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THE SPHINX & THE SPY

The Clandestine World of John Mulholland

By Michael Edwards



At mid-century *The Sphinx* stood as America's oldest and most prestigious magic magazine. Over its five-decade history, it had become part of the lifeblood of the conjuring world. Then, on June 29, 1953, John Mulholland wrote a letter to journal's subscribers. "This is to inform you that as of June 1, 1953, the publication of *The Sphinx* has been suspended. The immediate cause is that my health does not permit me to do the necessary work. My Doctor orders me to confine my efforts at this time to the shows by which I earn my living." [1]

It was true that Mulholland's health was not good. An inveterate smoker, he suffered from ulcers, stomach disorders and arthritis. Editing *The Sphinx* for twenty-three years had taken a physical and financial toll. But rather than limiting his activities to his live performances, Mulholland had actually embarked on a new endeavor...an endeavor far more secretive than anything in the realm of conjuring. He had entered a world of covert operations, espionage, mind control, drugs, and even death. John Mulholland had gone to work for the CIA.

At the time, John Mulholland was one of America's most highly regarded magicians. An outstanding stage as well as close-up performer, he had become a noted author, lecturer, historian, collector, editor, and world traveler. In many ways, he had helped make magic intellectually respectable.

Mulholland was born in Chicago, Illinois, on June 9, 1898. As a five-year old, he sat enthralled by a performance of Harry Kellar's. It would begin a lifelong love of conjuring. His family moved to New

York when he was quite young and it was there that he began to learn the techniques of the craft. At age 13 Mulholland began taking magic lessons from John William Sargent at \$5 an hour. Known as “The Merry Wizard,” the gray-haired, goatee’d Sargent had been President of the Society of American Magicians in 1905-6 and would later serve as Harry Houdini’s secretary from 1918 until 1920. He was a true mentor to young Mulholland and instilled in him not only an appreciation of the art of magic but of its theory, history, and literature.

Mulholland learned his lessons well. He made his debut as a performer when he was 15. While he would be later regarded as one of magic’s great scholars, his academic achievements were somewhat limited. He took a number of courses at both Columbia University and at New York’s City College, but did not attain a degree. From 1918 to 1924, he taught industrial arts at the Horace Mann School in New York. He sold books for a while and then taught at Columbia University before embarking on a career as a full time professional magician.

Over the years, Mulholland developed an enormous range of presentations. He was equally at home performing close-up magic, entertaining a society dinner, or working the mammoth stage at Radio City Music Hall. In 1927 Mulholland gave a lecture in Boston about the magicians of the world, illustrating each vignette with a trick from that nation. It added a new genre for him and for the profession: the magician as lecturer.

After the death of Dr. A. M. Wilson in April of 1930, he took over editorship of *The Sphinx*. For the next 23 years he would oversee magic’s most influential periodical. He was a prolific writer. Aside from the vast number of articles he penned, he authored such books as *Magic in the Making* (with Milton M. Smith in 1925), *Quicker than the Eye* (1932), *The Magic and Magicians of the World* (1932), *The*

Story of Magic (1935), *Beware Familiar Spirits* (1938), *The Art of Illusion*, (1944) reprinted as *Magic for Entertaining*, *The Early Magic Shows* (1945), *John Mulholland's Book of Magic* (1963), *Magic of the World* (1965) and *The Magical Mind -- Key to Successful Communication* (with George Gordon in 1967). He had also co-wrote a 1939 magic-detective novel, *The Girl in the Cage*, with Cortland Fitzsimmons.

Over the years, he amassed one of the world's finest collections of magic books and memorabilia. His library housed some 4,000 volumes related to conjuring.

His knowledge of tricks seemed inexhaustible, as was his familiarity with the performance, theory, psychology, history, and literature of magic. He served as the consultant on conjuring to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the Merriam-Webster dictionary and at one time was the only magician listed in *Who's Who in America*.

As America entered the 1950's, the world around John Mulholland was changing. The Cold War was at its height. U.S. foreign policy had gone from trust to terror. In June of 1950, over one hundred thousand soldiers from Communist North Korea crossed the thirty-eighth parallel, invading the republic to the South. The previous year, Soviet Union had detonated its first atomic bomb. The stakes had become enormous. The consequences of military confrontation could well be global thermonuclear war.

American policy-makers decided that other means – covert means — would have to be instituted to stop the expansion of communism. As a secret study commission under former President Hoover put it:

"It is now clear we are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed

objective is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable longstanding concepts of 'fair play' must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us."

The vehicle for this effort was the Central Intelligence Agency.

Within the Agency, there was a concern – almost a panic – that the Russians had developed a frightening new weapon: a drug or technology for controlling men's minds. A new term had entered the lexicon: "brainwashing." At show trials in Eastern Europe, dazed defendants had admitted to crimes they hadn't committed. American prisoners of war, paraded before the press by their North Korean captors, "confessed" in Zombie-like fashion that the US was using chemical and biological warfare against them. When George Kennan, the US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, made some inexplicably undiplomatic remarks at a press conference and was declared *persona non grata* by the Kremlin, American intelligence officials wondered if he had been hypnotized or drugged.

The CIA leadership feared a "mind control gap."

The Search for a Manchurian Candidate

In early April of 1953, Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles outlined to a Princeton audience the urgency of the situation. Describing “how sinister the battle for men’s minds has become in Soviet hands,” Dulles revealed that the Russians had developed “brain perversion techniques” which must be countered at any price.

The CIA had already begun crafting this counter. On April 3, 1953 Richard Helms, the Agency’s Acting Deputy Director, had proposed an “ultra-sensitive” program of research and development in clandestine chemical and biological warfare.

The goal, Helms wrote, was “to develop a capability in the covert use of biological and chemical materials. This area includes the production of various physiological conditions which could support present or future clandestine operations. Aside from the offensive potential, the development of a comprehensive capability in this field of covert chemical and biological warfare gives us a thorough knowledge of the enemies theoretical potential, thus enabling us to defend ourselves against a foe who might not be as restrained in the use of these techniques as we are. For example: we intend to investigate the development of a chemical material which causes a reversible non-toxic aberrant mental state, the specific nature of which can be reasonably well predicted for each individual. This material could potentially aid in discrediting individuals, eliciting information, implanting suggestion and other forms of mental control.”[2]

The “offensive potential” was unstated, but the aim was clear: to create what later would be known as a “Manchurian Candidate.” The term would come from the title of Richard Condon’s 1959 best seller about a plot to take an American soldier captured in Korea, condition

him at a special brainwashing center in Manchuria, and create a remote-controlled assassin programmed to kill the President of the United States. Condon's book was fiction; the Helm's plan was not.

In fact, the CIA had already begun exploring the use of chemicals to influence thought and action as well as to incapacitate and even kill. Of particular interest to the Agency was the potential the hallucinogen LSD had in this arena.

Discovered by Dr. Albert Hoffman on April 16, 1943, d-lysergic acid diethylamide -- or LSD as it would become known -- seemed to be a drug custom-made for the intelligence community. Its intense potency in even miniscule amounts would make it easy to administer covertly. The sense of euphoria and hallucinations that accompanied it might well lead those under interrogation to drop their guard and inhibitions, enabling a free flow of information. Some believed the chemical might even be used to alter the state of a persons being -- to convert an enemy agent, to dishearten idealistic adversaries, to reprogram a person's memory or thoughts, to get an individual to do something he or she otherwise would never do.

The proposed CIA work on drugs and mind manipulation was to remain one of the Agency's deepest secrets. "Even internally in the CIA, as few individuals as possible should be aware of our interest in these fields and of the identity of those who are working for us." [3]

On April 13, 1953 Allen Dulles approved the project. The program was to be known as "Project MKULTRA.[4] The "ULTRA" hearkened back to the most closely guarded American-British secret of the Second World War: the breaking of Germany's military codes. The "M-K" identified the initiative as a CIA Technical Services Staff (TSS) project. This was the division within the Agency responsible for such things as weapons, forgeries, disguises, surveillance equipment and the kindred tools of the espionage trade. Within the TSS,

MKULTRA was assigned to the Chemical Division (TSS/CD), a component with functions few others – even within the Technical Services Staff – knew about.

