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MIND CONTROL: MY MOTHER, THE CIA AND LSD

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HIGHLIGHT: In the 1950s the CIA set up a secret project called MKUltra to develop techniques for controlling human behaviour, with the ultimate aim of creating political assassins. As part of its experiments, thousands of civilians " African-Americans, prostitutes and Canadian psychiatric patients " were subjected, often unwittingly, to the most extreme exposure to mind-altering drugs. The project's chief psychiatrist treated the author's mother. She was lucky. Many others lost everything, including their lives

In 1954 my mother was admitted to the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal suffering from post-natal depression. She spent two months in the hospital and while there came under the care of Ewen Cameron, the head of the American Psychiatric Association, who re-diagnosed her as a paranoid schizophrenic. The diagnosis was to be repeated and hardened as years went by, even though she never re-entered the hospital, only seeing Dr Cameron as an out-patient and even then only occasionally. In 1967, Cameron died and she was released to a mostly happy, productive and creative life. She was one of the lucky ones.

In 1957, three years after my mother's release, Cameron had stepped up his treatments under the direct encouragement of the **CIA**, who financed him in a behavioural control project called MKUltra. For the next six or seven years, hundreds of Canadians were experimented on, without their consent, while the psychiatric profession stood silently by, bound by the codes of its calling. From 1957 until 1963, despite the misgivings of many in government and clinical medicine, Cameron became one of the most funded, published and renowned psychiatrists in the West.

Cameron had been a friend of Allen Dulles, the head of the **CIA**, ever since Dulles had chosen him to serve as the American psychiatric representative at Nuremberg, where he was to judge whether Rudolf Hess was fit to stand trial. The Scots-born psychiatrist was a naturalised American who, though he refused to become a Canadian resident, after the war became the chief of his own hospital in Montreal, a 30-minute drive from the US border. Crucially to the **CIA**, this meant that the experiments they wanted Cameron to carry out could be conducted on Canadians. As **CIA** psychologist John Gittinger pointed out in a deposition made during the 1980s, Canadians were deemed to be of little interest to the American public.

In 1977, with the release of documents under the US Freedom of Information Act, Cameron was discovered to have run the most extreme trials in mind control, using massive amounts of shock treatments, drugs like LSD and PCP, and particularly invasive forms of therapy he had devised called 'depatterning' and 'psychic driving'.

The Montreal Experiments, as they were later to be known, were instituted in 1953, at the start of the cold war. They were arguably the most extravagant example of the US government's widespread programme in human experimentation. Much of it is only now coming to public attention. The **CIA** has admitted to supporting human

behaviour control research at 150 institutions, including 44 universities and various hospitals, prisons and drug companies. In the 1970s, thousands of soldiers were unwittingly given LSD. They had been told they were testing gas masks and protective gear. The army also exposed up to 3,000 soldiers to BZ, a powerful hallucinogen, under development as a chemical weapon. The drug attacks the nervous system, causing dizziness, vomiting and immobility. Thousands more participated in a Medical Volunteer programme testing nerve gas, vaccines and antidotes.

The origins of the MKUltra programme were forged in 1951, after the Soviets had apparently persuaded Hungary's Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty, an outspoken anti-communist, to confess to espionage. Allen Dulles, head of the newly-born **CIA**, reasoned that the Soviets had made substantial scientific breakthroughs in behavioural control. When fresh-faced American kids, released POWs from Korean prison camps, were decanted on to the streets of American cities, passing out leaflets on the joys of communism, Eisenhower demanded action. Dulles responded by initiating an entire series of programmes in mind control, with acronyms like Bluebird, Artichoke, MKUltra, MKDelta and MKNaomi.

Ewen Cameron's work for the **CIA** was funded through the Society for Human Ecology, a **CIA** front that was connected to Cornell University in New York. Cameron and Dulles believed there was a way, through drugs, shock treatment and hypnosis, to eradicate an individual's original personality and install a new, improved one. They further believed that this procedure would eventually work on a mass scale, giving government the tools of behaviour control. A heavily edited MKUltra document of the times reads: 'The objectives were behaviour control, behaviour-anomaly production and counter measures for opposition application of similar substances.'

The ultimate goal of the MKUltra programme, it seems, was to create an army of outwardly normal operatives programmed to carry out political assassinations. In short, their very own Manchurian Candidates. Dulles and his pals, Richard Helms, scientists Sid Gottlieb and John Gittinger, and a netherworld character called George White, believed that a truth drug was the key, and they suspected that LSD was that drug. Certainly it induced massive confusion in any subject, which was, in their view, a damned good start. In order to begin testing the **CIA** commandeered the entire supply of LSD produced by Swiss manufacturer Sandoz in 1953, and when Eli Lilly in the US began manufacturing the drug they commandeered its production too.

At the end of November 1953, needing an 'unwitting' victim, Gottlieb, project monitor of MKUltra, slipped a dose of LSD to Frank Olson, a chemist specialising in airborne diseases. Olson, suffering from depression and paranoia, hurled himself out of a New York City hotel window two weeks later. The **CIA** officially, but secretly, took the position that the LSD had triggered Olson's suicide.

