

Happy Birthday CIA: Seven Truly Terrible Things the Agency Has Done in 70 Years

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On Monday, President Trump [tweeted](#) birthday wishes to the Air Force and the CIA. Both became [official](#) organizations 70 years ago on September 18, 1947, with the implementation of the National Security Act of 1947.

After spending years as a wartime intelligence agency called the Office of Strategic Services, the agency was solidified as a key player in the federal government's operations with then-President Harry Truman's authorization.

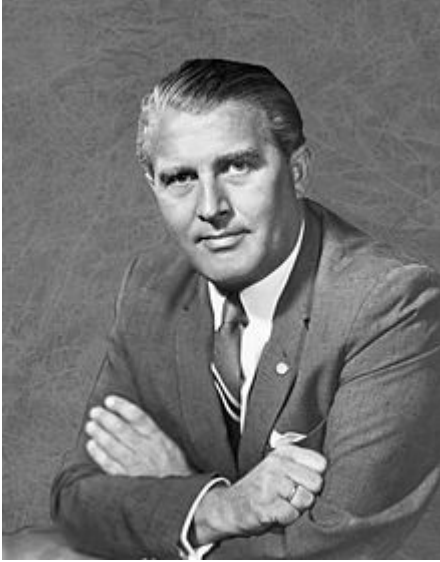
In the seventy years since, the CIA has committed a wide variety of misdeeds, crimes, coups, and violence. Here are seven of the worst programs they've carried out (that are known to the public):

1 - Toppling governments around the world — The CIA is best known for its first coup, Operation Ajax, in 1953, in which it ousted the democratically elected leader of Iran, Mohammed Mossadegh, reinstating the autocratic Shah, who favored western oil interests. That operation, which the CIA now [admits](#) to waging with British intelligence, ultimately resulted in the [1979 revolution](#) and subsequent U.S. hostage crisis. Relations between the U.S. and Iran remain strained to this day, aptly described by the CIA-coined term "[blowback](#)."

But the CIA has had a hand in [toppling](#) a number of other democratically elected governments, from Guatemala (1954) and the Congo (1960) to the Dominican Republic (1961), South Vietnam (1963), Brazil (1964), and Chile (1973). The CIA has aimed to install leaders who appease American interests, often [empowering](#) oppressive, [violent dictators](#). This is only a partial list of countries where the CIA covertly attempted to exploit and manipulate sovereign nations' governments.

2 - Operation Paperclip — In one of the more bizarre CIA plots, the agency and other government departments employed Nazi scientists both within and outside the United States to gain an advantage over the Soviets. As [summarized](#) by NPR:

The aim [of Operation Paperclip] was to find and preserve German weapons, including biological and chemical agents, but American scientific intelligence officers quickly realized the weapons themselves were not enough.



Wernher von Braun (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

They decided the United States needed to bring the Nazi scientists themselves to the U.S. Thus began a mission to recruit top Nazi doctors, physicists and chemists — including Wernher von Braun, who went on to design the rockets that took man to the moon.

They kept this plot secret, though they [admitted](#) to it upon the release of [Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program That Brought Nazi Scientists To America](#) by Annie Jacobsen. In a book review, the CIA wrote that

“Henry Wallace, former vice president and secretary of commerce, believed the scientists’ ideas could launch new civilian industries and produce jobs.”

They praised the book’s historical accuracy, noting “that the Launch Operations Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida, was headed by Kurt Debus, an ardent Nazi.” They acknowledged that

“General Reinhard Gehlen, former head of Nazi intelligence operations against the Soviets, was hired by the US Army and later by the CIA to operate 600 ex-Nazi agents in the Soviet zone of occupied Germany.”

Remarkably, they noted that Jacobsen “understandably questions the morality of the decision to hire Nazi SS scientists,” but praise her for pointing out that it was done to fight Soviets. They also made sure to add that the Soviets hired Nazis, too, apparently justifying their own questionable actions by citing their most loathed enemy.

3 - Operation CHAOS — The FBI is widely known for its [COINTELPRO](#) schemes to undermine [communist movements in the 1950s and anti-war, civil rights](#), and [black power](#) movements in the 1960s, but the CIA has not been implicated nearly as deeply because, technically, the CIA cannot legally engage in domestic spying. But that was of little concern to President Lyndon B. Johnson as opposition to the Vietnam war grew. According to former *New York Times* journalist and Pulitzer Prize-winner Tim Weiner, as documented in

his extensive CIA [history](#), *Legacy of Ashes*, Johnson instructed then-CIA Director Richard Helms to break the law:



Richard Helms (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

In October 1967, a handful of CIA analysts joined in the first big Washington march against the war. The president regarded protesters as enemies of the state. He was convinced that the peace movement was controlled and financed by Moscow and Beijing. He wanted proof. He ordered Richard Helms to produce it.

