
Reviewed by Steven Aftergood, Federation of American Scientists

Behavior modification experiments that were secretly conducted by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) through the MKULTRA program in the 1950s and 1960s continue to reverberate half a century later. The agency’s amoral, instrumental approach to human subject research often involved the exposure of unwitting persons to mind-altering drugs such as LSD and to conditions of extreme stress, leading to at least two documented fatalities.

The public disclosure of the MKULTRA program in the 1970s during Senate investigations of CIA activities and the program’s further exploration in John Marks’s 1978 book *The Search for the “Manchurian Candidate”: The CIA and Mind Control* had both political and cultural ramifications. The recklessness of the program helped to motivate the creation of new intelligence oversight structures. It also inspired enduring public fascination with and revulsion toward the CIA.

In this new book, the author and journalist Stephen Kinzer seeks to refresh the tale of MKULTRA for a new generation of readers by focusing on Sidney Gottlieb, the CIA chemist who led the program with vigor and unrelenting intensity. But any effort to update this story is hampered by the fact that most of the program documents were deliberately destroyed in 1973 at the direction of CIA Director Richard Helms, and most of the principals, including Gottlieb, are long since deceased.

To fill out the narrative, Kinzer therefore makes a problematic choice: he turns to the literature of conspiracy theory and anti-CIA polemic, treating them uncritically as reliable sources. In an early sign that something is amiss in the book, Kinzer reports that in 1953 CIA Director Allen Dulles “probably” supplied poison that was produced by Gottlieb to a disgraced CIA officer named James Kronthal, who then used it to commit suicide (p. 70). This startling allegation does not appear in standard CIA histories or biographies of Dulles. So what is Kinzer’s source? To a reader’s dismay, an endnote indicates that the information comes from a book called *Mary’s Mosaic: The CIA Conspiracy to Murder John F. Kennedy, Mary Pinchot Meyer, and Their Vision for World Peace* (p. 292). In other words, it is a source that cannot be taken at face value. Yet Kinzer does not question it.

It is surely possible to discover new information and to develop new perspectives by consulting unconventional and even disreputable sources. But such
materials need to be scrutinized with extreme care and to be evaluated in the light of existing knowledge. Too often here they are simply incorporated into the text at face value.

Kinzer quotes from “one study” that asserts as a fact that CIA doctors performed brutal mind-control experiments on dozens of North Korean prisoners of war and other so-called expendables and then killed the victims and burned their bodies (p. 64). But the “study” turns out to be a book of unsubstantiated allegations by a British writer of sensationalist exposés named Gordon Thomas, whose work is generally held in low regard.

“Many of Thomas’s claims in this book seriously challenge the credulity of his loyal readers,” investigative journalist H. P. Albarelli wrote in his own book about MKULTRA (which argued controversially that one of the known MKULTRA fatalities, Frank Olson, was actually murdered). “Besides being wrong,” Albarelli added, Thomas’s allegations are “unsupported by any documentation or cited sources.” Writing in Studies in Intelligence, a CIA book reviewer concurred, declaring of the Thomas book that “serious students of intelligence may ignore it without penalty.” Oblivious to such criticism, Kinzer relies on Thomas as well as Albarelli, along with a menagerie of other dubious sources.

An assertion attributed innocently to “one history of the CIA” (p. 189) is actually taken from an inflammatory book called Drugs as Weapons against Us: The CIA’s Murderous Targeting of SDS, Panthers, Hendrix, Lennon, Cobain, Tupac, and Other Leftists (p. 310).

By uncritically relying on such conspiratorial works, Kinzer does not elevate them into scholarship. Instead, his book joins their ranks.

Kinzer is a fluid writer and a skilled storyteller. His focus on Gottlieb adds a certain amount of human interest to the book but not as much insight. We are told that Gottlieb had a clubfoot and a stutter, that he was fond of folk dancing, and that he liked to grow his own food. But the explanatory value of such previously reported observations is close to nil, particularly given the absence of Gottlieb’s own voice.

Nor is it clear that Gottlieb can bear the historical weight Kinzer assigns to him. For all of his ruthlessly committed leadership of the MKULTRA program, he was an employee who had to answer to higher-ups. If Gottlieb had never existed, there would still have been something like MKULTRA, as Kinzer acknowledges in the book’s closing observations.

Missing also is a clear sense of the historical context in which MKULTRA occurred. The medical, psychological, and physical abuses perpetrated in many of these experiments were certainly unethical, but in that respect they were not unique to the CIA or to intelligence of the era. Comparable abuses occurred in the human radiation experiments performed for the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, the Tuskegee study of untreated syphilis in African Americans, and the use of prison populations for involuntary studies of malaria, which together are thought to have resulted in hundreds or even thousands of avoidable deaths.
Kinzer deems the MKULTRA program to have been a “cosmic failure” (p. 198) because it never succeeded in developing significant new chemical or behavioral methods of mind control. But the program had a defensive as well as an offensive aspect. Having gained confidence that no adversary could use such techniques effectively against U.S. personnel, the CIA was able to terminate it without regret.

Although Gottlieb did produce toxic materials for at least three planned CIA assassination efforts—against Patrice Lumumba, Fidel Castro, and Iraq’s Abdul Kassem—none of those assassinations was ultimately carried out by CIA operatives. For a “poisoner in chief,” it seems that Gottlieb did not do a lot of actual poisoning.


Reviewed by John Prados, National Security Archive

In the annals of espionage wars, the category of aerial reconnaissance collection is strongly represented. But the literature is dominated by two kinds of works, those that deal with specific aerial incidents, such as the U-2 shootdown of 1960, and those that cover the histories of particular aircraft types. A few overview histories of the aerial Cold War have appeared, largely compiled by researchers working from the outside using whatever sources they could gain access to. For a long time the inside story was lacking. The air reconnaissance program was and remained Top Secret, among the exotic categories of “special compartmented information.” Few documents were kept and even fewer declassified. Pilots and crewmen downed in aerial incidents mostly never lived to tell their stories. This began to change after the end of the Cold War. In 1996 the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) declassified an official history of the U-2 program along with many images from its reconnaissance missions. In 2001 the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) sponsored a symposium at which pilots and airmen who flew some of those Cold War missions told their stories and reflected on their experiences.

The CIA history and the two-volume proceedings of the NRO conference advanced the story but illuminated only pieces of the puzzle. The light through the doorway energized authors such as Curtis Peebles and Wolfgang Samuel. The latter had the advantage of actually being an Air Force pilot involved in overhead reconnaissance. Samuel brings to his book Silent Warriors, Incredible Courage the fascination of a ten-year-old looking up into the sky at the stream of Allied bombers pummeling his country, and later the river of victuals planes of the “sky bridge” to Berlin during the blockade of 1948–1949. In addition, he has a practical knowledge of the machines and instruments, a sense of what was important in the secret programs to