

DRUGS

# The Legacy of the CIA’s Secret LSD Experiments on America

Newly unclassified information blows wide the U.S. government's covert operation to dose hundreds of unwitting Americans with LSD in the 1950s and '60s.

By [Maia Szalavitz](#) @maiasz | March 23, 2012

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Before LSD escaped the lab and was evangelized by hippies, the U.S. government was secretly testing the effects of the drug on hundreds of unsuspecting American civilians and military personnel. In a must-read feature on newly unclassified material on the Central Intelligence Agency’s covert operation, the MK-ULTRA program, which ran from 1953 to 1964, *SF Weekly* fully exposes the bizarre world of the CIA’s unethical drug tests. The utterly-unbelievable-but-true story involved using hookers to lure in unwitting johns for undisclosed testing, narcotics agents who slipped drugs into drinks, and a U.S. marshal who held up a San Francisco bar not knowing he was high on acid.

It sounds like something out of a paranoid dream. And indeed, before the documentation and other facts of the program were made public, those who talked of it were frequently dismissed as being psychotic. But the U.S. government’s history of secret human experimentation ought to be kept in mind, particularly when we consider the power we grant to it and the way we regulate drugs.

The LSD experiments were purportedly carried out because the U.S. believed that communist Russia, North Korea and China were using the drug to brainwash captured Americans. Consequently, the CIA didn’t want to fall behind in developing and responding to this potentially useful technology.

So, incredibly, it decided to slip acid secretly to Americans — at the beach, in city bars, at restaurants. For a decade, the CIA conducted completely uncontrolled tests in which they drugged people unknowingly, then followed and watched them without intervening. In some cases, the agency used the drug to perform interrogations, but these procedures were conducted so inconsistently that they proved equally useless in providing useful data.

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The lack of ethical controls was even more appalling. Here's how *SF Weekly's* Troy Hooper [describes](#) what happened to one of the last living survivors of the MK-ULTRA operation:

It's been over 50 years, but Wayne Ritchie says he can still remember how it felt to be dosed with acid.

He was drinking bourbon and soda with other federal officers at a holiday party in 1957 at the U.S. Post Office Building on Seventh and Mission streets. They were cracking jokes and swapping stories when, suddenly, the room began to spin. The red and green lights on the Christmas tree in the corner spiraled wildly. Ritchie's body temperature rose. His gaze fixed on the dizzying colors around him.

The deputy U.S. marshal excused himself and went upstairs to his office, where he sat down and drank a glass of water. He needed to compose himself. But instead he came unglued.

Ritchie became so paranoid and distressed that he decided the only way to keep *them* from getting him was to strike first:

"I decided if they want to get rid of me, I'll help them. I'll just go out and get my guns from my office and hold up a bar," Ritchie recalls. "I thought, 'I can get enough money to get my girlfriend an airline ticket back to New York, and I'll turn myself in.' But I was unsuccessful."

Out of his skull on a hallucinogen and alcohol, Ritchie rolled into the Shady Grove in the Fillmore District, and ordered one final bourbon and soda. After swallowing down the final drops, he pointed his revolver at the bartender and demanded money.

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Fortunately, a waitress and a patron were able to subdue him and Ritchie was arrested before anyone got hurt. Even more fortunately, because he was a law enforcement officer who had served in the military and had no prior record, he was sentenced only to probation and a \$500 fine. But he was forced to resign from the Marshals Service.

It would be decades later, in 1999, when Ritchie came across the obituary of an American chemist, Sidney Gottlieb, who was involved in the CIA's acid experiments, that he put two and two together. The article mentioned a narcotics officer he once knew and noted the officer's involvement in the LSD experiments; then it hit Ritchie that he might have been secretly dosed on the day he went crazy.

The agency appeared to be experiencing its own form of madness. The San Francisco branch of the program (the other hub was in New York City) was dubbed Operation Midnight Climax and it involved agents using hookers to lure johns into a secret pad decorated with photos of women in bondage and other suggestive images by the French artist Toulouse-Lautrec. The johns were given acid-laced cocktails and, from behind two-way mirrors, a Bureau of Narcotics agent, who doubled as a CIA operative, along with his minions would quaff martinis and watch the drugged sex.

By the time the agency finally put a stop to the program in 1964, hundreds of people had unknowingly gone on acid trips on both coasts. The following year, Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters started holding the first "acid test" revels, accompanied by

the Grateful Dead.

The official rhetoric on LSD from the government's anti-drug agencies was that it was extremely dangerous. LSD was quickly made illegal and research into its potential as a treatment for alcoholism and other disorders was shut down. Wild claims about it damaging chromosomes and causing birth defects were promulgated.

But, of course, the CIA had thought the drug was safe enough to randomly distribute to unwitting Americans without even debriefing them about their experiences or providing any measure to keep them safe — something researchers now know is essential to avoid incidents like Ritchie's bar robbery.

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A notable aspect of LSD's history is the contrast in the way a single drug has been used and perceived by different groups. Just as one segment of the American population was starting to experiment with a drug they believed could produce peace and spiritual awakening, their government was using the same drug to try to "brainwash" people into compliance. The hippies mainly found unity and joy; the CIA paranoia and fear.

Both had inadvertently discovered what acid guru Timothy Leary would come to call "set" and "setting." Set is a person's mindset: mood, background, physiology and everything else unique to them at the time they take the drug. Setting is the physical and cultural environment.

Set and setting are fundamental to the effects of all drugs. They explain why you can have exactly the same amount of the same type of drink in one situation and be joyous, for example, while the same drinking pattern can lead to anger and aggression in another. But while drugs like alcohol, cocaine and heroin generally tend to produce at least somewhat consistent effects in multiple settings, psychedelics like LSD are much more sensitive to context. Being dosed without your knowledge in a fearful setting is thus very different from dropping acid deliberately in a calm, friendly place.

When we look at our drug laws, the senselessness of MK-ULTRA appears in bold relief. Here we have an institution that was supposedly protecting Americans from the harms of drugs actually drugging its unwitting population. This was "research" being conducted on human beings without any concern for their lives or welfare. And at the center of it was a substance that thousands — including Apple's [Steve Jobs](#) — have said brought deep meaning and inspiration to their lives.

What's unfortunate is that rather than having a democratic discussion about the proper role of LSD and similar drugs for consenting adults — and conducting legitimate research into their potentially beneficial uses — we are instead enmeshed in a culture of knee-jerk prohibition that produces repeated, uncontrolled and sometimes deadly human experiments.

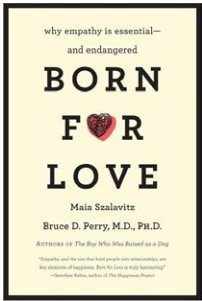
The recent rise of synthetic drugs, including so-called bath salts and fake marijuana, are only the latest evidence of our continuing denial that humans always have and always will seek to chemically alter their minds. The real question is, how safe or unsafe do we want to make the set and setting in which they do so?

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Szalavitz's latest book is *Born for Love: Why Empathy Is Essential — and Endangered.* It is co-written with Dr. Bruce Perry, a leading expert in the neuroscience of child trauma and recovery.

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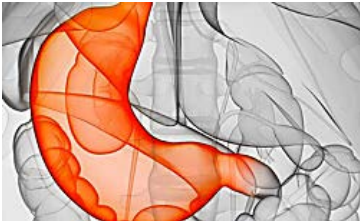
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