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LSD and the CIA

Government operated lsd warehouses? Believe it!

Lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD, has been a sacrament of artists, would-be prophets, and other such **social chaff** since the 1960s. Invented in 1938 by chemist Dr. Albert Hofmann while looking for an analeptic (circulatory stimulant), he found it had no effect on lab animals and forgot all about it. Years later, on the fateful day 16 of April, 1953, he accidentally absorbed a little through his fingertips and **went flying on the first acid trip**. By then the CIA had a ten-year-old program running, looking for interrogation drugs and truth serums. They'd played with caffeine, barbiturates, peyote, and marijuana. They also tried to get subjects to kill while under hypnosis, rounding out an operation seemingly concocted from **the plots of situation comedies**. Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain report in their [Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD, and the Sixties Rebellion](#), that by 1953, the CIA had authorized project MK-ULTRA, designed to perfect **mind-control drugs** during the Cold War.

Conceived by Richard Helms of the **Clandestine Services Department** (yes, the CIA actually gives its departments silly names like that), it went beyond the construction of mere truth serums and ventured into disinformation, induction of temporary insanity, and other chemically-aided states. The director of MK-ULTRA, Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, figured LSD's potential as an interrogative agent paled in comparison to its capacity to publicly humiliate. Lee and Shlain note the CIA imagined a tripping public figure **might be amusing**, producing a memo that says giving acid "to high officials would be a relatively simple matter and could have a **significant effect** at key meetings, speeches, etc." But Gottlieb knew that giving LSD to people in the lab was a lot different than just passing it out, and felt the department did not have an adequate grasp on its effects. So the entire operation tripped to learn what it was like, and, according to Lee and Shlain,

agreed among themselves to slip LSD into each other's drinks. The target **never knew** when his turn would come, but as soon as the drug was ingested a ... colleague would tell him so he could make the necessary preparations (**which usually meant taking the rest of the day off**). Initially the leaders of MK-ULTRA restricted the **surprise acid tests** to [their own] members, but when this phase had run its course they started dosing other Agency personnel who had never tripped before. Nearly everyone was fair game, and surprise acid trips became **something of an occupational hazard** among CIA operatives.... The Office of Security felt that [MK-ULTRA] should have exercised **better judgment** in dealing with such a powerful and dangerous chemical. The straw that broke the camel's back came when a Security informant got wind of a plan by a few [MK-ULTRA] jokers to **put LSD in the punch** served at the annual CIA Christmas office party ... a Security memo writer... concluded **indignantly and unequivocally** that he did 'not recommend testing in the Christmas punch bowls usually present at the Christmas office parties.'

The in-house testing phase now over, MK-ULTRA decided to use the drug

surreptitiously in the street to gauge its effects. They contract-hired George Hunter White, a narcotics officer, to set up Operation **Midnight Climax**, according to Lee and Shlain, "in which drug-addicted prostitutes were hired to pick up men from local bars and bring them back to a **CIA-financed bordello**. Unknowing customers were treated to drinks laced with LSD while White sat on a **portable toilet** behind two-way mirrors, **sipping martinis** and watching every stoned and kinky moment." Lee and Shlain go on to comment, "when [White] wasn't operating a **national security whorehouse**," White threw wild parties for his "narc buddies" with his ready supply of prostitutes and drugs. He sent vouchers for "unorthodox expenses" to Gottlieb, and later said, "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, cheat, steal, rape, and pillage** with the sanction and blessing of the All-Highest?" In case one needs reminding, these claims are backed by recently unclassified information. **Yes, Virginia, truth is stranger than fiction.**

Meanwhile, **back at the ranch**, Major General William Creasy, chief officer of the Army Chemical Corps at the time, felt that psychoactive chemicals such as LSD would be the weapons of the future. He felt that, say, **spiking a city's water supply** with acid and taking over would be much more humane than firebombing it. "I do not contend," he told This Week magazine in May 1959, "that driving people crazy even for a few hours is a pleasant prospect. But warfare is never pleasant... would you rather be temporarily deranged... by a chemical agent, or burned alive...?" This sounds humanitarian: why kill if unnecessary, eh? Unfortunately, Creasy wasn't all roses and sunshine. Lee and Shlain reveal that

Major General Creasy bemoaned the fact that **large-scale testing of psychochemical weapons** in the United States was prohibited. "I was attempting to put on, with a good cover story," he grumbled, "to test to see what would happen in subways, for example, when a cloud was laid down on a city. It was denied on reasons that always seemed a little absurd to me."

