

Project MKUltra was a top-secret CIA program (1953–1973) that sought to develop techniques for "mind control."<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

## 1. The Goal: "Depatterning"<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Cameron, working at the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal, developed a theory called **depatterning**.<sup>5</sup> 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).<sup>6</sup>

## 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.<sup>7</sup>
- **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.<sup>8</sup>
- **"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.<sup>9</sup> These messages (sometimes repeated half a million times) were meant to "repattern" the brain.<sup>10</sup>
- **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.<sup>11</sup>

### **3. The Consequences for Victims**

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

- **Total Retrograde Amnesia:** Many subjects forgot their names, their spouses, and their children.<sup>14</sup>
- **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.<sup>15</sup>
- **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.<sup>16</sup>
- **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 Records<sup>17</sup>**

In 1973, CIA Director Richard Helms ordered the destruction of all MKUltra files.<sup>18</sup> Because of this, the full extent of the memory-erasing experiments may never be known.<sup>19</sup> 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.