



Episode 1,494: The CIA and Mind Control

Guest: Stephen Kinzer

WOODS: As soon as I saw this title, I thought this is a definite. This thing is an absolute definite. And it's been interesting to see you've gotten some really good publicity already. I saw a write-up that NPR had. There's a natural interest in this, of course. And before getting into the details, I wonder, these days, if the CIA were ever to get up to something like this again, I wonder if we would know about it. I have the feeling that there's much more of a hunker-down, "don't reveal anything" mentality in Washington than there is a "Congress really wants to investigate and get to the bottom of things." Am I being too cynical?

KINZER: I think you're right, that a story like the one I tell in this book reveals something beyond the amazing story that it tells itself. After I spent a couple of years immersed in this story, I couldn't help but emerge asking myself: were there other Gottliebs? Are there? Could it be possible that projects like the one I describe in my book, that are bloody and have operations all over the world and are run by people who have a license to kill issued by the US government, are actually going on now? It makes you wonder how great the secret sphere really is, because in this book, I describe an amazing worldwide project that nobody knew anything about, even though it involves the most extreme experiments on human beings ever conducted by an agency of the US government and resulted in an unknown number of deaths. So how do you keep something like that secret? It certainly worked in Gottlieb's case for many years. And it does, to me, raise these larger questions of how powerful the secret sphere is, considering what we now know about how secret it was in a time when we didn't have available all the tools that we do have now to keep things secret.

WOODS: What was Sydney Gottlieb's background, such that he would be entrusted with a project like this?

KINZER: Gottlieb was a fascinating character. So the story of what he did is essentially the center of my book, but who he was makes it all the more interesting. So he was hired by the CIA as a young man. He was just 33. And his job was going to be to be the chief chemist at the CIA and then oversee the CIA search for mind control.

Now, the early CIA was made up largely of people who came from the same silver-spoon aristocracy and people who knew each other from Ivy League schools and prep schools and the same investment banks and the same law firms and private clubs and so forth. Gottlieb wasn't like that. He was a son of Jewish immigrants, grew up in the Bronx, went to public school and City College of New York. He had clubfoot, so he limped. He also stuttered. So he was very unlike the other officers in the early CIA.

And he also had another very interesting aspect to his persona that set him apart from everyone he worked with. He was something like a proto-hippie. He lived in a cabin in the woods with no running water. He meditated. He studied Buddhism. He grew his own vegetables. He got up before dawn to milk the goats. So here you have this odd Jekyll-and-Hyde character, who during the day is directing horrific experiments on three continents, and at night is thinking about his spiritual being and what else he can do to help humanity and be a wonderful, deep spiritual person. So it just adds just another layer to this amazing story.

WOODS: I hadn't realized that the US government drew certain conclusions about the whole Cardinal Mindszenty in 1949, where this Hungarian cardinal came forth and confessed to crimes that everybody knew he hadn't committed, and that clearly the Soviet Union had put him up to this and had tortured him in some way to making these confessions, and Pius XII was outraged at the whole episode. And so everybody knew this was a false confession. But the question was: what had the Soviets gotten up to get him to make a confession like this? And apparently, a number of people became convinced that they had mastered some kind of new mind control techniques. And this false assumption then helped to lead them down this road of Sidney Gottlieb and looking for some way, indeed, to match the Soviets, allegedly, in the ability to engage in mind control.

KINZER: So Sydney Gottlieb's mind control project, MKUltra, lasted for ten years and destroyed an unknown number of lives. At the end of the ten years, he came to the conclusion that it was all failure, and actually, there's no such thing as mind control.

So I had to ask myself: what led people like Gottlieb and the others in the early CIA to believe that there was such a thing? And I think there were two levels to it. It starts even before these people get into the CIA, when they're young people and when they're civilians, they were all absorbing books and movies in which mind control was a central theme. There's so many films like *Svengali*, where you are hypnotized into doing something you would never do before, or a potion is put in your drink and then you forget everything or you become a completely different person. So these are all fictional ideas. They just came out of imagination. But I think some of these people like Gottlieb and his bosses at the CIA imbibed these stories, and they weren't able to see the boundary between fiction and reality. They thought, *Oh, it looks good on the screen. Must be true*. So that was the beginning.