Helms reminded the president that the CIA was barred from spying on Americans. He says Johnson told him: 'I'm quite aware of that. What I want for you is to pursue this matter, and to do what is necessary to track down the foreign communists who are behind this intolerable interference in our domestic affairs...'

Helms obeyed. Weiner wrote:

In a blatant violation of his powers under the law, the director of central intelligence became a part-time secret police chief. The CIA undertook a domestic surveillance operation, code-named Chaos. It went on for almost seven years... Eleven CIA officers grew long hair, learned the jargon of the New Left, and went off to infiltrate peace groups in the United States and Europe.

According to Weiner, "the agency compiled a computer index of 300,000 names of American people and organizations, and extensive files on 7,200 citizens. It began working in secret with police departments all over America." Because they could not draw a "clear distinction" between the new far left and mainstream opposition to the war, the CIA spied on every major peace organization in the country. President Johnson also wanted them to prove a connection between foreign communists and the black power movement. "The agency tried its best," Weiner noted, ultimately noting that "the CIA never found a shred of evidence that linked the leaders of the American left or the black-power movement to foreign governments."

4 - Infiltrating the media — Over the years, the CIA has successfully gained influence in the news media, as well as popular media like film and television. Its influence over the news began almost immediately after the agency was formed. As Weiner explained, CIA Director Allen Dulles established firm ties with newspapers:

Dulles kept in close touch with the men who ran the New York Times, The Washington Post, and the nation's leading weekly magazines. He could pick up the phone and edit a breaking story, make sure an irritating foreign correspondent was yanked from the field, or hire the services of men such as Time's Berlin bureau chief and Newsweek's man in Tokyo.

He continued:

It was second nature for Dulles to plant stories in the press. American newsrooms were dominated by veterans of the government's wartime propaganda branch, the Office of War Information...The men who responded to the CIA's call included Henry Luce and his editors at Time, Life, and Fortune; popular magazines such as Parade, the Saturday Review, and Reader's Digest; and the most powerful executives at CBS News. Dulles built a public-relations and propaganda machine that came to include more than fifty news organizations, a dozen publishing houses, and personal pledges of support from men such as Axel Springer, West Germany's most powerful press baron.

The CIA's influence had not waned by 1977 when journalist Carl Bernstein [reported](#) on publications with CIA agents in their employ, as well as "more than 400 American journalists who in the past twenty-five years have secretly carried out assignments for the Central Intelligence Agency."

The CIA has also successfully [advised on and influenced](#) numerous television shows, [such as](#) *Homeland* and *24* and [films](#) like *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Argo*, which push narratives that ultimately favor the agency. According to Tricia Jenkins, author of [The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film & Television](#), a concerted agency effort began in the 1990s to counteract negative public perceptions of the CIA, but their influence reaches back decades. In the 1950s, filmmakers produced films [for the CIA](#), including the 1954 film adaptation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

Researchers Tom Secker and Matthew Alford, whose work has been [published](#) in the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, say their recent Freedom of Information Act requests have shown that the CIA — along with the military — have [influenced](#) over 1,800 films and television shows, many of which have nothing to do with CIA or military themes.

5 - Drug-induced Mind control - In the 1950s, the CIA began experimenting with drugs to determine whether they might be useful in extracting information. As Smithsonian Magazine has [noted](#) of the MKUltra project:

The project, which continued for more than a decade, was originally intended to make sure the United States government kept up with presumed Soviet advances in mind-control technology. It ballooned in scope and its ultimate result, among other things, was illegal drug testing on thousands of Americans.

Further:

The intent of the project was to study 'the use of biological and chemical materials in altering human behavior,' [according to](#) the official testimony of CIA director Stansfield Turner in 1977. The project was conducted in extreme secrecy, Turner said, because of ethical and legal questions surrounding the program and the negative public response that the CIA anticipated if MKUltra should become public.

Under MKUltra, the CIA gave itself the authority to research how drugs could: 'promote the intoxicating effects of alcohol;' 'render the induction of hypnosis easier;' 'enhance the ability of individuals to withstand privation, torture and coercion;' produce amnesia, shock and confusion; and much more. Many of these questions were investigated using unwitting test subjects, like drug-addicted prisoners, marginalized sex workers and terminal cancer patients- 'people who could not fight back,' [in the words of](#) Sidney Gottlieb, the chemist who introduced LSD to the CIA.

