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Enemies in the mind's eye

For more than 20 years, the CIA funded psychic experiments

By Marianne Szegedy-Maszak and Charles Fenyvesi

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His name would eventually be revealed as Joseph McMoneagle, but for the purposes of the Army's psychic intelligence unit, he was simply Remote Viewer No. 1. One fall day in 1979 he reclined in an easy chair in an office at Fort Meade, Md. The lights were dim. Sitting nearby was an interviewer, who gave him a series of geographical coordinates that were supposed to be his mind's destination. After about 20 minutes, McMoneagle brought himself out of a deep meditation and, as he describes it, "opened my mind." Gradually images began to appear: a low, windowless building; a smokestack. He smelled "a strange stink," a mixture of sulfur and natural gas. There was also a "smelting or melting activity." After an image came to mind, he drew it roughly on a piece of paper. Another viewer, No. 29, could "see" heavy metal equipment, including tubes conducting a "heat exchange." For him, the site emanated a "sense of power."

Far-fetched as it sounds, the remote viewers at Fort Meade were engaged in deadly serious work--an odd marriage of American intelligence-gathering and paranormal experimentation. Unbeknownst to themselves, viewers No. 1 and No. 29 seemed to be describing Lop Nor, a Chinese nuclear complex.

The experiment was only one episode in a remarkable research program run by the Defense Intelligence Agency and CIA from 1972 until 1996. The project, known variously as Grill Flame, Sun Streak, and finally Star Gate, explored a variety of parapsychological phenomena but especially one known as "remote viewing," the process by which someone in, say, Maryland visualizes an office in the Kremlin and describes it both in words and drawings. The viewers were shadowy and unacknowledged participants in the quest for intelligence about a range of security concerns: nuclear weapons sites, the Iranian hostage crisis, the kidnapping of Gen. James Dozier by the Red Brigades, the location of Col. Muammar Qadhafi during the raids on Tripoli in 1986, and the espionage case of Aldrich Ames.

The outlines of Star Gate have been sketched before, but new details of the project have come to light in 73,000 pages of previously classified records released by the CIA last November and made available just this month. (An additional 20,800 pages are undergoing review, and 17,700 pages were deemed too sensitive to release.) The documents illuminate a chapter of spying that bears closer resemblance to Miss Cleo than to James Bond.

In a sense, it was inevitable. From the early 1950s on, United States intelligence explored psychic research, hoping to use extrasensory perception (ESP) for intelligence operations. After all, the Soviets were doing it. Nonetheless, officials were torn between worries that the Soviets--and later the Chinese--were ahead of the United States in the psychic arms race and the skepticism of many American officials about spending money in the field seen as dominated by kooks.

Even such hardheaded operatives as Richard Helms, who later became the director of the CIA, were intrigued. The declassified documents reveal a memo written when Helms was deputy director for plans in 1963. For 10 years a small group in the Technical Services Division had been studying hypnosis and telepathy for use in clandestine operations but concluded that these fields were not ready for operational applications. Helms disagreed and sent a memo suggesting more research in "this somewhat esoteric (and perhaps scientifically disreputable) range of activities." He argued that given the Soviet preoccupation with "cybernetics, telepathy, hypnosis, and related subjects . . . recent reported advances . . . may indicate more potential than we believed existed."

Remote viewing was added to the roster of psychic phenomena in 1972 when the CIA became interested in the published viewing experiments of Hal Puthoff at the Stanford Research Institute. In 1972, the CIA gave the institute \$50,000 to study remote viewing. Russell Targ, who joined the project in 1972, recalls a CIA official telling him: "You are wasting your time looking at churches and swimming pools in Palo Alto." Two years later, the institute received the geographical coordinates of a "Soviet site of ongoing operational significance."

"Turning point." The target was Semipalatinsk, in what is now Kazakhstan. Aside from suspicions that the site was important, nothing was known about it. Given the coordinates, a remote viewer provided a layout of a cluster of buildings and drew a puzzling, "damned

big crane." He identified the underground facility as storage for Soviet missiles. Satellite photos verified the viewer's report, according to Donald Jameson, then a senior CIA Soviet specialist, who called the event a "turning point." One group within the agency refused to look at the Semipalatinsk data, objecting to the unscientific methodology. Another group allowed that the data might be real but called the process "demonic."

Still, officials were convinced enough of the program's potential that a training program was designed, as well as an ESP teaching machine. Questions designed to detect ESP talent supplemented the standard personality test used by the CIA. Some employees were deemed psychically gifted. When the CIA cut the program in 1975, the funds shifted first to the Air Force and then, in 1980, to the Defense Intelligence Agency. The military also looked for potential talent. That meant, says Paul H. Smith, a retired intelligence officer who spent seven years in Star Gate, "certain odd proclivities, like a creative pursuit in music or art, an interest or aptitude in foreign languages. They were also looking for people who didn't report any ESP experiences."

Between 1979 and 1994 Fort Meade's viewing site conducted roughly 250 projects involving thousands of missions. One, in 1987, was an attempt to find a mole in the CIA. The viewers came up with a composite: The man lived in the Washington area, drove an expensive foreign car, perhaps gray, lived in a palatial home, was intimate with a woman from Latin America, possibly Colombia. Aldrich Ames lived in a palatial house in the Washington area. He drove a Jaguar and was married to a Colombian. The car was red; the house was gray. Not that the information was used; Ames was apprehended in 1994. By 1995, the end of the Cold War, along with increasing concerns about unfavorable scrutiny, drained the remote-viewing program of both its vitality and its supporters, and CIA director John Deutch ended it. All told, it had cost \$20 million. The CIA says it no longer funds remote-viewing research, but the military is less emphatic in its denials. In the end, the weakness of remote viewing, says Smith, "is the weakness of any phenomenon that deals with the threshold of human perception. There are false positives, vague notions, and confused data that go with the territory." Paradoxically, for nearly a quarter of a century of American spying, that was also a strength.

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