

# C.I.A. in the Early Nineteen-Fifties Was Among

**By BOYCE RENSBERGER**  
 The Central Intelligence Agency was one of the pioneers in studying the drug LSD, having begun its research eight years before Dr. Timothy Leary swallowed his first dose of the powerful mind-altering substance.  
 The C.I.A., a review of the history of LSD research indicates, began its experiments with the drug at about the same time the Army and Navy began their studies of what was then, in the early nineteen-fifties, a mysterious drug with extraordinary powers to modify perception, thought, emotion and behavior.  
 LSD's potential utility as a chemical warfare agent was obvious from its earliest days in the laboratory in the late nineteen-forties.  
 Standard reference works on chemical warfare agents list LSD as one of a handful of "psychochemicals" under study

by the chemical warfare research laboratories once housed at Fort Detrick and at Edgewood Arsenal, both in Maryland. Chemical warfare research at these centers has since been phased out.  
**Plunged to His Death**  
 When Dr. Frank R. Olson, the bacteriologist employed at Fort Detrick who was given LSD by C.I.A. experimenters, plunged from a New York hotel window to his death 22 years ago, the drug had only been made available to researchers in the United States a few months earlier by the Sandoz Research Laboratories of Switzerland.  
 Various government agencies had been working with the drug for several years, having obtained it privately. A few civilian researchers had also begun work earlier, including Dr. Howard A. Abramson, the psychiatrist to whom the C.I.A. took Dr. Olson when he began

experiencing bad reactions to the drug.  
 LSD, or lysergic acid diethylamide, was first synthesized in 1938 by Dr. Albert Hofmann, a Sandoz chemist in Basel. The chemical's effects on the mind were not discovered until 1943 when Dr. Hofmann accidentally inhaled some LSD powder and experienced "a peculiar sensation" in which "fantastic pictures of extraordinary plasticity and intensive color seemed to surge toward me."  
 In 1947 the first systematic study of the effects of the curious compound confirmed Dr. Hofmann's earlier conclusions and spurred other researchers to investigate. Dr. Abramson began his experiments with LSD in 1951.  
 Because of the drug's wide-ranging effects, it was studied as a possible treatment for mental illness and as a way of producing artificial and temporary psychoses for research. According to Dr. Sidney Co-

hen of the University of California at Los Angeles, another pioneer in LSD research, the drug disrupts the brain's normal ability to sort and code incoming information, thereby permitting an overflow sensation and a loss of one's "sense of self." Visual and tactile hallucinations are common.  
 In the early days, Dr. Cohen said, LSD was of interest to military and intelligence agencies because it was thought it might be a way of "breaking down a person's defenses" during interrogation. There was interest in the drug's usefulness as such an agent and in finding an antidote to protect American military and intelligence personnel.  
 The drug would also have obvious value as a way of temporarily incapacitating individuals. Because extremely small doses of the drug are effective, LSD is almost impossible to detect in body tissues. The drug was also studied by chemical warfare scientists for use in a gas or aerosol form.

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## Pioneers in Research on LSD's Effects

to knock out enemy armies. Accounts of Dr. Olson's death have indicated that he apparently committed suicide more than a week after receiving LSD. All trace of the drug is ordinarily broken down by the human body and excreted within 24 hours. For this reason, Dr. Cohen and other authorities said the suicide could hardly have been a direct result of the drug.  
 Rather, Dr. Cohen suggested, the drug probably stirred up such a storm in Dr. Olson's mind that some long repressed memory or other information became conscious and had a depressing effect on Dr. Olson's mood. Dr. Olson's wife has said that after taking LSD he seemed "very melancholy" and talked of quitting his job because of some mistake he had made.  
 Dr. Cohen suggested that although the immediate effects of LSD had long subsided, the depression they spawned deepened and Dr. Olson became suicidal.

Dr. Cohen said such reactions, although uncommon, have occurred in other circumstances, particularly when the recipient of the LSD was not under close psychiatric supervision.  
 Dr. Judd Marmor, president of the American Psychiatric Association, issued a statement yesterday saying that giving LSD to a person without his full informed consent is unethical, even if done in the purported interest of "national security."  
 "Once you open that door," Dr. Marmor said, "you open the door to the potential for the ruthless modification of people's minds on the grounds of national security. I think that . . . would be a very dangerous thing from the standpoint of a democratic society."  
 From 1953 to 1966 the National Institute of Mental Health granted \$7.5-million to fund 84 research projects studying LSD. Some scientists examined the drug's chemical

properties, some studied its effects in animals and a few gave it to human beings.  
 The C.I.A.'s research on LSD is said to have continued from 1953 to 1963.  
 From the early nineteen-sixties on, it was increasingly apparent that quantities of LSD were being diverted from legitimate research by such persons as Dr. Leary, who upon expulsion from the Harvard faculty, went on to become a drug cult hero.  
 In 1966, faced with a growing barrage of publicity about drug abuse, Sandoz stopped production of LSD and the pace of research on the drug declined. It has now virtually ceased, even though some scientists such as Dr. Cohen believe LSD may still have a role to play in psychotherapy.  
 Despite Sandoz's move, illicit sources of the drug, which is only moderately difficult to make under clandestine circumstances, continues to supply a reduced number of recreational users of LSD.