SPECIAL REPORT

Evaluation of the Military's Twenty-Year Program on Psychic Spying

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In 1995 the Central Intelligence Agency contracted for an outside evaluation of 20 years of until-then classified government-funded programs in "remote viewing" (ESP). Psychologist Ray Hyman was one of two experts asked to review the research. Beginning on this page Hyman presents an overview of the program and of the evaluation. In a second article (pages 24-26), Hyman criticizes statements by some paranormal proponents about the evaluation and provides valuable critical perspective not just on this government-sponsored "Stargate" program, but also on the latest claims about parapsychology overall. On page 27, we print a major portion of the Conclusions section of the report commissioned by the CIA.—EDITOR

In the early 1970s the Central Intelligence Agency supported a program to see if a form of extrasensory perception (ESP) called "remote viewing" could assist with intelligence gathering. The program consisted of laboratory studies conducted at Stanford Research Institute (SRI) under the direction of Harold Puthoff and Russel Targ. In addition to the laboratory research, psychics were employed to provide information on targets of interest to the intelligence community.

The CIA abandoned this program in the late 1970s because it showed no promise. The Defense Intelligence

Agency (DIA) took over the program and continued supporting it until it was suspended in the spring of 1995. Under the DIA the program was named *Stargate* and consisted of three components. One component kept track of what foreign countries were doing in the area of psychic warfare and intelligence gathering. A second component, called the "Operations Program," involved six, and later three, psychics on the government payroll who were available to any government agency that wanted to use their services. The third component was the laboratory research on psychic phenomena first carried out at SRI and later transferred to Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) in Palo Alto, California.

This program was secret until it was declassified in early 1995. The declassification was done to enable an outside evaluation of the program. Because of some controversies within the program, a Senate committee decided to transfer the program from the DIA back to the CIA. The CIA, before deciding the fate of the program, contracted with the American Institutes for Research (A.I.R.), Washington, D.C., to conduct the evaluation. The A.I.R. hired Jessica Utts, a statistician at the University of California at Davis, and me, a psychologist at the University of Oregon, as the evaluation panel.

The idea was to have a balanced evaluation by hiring an expert who was known to support the reality of psychic phenomena and one who was skeptical about the existence of psi. Utts, in addition to being a highly regarded statistician, has written and argued for the existence of psychic phenomena and has been a consultant to the SRI and SAIC remote-viewing experiments.

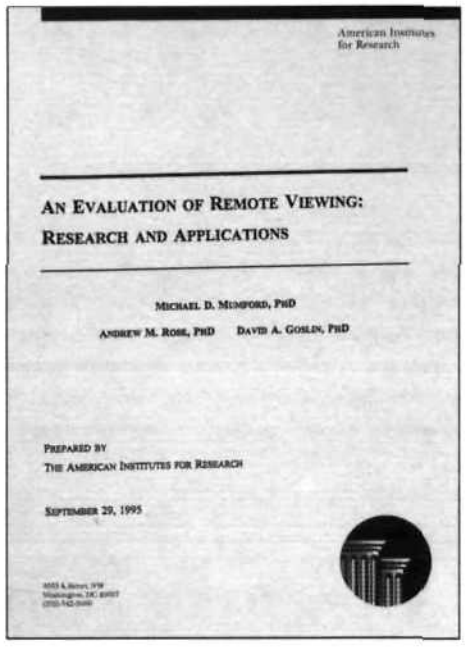
Most recently, I served on the National Research Council committee that issued a report stating that the case for psychic phenomena had no scientific justification (*SI*, Fall 1988). In the January 1995 issue of *Psychological Bulletin* I supplied a skeptical commentary on the article by Daryl Bem and Charles Honorton that argued that the recent ganzfeld studies provided evidence for replicable experiments on ESP (See *SI*, Fall 1985).

At the beginning of last summer, Utts and I were each supplied with copies of all the reports that had been generated by the remote-viewing program during the 20 years of its existence. This consisted of three large cartons of documents.

We met with Edwin May, the principal investigator who took over this remote-viewing research project (after Puthoff and Targ left SRI in the 1980s); representatives of the CIA; and representatives of A.I.R. The purpose of the meeting was to coordinate our efforts as well as to focus our efforts on those remote-viewing studies that offered the most promise of being scientifically respectable. May helped identify the ten best studies for Utts and me to evaluate.

While Utts and I focused on the best laboratory studies, the two psychologists from A.I.R. conducted an evaluation of the recent operational uses of the three remote viewers (psychics) then on the government payroll. We all agreed that any scientifically meaningful evaluation of these operational psychic intelligence uses was impossible. The operational program had been kept separate from the laboratory research, and the work of the remote viewers was conducted in ways that precluded meaningful evaluation. Nevertheless, we all cooperated in developing a structured interview that the A.I.R. staff could use on the program officer, the three psychics, and the individuals or agencies that had used the services of these remote viewers.

The users said, through the interviews, that the remote viewers did not supply information that was useful in intelligence or other contexts.


American Institutes for Research

AN EVALUATION OF REMOTE VIEWING: RESEARCH AND APPLICATIONS

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The remote-viewing experiments that Utts and I evaluated had, for the most part, been conducted since 1986 and presumably had been designed to meet the objections that the National Research Council and other critics had aimed at the remote-viewing experiments conducted before 1986. These experiments varied in a number of ways but the typical experiment had these components:

1. The remote viewers were always selected from a small pool of previously "successful" viewers. May emphasized that, in his opinion, this ability is possessed by approximately one in every 100 persons. Therefore, they used the same set of "gifted" viewers in each experiment.

