“Poisoner in Chief: Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA Search for Mind Control”
Stephen Kinzer, 2019, 354 pages, Henry Holt and Company, $30.00
Review by Norman M. Goldfarb

“Poisoner in Chief: Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA Search for Mind Control” tells the you-can’t-make-this-stuff-up story of Sidney Gottlieb’s unbelievable career as the CIA’s leader in research on mind-altering drugs, as well as his work-a-day attempts to assassinate foreign leaders and other routine CIA assignments.

Gottlieb’s principal cold-war mission, mostly conducted in the MK-ULTRA project under his direction, was to surpass Soviet and Red Chinese efforts to develop and test methods to brainwash, disorient, cause amnesia, extract secret information, etc. His agent of choice was LSD. In 1953, the CIA purchased the entire world supply of LSD from Sandoz for $240,000. Gottlieb was disappointed to learn that only 10 grams was available, instead of the expected 10 kilograms. At a standard dose of 100 micrograms, 10 grams constituted a mere 10,000 doses. He was later able to source LSD by the pound.

Whitey Bulger, the notorious Boston gangster, described his experience in an experiment sponsored by MK-ULTRA, in which he was given a “medicine for schizophrenia” nearly every day for 15 months:

In 1957, while a prisoner at the Atlanta penitentiary, I was recruited by Dr. Carl Pfeiffer of Emory University to join a medical project that was researching a cure for schizophrenia. For our participation, we would receive three days of good time for each month on the project... We were injected with massive doses of LSD-25. In minutes the drug would take over, and about eight or nine men — Dr. Pfeiffer and several men in suits who were not doctors — would give us tests to see how we reacted. Eight convicts in a panic and paranoid state. Total loss of appetite. Hallucinating. The room would change shape. Hours of paranoia and feeling violent. We experienced horrible periods of living nightmares and even blood coming out of the walls. Guys turning to skeletons in front of me. I saw a camera change into the head of a dog. I felt like I was going insane.

The men in suits would be in a room and hook me up to machines, asking questions like: “Did you ever kill anyone? Would you kill someone?” Two men went psychotic. They had all the symptoms of schizophrenia. They had to be pried loose from under their beds, growling, barking and frothing at the mouth. They put them in a strip cell down the hall. I never saw or heard of them again... They told us we were helping find a cure for schizophrenia. When it was all over, everyone would feel suicidal and depressed, wrung out emotionally. Time would stand still. I tried to quit, but Dr. Pfeiffer would appeal to me: “Please, you’re my best subject, and we are close to finding the cure.”

Obviously, none of MK-ULTRA’s experiments had oversight by an ethics committee. At best, they employed only a deceptive and perfunctory informed consent process. It is unclear whether any had a protocol, as the term is understood today. Experimental methods were, one might say, rather loose, for example: dosing a punchbowl at a whorehouse Gottlieb operated in San Francisco, and using prostitutes— the only trained professionals in the place — to solicit confidential information after personal services had been rendered.
After decades of work, Gottlieb concluded that the effects of LSD and other psychoactive drugs were too unpredictable for practical application by the CIA. On the other hand, some of MK-ULTRA’s experimental subjects, e.g., Ken Kesey and Allen Ginsberg, found other applications for LSD.

The book includes 16 chapters:
1. I Needed More of a Challenge
2. Dirty Business
3. Willing and Unwilling Subjects
4. The Secret That Was Going to Unlock the Universe
5. Abolishing Consciousness
6. An Effort to Tamper with This Project, MK-ULTRA, Is Not Permitted
7. Fell or Jumped
8. Operation Midnight Climax
9. The Divine Mushroom
10. Health Alteration Committee
11. We Must Always Remember to Thank the CIA
12. Let This Die with Us
13. Some of Our People Were Out of Control in Those Days
14. I Feel Victimized
15. If Gottlieb Is Found Guilty, It Would Be a Real First
16. You Never Can Know What He Was

Reviewer
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