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Intelligence Agencies and Parapsychology

FULL TEXT

ANNOUNCER: November 28th, 1995.

TED KOPPEL (ANCHOR): For 20 years, U.S. intelligence agencies have been experimenting with ESP.

JESSICA UTTS (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS): I'm a statistician, and when I look at the data I have to say that there's something there.

KOPPEL: It may have helped locate American hostages in Iran.

JOE MCGONIGLE (SP?): There were 2 or 3 others that were held away from the Embassy, and no one seemed to know exactly where that was. But we were instrumental in helping identify that location.

KOPPEL: It may have mapped a secret Soviet nuclear facility.

EDWIN MAY (FORMER ESP PROJECT DIRECTOR): This is an underground nuclear testing site in Russia, and our remote viewer drew a crane that was later shown to be there.

KOPPEL: If that's the case, then why does the government want to dump the program?

Tonight: Psychic Spies: Cold War Whimsy Or Secret Weapon?

ANNOUNCER: This is ABC NEWS NIGHTLINE.

Reporting from Washington, Ted Koppel.

KOPPEL: You have only to imagine how someone 100 years ago would have reacted to a description of many of the things we take for granted today.



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Think of telling someone in the 1890s about a flying cylinder that would routinely transport several hundred people at a time at an altitude of more than 6 miles from coast to coast in 5 hours or less. Try the concept of television, especially live television pictures, reaching the home viewer at the speed of light from a few thousand miles away. Explain the storage of a small library's worth of information on a silicone chip smaller than your fingernail.

We live in an age of once unimaginable miracles. So it would take equal measures of courage and hubris to dismiss as impossible the notion that some people may have certain psychic powers. This may reassure you. It may alarm you. But in fact, for some years now the U.S. intelligence community has wagered a modest amount of money on the possibility that such powers do exist.

That has included some pretty bizarre experiments, including the killing of rabbits and kittens in one room, while monitoring their mothers for signs of trauma in another room. Some of the experiments include the use of hallucinogenic drugs. But the most enduring experiments have been in the field of remote viewing.

As ABC's science correspondent Michael Guillen reports, we got into it when we discovered that they were in it.

MICHAEL GUILLEN (REPORTER): At the height of the cold war, everyone was worried about keeping up with the Soviets. There was the Bomber Gap, the Missile Gap, and then there was the ESP Gap. Reports that the Soviets were using psychics to spy on us prompted us to do the same to them.

EDWIN MAY (FORMER ESP PROJECT DIRECTOR): What we're looking at here is the first-ever use of remote viewing in an intelligence -- a real, genuine intelligence circumstance.

GUILLEN: Back in 1974, a psychic working for the CIA drew these sketches. He claimed he was able to see inside Semi-Palatinsk, a Soviet, super-top-secret nuclear testing facility.

MAY: He accurately described a huge crane that was known to be there. He went on later to describe underground spheres, and those spheres were later confirmed by other intelligence techniques.

GUILLEN: It was that child-like sketch that set off more than two decades of top-secret psychic espionage, directed first by the CIA and then eventually handed over to the DIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency. Now that the Cold War is over, now that the ESP Gap doesn't seem so critical, Congress has asked the CIA to review the 20-year-\$20 million program to see what we got out of it.

ABC News has obtained a copy of that report which is critical of psychic spying, saying that, quote, "continued use in intelligence gathering operations is not warranted". That negative conclusion has caused the psychic spies to come in from the cold, to speak publicly for the first time.

JOE MCGONIGLE: A lot of people don't believe in psychic functioning or remote viewing, and, so, I think they'll be surprised to find out that it not only exists and it's valid, but it's been used for this many decades.

GUILLEN: Joe McGonigle was an Army officer and for the past 17 years one of the intelligence communities most successful psychic spies.

MCGONIGLE: The way we work is usually sitting in a room that is empty of furniture, except for maybe a desk or a table, low lighting, so as not to be distracting.

MCGONIGLE [In a trance]...entry way, I guess you just call it stairs.

GUILLEN: McGonigle claims to be able to describe through sketches and words, people, places and things he's never seen before, hundreds, even thousands of miles away.

Most people call it extra-sensory perception, or ESP. Scientists call it remote viewing.

Case in point. During the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, dozens of Americans were being held inside the U.S. Embassy. But even more worrisome, several other Americans were carted off to some secret location.

