

**Tom O’Neill**

**Statement for the Record**

**Hearing, House Task Force on Declassification of Federal Secrets: Mind Control and Accountability: Uncovering the Truth of the CIA’s MKULTRA Project**

**June 30, 2026**

Almost fifty years ago, in a building a short walk from here, the last hearings into MKULTRA were held.

At those hearings, convened in August and September of 1977, representatives of the CIA told Congress and to the American people that their twenty-five-year effort to learn how to control the human mind had been a colossal failure.

During those same hearings, committee members like yourselves, promised that the victims of MKULTRA would be identified, compensated and provided lifetime medical care.

None of that ever happened.

We’ll get back to those hearings – because they’re important in the context of why we’re here today – but first, some background.

My name is Tom O’Neill and in 1999 I was assigned to write a magazine story about murders committed in 1969, by a group of “hippies” called the Manson Family. For those unfamiliar with this horrific episode of American history, in the summer of 1969, four young people on the orders of a cult leader named Charles Manson, went to the home of movie director Roman Polanski and murdered everyone in his house, including his eight-and-a-half-month pregnant wife, the actress Sharon Tate. (Polanski was out of the country).

The five victims were strangers to their killers, and the killers committed their crimes simply because they were told to.

The next night, two more people – a middle-aged couple named Rosemary and Leno LaBianca – were also killed in their home by three of Manson’s followers on his orders in the same grisly fashion.

At the time I received the assignment, I’d never heard of a thing called MKULTRA, and I wouldn’t until two years later, after I’d missed countless deadlines, lost the magazine assignment, and fallen down a nightmarish rabbit hole in my quest to understand how Manson had gained the ability to create an army of people who would kill on his command.

That journey to my discovery of MKULTRA, something that was a lot less discussed in the early 2000s, and to a psychiatrist named Louis Jolyon West.

I'll spare the committee the tedious story of how West, called "Jolly," by his friends, came to my attention, but suffice it to say, he crossed paths with Manson at a free medical clinic in the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco during 1967's "Summer of Love."

West had come to the clinic to recruit subjects for a study he planned to conduct that summer called "The Haight Ashbury Project" and Manson and his growing "family" of followers came for the free medical care.

At the end of the summer, West returned to his teaching post at the University of Oklahoma, and Manson migrated with his group to Los Angeles where two years later they would commit the crimes that historians have called "the end of the sixties."

And – spoiler alert – while I was never able to put Jolly West in the same room as Manson that pivotal summer, despite my best efforts, I was able to prove for the first time, that Jolly West had lied his entire career when he insisted he never worked for the program that had been initiated by the CIA in 1953 to create the technology -- using the same means and methods that Manson used -- to control the minds of people without their knowledge, with the ultimate goal of creating programmed killers.

In 1977, when the *New York Times* reported on its front page that the CIA had contracted dozens of academics and scientists to conduct LSD and other drug experiments on unwitting American citizens in colleges, hospitals, prisons and military facilities for over twenty years, West was among the seven subcontracted researchers named in the story.

West told the *Times*, however, that while he'd been approached by the Agency, he turned them down because he said he told them, LSD was too dangerous and unpredictable a substance to be used on humans. When reporters from the two student newspapers at the University of Oklahoma, where the *Times* alleged some of the experiments took place, asked West about them, he replied that he never conducted experiments for the CIA and had never used LSD in research anyway except, he said, with animals. He repeated those claims to reporters at the UCLA *Bruin*, where, in 1969, West had moved to become chairman of the psychiatry department and director of its Neuroscience Center.

At the hearings that followed the *New York Times* disclosures, West's name was never mentioned. Not once.

The MKULTRA allegations would occasionally resurface over the next two decades until West's death in 1999, but each time they'd be met by West's vigorous denials and threatened lawsuits. Once, he even had the temerity to compare his accusers to Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels, who, he said, repeated "the Big Lie *ad nauseum*" until people believed it.

In 2001, when I learned of West's proximity to Manson at exactly the same moment Manson emerged from the Haight with the power to accomplish MKULTRA's ultimate objective – the ability to create programmed killers -- I contacted UCLA to see if the recently deceased West had bequeathed his papers to the university. He had, but they hadn't been processed yet.

I begged and pleaded, citing no longer existent deadlines, and was given access by a kindly special collections director. Acting on a hunch, I returned several times a week as each of what became two hundred boxes was processed and released, and, after two months found the proverbial needle in a hay stack: correspondence between West and the director of the MKULTRA operation, Dr. Sidney Gottlieb.

