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Control C.I.A., Not Behavior

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So we must add repugnant medical experimentation to the list of horror stories emerging from the Central Intelligence Agency. It was no secret that the agency once hunted desperately for means to control human behavior, but the pertinent records were believed destroyed. Now, thanks to persistent critics and a diligent search by one agency employee, a batch of records has been found and, in edited form, released. Other evidence has come from an investigation by reporters of The Times and testimony by the C.I.A. director, Stansfield Turner.

The full facts may never come out. The found records are mostly financial documents, lacking narrative detail. But some of the research into drugs, hypnosis, shock and other techniques of behavior control was clearly unethical and perhaps illegal. The original motive was to develop a defense against the presumed mind-control expertise of the Russians and Chinese, but the program soon took on offensive (in both senses) characteristics. One objective, for example, was to program individuals so that they might do the agency's bidding even to the point of ignoring "such fundamental laws of nature as self-preservation." We are not sufficiently schooled in ethics to know how this differs from murder.

The means as well as the ends were often outrageous. In some of the research projects, individuals were drugged without their knowledge—any handy individuals, such as patrons of bars in New York and San Francisco, criminal sexual psychopaths confined in a state hospital, and apparently even assorted cancer patients. A nurse reportedly required hospitalization for delusions after she was placed in a dark, silent room to test the effects of sensory deprivation. No one seems to know how many citizens were used as guinea pigs and how many were directly harmed. Mercifully, some techniques, such as neurosurgery, were apparently ruled out as too dangerous. And as early as 1957, the C.I.A.'s inspector general understood that "some of the activities are considered to be professionally ethical and in some instances border on the illegal." But the pursuit of mind control continued well into the 1960's, possibly into the 1970's.

So did an obsession with the occult. Agency idea-men debated ways to dissolve the Berlin Wall, make rubber

from mushrooms, locate Soviet submarines by water witching and deliver clandestine messages by mental telepathy. This was not just imaginative brain-storming; it was fantasy fit for minds adrift on a sea of cloaks and daggers.

Mr. Turner testified this week that the C.I.A. had sponsored behavior control experiments by some 185 non-government scientists at some 80 institutions in the 1950's and 1960's. Most of the researchers were unaware of the agency's interest and support and much of the work was said to have been ethical and competent. Mr. Turner added that the agency was no longer running drug tests on either witting or unwitting subjects.

That, however, cannot be the end of the matter. The C.I.A. and the entire Government must pursue every potential victim, for treatment and compensation—a task whose feasibility is already under study. And the Congress must turn again to the stubborn question of safeguards against future perversions of what is still dignified by the label "intelligence."

Whatever formal structures are erected within Government to hold our most secret agencies accountable, there is no substitute for also holding their senior officials ethically and legally responsible as individuals for all activities. Even at this late date, if only as a deterrent, the country should be told who sanctioned such projects, and how. Moreover, Congress should think again about its drift toward new laws that would stiffen the penalties for the disclosure of classified information. The reporting of such abuses will often depend on the willingness of low-level officials to turn against the judgments and orders of superiors.

Congress might also consider a requirement that the C.I.A. follow a set of formal ethical standards in its research—perhaps the Nuremberg code or the guidelines issued in recent years by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. We know now that the C.I.A. once hired a magician to instruct it in sleight-of-hand techniques that might help in the surreptitious administering of drugs. No amount of reassuring patter ought to be trusted in watching over an agency with tricks like that up its sleeve.