Further, as Weiner noted:

Under its auspices, seven prisoners at a federal penitentiary in Kentucky were kept high on LSD for seventy-seven consecutive days. When the CIA slipped the same drug to an army civilian employee, Frank Olson, he leaped out of the window of a New York Hotel.

Weiner added that senior CIA officers destroyed "almost all of the records" of the programs, but that while the "evidence that remains is fragmentary...it strongly suggests that use of secret prisons for the forcible drug-induced questioning of suspect agents went on throughout the 1950s."

**PROJECT MKULTRA, THE CIA'S PROGRAM OF
RESEARCH IN BEHAVIORAL MODIFICATION**

**JOINT HEARING
BEFORE THE
SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE
AND THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
HEALTH AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES
UNITED STATES SENATE
NINETY-FIFTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION
AUGUST 3, 1977**



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Project MKULTRA, the CIA's Program of Research into Behavioral Modification. Joint Hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence and the Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research of the Committee on Human Resources, United State Senate, Ninety-Fifth Congress, First Session (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Years later, the CIA would be accused of distributing crack-cocaine into poor black communities, though this is currently less substantiated and [supported](#) mostly by accounts of those who claim to have been involved.

6 - Brutal torture tactics — More recently, the CIA was [exposed](#) for sponsoring abusive, disturbing terror tactics against detainees at prisons housing terror suspects. An extensive 2014 Senate report documented agents committing sexual abuse, forcing detainees to stand on broken legs, waterboarding them so severely it sometimes led to convulsions, and imposing forced rectal feeding, to name a few examples. Ultimately, the agency had very little actionable intelligence to show for their torture tactics but [lied](#) to suggest they did, according to the torture report. Their torture tactics [led](#) the International Criminal Court to suggest the CIA, along with the U.S. armed forces, could be guilty of war crimes for their abuses.

7 - Arming radicals — The CIA has a long habit of arming radical, extremist groups that view the United States as enemies. In 1979, the CIA set out to support Afghan rebels in their bid to defeat the Soviet occupation of the Middle Eastern country. As Weiner wrote, in 1979,

“Prompted by Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter signed a covert-action order for the CIA to provide the Afghan rebels with medical aid, money, and propaganda.”

As Weiner detailed later in his book:

The Pakistani intelligence chiefs who doled out the CIA’s guns and money favored the Afghan factions who proved themselves most capable in battle. Those factions also happened to be the most committed Islamists. No one dreamed that the holy warriors could ever turn their jihad against the United States.

Though some speculate the CIA directly armed Osama bin Laden, that is yet to be fully proven or admitted. What is clear is that western media [revered](#) him as a valuable fighter against the Soviets, that he [arrived](#) to fight in Afghanistan in 1980, and that al-Qaeda emerged from the mujahideen, who were beneficiaries of the CIA’s program. Stanford University has [noted](#) that Bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam, a prominent Palestinian cleric, “established Al Qaeda from the fighters, financial resources, and training and recruiting structures left over from the anti-Soviet war.” Much of those “structures” were provided by the agency. Intentionally or not, the CIA helped fuel the rise of the terror group.

Weiner noted that as the CIA failed in other countries like Libya, by the late 1980s “Only the mujahideen, the Afghan holy warriors, were drawing blood and scenting victory. The CIA’s Afghan operation was now a \$700-million-dollar-a-year-program” and represented 80% of the overseas budget of the clandestine services. “The CIA’s briefing books never answered the question of what would happen when a militant Islamic army defeated the godless invaders of Afghanistan,” though Tom Twetten, “the number two man in the clandestine service in the summer of 1988,” was tasked with figuring out what would happen with the Afghan rebels. “We don’t have any plan,” he concluded.

Apparently failing to learn their lesson, the CIA adopted nearly the exact same policy in Syria decades later, arming what they called “moderate rebels” against the Assad regime. Those groups ultimately [aligned](#) with al-Qaeda groups. One CIA-backed faction made headlines last year for [beheading](#) a child (though President Trump cut off the CIA program in June, the military [continues](#) to align with “moderate” groups).

Unsurprisingly, this list is far from complete. The CIA has engaged in a wide variety of [extrajudicial practice](#), and there are likely countless transgressions we have yet to learn about.

As Donald Trump cheers the birthday of an agency he himself once [criticized](#), it should be abundantly clear that the nation’s covert spy agency deserves scrutiny and skepticism — not celebration.

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