John Marks, whose Freedom of Information lawsuits uncovered the academic affiliation with the CIA in 1977, later called the documents I found a "blueprint" for the operation and the only unredacted record of its goals he'd ever seen.

The correspondence between West and "Sherman Grifford," the alias Gottlieb adopted for all outside agency communications (and directed to a dummy corporation called "Chemrophy Associates," with a PO Box in Washington, D.C.), began in June 1953 (two months after CIA Director Allen Dulles authorized MKULTRA), and lasted sporadically through the end of the fifties, though financial records indicate West continued to receive funding through at least the mid-1960s.

The first letter, from West to "Grifford," dated June 11, 1953, outlined the objectives, means and methods for the experiments West planned to conduct on unwitting human subjects at the Lackland Air Force Base outside San Antonio, Texas, where he was chief psychiatrist at the base hospital.

It reads like a page torn from the research notebook of Josef Mengele.

West proposed experimenting on "basic airmen," "prisoners in the local stockade," "special subjects referred by you," and psychiatric patients suffering from dissociative disorders. Such patients, he wrote, "might lend themselves to our experiments without any risks or special problems arising."

The "risks" and "special problems" West sought to avoid become clear in the next section of the letter, where he outlined the experiments themselves.

Using drugs "not on the Air Force list of standard preparations"—including LSD—in combination with hypnosis, West proposed inducing "trance states," "confusions," "amnesias" and other "specific mental disorders" in "unwilling subjects" who would remember nothing afterward. He sought to develop the ability to "extract information," "implant false information," and, perhaps most chillingly, to "alter the ideas and attitudes of formerly loyal individuals."

The six-page, single-spaced letter also discussed ways of concealing the work from his colleagues, including disguised funding, the use of false names and even the transfer of his immediate supervisor, whom West described as "an uncomfortably close scrutinizer of all my activities."

But the sentence that stayed with me most came at the very end of his list of objectives. "These experiments," West wrote, "needless to say, must eventually be put to test in practical trials in the field."

Gottlieb's response could hardly have been more enthusiastic.

"My Good Friend," he wrote, "I had been wondering whether your apparent rapid and comprehensive grasp of our problems could possibly be real...you have indeed developed an admirably accurate picture of exactly what we are after. For this I am deeply grateful." He closed his letter with, "We have developed quite an asset in the relationship we are developing with you."

West replied, "It makes me very happy to realize that you consider me 'an asset.' Surely there is no more vital undertaking conceivable in these times."

Less than one year later, on July 3, 1954, a 34-year-old Air Force sergeant with no criminal or violent history, abducted a three-year-old girl he saw playing in a parking lot outside the airbase. Hours later, she was found raped and murdered by his car in a nearby gravel pit. The airman, a decorated serviceman, husband and father of two named Jimmy Shaver, wandered up to the search party that had found the little girl and asked them where he was and how he had gotten there. Witnesses, including the military police who took him into custody, described Shaver as dazed and appearing to be in a trance. His wife reported that he didn't recognize her when she visited him in jail that evening.

At his trial, where West served as the psychiatric expert assigned to examine him, it emerged that Shaver had been a patient at the base hospital, undergoing experimental treatment for debilitating migraine headaches. Four years later he was executed, insisting until the end that he had no memory of committing the crime for which he was convicted.

That same year, West became a public advocate against capitol punishment.

There's not enough time today for me to take you through the timeline of West's curious career path from the 1950's through his death in 1999, except for one quick detour to the John F. Kennedy assassination investigation – my apologies, I know those hearings already occurred, but if you'll bear with me for a moment, I believe you'll understand the relevance.

In April of 1964, after Jack Ruby was convicted and sentenced to death for killing Lee Harvey Oswald, West traveled to Dallas to examine him on behalf of Ruby's new defense attorney. Ruby

had already been found competent to stand trial, had declined to testify in his own defense, and, apart from a brief statement by his first attorney immediately after Oswald's murder, had never publicly given his reason for killing the President's accused assassin.

West arrived to examine Ruby several weeks before Ruby would finally explain himself to the Warren Commission who planned to send Chief Justice Earl Warren, Congressman Gerald Ford and Commission Counsel Arlen Specter to interview Ruby in Dallas. But after several hours alone with Ruby in his jail cell, West emerged to announce to a gaggle of news reporters that in the preceding forty-eight hours West had suffered "an acute psychotic break" from which he would never recover. He asserted that Ruby "was now positively insane" and the condition appeared to be "unshakable" and "fixed." West added that during his examination, Ruby saw people in the room who weren't there, hid under a table and described hearing the screams of Jewish children being boiled alive at night.

