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# COLD WAR ERA HUMAN SUBJECT EXPERIMENTATION

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## HEARING BEFORE THE LEGISLATION AND NATIONAL SECURITY SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED THIRD CONGRESS SECOND SESSION

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**Testimony to the Committee on Government Operations,  
United States House of Representatives**

September 28, 1994

I.

**The unending event.**

My family's experience with U.S. government testing on unwitting subjects begins more than forty years ago. In November 1953 my father, Dr. Frank Olson, was given a dose of LSD, without his knowledge and without his consent in an after-dinner drink. This bizarre incident occurred during a meeting of Ft. Detrick scientists, organized by Dr. Sidney Gottlieb who at that time was in the early stages of what became a very long program of mind-manipulation research at the CIA.

At the time of that strange meeting, which one hesitates to call "scientific" even though it was organized by and for a small group of scientists, my mother was still a young woman. She was thirty-eight years old. I was nine, my sister was seven, and my brother was five.

Nine days after that meeting at Deep Creek Lake, in the pre-dawn hours of November 28, 1953, which was the Saturday after Thanksgiving, I was awakened to be told that my father was dead. I was told that he died from a fall out of the window of a New York hotel room.

For me on that pre-dawn morning it was as if the lights went out. I could not understand what I had been told. I remember seeing my mother sitting on the sofa across from me, motionless, with a frozen expression on her face. I remember an overwhelming feeling of isolation, a crushing sensation that the world in which I had been living was suddenly gone for ever.

Our family did not know what hit us. We did not know that my father had been the subject of an experiment. We did not know why he had been suddenly whisked away to New York to get some kind of psychiatric help — if that was indeed the purpose of his visits to a CIA consultant named Harold Abramson.

We did not learn these things for twenty-two years, until 1975; and even then we learned them by accident. On June 11 of 1975 — one day after my mother was told by her doctor that she had cancer — the Washington Post reported that an unnamed scientist had plunged to his death in 1953 after being drugged with LSD by the CIA. We deduced that this unnamed scientist must be my father. Eventually Vincent Ruwet, one of my father's colleagues, confirmed for us that this was in fact the case. But we were never officially notified by either the Rockefeller Commission, in whose report this story first appeared, or by the CIA, whose failure to contact us, rendered that agency's subsequent apology rather empty in our ears. It was as if a body long missing in action had at last been found, but the family were not notified.

Later that summer we were invited to the White House to receive a formal apology from President Gerald Ford. And we received from William Colby a set of heavily censored documents which he assured us contained everything the CIA had on this case.

White House attorneys helped our lawyers draft a bill that would compensate our family financially for my father's death and for the twenty-two year cover-up that followed it. After months of discussion, with participation by the White House, the CIA, the Justice Department, the Treasury Department, and the Labor Department we arrived at an agreement, supported by all these agencies, with which we were satisfied. White House attorneys assured us that Congress was over-whelmingly in favor of the bill, and that it would face no serious opposition.

On the day of the vote, however, we discovered that a single congressman opposed the bill. We were also informed that private bills require unanimous support, and that due to the opposition of this congressman, the bill could not pass. This individual later agreed to support the bill only if the proposed financial amount, carefully negotiated over many months, were cut by forty per cent.

We had no choice but to accept the terms dictated by this individual, even though the make-shift quality of this emergency compromise deprived us of a feeling of integrity in the settlement process. I remember my mother's comment to this congressman, who had refused even to meet with us. My mother said, "This bill represents an apology from the American people for what our family has suffered. If you compromise an apology you don't have an apology." And I remember too this congressman's response to my mother: "Oh Mrs. Olson, I would never want to compromise your pain or your suffering."

## II.

Widening reverberations.

No one ever did compromise my mother's pain or suffering: she had it in full measure. She bore her burdens with great dignity, but she paid a heavy price.

She never re-married. After my father died my mother maintained her public stance in the community as a woman of great, almost incredible strength. But privately she began a twenty-year descent into alcoholism from which, after repeated hospitalizations, she only narrowly escaped with her life.

My mother's serious drinking began shortly after my father's death. At the time of day when my father would normally have been returning home from work one of my father's colleagues began coming to our house, to have a drink with my mother. In 1975 we learned from the documents we received from William Colby that this colleague had been directed by the CIA to "keep track of the wife." Unfortunately, "keeping track" did not include telling my mother the truth.

My brother, sister, and I grew up in a home from which our father had inexplicably vanished, and in which our mother was gradually becoming severely alcoholic. On the surface we lived a remarkably normal life; most of pain was hidden from those who knew us and even from our selves.

My father's death affected each of the members of my family differently. For all of us, though, there was a feeling of shame — shame not only that our father had vanished, had perhaps committed some inexplicable kind of suicide, but shame especially because we didn't know how to speak about his death; that we had no idea what to say to our friends. My brother, sister, and I used to dread the moment when anyone would ask us how our father died. We eventually learned to reply to such questions by saying that our father had died of a nervous breakdown — though we had no idea what that might mean.