This unit was headed by Sidney Gottlieb, then a 34-year old Bronx native with a Ph.D. in chemistry from the California Institute of Technology. A brilliant biochemist, Gottlieb was a remarkable, albeit eccentric, man. A socialist in his youth and a Buddhist as an adult, he was on a constant search for meaning in his life. He found some of it in an unrelenting passion for his clandestine labors. He did not appear to be the least bit troubled by the moral ambiguities of intelligence work. He would do virtually anything if he believed it to be in the American interest. Overcoming a pronounced stutter and a clubfoot to rise through the ranks of the CIA, he would later describe himself as the Agency's "Dr. Strangelove." Others were less kind. Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair termed him America's "official poisoner." [5]

The very same day that Allen Dulles approved Project MKULTRA, Sidney Gottlieb went to see John Mulholland.

Gottlieb knew how to mix the potions. The question was how to deliver them secretly.

Mulholland agreed to help.

A Magician Among the Spies

Gottlieb wanted Mulholland to teach intelligence operatives how to use the tools of the magician's trade – sleight of hand and misdirection – to covertly administer drugs, chemicals and biological agents to unsuspecting victims.

Why Mulholland decided to do this is a matter of some conjecture. The world was a far different and more dangerous place in the early months of 1953 than it is today. The war raged in Korea. The bloody battles of Pork Chop Hill, Eerie and Old Baldy were headline news. Some 50,000 American servicemen had already lost their lives in the conflict and more than 7,000 were prisoners of war. Stalin's death in March raised tremendous concern about stability in the Kremlin. In the United States, Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade was raging. The prevailing mood was one fear, perhaps even paranoia.

“John did not have a political agenda,” says George Gordon, a close friend with whom Mulholland would later write *The Magical Mind*. “He said ‘yes’ because his government asked him to.”

Mulholland had an enormous sense of public duty. He took great pride in his contributions, however small. That a special edition of his book *The Art of Illusion* had been printed in a format so that its 160 page text could fit into the shirtpockets of World War II servicemen gave him great satisfaction.

He was very aware of the role other magicians had played in aiding their countries in times of trouble. He had written and lectured about Robert-Houdin's 1856 mission on behalf of Napoleon III to help quell the Mirabout-led uprising in Algeria. And he was very familiar with

the camouflage work Jasper Maskelyne had done for the British government during the Second World War.

Furthermore, the leaders of America's intelligence community were the kind of men Mulholland could easily like and admire. General William "Wild Bill" Donovan, the founder of the Office of Strategic Services, America's World War II spy agency liked to hire Wall Street lawyers and Ivy League academics to commit espionage. He filled the secret service with confident, intelligent, often daring young men from leading eastern colleges. By the time the CIA was established in 1947, these were the people who ran America's covert operations. Within the inner circles of American government, they were regarded as the best and the brightest. They planned and acted to keep the country out of war by their stealth and cunning – two qualities Mulholland long admired.

They were also America's elite. Steward Alsop noted they were called "the Ivy Leaguers, the Socialites, the Establishmentarians." He himself coined an alternative epithet: "the Bold Easterners." The CIA, he said, was "positively riddled with Old Grotonians." [6]

The men heading the CIA effort that Mulholland had been asked to join certainly fit this picture. The Princeton-educated Allen Dulles had been associated with the prestigious Wall Street law firm of Sullivan and Cromwell. His grandfather John W. Foster had been Secretary of State as had been his uncle-by-marriage Robert Lansing. A secret agent in both world wars, Dulles looked like an avuncular professor with his white brush moustache, his tweed suits, and his ever-present pipe. But behind the jovial exterior was a hard and determined leader. His brother John Foster Dulles became Secretary of State on January 31, 1953. Allen took up the CIA post twenty-six days later.

His deputy, Richard Helms, had a different personality but similar roots. His education had included a year at an exclusive Swiss

boarding school and another year in Germany. A Williams graduate, he tried his hand at journalism before joining the OSS. He served with Dulles in Germany and stayed within the intelligence community after the war. This prudent, professional spy – the chief of operations of the clandestine services -- could be seen playing tennis at the Chevy Chase Club on Sunday mornings clad in long white flannel trousers.

It may not be surprising that John Mulholland, who spent much of his career among in New York's fashionable society, would find such men fascinating. As Jean Hugar wrote to Orville Meyer: "I believe in reality he (Mulholland) has an inferiority complex. He doesn't mix with us poor mortals." [7]

If "The Very Best Men" who made up the CIA were to the magician's liking, the converse was also true. John Mulholland was precisely kind of person the Agency wanted and needed. Here was a man with a remarkable knowledge of the art of deception – its tools, its techniques, its psychology. And he knew how to keep a secret. Not only had Mulholland made a living from the execution of these skills, he had gained a reputation as conjuring's most accomplished teacher. By look and demeanor, the magician fit the Agency mold. While his roots were not really Eastern establishment, the tall, slender Mulholland with his prominent nose and thatch of gray hair certainly looked the part. He had entrée to a wide circle of business, governmental, social, academic, and entertainment leaders. A world traveler, he was equally at home on the New York City subway system or entertaining the Sultan of Sulu or the King of Romania.

How and when Mulholland came in first contact with the CIA remains unknown. Evidence suggests that it was in 1952, perhaps earlier. By March of 1953, he was certainly consulting for the Agency and being paid for these "professional services." Inasmuch as he was billing the government on a biweekly basis, it seems apparent that this was ongoing work with at least some of it related to development of

Project MKULTRA.[8]

During their April 13 conversation, Sidney Gottlieb asked Mulholland to put together a proposal for an operations manual applying the magician's art to clandestine activities. Mulholland summed up his suggestions as to what this covert guide would have to contain in a letter that he sent to Gottlieb the following week.

“I have given the subjects we discussed considerable thought,” Mulholland wrote. “Below is outlined what I believe is necessary adequately to cover instructions for the workers.

“1. Supplying...background facts in order that a complete novice in the subject can appreciate the underlying reasons for the procedures suggested. Part of this background would clarify the erroneous opinions commonly held by those who are familiar with (magician's techniques). In this section would be given alternative procedures, or modifications, needed by different types of operators (differences in fact or assumed), as well as changes in procedure needed as situations and circumstances vary. The material is necessary in order for the operator to be able to learn how to do those things which are required...

“2. Detailed descriptions of (covert techniques) in all those operations outlined to me. Also variations of techniques according to whether material is in a solid, liquid or gaseous form. Included would be explanations of (the skills) required and how quickly to master such skills. It is understood that no manipulation will be suggested which requires (actions) not normally used, nor any necessitating long practice. To state this positively: all (covert techniques) described would be adaptations of acts usually performed for other purposes. Descriptions also would be given of simple mechanical aids, how to make them, and how to carry them about. Where needed, application of the data given in section 1 would be supplied. The time consuming

part of writing this section will be in developing the adaptations and modifications of the best existing (methods) to fit new requirements.

“3. A variety of examples to show in detail how to make use of the (techniques) previously described. These examples would be given with varying situations and the ways to accommodate procedure to meet variations.

“If desired, I am prepared to start work on this project immediately. I believe I can complete the proposed writing in eighteen to twenty weeks. I understand, if I am given this assignment, that you, or your representative, would be willing to check my work at a conference approximately every two weeks.”

Mulholland estimated that the cost for him to do write the manual would be \$3,000.[9]

The Secret Book of Secrets

Gottlieb was very enthusiastic about Mulholland's approach and wanted to move ahead quickly. On May 4, he drafted a Memorandum for the Record spelling out what Mulholland was to do:

“1. The scope of this subproject is the collection, in the form of a concise manual, of as much pertinent information as possible in the fields of (magic as it relates to covert activities). The information collected will be pertinent to the problem of (surreptitiously administering) liquid, solid, or gaseous substances to (unknowing) subjects.

“2. The information will be collected principally from the previous studies made by Mr. Mulholland in connection with various problems he has considered. Mr. Mulholland seems well qualified to execute this study. He has been a successful (performer) of all forms of prestidigitation. He has made a careful and exhaustive study of the history of prestidigitation and is the possessor of an extensive library of old volumes in this field. He has further seriously studied the psychology of deception and has instructed graduate students...

“3. The period of time covered by this request covers six months from the date of commencement of work by Mr. Mulholland and the costs will not exceed \$3,000.”

