

THE WASHINGTON STAR
25 September 1977

MARY McGRORY: Can anyone exorcise the witlessness of the CIA?

Admiral Stansfield Turner assures us, whenever he can, that he has driven evil out of the CIA. That could be, but what can he do about the silliness?

The rich variety of twits retired from the Company who filed past Sen. Edward Kennedy's committee this week make you wonder if the admiral's undertaking is "mission impossible."

The former operatives of "Operation MK-Ultra" and MK-ChickWit seemed without embarrassment or remorse as they discussed their expensive and unproductive attempts to drug their unwitting fellow-citizens. Their memories of soluble swizzle-sticks and LSD aerosol cans, stink-bombs and Playboy-type safehouses they recounted with amusement.

David Rhodes, a red-haired former agency psychiatrist, who looked as if he had wandered off the pages of a Graham Greene novel, assured the committee airily that "at the time" he thought the work was "worthwhile."

Kennedy asked him if administering drugs to people without their knowledge was something approved under the canons of the American Psychological Association.

Rhodes replied, with that nimble evasion which marked most of the testimony taken from the former spooks, that he was "not absolutely sure."

What of his own opinion?

Rhodes seemed mildly taken aback by a query that was obviously not heard much around the Company.

"My personal feeling," he said, "is that administering drugs to an unwitting person — this is something, you know, we shouldn't do."

Then, as if he had said something indiscreet, or possibly socially unacceptable, he added, "That is a personal opinion."

He was on the stand with an ex-agent named Philip Goldman, who bore a striking resemblance to Daddy Warbucks, and who gave assurance that in slipping drugs to unsuspecting subjects, "We would take the precautions of giving the smallest possible dose."

Dr. Robert Lashbrook, the deputy director of MK-Ultra, a small, white-haired man, enjoyed setting the senators straight about the CIA documents they were questioning him about.

Just because a "memo for the system" stated something was no reason to take it seriously. They have something called "boiler-plate words" to describe projects which they wish to conceal from themselves.

"It is a summary," he said merrily, to the bewilderment of his audience. "Accurate records were kept, accurate files were maintained." What happened to the good stuff he did not say.

"All the information was destroyed?" asked Kennedy.

Dr. Lashbrook stepped back.

"I wouldn't know," he said.

As a group, they were remarkably unconcerned, not at all your ordinary civil servant called to account by the representatives of the people. The reason was not hard to find. They were as insulated from the cares of daily life as the ultra-rich. They had all the secret money they could ask for from an indulgent Congress. Their double-memo-keeping gave them total deniability. They were the elite troops in the cold war. It's a miracle we survived them.

The man who was their chief did much to explain their special cast of mindlessness. Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, who was heard but not seen — his health is not equal to the ordeal of television coverage — sat in a back room and his testimony was piped into the hearing room.

He was clearly the most muddled of them all. He had insisted on immunity for his covert appearance, but why is a mystery. He remembered next to nothing. He thought "there might have been a doctor" at the two-way mirror in the safehouse, so that an unwitting subject could be ministered to if his government OD'd him.

Gottlieb said in his rapid voice that the death of Frank Olson, who threw himself out a window in 1953 after the CIA had slipped him some LSD, had given him pause. But he consulted two doctors who told him that the relationship between the dosage and the death was not "necessarily causal." So the CIA stayed on drugs until 1973.

Admiral Turner, in his best quarter-deck manner, explained that one program was basically a Defense Department project, and reminded the committee that it had all happened a long time ago.

Sen. Kennedy countered that human drug-testing had continued until 1973. "But not on unwitting subjects," said the admiral, as if the distinction were everything.

A clear-eyed young woman from the Pentagon, its general counsel, Deanne C. Siemer, stepped forward and straightened out the record. She spoke in simple, declarative sentences. She dealt with one set of documents, one set of facts. On the projects in question, Defense had worked for CIA, not the other way around.

Her crispness dazzled the senators. They praised her extravagantly for the completeness of her presentation.

Any agency that comes off second best to the Defense Department, the mother church of obfuscation, extravagance and general witlessness, is in sad shape. The old submarine skipper seems to feel he can shape it up. Maybe he should torpedo it instead.