2. The remote viewer would be isolated with an experimenter in a secure location. At another location, a sender would look at a target that had been randomly chosen from a pool of targets. The targets were usually pictures taken from the *National Geographic*. During the sending period the viewer would describe and draw whatever impressions came to mind. After the session, the viewer's description and a set of five pictures (one of them being the actual target picture) would be given to a judge. The judge would then decide which picture was closest to the viewer's description. If the actual target was judged closest to the description, this was scored as a "hit."

In this simplified example I have presented, we would expect one hit by chance 20 percent of the time. If a viewer consistently scored more hits than chance, this was taken as evidence for psychic functioning. This description captures the spirit of the experimental evidence although I have simpli-

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fied matters for convenience of exposition. In fact, the judging was somewhat more complex and involved rank ordering each potential target against the description.

A hit rate better than the chance baseline of 20 percent can be considered evidence for remote viewing, of course, only if all other nonpsychic possibilities have been eliminated. Obvious nonpsychic possibilities would be inadequacies of the statistical model, inadequacies of the randomization procedure in selecting targets or arranging them for judging, sensory leakage from target to viewer *or* from target to judge, and a variety of other sources of bias.

The elimination of these sources of above-chance hitting is no easy task. The history of psychical research and parapsychology presents example after example of experiments that were advertised as having eliminated all nonpsychic possibilities and that were discovered by subsequent investigators to have had subtle and unsuspected biases. Often it takes years before the difficulties with a new experimental design or program come to light.

Utts and I submitted separate evaluations. We agreed that the newly unclassified experiments seemed to have eliminated the obvious defects of the earlier remote-viewing experiments. We also agreed that these ten best experiments were producing hit rates consistently above the chance baseline. We further agreed that a serious weakness of this set of studies is the fact that only one judge, the principal investigator, was used in all the remote-viewing experiments. We agreed that these results remain problematical until it can be demonstrated that significant hitting will still occur when independent judges are used.

Beyond this we disagreed dramatically. Utts concluded that these results, when taken in the context of other contemporary parapsychological experiments—especially the ganzfeld experiments—prove the existence of psychic functioning. I find it bizarre to jump from these cases of statistically significant hitting to the conclusion that a paranormal phenomenon has been proven. As I pointed out, we both agreed that the results of the new remote-viewing experiments have to be independently judged. If independent judges cannot produce the same significant hit rates, this alone would suffice to discard these experiments as evidence of psychic abilities. More to the point, just because these experiments are less than 10 years old and have only recently been opened to public scrutiny, we do not know if they contain hidden and subtle biases or if they can be independently replicated in other laboratories. The history of parapsychology is replete with "successful"experiments that subsequently could not be replicated.

Utts is obviously impressed with consistencies between the new remote-viewing experiments and the current ganzfeld experiments. Where she sees consistencies, I see inconsistencies. The ganzfeld experiments all use the subjects as their own judges. The claim is that the results do not show up when independent judges are used. The exact opposite is true of remote-viewing experiments. When subjects are used as their own judges in remote-viewing experiments, the outcome is rarely, if ever, successful. Successful results come about only when the judges are someone other than the remote viewer. The recent ganzfeld experiments get successful results only with dynamic (animated video clips) rather than static targets. The remote-viewing experiments mostly use static targets. I could go on spelling out such inconsistencies, but this would be futile.

Even if the consistent hit rate above chance can be replicated with independent remote-viewing experiments, this would be a far cry from having demonstrated something paranormal. Parapsychologist John Palmer has argued that the successful demonstration of an above-chance statistical anomaly is insufficient to prove a paranormal cause. This is because remote viewing and ESP are currently only defined negatively.

"The 'Operations Program' involved six, and later three, psychics on the government payroll who were available to any government agency."

ESP is what is left after the experimenter has eliminated all obvious, normal explanations.

Several problems are created by trying to establish the existence of a phenomenon on the basis of a negative definition. For one thing, if ESP is shown by any departure from chance that has no obvious normal explanation, there is no way to show that the observed departures are due to one or several causes. Also, the claim for psi can never be falsified, because any glitch in the data can be used as evidence for psi. What is needed, of course, is a positive theory of psychic functioning that enables us to tell *when psi is present* and *when it is absent*. As far as I can tell, every other discipline that claims to be a science deals with phenomena whose presence or absence can clearly be decided.

The evidence for N-rays, mitogenetic radiation, polywater, cold fusion, and a host of other "phenomena" that no longer are considered to exist was much clearer and stronger than the current evidence for psychic functioning. In these cases of alleged phenomena, at least we were given criteria to decide when the reputed phenomena were supposed to be present and when they were not. Nothing like this exists in parapsychology. Yet the claim is being made that a phenomenon has been clearly demonstrated.

Fortunately, we do not have to squabble over whether the current remote-viewing experiments do or do not prove the existence of an anomalous phenomenon. We can follow the normal and accepted scientific process of (1) waiting to see if independent laboratories can replicate the above chance hitting conditions using appropriate controls; (2) seeing whether the researchers can devise positive tests to enable us to decide when psi is present and when it is absent; (3) seeing whether they can specify conditions under which we can reliably observe the phenomenon; (4) showing that the phenomenon varies in lawful ways with specifiable variables. Every science—except parapsychology—has met this accepted procedure. So far, parapsychology has not even come close to meeting any of these criteria. It is premature to draw any conclusions. We will simply have to wait and see. If history is a guide, then this will be a long wait, indeed. □