Mulholland's proposal was approved that same day and \$3,000 was set aside to cover its cost. It would become Project MKULTRA, Subproject 4.[10]

MKULTRA – and its component parts – had already become one of the Agency's most secret operations. Mulholland's work, along with that of others working on the project, was considered “ultra

sensitive.” Consequently, there would be no formal documents that would associate CIA or the Government with the work in question. Instead, the Technical Services Staff was to reach “an understanding with the individuals who will perform the work as to the conditions under which the work will be performed and reimbursement arranged. No standard contract will be signed.”[11]

On May 5, Gottlieb, in accordance with this procedure, wrote the magician that “The project outlined in your letter of April 20 has been approved by us, and you are hereby authorized to spend up to \$3,000 in the next six months in the execution of this work.” No contract or formal agreement was enclosed or ever signed per CIA policy. However, the letter did include a check for \$150 to cover Mulholland’s latest work for the agency (March 18th – April 13th). In terms of when Gottlieb and Mulholland could next meet, the chemist noted “A very crowded schedule of travel makes it necessary for us to delay until June 8th our next visit with you. An effective alternative to this would be for you to come..on May, 13, 14, or 15 to discuss the current status of the work. Is this possible?”[12]

Mulholland wrote Gottlieb back on May 11. “Thank you for the notification that my project has been approved. I understand the stipulations. I am resuming work today.” Enclosed was a signed receipt for the check and a notation that Gottlieb’s missive had taken longer than expected to reach him. “Due to the fact that your letter was addressed to (a former address), it was delayed in reaching me. That was an apartment from which I moved ...years ago. The fact that the letter did reach me shows the cordial relationship I have with my local Post Office. My present address is above.”[13] He made no comment on how such an error could occur on such a confidential issue.

Mulholland was keenly aware of the project’s sensitivity. Among the stipulations was a commitment to total secrecy. Even the manuscript itself would have to be written in a manner that protected the Agency

should it fall into the wrong hands. There would be no references to “agents” or “operatives.” Instead, covert workers would be called “performers;” covert actions would simply be labeled “tricks.”

Mulholland immediately set about the task of researching and writing the manual. While he continued his performance schedule, he cleared his calendar of other commitments. He stopped giving magic lessons, put off work on other writing assignments, and suspended publication of *The Sphinx*.

Ending *The Sphinx* was a major step for Mulholland and for the magic community. Begun in Chicago in March of 1902 and subsequently housed in Kansas City and finally New York, this staid yet controversial periodical had become the most influential of magic journals. Mulholland had taken over the publication with Volume 29 Number 3 in May of 1930.[14] It was a source of great joy for him. It was also a tremendous burden.

“For 23 years, I have edited *The Sphinx* as a labor of love and without financial reward. Each of these years I have spent a great amount of time, and considerable money, to produce a magazine of service to the professional magician and to the serious student of magic. The magazine has been a professional publication and never has catered to those who look on magic as a sort of game. I realized I could not go on forever and for the past several years I have been searching for some individual, or group, qualified to take over the editing and publication of *The Sphinx* and maintain its standards. I found no such person, or persons, and until such is, or are, found the publication of the magazine will be suspended.

“I wish to express my appreciation to the many loyal readers, and above all to the contributors who made my editorship such a rewarding endeavor. It has been a source of deep personal gratification to know how well *The Sphinx* has been received during

the years.”[15] The final issue, the 597th, was Volume 52, #1, dated March 1953.

For the next several months, he worked continuously on the MKULTRA project.[16] He soon found, however, that if it were to meet the CIA’s expectations, his manual would have to be far more than a hypothetical extension of existing magic tricks, principles and methods to covert activities. He was going to have to create real world solutions to real world problems. He and Gottlieb discussed the challenge.

On August 3, Gottlieb set up a new subproject (Subproject 15) in order "to expand the original provisions of subproject 4 to include an allowance for travel for Mr. Mulholland and for operational supplies used in the course of this project.” Mulholland and the Agency, Gottlieb wrote, needed to meet more frequently in order to consult on the details of the manual and the travel allowance would facilitate Mulholland’s coming to Washington for some of these discussions. Furthermore, he noted, “Certain portions of subproject 4 require experimental verification by Mr. Mulholland. The item for operational supplies is intended to provide for the purchase of supplies used to test or verify ideas. The cost estimate for subproject 15 is \$700.00 for a period of six months.”[17]

Even with these additional resources, Mulholland found the project a greater challenge than he expected. Getting it right was imperative. The consequences of a magic trick going wrong might be embarrassment or a decline in bookings; a covert operation going bad could cost an agent his or her life. He met with Gottlieb in late summer to discuss the matter. Gottlieb agreed to consider extending the time to meet this need.

On September 18, Gottlieb filed an amendment to the MKULTRA Project Records that noted “The time period for the original proposal

by Mr. Mulholland was six months, which would expire about 11 October 1953. The unusual nature of this manual demands that it be a creative project... rather than a mere compilation of already existing knowledge. For this reason the time estimates are difficult to make in advance and it is apparent at this time that the estimate was too short for the adequate preparation of this manual. It is in the best interests of the Agency to extend this time limit and obtain the best possible manual rather than hold Mr. Mulholland to the six-month period. It is requested that the original six month time period be extended an additional six months. There is no change in the original cost estimate or the original agenda.”[18]

That same day, Gottlieb wrote to Mulholland: “This is at least a partial answer to the questions you asked the last time I saw you. According to my records, your initial estimate was six months, which would expire about October 11, I am initiating a six month extension of the original estimate, which should more than take care of the time factor. The original cost was \$3,000.00, of which \$1,500.00 is remaining as of now.[19]

Mulholland devoted his energies to the project and by November his first draft was complete. But neither the magician nor the Agency were completely satisfied with the product. As Mulholland wrote Gottlieb on November 11:

"The manual as it now stands consists of the following five sections:

"1. Underlying bases for the successful performance of tricks and the background of the psychological principles by which they operate.

"2. Tricks with pills.

"3. Tricks with loose solids.

"4. Tricks with liquids.

"5. Tricks by which small objects may be obtained secretly. This section was not considered in my original outline and was suggested subsequently to me. I was, however, able to add it without necessitating extension of the number of weeks requested for the writing. Another completed task not noted in the outline was making models of such equipment as has been described in the manual."

"As sections 2,3,4, and 5 were written solely for use by men working alone the manual needs two further sections. One section would give modified, or different, tricks and techniques of performance so that the tricks could be performed by women. The other section would describe tricks suitable for two or more people working in collaboration. In both these proposed sections the tricks would differ considerably from those which have been described.

"I believe that properly to devise the required techniques and devices and to describe them in writing would require 12 working weeks to complete the two sections. However, I cannot now work on this project every week and would hesitate to promise completion prior to the first of May, 1954." [20]

Mulholland estimated that it would cost \$1800 to finish the project. [21]

Gottlieb, whose goal was an operational guide that would be of use to agents in the real world, shared Mulholland's view that broadening its scope to include collaborative efforts by teams of operatives or by female agents was well worth the delay. On November 17, he authorized Mulholland to draft the two additional chapters and extended the timeline for completion of the book until May. This new work became MKULTRA Subproject 19. [22]

Impressed with Mulholland's range of knowledge and analysis, the CIA was beginning to extend its relationship with the magician beyond just the preparation of the covert operations manual. By now, the Agency was utilizing more and more of his expert advice. His ongoing meetings with the TSS staff accelerated. In December 9, Gottlieb expanded MKULTRA's Subproject 19 to increase the travel and operational supplies available to Mulholland and to provide for even more consultation between the conjuror and CD/TSS. At the same time, he was asked to take on yet another assignment: to work with the Agency "in connection with an investigation of claims in the general field of parapsychology..."[23]

The CIA was fascinated by the idea of mind reading and thought transmittal. If possible, such extrasensory abilities would be among the most potent weapons in their arsenal. It would revolutionize both the obtaining and the delivery of secret information. At one point, the Agency had been approached by a man claiming to be a "genuine mystic" who had developed a system for sending and receiving telepathic messages anywhere in the world. Mulholland's task was to evaluate this and other claims of telepathy and clairvoyance.

Mulholland, a hard-nosed skeptic, was right at home investigating the paranormal. He had been lecturing on the topic since 1930, when he began exposing the means and methods of fortunetellers. He soon broadened this to debunk and denounce other forms of occultism. By 1938, he had written a book on the subject, *Beware Familiar Spirits*, which traced the history of modern spiritualism and described its techniques. He had no interest in letting the assertions of "mystics," clairvoyants and mind readers go unchallenged.

With increasing frequency, someone inside the Agency would want an explanation for something they had seen or heard and Mulholland was asked to explain it. In virtually every case it would turn to have been accomplished through the stagecraft of magic. This would not stop the

CIA – or other branches of the United States Government – from spending enormous resources over the next three decades to explore the possibilities of parapsychology and remote viewing.