It is easier for me to speak about my own reactions than about those of my brother and sister. I was nine years old when my father vanished — a delicate age when interruptions to the logic of cause and effect can have a crushing impact on one's confidence that world is a reasonable place, and that one can trust people and events.

My son, who is here with me today, will never know his grandfather. I have to try to explain to him why, just as my brother has to explain this to his children. My sister, her husband and their two-year old child were all killed in an airplane

crash in 1978 while they were flying to upstate New York to consider an investment of their share of the money we received in the settlement of my father's case.

The best way in which I can convey the depth of impact which the revelations of 1975, and the settlement we made with the government, made upon me is that, beginning in the late 1970's, after finishing my Ph.D. at Harvard, I spent nearly a decade and a half living outside the United States. I moved to Sweden to live in the country from which my father's parents had immigrated as optimistic immigrants to the United States in the 1890's.

I relate these things to stress the way in which an incident like this reverberates for decades through the generations of a family and its close friends.

During the last year of his life, my father spoke of wanting to leave his job in bacteriological warfare research, and re-educate himself as a dentist. Dentistry is, in fact, the profession my brother has taken up. I suspect that the atmosphere of eerie silence in our family around my father's death strongly influenced my sister's decision to become a speech therapist, and to teach deaf children to speak. I know that it determined my decision to become a psychologist, as well as the particular path I followed within that discipline.

When I started graduate school in psychology in the early 1970's I was still strongly motivated by the need to understand what had happened to my father and the consequences this loss for the history of my family. I chose to work with the well-known psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton at Yale, the sequence of whose research comprised a virtual curriculum in the issues raised by my father's death. Lifton's early work concerned the psychology of brain-washing. Later he studied the psychology of survivors of massive trauma, identity-formation without the father, and the psychology of weapons scientists. In more recent work he has concentrated on the motivations of Nazi doctors who performed immoral experiments on human subjects in the Nazi death camps.

After World War II, in a project known as "Operation Paper Clip," many of those Nazi scientists were in fact recruited by the American military to work side-by-side with American scientists preparing the experiments whose effects we are considering today. This fact helps us to understand that, in other circumstances, the perpetrators of these acts would not be enjoying their retirements: they would be prosecuted as war criminals.

## III.

Struggling to learn the truth.

How did my father die? Sadly, I believe that we still don't know for sure.

For a brief moment in 1975 I thought the lights had been turned on again. Unfortunately the feeling of illumination did not endure. In the years after 1975 my brother and I became increasingly convinced that we still did not know the truth what about what had happened to my father.

In fact, I believe we cannot be certain about anything concerning my father's death, except that he died just outside the Statler Hotel in New York City (or was it in the hotel room itself?), after falling some thirteen stories from the room he had shared with Dr. Robert Lashbrook, who was Sidney Gottlieb's associate at the CIA.

The documents we received from the CIA in 1975 are so riddled with contradictions, omissions, and outright lies that it is difficult to have any confidence in them at all. The documents that would have been really informative were almost certainly shredded by Sidney Gottlieb when he retired from the CIA in 1975. What we have are remnants of the cover-up within the CIA itself, that began immediately after my father's death.

Over the past two decades my brother and I have become increasingly convinced that in fact my father was murdered. In June of this year we had his body exhumed so that a full-scale autopsy — blocked by the CIA in 1953 — could now be performed. For the first time in forty-one years my brother and I saw my father's body, which was remarkably intact. No one in my family had ever seen my father's body after he died. At the funeral the casket was closed, because my mother had been told that my father's body was so maimed that we would not want to see it. Now, in its mumified state, we discovered that this had not been true. Even that bit of consolation had been denied us.

Professor James Starrs of the George Washington University National Law Center is now over-seeing an exhaustive investigation of my father's remains. Professor Starrs' findings will be reported in a press conference to be held in late November, on the anniversary of my father's death. Professor Starrs' forensic investigation is not yet complete, but its preliminary results, which increasingly point toward the likelihood of homicide, are tending to confirm our most dire suspicions.

Meanwhile I have managed to locate a former CIA employee who worked in Gottlieb's small group during the years after my father's death. This source has confirmed that the members of that small group all believed that my father was murdered.

My father's case — still unresolved after four decades — illustrates what can happen when civil liberties are violated in the name of national security research. Once one starts on the dangerous path of poisoning one's own citizens in order to develop the weapons allegedly needed to protect them one enters a zone of lunacy where anything is possible, where sadists can disguise their maliciousness as patriotic duty.

In such a situation any experiment, if it goes awry, can quickly become a risk to the careers of the experimenters themselves. The path from experimental mind-manipulation to murder may then be a short one, for how else can one guarantee the security of an immoral research program in which one's fellow citizens are used as guinea pigs?

My brother and I can only hope that our father's case, and our family's experience, remain a lesson in the risks posed to a free society by pretentious pseudo-science, self-serving secrecy, and bureaucratic arrogance.