Undaunted, over the next 10 years the **CIA** financed a series of safe houses and apartments in San Francisco and New York City. Here it would throw parties for the inhabitants of the seedy underworld " prostitutes, their clients, nightclub patrons and employees " slip them LSD and other experimental drugs and watch, often through a two-way mirror, their resulting antics.

My family and I grew up in Knowlton, a village founded in the 1840s by three families looking for a watering hole for their relations and friends. It was a feathered pen, where no sign of messy life was allowed. The villagers were properly respectful. Neither French-Canadians nor Jews were offered property for sale until the 1970s. Knowlton was a hothouse for future Wasp leaders. In this community, with its emphasis on family and breeding, my brothers and I were considered flawed. Some mothers even considered us dangerous, and discouraged friendship. As a consequence, we grew mistrustful and hostile. We were suspicious of our mother and her behaviour, we constantly subjected her to a grim surveillance and radical interpretations of her behaviour. But we were confused. We wrestled with a fundamental contradiction. If she was what they called 'a paranoid schizophrenic', where was the evidence? To us, much of the time, she was an inspirational companion, funny, knowledgeable of the world, warm. But we didn't trust her, not entirely, not ever. For us, and for the community she lived in, she had been condemned.

To my brothers and I, a world capable of such a seemingly arbitrary and wrong sentence was a treacherous place filled

with snares and whirlpools of danger. We decided to hate the place where we grew up and we distrusted everyone, including, as time went by, our childhood friends. We clung to each other in an interlocking net of dependency and fear that only loosened when we grew much older. Nothing was ever deemed real until we had decided it to be real. And under all that complication was the overwhelming fear that we might lose our mother again, forever.

In the event my mother did suffer some temporary memory loss, but nothing to compare with some other patients who were admitted nearer to the formal start of the **CIA** programme. Leslie Orkilov, for example, who would later bring a suit against the Canadian government, lost her mother for two years. Velma Orkilov had complained of not wanting to have sex with her husband after Leslie's birth. Cameron submitted her to the entire depatterning programme. When she came home, Leslie reported to the Winnipeg Free Press: 'She was never a complete person again. It was no joy living in that family. I wonder how we lived through it. It was one long nightmare.'

Other patients lost their families. Linda MacDonald, a 57-year-old Vancouver woman, was admitted to the Allan when she was 25, for fatigue and depression following the birth of her fifth child. She was put into a drug-induced sleep for at least 86 days. She lost all memory of her life, including the ability to read and write. After she was released, she needed toilet training, and eventually lost her husband and six children. Many more of Cameron's former patients became destitute. Still others wasted away and died.

Ewen Cameron read science fiction every night before he went to sleep. In 1948, news reports of the invention of the Cerebrophone, a tape machine that taught people while they slept, caught his eye. He had one built at the Allan. He used the repeating messages, the speaker under the pillow, the subliminal approach to a supposedly defenceless human mind, to form the bedrock of the procedure he was to call 'psychic driving'. Cameron wanted to automate psychotherapy and most of all he wanted to cure schizophrenia. He also wanted to win the Nobel prize.

By 1953, he had become convinced of the efficacy of repetition. Repetition of a key phrase, uttered by the patient in taped interviews, caused, as he wrote 'discomfort, embarrassment, aversion and resentment'. In all this storm of emotion, he reasoned, must lie insight. He had a technician create a loop in tapes so that he could play back to the patient 30-second-long repetitions of significant things she or he had related to the doctor. The impact was powerful. The patient would become obsessed by the phrase, losing sleep, losing the ability to concentrate on anything else. Cameron would often have to sedate the patient.

From sedation to experimenting with psychoactive drugs was a short step. It seemed that it was now possible, through compounds found in antihistamines, a forerunner of chlorpromazine, and barbiturates to keep the patient in a controlled sleep for 65 days without serious side-effects. Since patients objected strenuously to repetition, he tried to make them more receptive through chemistry. One of the drugs used was LSD.

Cameron's next step was to overwhelm totally the patients' old behaviour patterns. The best way to do this was through electro-shock therapy, reinforced by drugs. Page-Russell shock treatment, one of the forms of shock therapy used at the time, was named after the two British doctors who developed it and involved an initial shock followed by five to nine smaller shocks. Page and Russell recommended using the treatment once or twice a week. By the time Cameron's treatment was standardised in 1955, he was using the procedure two or three times a day and called it 'depatterning'. Depatterning usually lasted from 15 to 30 days. According to reports from hospital workers at the time, the screaming echoed down the halls of the hospital. When the sedatives wore thin, patients would try to escape and the staff would have to chase after them.