And then, in the beginning of the Cold War, in the late '40s and early '50s, came two episodes, including one to which you refer, that played on this preexisting false belief in the mystery of mind control. One was the trial of Cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary. It turned out later on that he had been coerced by the same methods that prison guards have been using to coerce prisoners for centuries: extended isolation, beatings, and various other kinds of normal torments. But the CIA couldn't see it this way. They decided that he must have been brainwashed, and that this was evidence that the Soviets, the communists, had developed some nefarious mind control tool, and therefore, we should get into the race as well.

Then soon afterward, when American prisoners who had been taken during the Korean War were released, it turned out that a number of them had signed statements denouncing the United States and some had confessed to war crimes, including dropping germ bombs on North Korea, which the US government strenuously insisted never happened. How could they have done this? How could our strapping young men have ever signed statements like that? Again, the CIA came up with the one explanation that they wanted to find: brainwashing. So these episodes fell onto the fertile ground of imagination that had been fed by all these

movies and books, and then set the CIA off on a quest to try to make this imaginary state of mind, the ability to control other people, something real.

WOODS: I guess, was LSD the first major thing they tried?

KINZER: LSD was Sidney Gottlieb's obsession. He really believed, as one of his coworkers put it later on, that this could be the key that would help us unlock the universe.

WOODS: Yeah, now, that's an interesting phrase, but is he thinking about it as a weapon that, if you were under the influence of LSD, that maybe you would be highly suggestible, or that you would be mentally disabled somehow? What was the weapon aspect of LSD that he hoped for?

KINZER: Oh, there were a couple of things. First of all, he wanted to see if he could use it on individuals. So could you make a person disoriented? Could you alter the mind of a person in such a way that you could program them through the use of LSD? It later turned out, as he put it, that LSD was far too unpredictable to have any of this effect.

But he also used LSD for something far more sinister. Gottlieb concluded that if you're going to find a way to take over someone's mind, to implant a new mind in somebody's brain, the first thing you have to do is blow away the mind that's in there. So he spent years with some poor, victimized subjects, many of whom were either imprisoned or had no idea what was happening to them, and he tested all these extreme drug combinations, plus sensory deprivation, plus electroshock, to try to find ways to blow away a person's mind.

One of those ways was massive overdoses of LSD. I came across one experiment that he did, for example, in a prison, where he had the prison doctor isolate seven African American inmates and lock them into individual cells, then feed them what were described as double, triple, and quadruple doses of LSD every day for 77 days. So what he was trying to do was find a way to destroy a mind. And actually, he did. The end conclusion he reached was you can destroy someone's mind with enough bombardment, but you cannot implant another mind in its place. So those victims were given massive doses of LSD as part of Gottlieb's search for a way to destroy, or as he put it, as a way of abolishing consciousness.

WOODS: Now, they tried this in various ways. From what I understand from reading your book, people would be — sometimes they were drug users, sometimes they were petty criminals, people who, well, wouldn't really dare to speak out against what had been done to them. And they would be taken and involuntarily given this drug. So the key thing here is that this wasn't like a thing where you volunteered to sign up in the interest of science.

KINZER: Yeah, he did both. He did administer volunteer experiments, but he also entrapped people. He had a secret apartment, a safe house in New York City and then another one in San Francisco, where we actually hired prostitutes to bring men back into the apartment, where they would they'd be dosed with LSD so their reactions could be observed. And of course, these men had no idea what was happening to them. And since there was no follow-up, we can only imagine what might have gone on in some of their minds.

