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Experimenting With LSD

LONG BEFORE LSD gained its popular mystique as a "psychedelic" drug, it fascinated scientists. The reason was its extraordinary potency. When it was accidentally discovered in 1943, LSD was the most powerful mind-altering drug known to exist. As a result of that realization, investigators of at least three sorts began experimenting with it. In the heated atmosphere of present-day disclosures, the origins of those investigations have been badly misunderstood.

The first form of experimentation with LSD was among civilian medical investigators. They were curious whether the drug would have application for a variety of mental disorders. Eventually, their investigations took them into the problems of alcoholism, neuroses and treatment of patients with painful terminal illnesses. Even though many of those experiments were reported in the press long ago, some of them are being reported afresh as if they were somehow sinister, secret or both. That is not true of the experiments done under the auspices of the National Institutes of Health and any number of other serious scientific organizations.

The military investigations constitute the second major known branch of LSD research. The curiosity of the military concerned the potential use of LSD as a weapon. Could it be used against U.S. military forces? Could it be used by us against others in certain situations? To what extent could military personnel be disabled by the drug? Since it existed, and since there was talk of that possibility among American military planners from the outset of its discovery, those were not unreasonable questions to investigate.

The third branch of LSD experimentation apparently

centered on the question of what would happen to American diplomatic personnel abroad if an enemy agent gimmicked a U.S. diplomat's drink with LSD. Would he become a babbling fount of information?

The problem with the military and intelligence investigations concerns the manner in which their subjects were handled, especially in the aftermath of experimentation. That a former subject should have been under such lax care as to make it possible for him to jump out of a window is hardly excusable. One of the army's subjects came forward the other day and revealed that he had been behaving with inexplicable strangeness for 18 years. He discovered why when he read of the LSD experiments in the newspapers.

It is highly debatable whether it is ever ethical to administer any drug to a subject without his informed consent. In the case of the intelligence investigations, part of the problem concerns the object of the experiments. If the investigators wanted to find out what would happen in cases of surreptitious administration, it would be hard to validate the results without duplicating the feared conditions. Even granting that point, it is still possible to handle the experiment in such a way as to protect the subject afterward. Yet, in the case of the military and the intelligence experiments, evidence exists that many of the subjects were left to fend for themselves afterward. That is unfair to the subjects and their families, and that lesson should now be clear to anyone experimenting with such drugs. Both President Ford and CIA Director William Colby have made plain that they do not intend the cavalier and brutal errors of the past to be repeated.