

Brainwashing

The American public first heard of brainwashing in reports on American prisoners from the Korean War. In response the CIA undertook a secret project called MK-ULTRA to investigate mind control.

Text

Americans were first introduced to the term "brainwashing" during the Korean War (1950-1953) against the Communist North Koreans and Chinese. In several articles for Miami Daily News and New Leader Magazine, the journalist Edward Hunter (1902-1978) claimed that the Chinese military were practicing powerful new techniques of mind control on American prisoners of war. (It was later claimed that the CIA sourced Hunter's story.) These allegations captured the public imagination. After a decade of stories about the evils of Marxism, the American population readily believed that their enemies would try such measures to convert them into Communists.

The American turncoats

Apparent validation of Hunter's claims came in April 1953 from over one hundred American prisoners released by the Chinese. These soldiers reported that they had been subjected to a barrage of psychological techniques designed to change their beliefs in the American way of life. In September the situation became even more worrying to the American public after an armistice was signed with the Communist forces. Twenty-three American prisoners renounced their citizenship, choosing instead to remain in China. These "turncoats" publicly expressed their newfound views in the media and were even shown singing the Communist Internationale anthem in the Korean neutral zone.

In the period following this incident there was intense debate over why these soldiers converted to Communism. Almost all American prisoners of war did not succumb to the techniques to convert them. Therefore many magazines and newspapers tried to find clues in the men's history for why these particular soldiers swapped sides. Such reasons included low intelligence, poor upbringing, rebelliousness, and forming relationships with Chinese women. However, the overall result of the episode was that throughout the Cold War the American public associated Communists with brainwashing.

These images of Communist mind control were portrayed across American society in films and novels. One of the most compelling was American author Richard Condon's (1915-1996) book *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959), which was made into a Frank Sinatra movie in 1962. Condon's story depicted Communist scientists from the Russian Pavlov Institute converting captured American soldiers into assassins with hypnosis and drugs.

The CIA and mind control

Shortly after the apparent incidences of communist mind control in April 1953, the newly appointed CIA director Allen Dulles (1893-1969) gave a lecture in which he described "how

sinister the battle for men's minds had become in [Communist] hands." Furthermore, "the individuals so conditioned can merely repeat the thoughts that have been implanted in their minds by suggestion from outside." A few days later he authorized project MK-ULTRA, the CIA's secret drug and mind control program over the fifties and sixties.

A later CIA memo from August 1963 described the aims of the MK-ULTRA program. It was to explore "avenues to the control of human behavior." The techniques that were investigated included "chemical and biological materials capable of producing human behavioral and physiological changes," and "radiology, electro-shocks, harassment substances, various fields of psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and anthropology." These projects were investigated secretly by the CIA in trials on each other and even on unwitting human subjects. In addition the CIA sponsored over one hundred University research projects through a cover organization called *The Society for Investigation of Human Ecology*. Much of this work looked into the more theoretical side of the CIA's research into human behavior.

Although it is impossible to be certain of the full range of the CIA's investigations, some documents do indicate the kind of research taking place. Examples included giving the powerful hallucinogen LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) to unsuspecting citizens, and using hypnosis and various drugs in interrogation. They were also looking for ways to induce amnesia and for methods of encouraging people to change their basic value system. In retrospect, much of this research would now be considered professionally unethical.

Some experts now claim that the CIA did not succeed in developing methods to brainwash individuals. On the other hand, parts of their research are likely to have aided interrogation techniques, while there are known psychological methods that encourage people to change their core beliefs. The indoctrination of members into religious cults is a controversial example of such phenomena, for example. However, the overall results of the CIA's research program are largely unknown to this day. In 1973 the Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms (1913-2002), ordered his employees to destroy many of their MK-ULTRA records.

Box: Mind control techniques

Although one cannot be sure of the techniques used by intelligence agencies, academics have made studies of how religious cults attempt to indoctrinate individuals. These findings are controversial, however, with other scientists disputing whether they actually constitute brainwashing.

These techniques are hypothesized to rely on behavioral conditioning, a form of learning discovered by Russian physiologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov (1849-1936). A conditioned reflex is where an event automatically triggers a reaction. For example, if every time a dog receives food a bell rings, then the dog will automatically salivate when just the bell rings. Such conditioning is also effective in humans, and is the basis for therapeutic methods of treating patients with psychological problems.

Brainwashing reportedly uses this conditioning on individuals whose mental state has been made more suggestible and less rational. This could be by fasting, physical discomfort, sleep

deprivation, or intoxicating drugs. Electric shocks or insulin injections could also have a similar effect. The victims are then subjected to a barrage of psychological methods designed to make them accept new allegiances or belief systems. Such methods include isolation from former associates, forced obedience, rewards for cooperation, punishments or torture for non-cooperation, and continual reinforcement of these techniques.