Once the patient was completely confused in all spheres, psychic driving began. For the first three weeks, the patient was drugged into a half sleep, a football helmet clamped on to his or her head and the 'negative' driving message played up to 20 hours a day. The message would say something simple-minded like: 'My mother hates me, my husband wants to divorce me, my children hate me. I am a failure at everything I try,' in the patient's own voice. With some patients, Cameron intensified the negative effect by running wires to their legs and shocking them at the end of the message. After three weeks, a positive message would replace the negative, with the purpose of rebuilding a new personality on

the wreckage of the old. After 10 days of this, the patient was drugged into a complete sleep for two weeks, while his or her unconscious absorbed the new dominating force and conveniently forgot everything he or she had experienced.

In the early 1950s, there were few alternatives to Cameron's methods. The first half of the 20th century provides a litany of maltreatments of the 'mad': procedures that swung the patient around in a rotary machine to induce vomiting, or a German practice which placed the patient in a coffin with holes drilled into the lid and lowered the coffin into water until it was submerged. Many were cured to death. In America, from 1907 to 1933, the renowned and much praised Henry Cotton was so desperate for a cure for mental 'disease' that he would systematically remove the organs of his patients at Trenton State Hospital, starting with teeth, then leading to tonsils, the stomach, the small intestine, the bladder and so on. He had a death rate of 25 per cent but by the 1920s was claiming an 85 per cent recovery rate. People flocked to him. By comparison, Cameron's procedures were relatively benign.

In 1957, Cameron received his first **CIA** grant and stepped up the intensity of his psychic driving procedure. He also began work on sensory deprivation, another even more extreme 'therapy' of which he and Dulles were hopeful. He had a 'box' built in the converted stable behind his hospital and left one woman in the box for 35 days. Before prescribing this treatment, Cameron had diagnosed the 52-year-old Mary C: '. . . conversion reaction in a woman of the involuntal age with mental anxiety: hypochondriatic.' Mary C was going through the menopause. Cameron also injected some sensory deprivation patients with curare, a paralytic, presumably to immobilise them further.

The **CIA** claims that it ceased funding Cameron in 1961. Some researchers insist that the agency continued up until the end of 1963. Either way, Cameron left the Allan Memorial in 1964 after his funding evaporated. Three years later he died of a heart attack while mountain climbing near his home in Lake Placid, New York. The same year an independent study by Doctors Swartz and Termansen, commissioned by Cameron's successor, found that 50 per cent of patients relapsed within a year and of those who had reached the third stage of depatterning, 23 per cent suffered physical complications and 60 per cent persistent amnesia. Depatterning and psychic driving did not work.

By the beginning of the 1980s information about the Cameron experiments began to trickle into the press. To say that it hit our family broadside would be an understatement. For my brothers and I, these revelations confirmed and amplified our childhood fears. A bad science fiction movie had dropped into the middle of our safe, ordinary lives. The amorphous fears of childhood took on a real and fearsome shape that disoriented us all.

The newspaper reports that alerted us had been generated by a lawsuit brought against the **CIA** by nine of Cameron's patients in Washington in 1979. Years of discovery and pre-trial motions by lawyers Joe Rauh and Jim Turner had turned up tens of thousands of pages of documentation and depositions that outlined **CIA** financing of Ewen Cameron and other doctors and clinicians. Joe Rauh, a celebrated human rights advocate who had fought Senator McCarthy and represented the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in their bid for desegregated delegations to party conventions, had taken on the case partly in order to prove that 'the law is the only check on a secret agency in a democratic society'.

After more than 10 years of depositions and **CIA** diversions and delay the lawsuit wound to an end. Finally, at the beginning of the Bush presidency, the **CIA** settled for the largest sum of money possible without the formal approval of the Attorney-General. To the nine plaintiffs and the lawyers it was a hard-won victory, but it was not enough.

In Canada, there are still some 50 lawsuits lodged against the Royal Victoria Hospital, home of the Allan Memorial Institute. Despite a \$ 100,000 pay-off to each of 69 patients, many remain dissatisfied, claiming their lives and those of their families were ruined. There has been no apology from the Canadian government, even though it continued to fund Cameron's mind control experiments after the Americans had stopped. Moreover, there has been no admission of guilt from either the Canadian or American government.

Richard Helms, in his deposition to Joe Rauh in 1985, admitted that he had destroyed most of the MKUltra documents in 1973, during the government-wide panic caused by Watergate. But MKUltra continued well into the 1970s, and many **CIA** observers say there is little reason to believe it does not continue today under a different set of acronyms.

Credited among conspiracy theorists with triggering everything from **CIA**/mob assassination plots to the emergence of lethal viruses to the proliferation of the drug culture, MKUltra remains a great un-researched black hole which influences every nightmare in modern culture. For many of its victims, the nightmare will only end with death.

However, my mother has now put the Cameron experience and its aftermath firmly behind her. In her early 70s, she has recently taught herself to speak fluent French, she plays the stock market cleverly and lifts weights at the local gym. She is ambivalent about Cameron, seeing him as both a friend and an evil genius, a man who somehow, somewhere along the line, turned. Yet sometimes he supported her when she most needed it. And, despite it all, she still quotes his advice.

Elizabeth Nickson's novel The Monkey-Puzzle Tree is published by Bloomsbury (pounds 14.99)

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