Major General? And they say the Army is a true meritocracy.... Anyway, **not to be outdone by the CIA**, the Army Chemical Corps later came up with **quinuclidinyl benzilate**, or BZ, coined a **super-hallucinogen**. It affected individuals for **three days**, "although symptoms - headaches, giddiness, disorientation, auditory and visual hallucinations, and maniacal behavior - have been known to persist for as long as **six weeks**." Yipes!

Dr. Van Sim, chief of the Clinical Research Division, tried all new chemicals himself before subjecting volunteers to them. "Did he enjoy getting high, or were his acid trips **simply a patriotic duty**?" ask Lee and Shlain. Sim, who had tried acid on "several" occasions, reported, "It's not a matter of compulsiveness or wanting to be the first to try a material." He later described his first experience with BZ: "**It zonked me for three days. I kept falling down and the people at the lab assigned someone to follow me around with a mattress.**" He later received the Decoration for Exceptional Civilian Service, cited for "exposing himself to dangerous drugs 'at the risk of grave personal injury.'" Talk about lying down on the job....

Some 2800 soldiers were subsequently exposed to BZ, most of them knowingly. Air Force enlisted man Robert Bowen noted one paratrooper temporarily lost all muscle control and later seemed mad: "The last time I saw him he was taking a shower in his uniform **and smoking a cigar.**" We find that an acceptable alternative to a nuclear arsenal around here, but feel it might behoove the Government to stop abusing its own army and direct its efforts exclusively to those, say, in **middle management positions**.

Further Reading

Those wishing to know more about drug use throughout history would do well to investigate some of our other material here at History House on the subject ranging from casual drugs such as

[caffeine and opium](#), to nitrous oxide and the advent of anesthesia and a hell of a lot of giggling (parts [one](#) and [two](#)). If you're into government conspiracies, you can't get any better than highly amusing (and improbable) [plans to kill Fidel Castro](#).

Bibliography

1. Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain. [Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD, and the Sixties Rebellion](#). Grove Press, 1986.

In Brief

Before Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey, the CIA used marijuana and LSD in an effort to create mind-control drugs. This initially sober research turned into a drugfest wherein CIA operatives conducted studies with a state-run bordello and surreptitiously slipped things into each other's drinks, making surprise acid trips an occupational hazard of working at the CIA - definitely an OSHA violation.

Party On

You might also be interested in:

[Caffeine and Opium - for Babies](#)

Caffeine-addled moms and dads got Junior to behave with opium sedatives.

[What A Gas: Part I](#)

Who discovered nitrous and why did it take them so long?

[What A Gas: Part II](#)

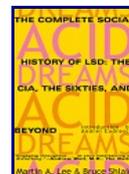
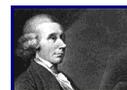
Nitrous Oxide has always been used more for fun than for medicine.

[If at First You Don't Succeed: Killing Castro](#)

What exactly did Castro do to make the CIA attempt to kill him with exploding clams?

[Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD, and the Sixties Rebellion](#) by Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain (4/5)

The authors expose the US Government's reasearch on mind altering drugs and have an impressive list of declassified CIA documents to back up their wildest claims (A government whorehouse? Believe it! See the story for more). The book initially examines government agencies and later settles into a sociologically oriented discussion of the Sixties. It delves into the growing underground drug trade which snuck its way into hippie idealism and free love and turned genuine intellectual excitement into the moral dearth of the Seventies. A fine read teeming with double agents, mystified politicians and drug gurus, it's a great book for anyone interested in the Sixties and Liberalism. [Read more at Amazon.com](#)



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