West continued to treat Ruby until shortly before his death in 1967.

Two months after West's first visit to Ruby, Commissioner Warren, Representative Ford and Arlen Specter took sworn testimony from him at the Dallas jail, but the testimony had to be halted, as Specter recounted in his memoir, because Ruby was babbling incoherently. At one point, Specter wrote, Ruby pulled he and Warren aside to whisper, "they're cutting off the arms and legs of Jewish children in Albuquerque and New Mexico."

It's important to note here that former CIA Director Allen Dulles, who authorized MKULTRA in 1953, sat on the Warren Commission, while Richard Helms, who oversaw the program and later ordered its records destroyed, served as the CIA's liaison to that Commission.

Both men knew exactly who Louis Jolyon West was and what his particular talents were, yet neither disclosed West's relationship with the Agency.

Which brings us back to 1977.

At the last MKULTRA hearings, co-chaired by Senators Edward Kennedy and Daniel Inouye, a parade of former and current CIA officials, including newly appointed CIA Director Stansfield Turner and the "Black Sorcerer" himself, Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, testified that the entire twenty-five-year experimental program had produced no useable technology. In a remarkable break from the tradition of not criticizing itself, Director Turner labeled the project "abhorrent," Gottlieb admitted to being embarrassed by it, and the resulting coverage in the nation's newspapers was no less brutal (the *Washington Post* headlined one story, "The Gang That Couldn't Spray Straight").

Committee members took the high ground, too. Sen. Inouye called the operation "grandiose and sinister." Sen. Kennedy labeled it "perverse" and "corrupt," and voiced particular contempt

for the clandestine co-opting of universities and colleges by the CIA, which he derided as “an erosion [of] the freedom of individuals and institutions in the name of national security.”

Promises of finding victims and perpetrators were extracted from the CIA by the committee, with pledges of retribution, compensation and reparations reinforced by decrees from President Jimmy Carter and his attorney general, Griffin Bell.

The hearings were adjourned and the agency officials retreated to Langly, a little worse for wear, but with their power – and secrets – intact.

None of that happened.

What nobody in that hearing room knew, however, was that also buried among Louis Jolyon West’s papers at UCLA was one more document, a fourteen-page report, written in 1956, that suggested something very different from what Congress had been told in 1977.

Just three years after contracting with the CIA, West reported that by administering “LSD” and other “new drugs” which “speed the induction of the hypnotic state and deepen the trance that can be produced in given subjects,” he had developed the ability to replace “true memories” with “false ones” in a person without that person’s awareness.

“In other words,” he elaborated, “it has been found to be feasible to take the memory of a definite event in the life of an individual and, through hypnotic suggestion, bring about the subsequent conscious recall to the effect that this event never actually took place, but that a different (fictional) event actually did occur.”

This was the Holy Grail of the operation – the secret to taking possession of a person’s mind and to controlling their behavior.

Yet in 1977, despite Director Turner’s sworn testimony that the agency had produced every surviving record in its possession, this document had been significantly altered before being turned over to Congress.

I found its facsimile years later at the National Security Archive at George Washington University, the official repository for the material released by the CIA in 1977.

The document had the same cover page and title —“The Psychophysiological Studies of Hypnosis and Suggestibility”—with West’s name and institutional affiliation redacted, as expected. But in place of his detailed report was a four-page summary that did not exist in the original and was clearly written by another hand.

Gone was West’s extraordinary claim.

In its place was a *theoretical* discussion of LSD and its *possible* effects on dissociative states.

The summary of the document received by congress in 1977 concluded:

The effects of these agents [LSD and other drugs] upon the production, maintenance, and manifestations of dissociative states has never been studied.

*Never been studied.*

I remind the committee that in the original document, which I hold here in my hand, West wrote:

Although the administration of LSD produced in many individuals an increase in the spontaneous occurrence of dissociative phenomena, there was nevertheless a definite interference with hypnotizability. The individual who had been pre-medicated with LSD was more difficult to hypnotize. However, an interesting preliminary observation is that at least some of the effects of LSD can be overcome by hypnotic suggestions...

Nearly fifty years ago, another committee investigating MKULTRA believed it had been told the truth about the program.

It had not.

I respectfully submit that these records – some newly available and others that remained outside the government's disclosures for decades -- warrant a thorough reexamination of what this program accomplished, what Congress was told, and what may still remain hidden.

I'm happy to provide the documents I've referenced today, and I request that this statement be entered into the Congressional Record as well.

Thank you.