



Parapsychology in Intelligence:

The Rise and Fall of the CIA's Psychic Spies

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It is the summer of 1974. In Langley, Virginia, just outside Washington, DC, a handful of CIA officers venture to the edge of espionage, launching the first documented psychic spying mission in U.S. history.

The target: a secret research center in a remote region of the Kazakh Republic, USSR. At the CIA, where little is known about the facility, the Soviet site is referred to as URDF-3 (Unidentified Research and Development Facility Number 3). Pat Price, a "remote viewer" working on a CIA contract, is handed the coordinates of the target. After clearing his mind, Price peers out mentally in search of the site, and claims to observe it. A striking feature of the facility, he says, is the presence of a "damn big crane."

A CIA officer assigned to the unorthodox operation has seen the latest reconnaissance photos of URDF-3, and he marvels at what he later calls "some amazing descriptions" furnished by Price. There is indeed an unusually large crane at the site, one that Price is able to sketch in startling detail.

The day of the psychic spies had arrived.



Price's remote viewing (RV) operation, and the strange developments in the U.S. intelligence community that set the stage for psychic spying, were described in detail as far back as 1977. But the astonishing story of the CIA's plunge into the paranormal was then available to a limited audience -- in fact, it was restricted to CIA eyes only.

A classified history of the CIA's attempts to utilize RV for espionage purposes appeared in *Studies in Intelligence*, the agency's internal journal on the tricks of the spy trade. Released to the public in 1996, the report has gone largely unnoticed in its file box at the National Archives facility in University Park, Maryland.

Titled "[Parapsychology in Intelligence: A Personal Review and Conclusions](#)," the report was authored by Dr. Kenneth A. Kress, a CIA engineer with the agency's Office of Technical Services (OTS). Kress managed the day-to-day operations of the project, and became one of the best known CIA parapsychology buffs. Working in this capacity, Kress held what might be the rarest of CIA jobs, that of paranormal project officer.

RV was a natural choice for the intelligence officer with a yen for weird science. The technique is a form of extra-sensory perception (ESP), a purported psychic phenomenon that has stirred heated debate among scientists. If RV could be verified as a viable way of "seeing" far-off people and places, Kress and others reasoned, the CIA (or perhaps the KGB!) would have the ultimate spy weapon in hand. Mental powers, properly focused, could circumvent the enemy's secrecy and security measures completely.



Jim Schnabel, an investigative reporter from England, notes in his book *Remote Viewers: The Secret History of America's Psychic Spies* that Kress was "in some ways the father of America's remote-viewing program." Who better, then, to recount the origins and demise of the CIA's RV program? Kress' report is richly detailed, offering not only his own observations as a key player in the program, but also the analysis of several other CIA officers who became involved.

After briefly reviewing CIA-sponsored explorations of psychokinetics (the ability to affect physical objects with mental powers), Kress devotes most of the report to RV matters. He reveals some interesting background by mentioning that the CIA had ventured into the study of ESP a decade before his projects

began. He notes a 1961 study of the phenomenon secretly contracted "under the auspices of Project ULTRA" -- the CIA program of mind and behavior control experiments more commonly known as **MKULTRA**. The study, by Oxford University's Stephen Abrams, "claimed ESP was demonstrated but not understood or controllable."

As Kress tells it, it was Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff, two physicists in the employ of the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), who "re-awakened CIA research in parapsychology." SRI, a California-based research group that has long handled scientific tasks for military and intelligence agencies, would conduct much of the CIA's RV work. The ball got rolling in early 1972, when Targ and Puthoff convinced the Office of Technical Services to invest \$874 in a small psychic research project.



The test went well, and soon OTS had committed and additional \$2,500. By the end of the year, OTS was fully on board with the psychic research effort, upping its investment to \$50,000.

Eventually the CIA would spend some \$750,000 on research and development of psychic spying skills, according to news reports published in the 1990s.