With this additional work at hand, it was soon evident that Mulholland would not be able to have the manual finished as anticipated. "An extension of time is needed to give Mr. Mulholland more time to complete this task," Gottlieb wrote. "The original estimated completion date was May 1, 1954. It is noted that the completion date estimate is now extended to November 1, 1954." [24]

In the spring of 1954, Mulholland found himself facing an unforeseen problem. Much of his income for the previous year had come from the CIA for work that he knew was to be kept absolutely secret...even from other branches of the United States Government. But now it was time for him to prepare his taxes. Mulholland requested instructions from the Agency on how he was to report this income to the Internal Revenue Service and what he should do if he were audited or questioned by the IRS.

An internal CIA memo spelled out the problem: "Mr. Mulholland is a self employed magician whose normal income is derived from payment by various individuals and organizations for individual performances. Although not applying to calendar year 1953, other characteristic sources of income are from publishers of books, etc., and from individuals to whom he has given instructions in magic. When preparing his Federal Income Tax form, income is customarily listed by individual performances, etc., with the person or organization paying for the performance, the location of the performance, the amount received, and the deductions itemized for each performance or each source of funds, rather than for a standard deduction to be taken. As may or may not be characteristic with professional performers, these deductions are often questioned by the Internal Revenue people, and Mr. Mulholland is frequently called on to justify some of his

deductions. For this reason, a detailed record book is kept of his income, with a separate page for each performance or source of income.”

While acknowledgement of the magician receiving payments from the Agency was not felt to be a breach of security in itself, the CIA believed that it was absolutely imperative that the nature of Mulholland’s work be kept from IRS scrutiny. "After several conferences with the Assistant General Counsel of the Agency, and the Security Officer for TSS, the following was recommended: Mr. Mulholland should report all funds received from CD/TSS except for funds for travel expenses, but no attempt should be made to itemize deductions based on these funds. Income tax should be paid on the entire amount reported. Mr. Mulholland should determine a conservative value for the amount of tax paid in excess of what would have been paid if reasonable deductions were made. The reason for this was the feeling that any questions by the Internal Revenue people concerning funds paid by CD/TSS would be prompted by questions on deductions made. It was recommended that the excess tax paid by Mr. Mulholland be refunded by the CD/TSS.“[25] This recommendation was immediately accepted “to protect the security of the Agency.”[26]

Mulholland followed the Agency’s instructions and was reimbursed by the CIA for the excess taxes that resulted from this approach [27] Subproject 15 was expanded to include this financial arrangement [28] and similar agreements were instituted for subsequent years in which he received remuneration from the Agency.[29]

Operational Applications of the Art of Deception

Mulholland continued work on the operational guide throughout the spring and summer. The text was completed by early fall. But the magician had one more task to do – to help prepare drawings, diagrams and photographs to illustrate the book’s proposed techniques.[30] By winter, the manuscript was finally complete. It was titled *Some Operational Applications of the Art of Deception*.

“The purpose of this paper,” Mulholland wrote in the introduction, “is to instruct the reader so he may learn to perform a variety of acts secretly and indetectably. In short, here are instructions in deception.”[31]

The following eight chapters – illustrated with diagrams hand-drawn by Mulholland – ran over 100 pages and outlined how to apply the magician’s art to the needs of espionage and covert activity. It covered how to administer pills, liquids, gasses and loose solids surreptitiously. It discussed means of obtaining small objects secretly. It proposed strategies and tactics to fit the needs of female agents. And it put forth techniques that could be used by teams of men working in tandem. All this was set forth in language that adhered to the original stipulations put to Mulholland in April of 1953. The language of the manual had to sound like a simple magic text without any words or examples that would connect it to its true clandestine use.

But this was not some primer for amateur magicians to learn a few tricks. No matter how gentle the language, this was to be a guide for agents in the field to perform dangerous, provocative and even lethal acts. The solids, gases and liquids were not harmless substances. What Mulholland was teaching CIA operatives to do was

surreptitiously administer mind-altering chemicals, biological agents, dangerous drugs, and lethal poisons in order to disorient, discredit, injure, and even kill people.

Today – five decades after it was written – the tricks and approaches set forth in this manual are still classified “top secret.”

Mulholland’s name appears nowhere on the document, but – consciously or not -- he did leave a subtle trace: the illustrations he sketched detailing facial expressions look very much like self-portraits. This notwithstanding, *Some Operational Applications of the Art of Deception* remains John Mulholland’s most secret book of secrets.

A Member of the Team

While the operational manual was now complete, John Mulholland's work for the CIA was far from over. He had become part of the MKULTRA team and the Agency was already employing his knowledge and skills in a wide range of ways.

In October of 1954, Mulholland's agreement with the CIA was extended to include his assistance in the "design of devices for the covert delivery of materials" as well as provide for "such other travel and services as may be desired from Mr. Mulholland at various times." [32]

The following summer, the Agency asked the magician to undertake another assignment. The success of intelligence operations almost always rests on the ability to transmit information clandestinely. Theirs, after all, is a world of secrets. Mulholland's manual had spelled out how to administer materials – notably pills, liquids, and loose solids – to unsuspecting victims through the tricks of the magician's trade. He was also helping the Technical Services Staff design devices to carry this out. Now he was to show the intelligence community how to use the methods of magic to exchange information covertly with one another. Furthermore, he was to use his knowledge and creativity to fashion new methods that were unknown even to the conjuring community.

On August 25, Gottlieb outlined this new project "on the application of the magician's art to the covert communication of information" in a confidential CIA memo. According to Gottlieb, "this would involve the application of techniques and principles employed by 'magicians, 'mind readers' etc, to communicate information, and the development of new techniques. It is contemplated the above would provide a

contribution to the general efforts in the area of non-electrical means of communication. Mr. Mulholland has agreed to undertake this task.” Mulholland’s compensation for this was raised from \$150.00 per week to \$200.00 per week.[33]

The Agency continued to enlarge the scope of John Mulholland’s work. On June 20, 1956, the magician’s arrangement was again expanded. “Objective: to make Mr. Mulholland available as a consultant on various problems, TSS and otherwise, as they evolve. These problems concern the application of the magician's technique to clandestine operations, such techniques to include surreptitious delivery of materials, deceptive movements and actions to cover normally prohibited activities, influencing choices and perceptions of other persons, various forms of disguise; covert signaling systems, etc".[34]

That August the Agency extended its financial arrangement with the magician for another year.[35] And in November of 1957 Mulholland’s projects were authorized for yet another 12 months.[36] CIA financial records show that he continued to submit vouchers and be paid through February 5, 1958.[37]

It is not clear whether John Mulholland continued to consult for the CIA after that. By then, his health had deteriorated considerably. He still smoked constantly. His arthritis had become very severe, but ulcers and other stomach problems prevented him from taking even aspirin to relieve it. He severely limited many – if not most – of his projects and activities.

While Mulholland’s work for the CIA may have ended, the Agency continued its interest in the connection between the techniques of conjuring and espionage. Indeed, in the spring of 1959, the Agency extended another MKULTRA Subproject (subproject 83) to revise and adapt some of material that Mulholland had developed on "deception

techniques (magic, sleight of hand, signals) and on psychic phenomena.”[38]

Project MKULTRA was eventually brought to a close in 1964.

MKULTRA was not merely some academic research experiment. Nor was Sidney Gottlieb, the man who oversaw Mulholland’s work, just an American version of “Q,” the scientific wizard who supplied James Bond with his dazzling gizmos and gadgets. Certainly Gottlieb’s Technical Services Staff came up with more than their share of wristwatch radios and disappearing inks. At his core, Gottlieb was a dedicated and determined “operations” leader. His chemical division laboratory stored a vast array of poison pills and potions. And Gottlieb knew how – and was willing -- to use them.

