pledges of government subsidy of victims' medical bills, even as the agency's own experts seem to have debunked the phenomenon altogether.³⁶

While investigative journalists have done much of the work of exposing CIA crimes, the media has clearly been captured and/or outgunned for decades now. A docile and access-dependent press has bent over backwards to do the CIA's public relations work for it. *The New York Times*, for example, reported uncritically about the CIA's plan to share satellite data with climate scientists.³⁷ As the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) subsequently complained, the CIA's lack of transparency "calls into question the integrity of the [CIA] Center on Climate Change, if not the Agency as a whole."³⁸

Moments of resistance, such as from FAS, hint at the potential for politically conscious scientists to work towards the dismantling of the CIA, a goal articulated by people such as Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Bernie Sanders.³⁹ Given their indispensable role in the technocratic power structure that "capital-I" Intelligence draws upon, scientists and engineers need to demand greater transparency and justice for CIA abuses, which largely remain unaddressed. A more modest goal would be to normalize the idea that it is bad to work for the CIA, or to cite their claims without a deep and historically informed skepticism. We need to take seriously the words of Mike Pompeo: "I was the CIA director. We lied, we cheated, we stole."⁴⁰ The

CIA's leadership clearly understands that they can't be trusted; it's time we did as well.

Notes

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