MCGONIGLE: No one seemed to know exactly where that was. But we were instrumental in helping identify that location. The inside of the location, the exterior of the location, the uniforms and the kinds of people that were holding them.

MAY: I approach the subject or remote viewing as any physicist would, namely, from the point of extreme skepticism.

GUILLEN: For the past 20 years, nuclear physicist Ed May has done 1500 experiments to test the scientific validity of remote viewing, figuring out who's good at it and why.

MAY: Generally speaking, our remote viewers are normal people like you and I. So then, how do we identify the good ones? We identify the good ones by asking people to just try remote viewing. It's kind of like a native talent. Those people who can do it, do it. Those people who can't, can't. And we choose the people that do.

DALE GRAFF: Early on, as a physicist, I really wasn't sure whether or not there was anything to the phenomenon. But if you go out in the field and you work with it over and over and over and you see some of these very interesting cases, they can't all be written off by chance.

GUILLEN: For five years, physicist Dale Graff directed the DIA's remote viewing program, code named Project Stargate. Back in 1982, when U.S. Brigadier General James Dozier was kidnapped by Italian militants DIA psychics say they helped locate him.

GRAFF: We had one viewer come up with the name of the city, Padua. We had another one come up with the name of the building he was in.

McGONIGLE: It was accurate. It was absolutely accurate. As well as the description of the interior of the room he was being held in, how he was being held, chained to the heater, the wall heater, that sort of thing.

GUILLEN: All of this sounds very impressive. But ABC News was told that psychic spying has been used in about 500 cases. Of those, fewer than a dozen were claimed to be right on target. In the remaining cases, even the proponents admit the inaccurate information far outweighed the good.

MAY: Just because it is not 100% accurate by no means implies that it is useless for intelligence gathering. For example, when we have agents for--agents overseas gathering information, their data is by no means accurate, either.

REPORTER: Twenty men are under indictment tonight--

GUILLEN: One case where psychic spies say they played a critical role was in 1989. Charles Jordan was a U.S. Customs agent gone bad, a dangerous fugitive who had eluded police for two years.

WILLIAM GREEN (CUSTOMS OFFICIAL): The collective wisdom at the time, including from everybody I talked to, was that he was probably in the Caribbean.

GRAFF: We were called into the case, and one of our project viewers started describing him in northern Wyoming and described an area at a campground close to an Indian burial site.

GUILLEN: Using this and other information, Jordan was finally caught...

GREEN: In Wyoming near, near a national park, down near the Grand Tetons, near Yellowstone, next to an Indian reservation, next to an Indian gravesite.

GRAFF: We like to count it as a success.

GREEN: It was almost, you know, those were his words, spooky or something. Here's the guy next to a famous gravesite, next to a reservation. It couldn't have been much more accurate than that.

GUILLEN: So, what do all these stories add up to? Well, the two experts commissioned by the CIA report disagree. First, there's psychologist Ray Hyman from the University of Oregon.

RAY HYMAN: My considered judgment, if someone pushed me hard right now, I'd have to say the odds are 99 to 1 that there's nothing to remote viewing.

UTTS: I think remote viewing has been demonstrated over the 20 years of work that's been sponsored by the government.

GUILLEN: Jessica Utts is a statistics professor at the University of California Davis. She thinks scientists should take remote viewing seriously.

UTTS: What it proves to me is that we don't quite understand either the nature of the mind or perhaps the nature of time and space, but that there's some mystery out there that we need to solve.

GUILLEN: Solving the mystery, says Utts, is best done out in the open, by organizations like the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health. In fact, even those who've been part of the psychic spy program can see the writing on the wall, that it probably is time to take the ESP out of espionage.

For NIGHTLINE, I'm Michael Guillen in Washington.

KOPPEL: When we come back, we'll be joined by a former Director of the CIA, by a former member of the CIA team that dealt with psychic projects, and by a scientist who is an expert on parapsychology.

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KOPPEL: Joining us now:

From Seattle, former CIA Director Robert Gates, who served during the Bush administration.

From our San Francisco bureau Dr. Edwin May, a nuclear physicist who has researched extra-sensory perception for more than 20 years.

And here in our Washington bureau, a former technical advisor with the CIA who prefers to be known only as "Norm". "Norm" monitored ESP programs within the intelligence community.

