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C.I.A. Secrets: Poison Pellets, Marshmallows

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WASHINGTON, June 15 — The Central Intelligence Agency's secret experiments on new methods of espionage have included using trained seals and otters, monitoring the "bioplasma fields" of agents and testing the sonar of electric fish, according to documents newly made public. The experimenters also worked on developing such weapons as a poison pellet, electric stun guns, calibrated blackjacks and marshmallow barrages.

The intelligence agency's research and development staff was also interested in the secret life of plants, peace pills and an array of other futuristic schemes that were discarded as impracticable or as quackery, according to about 3,000 heavily censored pages of study evaluations and other documents relating to C.I.A. activities from 1965 to 1975. The material has been made public at the agency's headquarters in Langley, Va., as a result of a request under the Freedom of Information Act initiated by The New York Times.

Many Details Are Deleted

Which of the ideas were developed and which were discarded is uncertain because the intelligence agency refused official comment on the documents. In addition, many details and almost every proper name and title were deleted from the documents, so that projects emerge only in general terms. The agency has been stung by earlier disclosures of covert research and development projects that included the use of LSD and other mind-altering drugs, as well as elaborate sexual entrapment schemes.

Some of the actions described in the documents, such as investigations into behavior modification and mind control, grew out of research of the 1950's and 1960's, which in turn stemmed from continuing Soviet interest in mind-control techniques that most Western scientists consider farfetched.

Other efforts were elaborate engineering projects that sought to counter hijackings and terrorism. One was a giant piston that would be incorporated in the pilot's seat in an airplane, so that when a hijacker entered the airliner's flight deck the pilot could trigger the 25-pound piston and knock the hijacker back through the door.

Another antiterrorism project was an electrified net, whose purpose was not clearly described. One document said: "The [deleted] nonlethal electrified net system was forwarded to [deleted]. Unfortunately, the data provided by the manufacturer are not completely explicit. Based on certain assumptions about the device, it was concluded that under some conditions the [deleted] could cause partial incapacitation by paralyzing the subject's arms."

Yet even with the deletions, the documents offer tantalizing hints of investigations by the agency of proposals that range from the edge of possibility to the deadly real.

Studies of Deadly Device

There were several references to studies of a "jet propelled medicine ball," which presumably refers to a murder weapon that has been used by Soviet agents to kill several anti-Communist dissidents in Western Europe.

One case involved Georgi Markov, a Bulgarian dissident who died in London two years ago after having been struck by a poisoned pellet shot from an umbrella tip. The hollow pellet, smaller than a BB shot, was filled with a deadly poison derived from the castor bean. The C.I.A. document was written years before the dissident's murder.

Another memorandum, dated October 1971, stated that "electric current appears to be a promising means of delivering a wide spectrum of incapacitation to a single individual, or a few individuals. Application of the agent can be well controlled and is reasonably safe under appropriate conditions."

'Incapacitation' With 30,000 Volts

A subsequent report stated: "The concept may be summarized as a self-contained, hand-carried, battery-powered unit design to project one or two insulated delivery wires at high velocity to a subject who may be at ranges of up to 100 meters; delivery wires may terminate at electrodes that may be bare wire, net, dart, barb, burr, adhesive or some other form; current is passed through the subject in brief .1 joule to 3 joule pulses at about 30,000 volts repeated 2 to 20 times per second."

"Data are presented from tests involving a small number of experimental animals and human volunteers," the report continued. "During these tests incapacitation periods were limited to four seconds or less. The concept appears basically sound provided that a reliable wire delivery and electrode emplacement system can be proved satisfactory under field conditions."

Other projects mentioned were "a study of incapacitating darts" and "a

flash blindness incapacitator" using an extremely bright light source, similar to a British device used to end a number of hostage sieges. For projects involving "a hand-held calibrated blackjack," plastic cocoons, taffy pellets and marshmallow barrages, nearly all details were deleted.

As in papers obtained through previous Freedom of Information requests, there were references to Project OFTEN, which was started in 1968 jointly with the Army Chemical Corps at Edgewood, Md., to study the effects of rare drugs.

Use of Drugs to Alter Behavior

As was described in the earlier documents, the intelligence agency spent a great deal of time and resources testing drugs that might influence behavior. One memorandum of March 1973 stated that while some drugs were effective for altering moods and behavior, "the techniques are not as efficacious or finely tuned as the popular media leads one to believe."

Psychopharmacology, or control by altering brain chemistry, "is for the most part safe and effective but does not really afford mind control," the memorandum said, adding that "the notion of a 'peace' pill, 'truth' pill or 'smart' pill is still in the wish stage."

The investigation of "bioplasma fields," extremely weak electrical forces surrounding both inanimate objects and humans, was another source of scientific preoccupation, according to the documents.

While the exact aim is somewhat unclear, the agency apparently sought to determine if extrasensory perception existed and could be used to "read" the thoughts of an enemy agent.

"Interest in this area is on the upswing again, in large part due to current popularity in lay literature of 'biofeedback'

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