

Project MKUltra was a top-secret CIA program (1953–1973) that sought to develop techniques for "mind control."¹ Memory loss was not just a side effect but a **primary objective**. The CIA wanted to find ways to erase a person's identity, wipe memories of interrogations, and create a "blank slate" that could be reprogrammed.²

The most extreme and well-documented experiments involving memory loss occurred under **Dr. Donald Ewen Cameron** in what was known as **Subproject 68**.³

1. The Goal: "Depatterning"⁴

Dr. Cameron, working at the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal, developed a theory called **depatterning**.⁵ He believed that to "cure" mental illness (or reprogram a spy), he first had to completely shatter the subject's existing personality and memories to create a *tabula rasa* (blank slate).⁶

2. Methods Used to Induce Memory Loss

Cameron used a "multi-pronged" approach to destroy a subject's memory and cognitive function:

- **Intensive Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT):** Unlike standard therapy, which used one shock every few days, Cameron used "Page-Russell" ECT—shocks administered two or three times a day at much higher voltages. This continued for 30 to 40 days, often causing subjects to lose their ability to speak or recognize their own families.⁷
- **Drug-Induced Sleep (Comas):** Patients were kept in chemically induced comas for weeks or even months (up to 86 days) using heavy doses of Thorazine and other barbiturates.⁸
- **"Psychic Driving":** While the subjects were in a drug-induced state or recovering from electroshock, Cameron played looped audio recordings for 16–20 hours a day.⁹ These messages (sometimes repeated half a million times) were meant to "repattern" the brain.¹⁰
- **LSD and Sensory Deprivation:** High doses of LSD were combined with sensory deprivation (taping over eyes/ears) to further disorient the subjects and break down their sense of time and self.¹¹

3. The Consequences for Victims

The results were devastating and often permanent.¹² Many victims did not just lose specific memories; they lost the **ability to function** as adults:¹³

- **Total Retrograde Amnesia:** Many subjects forgot their names, their spouses, and their children.¹⁴
- **Regression to Infancy:** Some victims were found in a childlike state, requiring toilet training and needing to be taught how to use a fork or tie their shoes again.¹⁵
- **Permanent Cognitive Impairment:** Survivors often suffered from lifelong vertigo, inability to concentrate, and the loss of professional skills they had spent years acquiring.

4. The CIA's Operational Interest

Beyond "therapy," the CIA was looking for practical tools for the field, including:

- **"The Knockout Pill":** A substance that could be surreptitiously administered to provide "maximum amnesia" so a target would have no memory of an encounter.¹⁶
- **Memory Replacement:** Techniques to erase a captured agent's memory of their mission and replace it with a "cover story" that they would believe even under torture.

5. Destruction of Records¹⁷

In 1973, CIA Director Richard Helms ordered the destruction of all MKUltra files.¹⁸ Because of this, the full extent of the memory-erasing experiments may never be known.¹⁹ Much of what we know today comes from a small cache of financial records that survived because they were misfiled, and from the testimony of survivors during the 1977 Senate hearings.