But the other piece of this LSD obsession that Gottlieb had, and he later on said that he had used LSD at least 200 times himself, had to do with turning on what became the American

counterculture. So Gottlieb was the first acid visionary. He brought LSD to the United States. In 1953, he arranged for the CIA to buy the entire world's supply of LSD from the chemical company in Switzerland that manufactured it. He then used a couple of bogus foundations to inform universities and hospitals around the United States that there was no money available for research into this new drug, and we'll supply you with the drug as well.

So this was a way where they would actually just ask for volunteers. People would come in, and they would be given a dose of LSD, and then their reactions would be recorded. Among the people who showed up as volunteers were Ken Kesey, who went on to write *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; Robert Hunter, the lyricist for the Grateful Dead; Allen Ginsberg. These are people that all got their first LSD from Sidney Gottlieb, from MKUltra, from the CIA. Of course, they didn't realize that at the time, but in later life, they all did come to realize it. And I use a few quotes from people like John Lennon, who when asked about LSD said, "We must always remember to thank the CIA."

In fact, Timothy Leary, who became the high priest of psychedelic drugs, also had his first exposure through the Sidney Gottlieb, although like everybody else, he never heard that name. So Tim Leary first got interested in psychedelics when he read an article in *Life* magazine in 1957 about an expedition by a couple of Americans to Mexico, where they were able to find the so-called magic mushroom. That's what electrified Tim Leary, and he went off and then tried the mushroom, and everything else happened after that. But he had no way of knowing that that expedition that found the magic mushroom was secretly financed by Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA. And one of the guys that went was a CIA agent. So even Tim Leary got his LSD interest directly from the CIA. And that's really one of the great ironies of Sidney Gottlieb's life, that LSD, the drug that he hoped would give the CIA the mechanism to control people's minds, actually wound up fueling a generational rebellion aimed at destroying everything that the CIA defended and held dear.

WOODS: That's one of those cases of unintended consequences that we hear about so very often. I feel like I'm taking liberties here when I ask you about Frank Olson, because it's such an involved story. It's so mysterious, and to me, it was one of the most gripping parts of your book. So I don't want to spoil anything for people, but at the same time, doggone it, I'm so fascinated by the story of Frank Olson, especially the way you described the events. It read like a novel, the beginning of that chapter. I'm sure that's what you were going for. And eventually, you get to the point where Frank Olson jumps out the window to his death.

KINZER: Or does he?

WOODS: Yeah, or does he? Yeah, I love the name of the chapter, "Fell or Jumped," because that's what I guess his son was told. "Your father fell or jumped from the window." There's a pretty big difference, as his son noted later, between fell or jumped.

KINZER: And there's a third option, which is: was pushed.

WOODS: Yeah, "was pushed," right.

KINZER: They didn't bring that one up. So this is one of the great remaining mysteries of MKUltra. There were only a small group of chemists in the inner circle that knew everything

that MKUltra was doing. One of them was Frank Olson, who already was working on these projects even before Gottlieb arrived.

So during the summer of 1953, Frank Olson made a trip to Europe, where the CIA was conducting these extreme interrogations on poor, unfortunate, who he called Expendables. He watched people being tortured and dying under torture after being given toxins that he himself had prepared back in the United States. He became very distraught by this, and he talked to a couple of people about how upset he was. He even told one of his friends he wanted to quit the CIA. Then he told that to a couple of his colleagues at the CIA.

Well, Frank Olson knew some of the very deepest and darkest secrets of the Cold War. MKUltra was a big secret even within the CIA, so the idea that one of the people that knew everything about it might be quitting and walking away, unhappily – and at one point, he even asked a friend, "Do you know a good journalist?" – was terrifying to the other members of the group.

The group leader, Sidney Gottlieb, convened a retreat in which the group all got together for a few days, and he arranged for Frank Olson to be surreptitiously dosed with LSD. And we don't know the exact reason for that. Was it to try to get him to see if he could be lured into saying things he shouldn't say? Were they trying to test him in some way? In any case, he didn't change his mind. He didn't decide everything was wonderful again. He remain troubled. And a week later, he went out a 13th-floor hotel window in New York City.