Mr. Gates, during the time that you were the Director of Central Intelligence, what was your awareness of any of these projects?

ROBERT GATES (FORMER CIA DIRECTOR): After the mid 1970s, CIA basically monitored the activities of other government agencies and what was going on in the academic community and then in mid 1980s, then-deputy director John McMahon formalized that. So, CIA really during that period had a very limited role and essentially was just watching what was going on elsewhere.

KOPPEL: "Norm", when you and I were talking in the, in the green room before, you just happened to mention Mr. McMahon. What, what was your relationship to him?

"NORM" (FORMER CIT TECHNICAL ADVISOR): I was a technical advisor to him for a period of years there in the operations directorate, and he assigned me the duty of being a coordinator or customer representative to the efforts of DIA.

KOPPEL: Now, did that extend into the 1980s?

"NORM": I was with it up until 1984.

KOPPEL: When you say customer rep, that, that, that has a, that's a wonderful, benign, neutral--what did that mean?

"NORM": All right. The ground rules, as explained to me was we were anxious to deal only with real cases that had the potential of providing a useful product. In other words, not make-believe experiments to be, you know, wasting time with. So, my job was to keep my eyes and ears open and find cases that probably had nowhere else to go, or that had some element that maybe we could use remote viewing and get the answer to.

KOPPEL: But you were still doing this on behalf of the CIA--

"NORM": Correct.

KOPPEL: --and the DIA into the, into the 1980s.

"NORM": Correct.

KOPPEL: This is not something you were aware of, Mr. Gates?

GATES: I think it's very much in keeping with what I was describing in terms of a monitoring role of what other agencies of government as well as the academic community were doing.

KOPPEL: So, when you say monitoring, you mean, it was contracted out to, what, other agencies, other, other--

GATES: The other agencies and elements of the government were carrying on the active role in this. CIA was merely watching to see what they were coming up with.

KOPPEL: And did you at any time feel that this was worth the taxpayers' money? And I don't want to leave the suggestion that a great deal of money was spent. It was \$20 million over 20 years, which in budgetary terms is peanuts. Right?

GATES: Well, all I can say is that in the 20 years or 25 years that I was perhaps in a position to be aware, I don't know of a single instance where it is documented that this kind of activity contributed in any significant way to a policy decision or even to informing policy makers about important information.

KOPPEL: Dr. May, was there any time during the period that you have been studying these, these phenomena when you were particularly impressed by one or more incidents that you could account for us now?

MAY: Well, Ted, as you know, my main role in this was the guy doing the research. And while I'm interested in applications, perhaps even intelligence applications, my main focus was to figure out how it worked and what we can confirm in the laboratory. And to that extent we had dramatic cases in the laboratory, both statistically important as well as visually compelling.

KOPPEL: Now, can you give me an example or two of something that you found particularly compelling, or, or that would be compelling to an audience of lay people?

MAY: Well, I think about 15% of our data, over 1500 separate remote viewing trials, are of such a quality that you might think they were sketched. But they were done in very tight protocols, the best that modern science, physics, physiology, and psychology could bring to bear on the issue.

The remaining of the data is somewhat statistical. So, it's really hard, you know, to look at the data and say: That's real. But 15% of it is extremely compelling.

(OVERLAPPING VOICES)

KOPPEL: ...I wonder if I can ask you to jump back in again, because you were quite explicit at the beginning in saying that you weren't interested, or you were told not to have anything to do with sort of academic cases, that only cases that would have a practical application.

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"NORM": That is correct.

KOPPEL: Can you cite one or two of the most dramatic?

"NORM": Well, I'm very limited there. I would not want to get into too many specifics. But we did use it to try to locate people that we didn't know where they were, or worried about. And on a couple of occasions that was reasonably successful. I, I would agree that there's never been a case to my knowledge that produced any significant intelligence product. Some interesting results, and maybe even tantalizing. But beyond that, it, it left more questions than it answered.

KOPPEL: You had a very unscientific phrase that you used, when you and I were chatting before. You said you had a couple of 8-martini jobs.

"NORM": Yes. Well--

KOPPEL: What did you mean by that?

"NORM": Okay. When you're in the middle of an interview like this, if the psychic turns to the person in the room who's looking for the answer to the question and said: The photograph you gave me, you developed that film in a house a mile down the road in the basement. That's grounds for an 8-martini evening, because the guy that took the picture, that's all true, by the way, in this case I'm thinking of, had forgotten that fact. So, the knowledge was in the room, but not in any conscious way.

