Imagine yourself at a co-worker’s party. Suddenly you start to see vivid flashes of color and people’s faces slowly start to melt away from their bodies. You slowly turn around as the lampshade behind you grows teeth and opens its menacing mouth, threatening to swallow you whole. “Breathe,” you tell yourself. It’s just an acid trip. Of your own free will, you’ve just knowingly ingested acid (LSD), and you try to calm yourself down by talking yourself through the strange experience. Now imagine this scenario happening to you without your knowledge of ingesting the drug. Regrettably, this is what happened to an unidentified number of people throughout the 1950’s. While the nation was gripped by the fear of the Cold War, the CIA was busy experimenting with LSD, in hopes of finding a truth serum or mind control agent they could use in the interrogation process. Their guinea pigs were American citizens, from all walks of life, who were told nothing beforehand about the experiments. Due to the nature of these experiments, it is clear that the CIA was truly paranoid and felt that mind control drugs were a true threat to the United States. The CIA’s secret testing of LSD on unsuspecting people in the 1950’s was fueled by paranoid thoughts.

In the 1950’s, the CIA started secretly testing LSD on people shortly after the drug was discovered. Lysergic Acid Diethylamide, or LSD, was discovered in Switzerland in 1943 by scientist Albert Hofmann. According to the article “Albert Hofmann” in The Economist, Hofmann came across LSD by accident while working on ergot fungus in the Sandoz research
lab, located in Basel, Switzerland. Hofmann accidentally ingested LSD-25 one day and soon began experiencing strange side effects. He went home shortly after, and it was there that he experienced the world’s first acid trip (98). Little did Hofmann know this new drug would be used in unethical experiments lead by the CIA.

Shortly after Hofmann discovered the effects of LSD, the CIA became highly concerned that the Communists had mind controlling drugs in their possession, and that they would soon use them against the Americans. According to the article “Mind-Control Studies Had Origins in Trial of Mindszenty” in the New York Times, after CIA employees witnessed a treason trial in Budapest, they were convinced the confession coming from the man on trial was due to the influence of some “mysterious mind-bending drug” or that he was in a “post hypnotic trance” (16). The CIA was sure that the Communists “had embarked on a campaign to control men’s minds and they were determined to find a defense” (“Mind-Control Studies Had Origins in Trial of Mindszenty” 16).

The CIA’s fears soon became reality when they learned that the Russians had purchased a large amount of LSD from the Sandoz research lab. Ira Feldman, who worked for the CIA during the 1950’s, explained to Richard Stratton, writer for Spin Magazine, that in 1951, when the CIA became aware that the Russians had purchased 50 million doses of LSD from Sandoz Pharmaceuticals, Allen Dulles (CIA director) convinced the CIA and Pentagon officials to purchase the remaining amount (first thought to be 100 million doses) of LSD before the Russians could. According to Feldman, “…LSD was lauded by military and intelligence scientists working on chemical warfare compounds and mind-control experiments as the most potent mind-altering substance known to man” (N. Pag.). Josh Clark, author of the article “Did the CIA Test LSD on Unsuspecting Americans,” agrees with this stating, “When the Sandoz
supply became known, the United States moved to take it off the market. It turned out Sandoz had manufactured only about 40,000 doses. The United States bought them anyway. And with the LSD in their possession, military researchers and the CIA began conducting their own experiments (N. Pag.). Project MK-Ultra was now underway.

Sidney Gottlieb, head of the agency’s technical services division, was in charge of MK-Ultra, which had 149 subprojects underneath it. Gottlieb soon hired George White (an undercover agent for the narcotics bureau) to run the LSD experiments. According to Clark, White and his wife would host parties in their New York apartment. It was here that White would lace his guests’ drinks with LSD. He would then observe and take notes on their reactions. Clark states, “In some instances, the effects included giddiness and euphoria; others were darker, with the subjects realizing something was terribly wrong and reacting badly” (N. Pag.). White would then release the victims out into the world, where they were left to their own devices, never really knowing what they were experiencing.

White was ordered to move the experiments from New York to San Francisco under the code name Operation Midnight Climax. The article, “LSD and the CIA: Government Operated LSD Whorehouses? Believe It!” quotes Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain (authors of the book Acid Dreams), as stating that under Operation Midnight Climax, “…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…watching every stoned and kinky moment” (N. Pag.). Feldman adds to this, stating that when White moved the experiments to San Francisco, he was hired to supply White with the prostitutes. He paid the girls, “$50 to $100 a night to lure johns to a safe house apartment that White had set up on Telegraph Hill with funds provided by the CIA.” He states
George White told him they needed to test the “mind-bending drugs” to “find out if they can be used to brainwash people” (qtd. in Stratton N.Pag.). The LSD testing that went on in San Francisco and New York were just a few of the LSD experiments taking place in the CIA from 1950 through 1960.

In 1963, CIA agent John K. Vance discovered the LSD projects on accident. According to Joe Holley, writer for the Washington Post, Vance uncovered the LSD secrets while investigating the agency’s technical services division. Due to the report done by Vance and the inspector general, MK-Ultra was put to an end. However, the public didn’t become aware of MK-Ultra until 1977, when Senator Frank Church held hearings before a senate subcommittee. Gottlieb testified and “acknowledged that the agency had administered LSD to as many as 40 unwitting subjects, including prison inmates and patrons of brothels set up by the agency” (B08). No charges were ever brought up against Gottlieb or the other men involved, even though Gottlieb admitted to destroying records pertaining to MK-Ultra. The victims of MK-Ultra were left to put the pieces of the puzzle together for themselves once MK-Ultra became public. Some families have decided to sue Gottlieb and the CIA. Some victims have settled out of court for various sums of money, some cases have gotten thrown out, and some are still on going. Gottlieb eventually died in 1999, taking the secrets of MK-Ultra with him to the grave.