While a clubfoot kept him from military service in World War II, it didn’t stop him from engaging in some of the CIA’s most covert and deadly missions. He traveled to Leopoldville (Kinshasa) with an Agency-developed bio-toxin in his diplomatic bag. Designed to mimic a disease endemic to the Congo, the virus was cultured specifically for its lethal effect. Its intended victim: Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba. Once in the Congo, the scientist carefully instructed CIA operatives in how to apply the toxin to Lumumba’s toothbrush and food.[39] Gottlieb mailed a monogrammed handkerchief -- doctored with brucellosis-- to Iraqi colonel Abd a-Karim Qasim [40] and he developed poisoned cigarettes intended for Jamal abd an-Nasir of Egypt.[41] Fidel Castro was an ongoing focus of Gottlieb’s chemists – from the LSD the Agency hoped to spray in the Cuban leader’s radio booth to the botulinum pill-laden pencil they crafted to assassinate him.[42]

Foreign leaders were not the only objects of Gottlieb’s interest. Gottlieb was constantly experimenting to see the real world impact of his drugs. Such experimentation was at the heart of the MKULTRA

project. The Agency conducted 149 separate projects involving drug testing, behavior modification, and secret administration of mind-altering chemicals at 80 US and Canadian universities, hospitals, research foundations, and prisons. Over the years, hundreds of individuals were guinea pigs in this research. Some were government employees, military personnel, and students who had varying degrees of knowledge about the tests. But many were unwitting subjects, particularly drug addicts, prostitutes, mental patients, and prisoners -- people who were unlikely to complain and even less likely to be believed if they did. One group of men was kept on LSD for 77 days. A mental patient in Kentucky was dosed with LSD for 174 days. The CIA even set up its own brothel to monitor the effects of the hallucinogen on prostitutes and their unsuspecting clients.

Gottlieb's MKULTRA projects weren't limited to mind-altering chemicals. He explored a host of biological agents, toxins, and other drugs as well as such areas as crop and material sabotage, harassment techniques for offensive use, gas propelled sprays and aerosols, hypnosis, sensory deprivation, and electroshock.[43]

But the darkest episode may well have been one in which John Mulholland found himself personally involved during the very first year of his MKULTRA work: the death of Dr. Frank Olson.[44]

Death and the Magician

Recruited by the US Army from graduate school at the University of Wisconsin in 1943, Frank Olson was one of the pioneering scientists in America's biological warfare program. He served his active duty in the Army Chemical Corps at Camp Detrick in Frederick, Maryland, and later traded his Army job for a civilian position within the same branch. He was soon working in a new and highly secretive subgroup: the Special Operations Division (SOD). The Division had three primary functions: assessing the vulnerability of American installations to biological attack; developing techniques for offensive use of biological weapons; and biological research for the CIA. This CIA research included an MKULTRA subproject (code name MKNAOMI) in which SOD was to produce and maintain vicious mutant germ strains capable of killing or incapacitating would-be victims. An expert in biochemistry and aerobiology, Olson's specialty was delivering such deadly diseases in sprays and aerosol emulsions.

Twice each year, the MKNAOMI team from SOD held a working retreat where the Army scientists could plan and discuss future projects with their CIA counterparts. On Wednesday, November 18, 1953, Olson and five of his SOD colleagues traveled to a remote stone cabin located at Deep Creek Lake in western Maryland for such a meeting.

Sidney Gottlieb was always looking for ways to test the effects of his chemicals. This session presented just such an opportunity. His goal, he would later say, was to "ascertain the effect clandestine application (of LSD) would have on a meeting or conference." After dinner on the second night of the retreat, he had his assistant, Dr. Robert Lashbrook, place a "very small dose" of LSD in a bottle of Cointreau. All but two of the SOD team were served the LSD-laced liqueur. As

part of this “experiment,” Olson unwittingly received some 70 micrograms of the hallucinogen.

Until then, Gottlieb saw nothing unusual in Olson's behavior. However the introduction of the drug had a definite effect on the entire group. Increasingly boisterous, they soon could not engage in sensible conversation. The meeting continued until about 1:00 a.m., when the participants retired for the evening. Gottlieb later recalled that Olson, among others, complained of "wakefulness" during the night. But aside from some evidence of fatigue, Gottlieb observed nothing unusual in Olson's actions, conversation, or general behavior the next morning.

By the time Olson returned home Friday evening, things had changed radically. The 43-year old biochemist was, as his wife Alice would later recount, “a totally different person” -- severely depressed, anxious, highly agitated. Lapsing into silence, Olson wouldn't tell his wife anything that had occurred. All he would say was “I'm going to have to resign, I've made a terrible mistake.”

The following Monday, November 23, Olson was already waiting for his boss, Lt. Col. Vincent Ruwet, when he arrived at work at 7:30 a.m. Olson told him that he wanted to quit or be fired. Ruwet reassured him that everything would be all right. Olson phoned his wife “I talked to Vin, he said I didn't make a mistake, everything is fine and I'm not going to resign.” But Tuesday morning saw a return of his anxiety and depression. Olson again went to Ruwet and, after an hour-long conversation, the two decided that Olson would benefit from medical assistance.

Col. Ruwet – keenly aware of the sensitivity of Olson's circumstances – immediately turned to the CIA for help. He telephoned Robert Lashbrook and advised him that "Dr. Olson was in serious trouble and needed immediate professional attention." Agreeing to make the

appropriate arrangements, Lashbrook then phoned Gottlieb.

Ruwet was instructed to bring Olson to Washington, D.C. to meet with Lashbrook. A few hours later all three men were on their way to New York to see the physician that Gottlieb and Lashbrook had agreed upon: Dr. Harold Abramson.

Abramson was an unlikely doctor from whom to seek psychiatric assistance. An allergist and immunologist practicing medicine in New York City, he had no formal training -- let alone a degree -- in psychiatry nor did he hold himself out to be an expert in the field. He was, however, closely associated with research projects supported indirectly by the CIA and had substantial experience with LSD. Fully vetted by the Agency, he had a "top secret" security clearance. And while the CIA's Security and Medical offices maintained a long list of other doctors, including psychiatrists, with such "top secret" approval, Abramson's work and interest placed him well inside the Technical Services Staff's "family." Gottlieb was determined that his secret activities remained secret -- even within the wider reaches of the CIA.

Abramson saw Olson twice that day -- first at his East 58th Street office and then later that night at Olson's hotel. On the latter visit, the doctor gave the biochemist two bottles: one of bourbon and one of the sedative Nembutal -- an unorthodox prescription for someone in Olson's condition.

Frank Olson was slated to see Abramson again the following day. Before doing so, the three men made another stop. "We accompanied Dr. Lashbrook, at Dr. Lashbrook's suggestion, on an official visit he had to make," Ruwet would later disclose in a confidential CIA affidavit. That visit was to John Mulholland.

The three men arrived at Mulholland's office around 3:00pm on November 25. Things did not go well. "During this visit, Dr. Olson

became highly suspicious and mixed up. When this became apparent we tactfully cut the visit short.”[45]

Lashbrook then took Olson for another session with Abramson. The next morning, Thursday, November 26, Lashbrook, Olson and Ruwet returned to Washington so that Olson could spend Thanksgiving with his family. An SOD driver met Olson and Ruwet at National Airport. But as they were driving up Wisconsin Avenue, Olson had the car pull into a hotel parking lot. Olson told Ruwet that he was too ashamed to face his family and afraid that he might become violent with his children. After a lengthy discussion, it was decided that Olson and Lashbrook would return to New York, and that Ruwet would go to Olson’s home in Frederick, Maryland, to explain the situation to Olson’s wife.

Lashbrook and Olson flew back to New York that same day for further consultations with Abramson. They spent Thursday night at a Long Island hotel not far from Abramson’s Long Island clinic. The next morning the two men returned to Manhattan with Abramson. By now the biochemist was acting more and more “psychotic” with what Abramson would later say were “delusions of persecution.” Olson thought the CIA was out to get him. After further discussions with Abramson, it was agreed that Olson should be placed under regular psychiatric care at Chestnut Lodge, an institution closer to his home and which had CIA-cleared psychiatrists on its Rockville, Maryland, staff.

Arrangements were made for Frank Olson’s immediate admission to the hospital. In what was undoubtedly a remarkable coincidence, the doctor who served as the admitting physician for was Dr. Robert W. Gibson – the 25-year old son of Walter Gibson.[46] Walter Gibson was one of magic’s most prolific writers and editors, though the general public would know him best as the author of “The Shadow.” He was also a close friend and colleague to John

Mulholland.

Unable to obtain air transportation for a return trip on Friday night, Lashbrook and Olson made plane reservations for Saturday morning and checked into room 1018A in the Statler Hotel. Between the time they checked in and 10:00 p.m. they watched television, visited the cocktail lounge, and then had dinner. According to Lashbrook, Olson "was cheerful and appeared to enjoy the entertainment." He "appeared no longer particularly depressed, and almost the Dr. Olson I knew prior to the experiment."

After dinner Lashbrook and Olson watched television for about another hour, and at 11:00p.m. Olson suggested that they go to bed, saying that "he felt more relaxed and contented than he had since [they] came to New York." Olson then left a call with the hotel operator to wake them in the morning.

