Tinker, tailor, soldier... illusionist?

When the CIA tried its hand at magic

Tom Scocca

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What goes on in the shadows? First, consider what's happening in the foreground.

"The instant the performer sees the spectator take a cigarette, cigar, or pipe, he takes the packet of matches from his pocket, tears off one match, and holds packet and match ready to ignite the match," the magician John Mulholland wrote in a manual in the 1950s. "He does these things openly because what he does can only be looked upon as a friendly and courteous gesture."

Mulholland's instructions were written not for stage magicians, but for the covert operatives of the CIA. At the height of the Cold War - in the era of nuclear missiles and submarines, amid the tangled cloak-and-dagger maneuverings of espionage and counterespionage - the agency was also secretly doing something else. It was trying to learn to do magic.

The CIA hired Mulholland to explain techniques of sleight-of-hand and surreptitious signaling so that agents could use them in the field. His text, which was originally supposed to have been destroyed, has now been recovered, declassified, and reprinted as "The Official CIA Manual of Trickery and Deception." It deals mostly with basic stagecraft, minus the stage. If, before you struck a match, Mulholland advises the reader, you had stuck a pin into the back of the matchbook, it would be possible to pull the pin out with the fingernail of the left ring finger, the whole maneuver physically concealed by the matches and psychologically concealed by the broad, open gesture of lighting a match.

Or instead of a pin, one could glue a small pill to the back of the matchbook. And with practice, one could pick the pill off and make it fall at the moment the matches were passing above a drink belonging to the - what was the word? - "spectator." Words, too, require a little legerdemain, when the readers are secret agents and the point of the maneuver is to drug or poison someone. Here is a trick with a pin that also works with a pill. Foreground, background.

Former CIA deputy director John McLaughlin writes in a forward to the manual that "[a]s best we know," the drink-spiking techniques "were never actually used." The assurance would be more reassuring if the authors who had recovered the manual, H. Keith Melton and Robert Wallace, had not included their own historical overview of CIA trickery. In it, they explain that Mulholland's writing was part of the secret MKULTRA program, whereby the CIA sought methods and materials "capable of employment in clandestine operations to control human behavior." And part of MKULTRA did involve dosing unsuspecting subjects with LSD and other drugs.

The Soviets were doing it, after all, or were believed to be. The trickery manual and Melton and Wallace's accompanying history usher the reader into the closed loop of ethics of the Cold War, as it was waged in both the covert and overt arenas: The Reds were a foe so ruthless, they had to be fought ruthlessly. Techniques of stage magic - developed and taught in secrecy, according to the magicians' code, for the sake of entertaining willing audiences - were transferred to the realm of nonconsensual secrecy, to be used on people who were not asking to be fooled.

At the time, so was every other form of deception. In the superpower struggle for power and influence around the world, the CIA was secretly funding and engineering everything from literary journals to coups and armed rebellions. It was total warfare, but with creeping breadth in place of nuclear intensity. Both the ideas and techniques of secret war pervaded the culture - the corrosive belief in hidden conspiracy and the nifty thrill of spycraft itself, the codes and disguises and miniature cameras.

Melton and Wallace have rounded up some of the extreme forms of covert activity. The Soviets deployed a cyanide-bullet gun concealed in a cigarette pack; the Americans countered with a "nondiscernable bioinoculator" gun shooting tiny poison darts. A pop-up dummy took the place of an agent diving out of a moving car. A person was transported in a St. Bernard costume in a crate to a fake veterinary office. A radio was hidden in an artificial scrotum, to be worn over the real scrotum; miniature lock-picking tools were packaged in a suppository capsule.

Mulholland's actual manual evokes a more understated, but eerier, figure - not a dashing hero with infinite James Bond-ian technology at his disposal, but a gray, anonymous person who "should be so normal in manner, and his actions so natural, that nothing about him excites suspicion."

Beyond a few points of conjuring philosophy - the hand is not quicker than the eye; "[a] trick to be good must be simple in its basic idea" - Mulholland focuses on a few tricks for secretly dropping things or picking them up, and on how to do those tricks in an unremarkable manner. He supplies instructions on making and concealing droppers for liquids, a protocol for handling multiple small items so that one of them ends up in a pocket, and advice on how to put on a stupid face: "The more facial muscles are relaxed and eyes thrown out of focus, the greater the effect. Doing these actions to a mild degree merely shows a lack of alertness or disinterest."

Today Mulholland's account of real-world stagecraft amounts to an etiquette manual for a lost moment of history. The matchbook trick depends on people smoking and drinking. There is a survey of the many pockets found in every man's suit, and which ones are most natural for casually slipping objects into. Mulholland dwells on the particular challenges faced by a female agent dumping powder into someone's drink with a hollowed-out pencil - when she sketches a map or diagram, as pretext for bringing the loaded pencil into play, a male mark will inevitably try to commandeer the pencil himself to correct her drawing. Perhaps if she finds an excuse to sketch women's clothing, Mulholland allows, "he will not wish to redraw the sketch."

Such finesse is hard to detect in the present-day scandals over the crude and brutal treatment of captives by the CIA. The agency that came up with this manual - to say nothing of the dog costume, hollowed-out silver dollars, and schemes to put depilatory drug powder in Castro's boots to make his beard fall out - is the same agency currently complaining that its employees will be unable to do their jobs if the United States enforces the existing laws against torture. Agents who would have been willing to stab themselves with a needle laced with shellfish toxin and die anonymously behind enemy lines have given way to people worried about possibly being investigated and

prosecuted stateside. Reading the manual, you wonder: When did the brave men with a wealth of tricks concealed in their suit pockets become such hapless crybabies?

Or, on second thought, maybe they just want us to think they're hapless crybabies.

Tom Scocca is working on a new book, "Beijing Welcomes You."

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