Project MK-Ultra left a deep mark in the hearts of the public and the people involved. During a time when the people of the nation looked to their government to protect them, their government was the one hurting them. Many people were outraged by the LSD experiments. They felt that the CIA violated everything that America stands for. Frank Olson’s family is just a few of these people. Olson was a researcher for the CIA during the time period of MK-Ultra. Gottlieb slipped LSD into Olson’s drink and a few days later he was said to have committed
suicide (by throwing himself out of his hotel room’s window) due to a bad reaction to the drug. In a 1975 press conference release, the Olson family released a statement saying, “Though it [the CIA] was envisioned as an organization which would protect the freedom and security of Americans, the CIA has in fact substantially threatened these values” (N. Pag.). A member of the general public is quoted in the 1975 Olson family statement as agreeing with this stating, “After learning of this [Olson’s death and the LSD testings], one wonders whether there is anything the United States government is not capable of doing?” (N. Pag.). John Marks, author of *The Manchurian Candidate*, adds to the Olson family’s reaction by stating that, “…but with his [Gottlieb’s] experiments on unwitting subjects, he clearly violated the Nuremburg standards—the standards under which, after World War II, we executed Nazi doctors for crimes against humanity” (qtd. in Weiner C22). For many people, this scandal left nothing but a sour taste in their mouths and complete distrust for a top organization run by government officials.

Not everyone would agree that MK-Ultra was wrong. Some of the agents involved with the LSD experiments felt they were true patriots and were doing the nation a great favor. John Gittinger, a CIA psychologist, stated, “We were in World War II mode. The war never really ended for us” (qtd. in Weiner C22). A former agency official agreed stating, “People had quite a lot of fears, and if nothing could be done, people’s imaginations could have gone most anywhere. I think what we did helped. It proved that things weren’t as bad as people might have thought” (qtd. in “Mind-Control Studies Had Origins in Trial of Mindszenty” 16). Some of the men clearly knew what they were doing was wrong, but they still felt they were just doing their job. The article, “Mind-Control Studies Had Origins in Trial of Mindszenty” maintains that, “They [the CIA] were aware that it was considered unethical to experiment on people with drugs without their knowledge, but they decided ‘unwitting’ testing was essential if accurate
information on LSD and other substances was to be obtained” (16). For these men, MK-Ultra was essential to the country in order to protect its citizens.

This scandal reveals a culture terrorized by the fear of wars past and those yet to come. 1950 marked the beginning of the Korean War and the fear of Communist spies. People went about their day to day business with the silent reminder that the fall out shelter existed in case of a bombing. Children in schools were taught to hide under their desks if the country ever fell under attack by an atomic bomb. Paranoia was at an all time high, and the government felt that they were doing the right thing. Stratton states, “The program [MK-Ultra] began in 1953 amid growing fear of the Soviet Union’s potential for developing alternative weaponry. The atomic bomb was a sinister threat, but more terrifying still were possible Soviet assaults on the mind and body from within—through drugs and disease” (N. Pag.). MK-Ultra was a program grown from paranoid delusions the government built in their own minds. The fact that this program was kept a secret for so long shows that the government truly felt that there were Communist spies around every corner in America, just waiting to ambush at the precise moment. MK-Ultra may be one reason why many Americans feel they can’t trust their government.

This scandal also reveals a culture that faced threats that are not so different from present times. With the passing of 9/11 and the threat of biological warfare (anthrax etc.), many people felt (and still do feel) paranoia. Terrorist attacks are a real threat, yet no one suspects terrorist attacks from behind ally lines. Presently, no one in America would suspect their government could be involved in using human beings as test subjects in an illicit experiment, just as no one in the 50’s would have expected the government could be responsible for such an atrocity. No one will ever know for sure. Hopefully, the people that currently run the government have learned
that they have no right to use the citizens of America (or any nation for that matter) as guinea pigs simply to calm paranoid and delusional fears.

If the CIA never came under investigation and the experiments of MK-Ultra were carried on, the effects it would have had on America and its citizens would have been devastating. No one would be safe in a country that prides itself on security. America would be similar to something out of a horror/sci-fi movie. Government officials would feel they could do anything to anyone, anywhere, at anytime. Not only is this unethical, it also goes against everything America stands for. If the CIA felt the LSD experiments were the only way they could safeguard America, than they should have gotten permission from people before carrying out experiments on them. The fact that the people running the experiments were government officials, still gave them absolutely no right to lure people into an experiment that their minds weren’t prepared to handle. Sidney Gottlieb, head of the experiments, was even quoted as saying, “The experiments were useless” (qtd. in Weiner C22), yet they were carried on regardless. These men thought they were doing a justice to their country, but all they were doing was harming innocent people, their minds, and their families. MK-Ultra is the perfect example of what paranoia can lead people to do. One can only hope that the government has learned from their past mistakes.
Works Cited