At approximately 2:30 a.m. Saturday, November 28, Frank Olson crashed through the closed window blinds and the closed window of his hotel room and fell to his death on the Seventh Avenue sidewalk 10 floors below.

Lashbrook would later claim that he was awakened by the crash of glass as Olson hurtled through the closed window. But his first reaction was not to run downstairs or call the police or the hotel operator. Instead, he telephoned Gottlieb at his home and informed him that Olson was now dead. It was only then that Lashbrook dialed the front desk and reported the incident to the operator.

By that time a cover-up had already begun. The question is a cover-up of what?

Within minutes, uniformed New York City police officers and hotel employees came to Lashbrook's room. The CIA staffer was still in his

underwear, on the telephone in the bathroom. He told the police that he worked for the Defense Department and he didn't know why Olson had jumped from the window, but he did know that Olson "suffered from ulcers" and might have been suffering from job-related stress. The police suspected foul play.

Two officers of the 14th Detective Squad then interviewed Lashbrook at the local police station. Getting information out of him, they noted, "was like pulling teeth." They asked to see what was in his pockets and billfold. Among the contents of his wallet was a scrap of paper with the initials "JM" on it, an address, and a telephone number.[47] When asked by the officers who this "JM" was, "Lashbrook indicated he preferred not to identify him because of security reasons and the matter was pressed no further by the detectives." [48]

The police had little reason to see any connection between paper and the incident. Their suspicions were in another direction. At one point, the two officers speculated to each other that the case might be a simple homicide with homosexual overtones and noted this in their written report.

In the meantime, Sidney Gottlieb had already reported up the chain of command. CIA Director Allen Dulles immediately dispatched agents of the Security Branch -- what some have termed the "CIA's fixit men"-- to contain the situation. The Security Branch agents quickly closed the NYPD investigation. They took every necessary step to prevent Frank Olson's death from being connected with the CIA in any way. They supplied complete cover for Lashbrook so that his association with the Agency would remain a complete secret.

With the external front under control, the Agency then turned to its own internal investigation. Lashbrook was again interviewed, but this time by an experienced agent from the CIA. Now when asked who "JM" was, Lashbrook identified him "as John Mulholland."

Interestingly he referred to him not as “John Mulholland, the magician” or “John Mulholland, a writer and lecture.” He identified him solely as “John Mulholland, an Agency employee.”[49] Moreover, among the papers in Lashbrook’s room was “a receipt on plain white paper for \$115.00 dated November 25 1953 and signed by John Mulholland. The receipt indicated ‘Advance for Travel to Chicago.’”[50]

However forthcoming Lashbrook was, the Technical Services Staff still tried to keep the details of its operations from the scrutiny of others even within the Agency itself. It downplayed the connection between TSS and Olson’s death and minimized any link to LSD. Internal memoranda written after the biochemist’s passing questioned his emotional stability – a direct contradiction to statements evaluating his mental state prior to the Deep Creek incident. In the end, however, the full details of MKULTRA and the experiment involving Olson reached others within the CIA.

The CIA officially took the position that Olson’s death was indeed a suicide, triggered by the LSD given to him by Gottlieb and Lashbrook. But of course it hid even that from the public, including the Olsons. The family had only been told that the stress of his job had led to a nervous breakdown and that Frank Olson had killed himself. What little else they knew came from a small article in their local paper: "Army Bacteriologist Dies in Plunge from NY Hotel." In order to assure his family of Civil Service benefits, the CIA had his death officially recorded as a “classified illness.”

And so it remained for twenty-two years. Then in June 1975 a special commission chaired by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller released the findings of its investigation into illegal CIA domestic operations. The *Washington Post*’s coverage of the Rockefeller Report noted that in the early 1950’s an unnamed civilian employee of the Department of the Army had leaped to his death from a New York hotel window after

the CIA had given him LSD without his knowledge. On reading the article, Alice Olson instantly realized the man described in the morning paper was her husband.

Vincent Ruwet confirmed her suspicion that the individual was indeed Frank Olson, but because of the still top-secret status of the project was unable to divulge any further details. On July 11, 1975, the Olson family held a press conference expressing their outrage and anguish, called for a full accounting of the incident, and filed a wrongful death suit against the United States Government. The story made national headlines.

Mind Control Murder?

Official Washington moved quickly to end the furor. President Ford invited Alice Olson and her son, Eric, to the White House where he personally apologized on behalf of the government. Congress enacted legislation providing \$750,000 in compensation to the Olson family. And CIA Director William Colby met the Olsons for lunch, where he gave them what he said was the complete CIA file on the Olson case.[51]

While the CIA was now “admitting” that Frank Olson’s death was a suicide brought on by the after-effects of CIA-administered LSD, Eric Olson was never fully convinced. This was, he felt, a classic example of sophisticated misdirection, using a skill from the magician's toolkit to protect a clandestine operation. "I believe the key to all this," he would later write, "lies in the connection between the heart of covert operations, which consists in creating adequate cover stories, and the heart of the magician's art, which consists in being able to direct attention precisely to the place where the thing is not happening...All curiosity was riveted on the startling disclosure that the CIA had unwittingly drugged a top scientist, but left no curiosity available for the question of, 'Oh yes, what about his death; you haven't told us how he could have gotten out the window.'"[52]

After his mother died in 1993, Eric and the family decided to move Frank Olson’s remains from another cemetery so that he could be reburied beside his wife. At the same time, the son got a court order to have an autopsy performed.

Frank Olson had been buried in a sealed casket. This was supposedly to spare his family from seeing how badly mutilated his face and body were from crashing through a plate glass window and falling ten

stories to the concrete below. But when the casket was opened, Olson had none of the cuts or abrasions on his face as had been expected. Instead, the forensic pathologist, Dr. James Starrs, a Professor of Law and Forensic Science at the National Law Center at The George Washington University, found a deep bruise on Olson's forehead. The bruise was severe enough to have rendered Olson unconscious, Starrs thought, but probably did not result from the fall. His conclusion was that the evidence was starkly "suggestive of homicide."

That was Eric Olson's conclusion as well. He simply couldn't imagine how his father could have run across the small, dark hotel room, gained enough velocity to vault over a radiator and crash with enough force to go through the closed blinds and the heavy glass pane of a shut hotel window...all with a CIA agent asleep in the next bed whose entire responsibility was to keep track of his father.

Despite this new evidence, federal prosecutors refused to pursue the inquiry. The terms of the \$750,000 Congressional financial settlement precluded a civil suit. But Eric Olson was able to persuade New York public prosecutor Stephen Saracco to look into the case. Saracco decided there was indeed enough evidence to convene a grand jury for an investigation into the death. That investigation is continuing.

If Olson was murdered, the question is why? Did the Technical Services Staff find itself with a man who knew so much and yet was so ill that he was a threat to the MKULTRA's secrecy? Was the Olson case an experiment in mind and behavior control that went so terribly wrong it had to be terminated? Had Frank Olson said or done something that was – as he himself feared -- a breach of security? Had he seen something so repugnant in the MKULTRA work that he couldn't be part of it? Did the biochemist intend to resign from an agency that could then neither let him continue nor permit him to quit? These remain questions for the grand jury to ponder.

Another unanswered question is raised by the small scrap of paper that Robert Lashbrook had in his wallet the night Frank Olson died. That was the paper with the initials “JM” on it along with John Mulholland’s address and telephone number. Why was Olson in John Mulholland’s office on November 25? And what made him so upset that the meeting had to be abandoned?

That Lashbrook would be meeting with Mulholland should not be surprising. Part of the original agreement between Mulholland and the CIA was that Gottlieb – or his representative – would review the work the magician was doing for the Agency at a biweekly conference.[53] As the project progressed, it was clear that “frequent consultations between Mr. Mulholland and CD/TSS” were indeed essential. In order to facilitate these conferences, Mulholland was provided an additional travel allowance.[54] Even so, meetings were not always easy to schedule and Lashbrook’s being in New York on other business would certainly have made getting together simpler.

Moreover, Mulholland’s work on the manual was at a critical point. His manuscript encompassing the original outline of the guide had just been completed. The magician was now turning his attention to the two new sections to be added to the first draft: one on covert activities by women and the other on applications suitable for teams of two or more people working in collaboration with each other. In fact, it had only been a week since Gottlieb authorized Mulholland to proceed on these two additional chapters.[55] Conferring with Lashbrook on the scope and substance of this material would be only natural.

