

MK-Ultra

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MK-Ultra was a top-secret CIA project in which the agency conducted hundreds of clandestine experiments—sometimes on unwitting U.S. citizens—to assess the potential use of LSD and other drugs for mind control, information gathering and psychological torture. Though Project MK-Ultra lasted from 1953 until about 1973, details of the illicit program didn't become public until 1975, during a congressional investigation into widespread illegal CIA activities within the United States and around the world.

The Cold War and Project MK-Ultra

In the 1950s and 1960s—the height of the [Cold War](#)—the United States government feared that Soviet, Chinese and North Korean agents were using mind control to brainwash U.S. prisoners of war in Korea.

In response, Allan Dulles, director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), approved Project MK-Ultra in 1953. The covert operation aimed to develop techniques that could be used against Soviet bloc enemies to control human behavior with drugs and other psychological manipulators.

The program involved more than 150 human experiments involving psychedelic drugs, paralytics and electroshock therapy. Sometimes the test subjects knew they were participating in a study—but at other times, they had no idea, even when the hallucinogens started taking effect.

Many of the tests were conducted at universities, hospitals or prisons in the United States and Canada. Most of these took place between 1953 and 1964, but it's not clear how many people were involved in the tests—the agency kept notoriously poor records and destroyed most MK-Ultra documents when the program was officially halted in 1973.

LSD and Sidney Gottlieb

The CIA began to experiment with [LSD](#) (lysergic acid diethylamide) under the direction of agency chemist and poison expert Sidney Gottlieb. He believed the agency could harness the drug's mind-altering properties for brainwashing or psychological torture.

Under the auspices of Project MK-Ultra, the CIA began to fund studies at Columbia University, Stanford University and other colleges on the effects of the drug. After a series of tests, the drug was deemed too unpredictable for use in counterintelligence.

MK-Ultra also included experiments with [MDMA](#) (ecstasy), mescaline, [heroin](#), barbiturates, [methamphetamine](#) and psilocybin ("magic mushrooms").

Operation Midnight Climax

Operation Midnight Climax was an MK-Ultra project in which government-employed prostitutes lured unsuspecting men to CIA "safe houses" where drug experiments took place.

The CIA dosed the men with LSD and then—while at times drinking cocktails behind a two-way mirror—watched the drug's effects on the men's behavior. Recording devices were installed in the prostitutes' rooms, disguised as electrical outlets.

Most of the Operation Midnight Climax experiments took place in [San Francisco](#) and Marin County, [California](#), and in [New York City](#). The program had little oversight and the CIA agents involved admitted that a freewheeling, party-like atmosphere prevailed.

An agent named George White wrote to Gottlieb in 1971: "Of course I was a very minor missionary, actually a heretic, but I toiled wholeheartedly in the vineyards because it was fun, fun, fun. Where else could a red-blooded American boy lie, kill and cheat, steal, deceive, rape and pillage with the sanction and blessing of the All-Highest?"

The Death of Frank Olson

Frank Olson was a scientist who worked for the CIA. At a 1953 CIA retreat, Olson drank a cocktail that had been secretly spiked with LSD.

A few days later, on November 28, 1953, Olson tumbled to his death from the window of a New York City hotel room in an alleged suicide.

The family of Frank Olson decided to have a second autopsy performed in 1994. A forensics team found injuries on the body that had likely occurred before the fall. The

findings sparked conspiracy theories that Olson might have been assassinated by the CIA.

After prolonged legal proceedings, Olson's family was awarded a settlement of \$750,000, and received a personal apology from President [Gerald Ford](#) and then-CIA Director William Colby.

Ken Kesey and Other MK-Ultra Participants

Ken Kesey, author of the 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, volunteered for MK-Ultra experiments with LSD while he was a college student at Stanford University.

Kesey later went on to promote the drug, hosting LSD-fueled parties that he called "Acid Tests."

Acid Tests combined drug use with musical performances by bands including the Grateful Dead and psychedelic effects such as fluorescent paint and black lights. These parties influenced the early development of hippie culture and kick-started the 1960s psychedelic drug scene.

Other notable people who reportedly volunteered for CIA-backed experiments with LSD include Robert Hunter, the Grateful Dead lyricist; [Ted Kaczynski](#), better known as the "Unabomber"; and [James Joseph "Whitey" Bulger](#), the notorious Boston mobster.

Church Committee

In 1974, New York Times journalist Seymour Hersh published a story about how the CIA had conducted non-consensual drug experiments and illegal spying operations on U.S. citizens. His report started the lengthy process of bringing long-suppressed details about MK-Ultra to light.

The following year, President Ford—in the wake of the Watergate scandal and amid growing distrust of the U.S. government—set up the United States President's Commission on CIA Activities within the United States to investigate illegal CIA activities, including Project MK-Ultra and other experiments on unsuspecting citizens.

The Commission was led by Vice President [Nelson Rockefeller](#) and is commonly referred to as the Rockefeller Commission.

The Church Committee—helmed by [Idaho](#) Democratic Senator Frank Church—was a larger investigation into the abuses of the CIA, [FBI](#) and other U.S. intelligence agencies during and after the resignation of President [Richard M. Nixon](#).

The Church Committee delved into plots to assassinate foreign leaders, including Cuban dictator [Fidel Castro](#) and Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba. It also uncovered thousands of documents related to MK-Ultra.

These revelations resulted in Ford's 1976 [Executive Order](#) on Intelligence Activities that prohibited "experimentation with drugs on human subjects, except with the informed consent, in writing and witnessed by a disinterested party, of each such human subject."