Now, I can tell you that although that case was immediately described as a suicide, even now, even in these current days, the New York City medical examiner is considering the question of whether to reclassify that death from cause unknown, which is what it became after the suicide verdict was overruled, to homicide. If so, that would open up a whole new investigation and bring the whole Gottlieb story back to life, because if Frank Olson was pushed out that window – and a lot of circumstantial evidence suggests that he was – it certainly would have been Sidney Gottlieb who was involved in the decision that that had to be done.

WOODS: Yeah, that's an extraordinary story. Now, there are other things we could talk about, too. We could talk about mushrooms. Well, first of all, what do you think is the worst the absolute worst thing that was done as part of this program?

KINZER: Inside the United States, a number of people in prisons were given extended doses of LSD and other drugs. In Canada, an MKUltra experiment resulted in the destruction of many minds, as people were put into comas for weeks and weeks, then subjected to flashing strobe lights during this coma state. They were given headphones with phrases like "My mother hates me" repeated tens of thousands of times over days and days, all as a way to try to destroy their minds.

But you could argue that even worse than these were the experiments that were conducted on the so-called Expendables overseas. I went and discovered the location of the first – I think it might have been the very first CIA secret prison. It's located in a beautiful villa in Germany, and in fact, I have a photograph of that villa in my book, *Poisoner in Chief*. And it looks like you could go there for a nice wine tasting in the afternoon. It's a lovely villa.

The guy that owns it took me into the basement and showed me the cells and he said, "Here, the CIA carried out experiments that were just a continuation of what the Nazis were doing in the concentration camps." And in fact, MKUltra and Gottlieb had former Nazi doctors on their payroll, helping to give them ideas for how they could destroy people's minds and bodies. Then the guy who owns this house now, which has been turned into nice apartments, also told me people in the neighborhood have said to me that everyone knows what was happening here, and the bodies of the victims are buried out in places that used to be forests that are now covered by apartment blocks and shopping malls.

We have indications that the same kind of thing happened in East Asia, that extreme experiments were conducted on people, and when they failed, the victims were shot. So although experiments inside the United States resulted in the destruction of many minds, when it came to deaths, and we don't know how many there were, those were carried out in these super-extreme experiments that Gottlieb was overseeing at secret CIA prisons across Asia and Europe.

WOODS: What was Gottlieb's role in attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro?

KINZER: This is what first got me into the story. So I vaguely became aware that if there had been poisons made for foreign leaders, somebody must be a poisoner. Somebody must make those poisons, and who would that be? That's how I found Sidney Gottlieb. So he was the "poisoner in chief" of the title of my book. But as I began to research him, I then realized that he had all this other stuff, and that actually making poisons for foreign leaders was just one of his sidelights.

So the Fidel Castro project is really an amazing example of Gottlieb's imagination. President Eisenhower ordered Castro "sawed off," as he put it, in the spring of 1960. And the CIA then had this brilliant idea, as has been amply documented, that they would hire the mafia to do it. The CIA intermediary met with two leading mafia gangsters in Las Vegas, and they told him something which seems like it makes a lot of sense. They said the idea of gunning Castro down like you would see in the movies about what happened with Al Capone in Chicago, that's not going to work. That's a dumb idea, because the shooter would never be able to get away. You must have somebody on your payroll that makes poisons, right? Well, of course, they had never heard of Sidney Gottlieb. Nobody had. But they were right. There was a person that made poisons.

So Gottlieb then went on to spend years, literally, making poisons intended to kill Fidel Castro. He used botulinum poison to infect a box of 50 cigars that were supposed to be passed to Castro. They never could get to Castro. So then Gottlieb went to making pills that were passed to agents who were thought to have access to Castro. He was even asked to create a poison wetsuit. So Castro liked scuba diving, and the idea was that we'd get someone to give him as a gift a wet suit, which would have a poison inside that would kill or incapacitate him. Who would make such a poison? There's only one person. It was Sidney Gottlieb. He knew more about poisons than any person in America and probably more than anyone in the world.