At the same, the Agency had begun to rely increasingly on Mulholland for his advice and expertise. Lashbrook carried with him a check for \$115.00 – a travel advance for an upcoming trip that Mulholland was making to Chicago on behalf of the CIA. Why Mulholland was going to Chicago for the Agency remains uncertain, although there is some

evidence that he was going to take part in secretly assessing the claims of Andrija Puharich – claims that related to electronic systems and telepathy. His subsequent handwritten travel voucher for the December 3 journey only lists meeting with a “contact.”[56] Perhaps the Lashbrook visit was scheduled for the two men to discuss this activity. In any event, Lashbrook did deliver the check during the November 25 session and received a handwritten receipt in return.[57]

With only an hour between the time Lashbrook was slated to meet with Mulholland and Frank Olson’s next appointment with Dr. Abramson, it might have been simply out of convenience that Lashbrook suggested that Olson and Col. Ruwet accompany him on this visit. Mulholland was always a gracious host and an engaging conversationalist. It may well be, as John Marks suggests, that “Lashbrook thought that the magician might amuse Olson.”[58] In fact, just the opposite occurred. Olson got so suspicious and upset that the meeting was quickly ended.

There are others who suggest that the motive behind the Mulholland visit was far less benign. “One of the things Mulholland may have been helping them do was to create a cover story for what...they were doing in New York in the first place,” notes Eric Olson. Beyond that, he says, “it fits with what they were trying to do in New York: to assess, from any direction possible, how deep...they were in with my father, and to try, again by any means possible, to fix it and save their own butts.”[59]

Frank Olson’s son is not the only one to suggest that Mulholland’s conjuring-related knowledge and skills were being put to use to interrogate and influence the biochemist. This is clearly the implication of the film documentary *Mind Control Murder* produced by Principal Films and presented as part of Arts & Entertainment Network’s *Investigative Reports* series in September of 1999.[60]

The documentary puts forward its “strong evidence” that Olson was eliminated by the CIA because he wanted to leave the government after witnessing the real world use of MKULTRA interrogation techniques, including drugs and hypnosis...techniques that have been “terminal” in nature. The activities at Deep Creek, it suggests, were designed to find out what Olson knew, what he had done, and what he was likely to do. It cites independent writer and investigator Hank Albarelli: “I think there was an experiment of some sort at Deep Creek Lodge. I think that it might have involved hypnosis and that hypnosis experiment may have been continued in New York in John Mulholland’s office and possibly in Dr. Harold Abramson’s office.”

“If Albarelli is right,” the film’s narrator Bill Kurtis concludes, “the...method of special interrogation was both the secret Olson was worried about and the technique that two of its leading practitioners – John Mulholland and Harold Abramson – then used on him.”

The problem with this theory is that there is no evidence that Mulholland was skilled as a hypnotist. To the contrary, he appears to have been extremely skeptical of its practicality, dismissing many exhibitions of hypnosis as merely “magic shows.”[61] Moreover, the Agency had access to a wide range of individuals with true expertise in the area. There were at least eight separate MKULTRA subprojects devoted to hypnosis, including two involving hypnosis and drugs in combination.[62] Five major CIA-sponsored hypnosis experiments had already been undertaken by that November. Indeed, Gottlieb had observed some of this work firsthand and was well acquainted with the hypnotists involved.[63]

“Even if Mulholland were not a skilled hypnotist they still might have gone to see him, even if hypnosis were the purpose,” counters Eric Olson. “He might have been the best they had available at the moment, and, also, the only guy with an adequate security clearance to handle what they wanted. But they might have found

other ways of using Mulholland's skills, in addition to or beyond hypnosis. ..I think the overall purpose is clear: they were exploring whether and to what extent they might distract my father (certainly the essence of the magician's art) for the purpose of taking his eye off the ball, making him forget, creating amnesia. In trying to distract my father...they were taking a risk: the same techniques that ultimately might quiet him could also, if he detected what was going on, increase his anxiety and fear.”[64]

Whatever happened in Mulholland's office that November afternoon, it did not curtail his work with the Central Intelligence Agency. He continued his relationship with the CIA for at least another five years. His ability to keep this part of his life secret for so long may well have been his greatest magic trick.

In Search of Secrets

That any evidence of John Mulholland's involvement with the CIA still exists is remarkable in itself – although it would take decades for it to come to light. The CIA's practice was to maintain no records relating to the planning and approval of MKULTRA programs.[65] Few other files ever existed. Then, in January 1973, acting on Sidney Gottlieb's verbal directions, the Agency's Technical Services personnel sought out and destroyed every single MKULTRA record they could find. Gottlieb later testified -- and Richard Helms -- confirmed that in ordering the destruction of the papers, Gottlieb was carrying out then-CIA Director Helms' verbal orders.[66]

At some point, John Mulholland's personal files were also apparently vetted to remove any connection between him and the Agency. While Mulholland was meticulous in his personal record keeping, not a single reference to his clandestine work remains in his personal archives. Noted writer and intelligence expert Jim Hougan combed through the magician's files which are now housed in David Copperfield's secret warehouse in Nevada. "I went through each and every document page by page. Not a single line related or referred to the Agency. They were spic-and-span. It was apparent that John Mulholland's files had been gone through and sanitized by someone who knew the Agency and knew how to eradicate any hint of its presence." [67]

Despite these efforts and unbeknownst to Gottlieb and his staff, some MKULTRA documents still remained. These files – presumably routine records from the TSS's Budget and Fiscal Section --had been sent to the CIA's Retired Records Center outside of Washington in 1970. They should not have contained any MKULTRA material. The financial paper associated with sensitive projects such as this were

normally kept by the branch itself under the project title, not in the files of the branch's Budget and Fiscal Section. Why these records were stored in this manner is not known, but it accounts for why the material escaped retrieval and destruction in 1973. It also explains why the Agency was unable to find these MKULTRA documents in response to a subsequent U.S. Senate Select Committee investigation of CIA abuses in 1975. The Agency examined both the active and the retired files of all the branches of the CIA considered likely to have had an association with the project, but never looked into the Budget and Fiscal Section retired records.[68]

Then, in 1977, two exceptionally diligent Agency researchers processing a Freedom of Information Act request for former State Department officer John Marks decided to double-check the Budget and Fiscal Section's historical archives. They uncovered seven cartons of MKULTRA material. In August, the Carter White House made the existence of these papers public, though it downplayed the significance of their contents. In accordance with the requirements of federal statute, some 16,000 pages of evidence had to be released to Marks.

All 16,000 pages were, in the CIA's own words, "heavily sanitized." Few documents had escaped redacting. Hundreds of names, places and dates were blacked out. Entire pages were blank. Working with four researchers, Marks painstakingly went through the papers, cross-referencing the material, finding clues wherever he could. In some instances, the blacked out text could be deciphered simply by holding the page to the light; others were identified by their context. His resulting 1977 book, *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*, did what two United States Senate Committees could not do: it assembled a detailed account of the CIA and its foray into drugs and mind control.

Marks' book ran 264 pages. Only four sentences related to John

Mulholland. Those four sentences stimulated the author's own Freedom of Information Act request calling for the Central Intelligence Agency to release of any information or records relating to Mulholland's work with the CIA, including any written agreements between him and the Agency, copies of the documents he produced, or other related materials.

On June 26, 2000, the Agency responded with explicit written confirmation that John Mulholland indeed had a contractual arrangement with the CIA relating to the operational uses of the magician's skills.[69] It included over 200 pages of material directly linked to Mulholland and his involvement with the intelligence community. Like the documents released to John Marks in 1977, these files were heavily -- though inconsistently -- redacted. A request for a re-review of these files is still pending.

Despite the CIA's editing of the material, the documents provided a remarkably comprehensive account of John Mulholland's work for the CIA. At times, however, unveiling this information was like assembling a giant jigsaw puzzle. Each and every document had to be carefully scrutinized and then crosschecked against all of the other released papers. All of the material supplied to John Marks in 1977 as well as all of the material released to the Olson family by the CIA in 1975 was reviewed in light of this new evidence. Finally, all of this information was reassembled to form a chronological narrative. This article is a summary of those findings.

These files may be the last link we have to the clandestine world of John Mulholland. Sidney Gottlieb retired from the CIA in 1973, receiving the Agency's Distinguished Intelligence Medal for his 22 years of service. After retiring, Gottlieb and his wife worked in a leprosy hospital in India for 18 months, then moved to a farm in Rappahannock, Virginia. Gottlieb's health, however, was not good and he suffered from a long history of heart ailments. After a month-long

bout with pneumonia, Sidney Gottlieb died at his home on March 7, 1999. He was 80 years old . Allen Dulles, the man who approved MKULTRA, died three decades earlier. Vincent Ruwet passed on in 1996.

