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High Spy

By Martin A. Lee*MARTIN A. LEE is finishing a book on the CIA and the Sixties counterculture.*

IMAGINE A DIMLY LIT ROOM, WITH the shades drawn and a quiet ambiance. A heap of pharmaceutical-grade cocaine is sitting atop the desk. There are more delicacies in the drawers: mushrooms, hash, an assortment of pills and poppers, LSD. Even a small stash of heroin. And safely ensconced in the closet is a tank of nitrous oxide.

Some might find such a place a dooper's dream. But not quite. For this Eden of altered states is actually the unholy confines of a Central Intelligence Agency laboratory.

People who came of age during the Sixties might be surprised to learn that the CIA and the U.S. military were into recreational drugs long before those of the Woodstock generation toddled out of their cribs. And according to documents largely obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, America's spy masters literally sampled every conceivable "feelgood": cocaine, speed, marijuana, downers, laughing gas, amyl nitrate, psychedelics. What's more, the government chemists are currently testing new drugs that might only show up on the streets years from now.

Of course, the CIA and the army did not think in terms of kicks, religious experiences or creative buzz patterns. On the contrary, their purpose was explicitly sinister: to develop weapons that would blow minds and control behavior, in order to gain strategic advantages over potential enemies. Hundreds of millions of dollars were devoted to this pursuit, which drew upon the talents of scientists at a wide range of research institutions. The results were sometimes surprising, occasionally amusing, but, more often than not, deadly serious.

IT ALL STARTED DURING WORLD WAR II, when the office of Strategic Services (OSS), the CIA's predecessor, undertook a top-secret research program to develop a speech-inducing drug for use in intelligence interrogations. This was the first concerted attempt on the part of an American espionage organization to modify human behavior through chemical means.

"We were not afraid to try things that were never done before," explained OSS chief William "Wild Bill" Donovan, who was known for his freewheeling and unconventional approach to the cloak-and-dagger trade. In the spring of 1942, Donovan assembled a half-dozen prestigious American scientists and asked them to come up with a substance that could break down the psychological defenses of captured spies and POWs, thereby causing an "uninhibited disclosure of classified information." Such a drug would also be helpful for screening OSS personnel to identify German sympathizers, double agents and potential misfits.

Dr. Winfred Overholser, superintendent of St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington D.C., was appointed chairman of the blue-ribbon panel. Another member was Harry Anslinger, the head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. The research committee surveyed and rejected numerous drugs, including alcohol, barbiturates and caffeine. Peyote and scopolamine were also tested, but the visions and hallucinations produced by these substances hindered the interrogation process. Eventually, marijuana was chosen as the most likely candidate for a speech-inducing agent.

OSS scientists created a highly potent extract of cannabis, and a clear and viscous liquid was obtained through a process known as esterification. The final product had no color, odor or taste. This would make it nearly impossible to detect when administered surreptitiously, which is exactly what the spy troop intended to do. "There is no reason to believe that any other nation or group is familiar with the preparation of this particular drug," states a once-classified OSS document. Henceforth, the OSS referred to the marijuana extract as TD—a transparent nickname for Truth Drug.

Various ways of administering TD were

tried on both willing and unsuspecting subjects. For example, OSS operatives found that the medicated goo could "be injected into any type of food, such as mashed potatoes, butter, salad dressing, or in such things as candy." But what if a person had a particularly ravenous appetite? Too much TD could knock a subject out and render him useless for interrogation. The OSS eventually determined that the best approach involved using a hypodermic syringe to inject a diluted TD solution into a cigarette or cigar. After having a smoke, the subject would get suitably stoned, at which point a skillful interrogator would move in.

The effects of TD are described in an OSS report: "The drug appears to relax all inhibitions and to deaden the areas of the brain which govern an individual's discretion and caution. It also accentuates the senses and makes manifest any strong characteristics of the individual. Sexual inhibitions are lowered, and the sense of humor is accentuated to the point where any statement or situation can become extremely funny to the subject. On the other hand, a person's unpleasant characteristics may also be heightened. It may be stated that, generally speaking, the reaction will be one of great loquacity and hilarity." A rather mild and playful assessment compared to the public rantings of narcotics chief Harry Anslinger, who orchestrated an unrelenting media campaign against "the killer weed."

After OSS agents tested TD on themselves, their associates and U.S. military personnel, they utilized the drug operationally, although on a limited basis. The results were mixed. In certain instances, TD subjects felt a driving necessity "to discuss psychologically charged topics. Whatever the individual is trying to withhold will be forced to the top of his subconscious mind." But there were also those who experienced "toxic reactions." One unsuspecting dooper became irritable and threatening, and complained that he felt like "two different people." The peculiar nature of his symptoms precluded any attempt to question him.

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