So he had a fantastic array of different organic toxins and bioweapons in his secret freezers, and he could take them out and mix potions, which not only could kill or incapacitate, but could do it either immediately or after a long time so the person would be able to get home or get away without being noticed. And he even had pills that were used by CIA officers in case they had to commit suicide. You'll remember that Gary Powers, the U-2 pilot who was

shot down over Russia in 1960, was carrying a suicide device. So around his neck, he had a silver dollar, and that silver dollar had a pin stuck into a cavity around the edge. And if you pulled out that pin, it was coated with a shellfish toxin. You just had to stick your skin within anywhere, and you'd be dead within 15 seconds. The only person that could make that was Sidney Gottlieb, and that's why he really deserves this title. He was America's poisoner in chief.

WOODS: All right, one last thing then. Senator Mike Mansfield became known for wanting more transparency at the CIA and oversight of the CIA, which was something that obviously Gottlieb didn't want, the CIA didn't want, Eisenhower in the '50s didn't want. But we did get the Church Committee, ultimately. We did find out some stuff. So when was it that we came to know about MKUltra, and did anything ever happen to Sidney Gottlieb?

KINZER: So at the end of Gottlieb's career, as he was walking out the door of the CIA in 1973, he agreed with his boss, the CIA director Richard Helms, who had been his protector and enabler for 20 years at the CIA, that they should destroy all the records of MKUltra. Gottlieb actually drove out to the CIA record center to supervise the destruction himself, and the archivist wrote that these records were destroyed, quote, "over my stated objections." So at least seven boxes full of MKUltra records were destroyed. Others were destroyed by Gottlieb's secretary at his direction. So a great archive was lost.

Later on, however, it was discovered that a number of expense accounts and expense reports for MKUltra operations were in another warehouse, and those were used to try to reconstruct a little bit of what happened. The Church Committee did look into MKUltra, and Gottlieb himself, who had lived in total invisibility for his entire career, was actually called to testify twice in front of Senate panels. Now, he was able to do this in a closed room, so nobody could see him, and the first time he was able to use a pseudonym.

Nonetheless, these testimonies did not really come close to the heart of what Gottlieb had done. The senators didn't know enough about MKUltra to ask him any probing questions, like did you ever conduct experiments outside the United States? Did anybody ever die as a result of one of your experiments? None of this came up. So Gottlieb got out pretty unscathed.

Nonetheless, as I write at the ending to my book, he obviously was plagued by conscience towards the end of his life. He embraced kind of a spiritual, community-oriented life and became the Sidney Gottlieb he always thought he was. He got a degree in speech therapy, so he could help kids that stuttered. He worked in a hospice. He was a community activist in his town in Virginia. He was a sweet guy, and for people who didn't know what he had done, actually a sterling example of a wonderful, community-spirited person. But as I found from a number of people that knew him, he was tormented. He never was able to shake the memory of what he had done. And anybody who believes in final judgment or karmic payback would have to be distressed to look back on a life like Gottlieb's.

WOODS: Well, it is quite an extraordinary book. I just noted that *The New York Times* has already reviewed it. I mean, this is terrific for you. Your Amazon sales rank is really good. It's going to be different by the time this airs, so I won't say, but it's really good. So I'm really glad. More people should know about this. The book is *Poisoner in Chief: Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA Search for Mind Control*. I'm going to link to where you can get it on Amazon at TomWoods.com/1494, our show notes page for today. Stephen, your website is StephenKinzer.com, Stephen with a PH, so people can check you out there. But mainly, they

need to just go and get this book, *Poisoner in Chief*. As I say, I'm linking to it at TomWoods.com/1494. Well, best of luck with the promotion, and thanks so much.

KINZER: Thank you. Good to be with you.