John Mulholland died at age 71 on February 25, 1970 after a long illness in University Hospital, New York. His life had been dedicated to magic and the keeping of secrets. His clandestine work for the CIA was one secret he was able to maintain until the very end.

NOTES:

[1] Mulholland letter to subscribers of *The Sphinx*, June 29, 1953, George Daily Collection

[2] Memorandum for Director, Central Intelligence, *Two Extremely Sensitive Research Programs*, Central Intelligence Agency, April 3, 1953, author's files

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Memorandum for Deputy Director (Administration), *Project MKULTRA – Extremely Sensitive Research and Development Program*, Central Intelligence Agency, April 13, 1953, author's files

[5] Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, "US Official Poisoner Dies," *CounterPunch*, Institute for the Advancement of Journalistic Clarity, March 1999

[6] Stewart Alsop, *The Center: The Anatomy of Power in Washington*, London, Hodder & Stroughton, 1978

[7] John Northern Hilliard, *Greater Magic*, Kaufman and Greenburg, 1994, page 1095

[8] Mulholland invoice, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 4-30, April 13, 1953, author's files

[9] Mulholland letter to Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 4-29, April 20, 1953, author's files

[10] Memorandum for the Record, *Project MKULTRA, Subproject 4*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 4-28, May 4, 1953, author's files

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Letter to John Mulholland, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 4-28, May 5, 1953, author's files

[13] Mulholland letter to Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 4-2, May 11, 1953, author's files

[14] James B. Alfredson and George L. Daily, Jr., *A Bibliography of Conjuring*

Periodicals in English: 1791-1983, Magicana for Collectors, York, PA, 1986

[15] Mulholland letter to subscribers of *The Sphinx*, June 29, 1953, *op. cit.*

[16] Expense Record, MKULTRA, Subproject 4, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 4-1, author's files

[17] Memorandum for the Record, *Project MKULTRA, Subproject 15*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 15-2, August 3, 1953, author's files

[18] Memorandum for the Record, *Amendment to Project MKULTRA, Subproject 4*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 4-17, September 18, 1953, author's files

[19] Letter to John Mulholland from Sidney Gottlieb, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 4-17, September 18, 1953, author's files

[20] Mulholland letter to Sidney Gottlieb, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 19-2, November 11, 1953, author's files

[21] Cost Estimate, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 19-3, November 17, 1953, author's files

[22] Memorandum for the Record, *MKULTRA, Subproject 19*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 19-5, November 17, 1953, author's files

[23] Memorandum for the Record, *Project MKULTRA, Amendment to Subproject 15*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 15-13, December 9, 1953, author's files

[24] Memorandum for the Record, *Extension of Time for MKULTRA, Subproject 19*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 19-9, April 19, 1954, author's files

[25] Memorandum for the Record, *Summary of Events Related to Reimbursement of Taxes to John Mulholland*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 15-18, July 9, 1954, author's files

[26] Memorandum for the Record, *MKULTRA, Subproject 15, Expansion of Scope*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 15-19, July 9, 1954, author's files

[27] Mulholland Receipt for Bank Check No. M142064, Central Intelligence Agency,

MKULTRA document 15-23, July 31, 1954, author's files

[28] Memorandum for the Record, *MKULTRA, Subproject 15, Expansion of Scope*, op. cit.

[29] Memorandum for the Record, *Reimbursement of Excess Federal Income Taxes to Mr. John Mulholland*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 15-24, February 24, 1955, author's files; Memorandum, *Reimbursement for Excess Income Taxes*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 15-33, January 16, 1956, author's files

[30] Memorandum for the Record, *Project MKULTRA, Subproject 34*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 34-46, October 1, 1954, author's files

[31] *Some Operational Applications of the Art of Deception*, Central Intelligence Agency, undated, p. 2, author's files

[32] Memorandum for the Record, *Project MKULTRA, Subproject 34*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 34-46, October 1, 1954, author's files

[33] Memorandum for the Record, *Definition of a Task under MKULTRA Subproject 34*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 34-39, August 25, 1955, author's files

[34] Memorandum for the Record, *MKULTRA, Subproject 34*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 34-29, June 20, 1956, author's files

[35] Memorandum for the Record, *Project MKULTRA, Subproject 34A*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 34-26, August 31, 1956, author's files

[36] Memorandum for the Record, *Project MKULTRA, Extension of Subproject 34*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 34-7, November 15, 1957, author's files

[37] Invoice Check List, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 34-48, author's files

[38] Memorandum for the Record, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 83-12, March 26, 1959, author's files

[39] U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (Church Committee) *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders: An Interim Report*, Government Printing Office, 1975, pp.20-21

[40] *Ibid.* p. 181

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] Central Intelligence Agency, Office of the Inspector General, *Report on Plots to Assassinate Fidel Castro*, CIA-IG, May 23, 1967

[43] *Testimony of Admiral Stansfield Turner*, Select Committee on Intelligence & the Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research of the Committee on Human Resources, U.S. Senate, 1977, pp. 10-14

[44] A detailed and documented chronology of the events surrounding the Frank Olson case can be found in Appendix A, *Project MKULTRA, The CIA's Program of Research in Behavioral Modification*, Joint hearing of the Select Committee on Intelligence & the Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research of the Committee on Human Resources, Washington, DC 1977; the primary source documents can be found in *CIA Documents Concerning the Death of Dr. Frank Olson*, Center for National Security Studies documents collection, Box 8, Number C-35, National Security Archives, Washington, DC. The author's account is based on the documents contained in these two sets of materials.

[45] Affidavit of Lt. Col. Vincent L. Rewet, *CIA Documents Concerning the Death of Dr. Frank Olson*, CNSS, Box 8, C-35, Document 15, undated, National Security Archive, Washington, DC

[46] Robert Gibson interview with Eric Olson, December 20, 1999, Olson notes in author's files

[47] Joseph Treaster, "CIA Hired Magician in Behavior Project" *New York Times*, August 3, 1977

[48] Agent's Report, Case record #73317, December 3, 1953, *CIA Documents Concerning the Death of Frank Olson*, CNSS, Box 8, C-35, National Security Archive, Washington, DC

[49] *Ibid.* Document 60

[50] *Ibid.*

[51] These files were released by the Olson family in 1976 and can be found in the Kennedy subcommittee hearings on Biomedical and Behavioral Research, pp. 1005-1132; see also *CIA Documents Concerning the Death of Dr. Frank Olson* above

[52] Eric Olsen email to author, January 26, 2001

[53] Mulholland letter to Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 4-29, April 20, 1953, author's files

[54] Memorandum for the Record, Project MKULTRA, Subproject 15, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 15-2, August 3, 1953, author's files

[55] Memorandum for the Record, *Project MKULTRA, Subproject 19*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 19-5, November 17, 1953, author's files

[56] Mulholland invoice for Dec. 3-4, 1953 trip to Chicago, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 15-6, author's files

[57] Mulholland receipt for travel advance, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 15-6, author's files

[58] John Marks *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1979, p. 87

[59] Eric Olson e-mail to author, January 25, 2001, author's files

[60] A&E Investigative Reports: *Mind Control Murder*, Principal Films (London) and Arts & Entertainment Network, 1999, Videotape AE-17604

[61] John Mulholland and George Gordon *The Magical Mind*, Hastings House, 1967, p. 77

[62] *Testimony of Admiral Stansfield Turner*, op. cit. page 10

[63] Memorandum for the Record, *Visit to Project (deleted)*, Central Intelligence Agency, MKULTRA document 5-11, May 11, 1953

[64] Eric Olson email to author, January 25, 2001, author's files

[65] *Testimony of Admiral Stansfield Turner*, op. cit., page 9

[66] Joint hearings; Select Committee on Intelligence & the Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research of the Committee on Human Resources, U.S. Senate, Appendix A, page 69 August 3, 1977

[67] Jim Hougan interview with author, January 25, 2001

[68] *Testimony of Admiral Stansfield Turner and Appendix B: Documents Referring to Discovery of Additional MKULTRA Material*, Select Committee on Intelligence & the Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research of the Committee on Human Resources, U.S. Senate, 1977

[69] Letter to Michael Edwards from Kathryn Dyer, Information and Privacy Coordinator, Central Intelligence Agency, June 26, 2000