But things like that, little asides that they come up with sometimes are the real grabbers. But the gold nugget somehow tends to elude us.

KOPPEL: Let's take a short break. And when we come back, I'd like to talk to each of you about what kind of practical application, application all of this may yet have in the future.

We'll be back in a moment.

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KOPPEL: And once again we're back with Robert Gates, Edwin May and "Norm".

Mr. Gates, if I describe this simply as a tool, do you see a practical application for it in unison with other tools that the intelligence organizations have?

GATES: I think it's only fair to say that most intelligence professionals have been pretty skeptical of this. As was suggested at the beginning of your program, we got into it, I think, mainly

because we heard the Soviets were involved and also because the Congress, individual members of the Congress and some staff pushed us into it.

There are some who continue to believe that it, it would continue to be a tool. My own view is that, that this is a tool best developed in the academic community or in the public arena, not by the intelligence community.

KOPPEL: Dr. May, you were nodding your head.

MAY: I couldn't agree with Director Gates more. I think it's perhaps premature to--for the potential intelligence application. But there are other things that should be explored, and better explored in the light of day.

KOPPEL: What kind of explanation would you recommend? I mean, for example, there's been a great many parapsychology experiments down at, down at Duke. I have no idea what, if anything that has produced over the years. But is that the kind of thing you're talking about?

MAY: Well, I'm really referring to the kind of experiments that we've been discussing here in terms of remote viewing. Essential applications, for example, there have been books written with some modicum of success in law enforcement. Other areas, involving the environment. Perhaps even if it is used properly, and that's a major point, Ted, that perhaps in business there may be some statistical edges one can gain in the business environment.

KOPPEL: What kind of, what kind of experiments did you conduct? And what did you consider a successful conclusion?

MAY: Imagine, if you will, a collection of photographs, like from a national magazine, with 100 of them. One of them is chosen at random. And a remote viewer on the East Coast may have not any familiarity whatsoever with this collection and particularly the one that was chosen at random. That individual is then asked to describe that picture as best he or she can in words and in drawings. And afterwards a formal statistical comparison is made. It's that type of an experiment in remote viewing.

KOPPEL: And if someone had come to you when you were Director of the CIA, Mr. Gates, and said: Look, we've got this person who scores far better than chance. And you're up against a, you're up against a dead end in some operation where you're trying to get information, would you have sanctioned using such a person?

GATES: You might be willing, if you're trying to locate a hostage being held by terrorists or something like that, be willing to enlist such a person. But you would never--in my judgment--you would never proceed on the basis of that information alone. You

might take whatever information came out of it and try to use that in some way to corroborate, try and corroborate it. But you, I would certainly never act on the basis of that alone.

KOPPEL: All right. Let me just get a, a last thought from each of you.

"Norm", let me begin with you, as to, as to what you believe the future application of, of this to be.

"NORM": Let me also emphasize that I agree with everything I've just heard. And the future application, I don't think we're yet ready. There's too much data that tells us something is there. You can't dismiss that.

Whether or not we're ready yet to do something with it, I'm not sure the focal point needs to be within the intelligence community. There are too many restrictions involved with that. It needs to be out in the open somewhere and let the intelligence community monitor the results. And then, if, if they have a desperate case from time to time and a proven psychic that has a good track record, then you want to make use of it.

But I want to emphasize, we--one of the ground rules in our case, we never acted on any information that was not confirmed from other sources.

KOPPEL: Dr. May.

MAY: Well, I would agree with "Norm" on that. These kinds of research problems are best studied in the open. So, I would ask the intelligence community to watch what we do for the next few years and under "Norm"s ground rules, I could agree.

KOPPEL: And final word from Mr. Gates?

GATES: I think that this is a pretty low priority for the intelligence community, and it's better done on the outside.

KOPPEL: Gentlemen, I thank you all very much for joining us this evening.

I'll be back in a moment.

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KOPPEL: Tomorrow on GOOD MORNING AMERICA, the President has repealed the 22-year-old national 55-mile-an-hour speed limit. The nationwide impact on GOOD MORNING AMERICA tomorrow on this ABC station.

And that's our report for tonight.

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I'm Ted Koppel in Washington. For all of us here at ABC News,
good night.

(END)