In Kress' account, we can see the rancorous debates that funding such projects caused at CIA headquarters. In the mid-1970s, top officials were so beleaguered by scandal that they had little enthusiasm for weird-sounding endeavors like the RV spy ops. At one important juncture in the experiments, Kress writes, William Colby, then the CIA's Deputy Director of Operations, and CIA Director James Schlesinger decided that "the project was too sensitive and potentially embarrassing" to pursue. With the agency under heavy fire for its role in the Watergate scandal, this strange form of spy craft was seen as yet another risky political liability for the agency.

Looking back on the context of his RV work, Kress would note with a bit of humor: "As Project Officer, clearly my sense of timing had not been guided by useful paranormal abilities!"

Yet the RV project went forward, albeit in halting, unsure steps. Operational experiments using Pat Price, the psychic spy Kress called "our best subject," produced some arguably useful results. "In general, most of Price's data were wrong or could not be evaluated," Kress reported. "He did, nevertheless, produce some amazing descriptions."

In late 1975, Price's CIA handlers asked him to envision several sites in Libya using RV.

Price spotted clandestine training centers for guerrilla fighters and underwater demolition teams. His findings were confirmed by reconnaissance photos, and the CIA's RV unit was hopeful that the program would survive based on the success of the Libya operation. But just when things were looking up, the RV intelligence collection program was dealt a fatal blow: Price suffered a heart attack and died, and the program was effectively shut down.



In November 1976, CIA Director George Bush became concerned about Soviet advances in parapsychology and called the agency's RV researchers for a briefing.

The CIA/RV story did not end with Price's demise, however.

Some senior officials kept an eye on the phenomenon. Kress reports that in November of 1976, CIA Director George Bush became concerned about reported Soviet advances in parapsychology, and called in the agency's RV researchers for a briefing. (Such concerns often provided the impetus for U.S. government parapsychology research; the fear that the Soviets were getting ahead in the mind-war game was widespread among paranormal enthusiasts at military and intelligence agencies.)

In late 1995, the CIA finally fessed up to its secret involvement in parapsychology projects, and commissioned a report by private analysts to evaluate the merits of the RV method. ([Click here](#) to read the report and an overview by Enigma editor D. Trull.) A CIA public statement on the matter said that the agency's experiments with the technique were "always considered speculative and controversial."

Though the CIA seems to have all but abandoned RV in the mid-1970s, various Defense Department offices picked up the technique and examined and employed it much more extensively than the agency had. Since the 1995 revelations a number of media reports, memoirs, and investigative history books have revealed that several government agencies used psychic spying, with occasional apparent successes, to search out far more than just enemy research facilities. RV targets included U.S. hostages in foreign countries, Soviet submarines under the sea, and even secrets stashed in U.S. government filing cabinets (an effort to determine if the Soviets could conceivably do the same thing).

Psychic spying even caught the attention of the White House. In 1996, former President Jimmy Carter revealed that during this administration, the government used RV to locate a downed U.S. spy plane. ([Click here](#) for a report on Carter's comments.)

By the time the programs ground to a halt, the Defense Department had invested an estimated \$20 million in RV and related pursuits. While the military's interest in the programs had fluctuated over the years, the Pentagon was prodded on by a pack of paranormal-minded politicians in the U.S. Congress.

So is there real potential for parapsychology in intelligence operations? Kress' final analysis of the CIA's short-lived RV work was both hopeful and regretful. "Tantalizing but incomplete data have been generated by CIA-sponsored research," he concluded. The agency never definitively determined if psychic spying works, he wrote, because "circumstances, biases, and fear of ridicule prevented CIA from completing a scientific investigation of parapsychology and its relevance to national security."

Want to know more?

[Click here](#) to read Kress' full report, "Parapsychology in Intelligence." Two excellent Web resources contain extensive information and declassified documents on government RV programs: see the [Remote Viewing/Mind Control Index](#) and the [Star Gate Documents](#) page.

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