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National academy to assess potential for 'psychwars'

By Ed Rogers
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The prestigious National Academy of Sciences is checking into hordes of published claims that research being done for the CIA and the Pentagon could lead to psychic spying and mind warfare.

Believers in the paranormal claim that certain people, called "psychics," can see objects beyond the normal vision range, through "clairvoyance," and move objects by mental power, through "psychokinetics."

For more than a decade, newspapers, magazines and books have claimed the government is spending "millions of dollars" on research into occult phenomena that make the exotic "star wars" technology look tame.

These reports claimed that psychic espionage and weapons operated by the power of the mind are on the verge of reality.

The most spectacular of these reports claimed a "psychic" used in research for the CIA in 1972 by the Stanford Research Institute, now SRI International, was able to describe Soviet military bases by clairvoyance, or so-called "remote viewing."

Throughout the years, skeptical scientists have tried to spread doubts about the claims. They repeatedly challenged the 1972 "remote viewing" report on the ground that the results could not be verified by independent investigators.

The skeptics also have challenged even the idea that the government is committed in a major way. But they have not been able to squelch the "psychwar" fad.

A year ago former CIA Director Stansfield Turner disclosed that the agency had, in fact, sponsored "remote viewing" research when Vice President George Bush was the CIA director.

"Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't," he said, adding that during his term as director, the CIA watched developments in this country and "tried to monitor the Soviet Union's research."

The CIA will not say what it is doing now, but a spokesman commented: "We obviously have to keep track of what the Soviets, hostile powers, are doing in that area."

Robert Morris, former president of The Parapsychological Association, said he welcomes any attempt to add objective information about the field, but declined in an interview to comment on any of the investigation reports.

"I've had a policy in general of not really commenting," he said. "I'm reluctant to become identified with a fixed concrete position. I think that's really the most appropriate."

Mr. Morris, formerly senior research

scientist for the school of computer and information science at Syracuse University, has now accepted an appointment to the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at the University of Edinburg.

The skeptics are not optimistic that even the National Academy of Sciences investigation will end the controversy any more than a negative Air Force report in 1969 dispelled belief in flying saucers.

Philip J. Klass, a senior Aviation Week research editor whose hobby is debunking UFOs and the claims of other paranormal cults, warned that the academy's study is "fraught with pitfalls."

"Considering the broad scope of the assignment and the limited time and resources available, I very much doubt that it will come up with a definitive answer to whether psychic phenomena do or do not exist," Mr. Klass said.

The national academy's two-year review is being conducted by a new "Committee On Techniques for the Enhancement of Human Performance," which will operate under the academy's Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences.

David A. Goslin, executive director of the commission, said as a spoof on the parapsychologists that the Pentagon has already developed "a wholly different approach to remote viewing — it's called 'satellite.'"

"However," he said, "I'm certainly not going to try to prejudge what our committee is going to conclude. The committee has an open mind. This is not a witch hunt. It is not a debunking exercise."

In reviewing claims made for research into paranormal powers, Mr. Goslin said, the 14 scientists chosen to conduct the review will be asking this question: "Is there any reasonable scientific underpinning?"

The committee's review of parapsychology research will be only one part of a review of all available techniques for the "enhancement of human performance," he said.

Psychologists are studying the learning process by playing records to a sleeping person, inducing deep concentration and other methods, including biofeedback — the effort to gain conscious control of blood pressure, brain activity and other body functions.

The committee consists of "distinguished scientists" whose disciplines include physiological psychology, learning-behavior studies, statistics evaluation research, sociology and social psychology, Mr. Goslin said.

Daniel Druckman, who took over as project director last September, said the scientists

have divided themselves into "study groups" and are visiting research sites and reviewing academic literature of their assigned subjects.

The study groups are to report their findings by June 1987, Mr. Druckman said.

"We are in the process of looking closely at various research going on in parapsychology in key laboratories around the country," Mr. Druckman said. "I don't want this thing to get sensationalized. It's not that sort of a study."

Asked if the government is financing any of the research, Mr. Druckman said, "None that I know of."

The review is being financed by a two-year, \$453,000 contract with the Army Research Institute, which is seeking "validated, promising avenues for application to personnel training, assignment and operation."

One of the national academy scientists is Ray Hyman, a University of Oregon psychology professor, who said he is concerned about the outlandish claims that are being made in published reports about pseudoscience research.

"The stuff that seems to get emphasized is stuff that even parapsychologists are alarmed at in the sense that it is very far out," he said in an interview.

"I'm a little hesitant to tell them [military agencies] not to look at it at all," Mr. Hyman said. "If you put yourself in the shoes of the military people, they've got to hedge their bets, I suppose."