

Crimes of the Surveillance State: A Victim's Story

How a brilliant Vermont mathematician became an early target of government harassment

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"I was totally unprepared for today's bombshell revelations describing the NSA's efforts to defeat encryption," wrote Professor Matthew Green on Sept. 5. "Not only does the worst possible hypothetical I discussed appear to be true, but it's true on a scale I couldn't even imagine."

Widely circulated online Green's words reflected the betrayal felt by other scientists and academicians who have often worked in secret with the government. In response, however, the acting dean of the engineering school at Johns Hopkins asked him to take the post down and stop using the NSA logo as clip art. He also warned that if Green resisted or continued he would need a lawyer.

In covering this story, The UK Guardian concluded that if America's system of research universities "becomes captive to government and handmaiden to the surveillance state, that would be an economic and cultural crime of monstrous proportions." Unfortunately, the crime was committed long ago.

Green's story reminds me of a professor I met decades ago - William Pierce, a gifted mathematician, a former university professor with a Harvard Ph.D., and valedictorian of the University of Vermont's 1943 graduating class. He was 57-years-old when we met in 1978 and was no longer working at a university. But he'd attended a local talk about intelligence community abuses and claimed he had an even more explosive story to tell.



William A. Pierce, 1961

Even before the Internet it was easy to verify some details, particularly his academic credentials and past employment. William Augustus Pierce had indeed been an academic star. Born in Lyndonville in 1921, he'd received the highest academic grades as an undergraduate at UVM since John Dewey.

In 1950, attracted by "an excellent group of research scholars," Pierce joined the Math Department at Syracuse University. But the City of Syracuse "was then a hotbed of anti-Communist activity," he told me, "and the University was under considerable pressure to do something about 'them reds on the faculty' - especially the Jewish reds in the Math Department."

A few months after he arrived, Dr. Donald Kibbey, then acting Math Department chair, fired two members of the Syracuse faculty for alleged activities in "controversial" political groups. Several other mathematicians submitted their resignations in solidarity, and one colleague, Prof. Paul Rosenbloom, warned Pierce that he "was terribly wrong to stay at Syracuse."

More than 25 years later, he still chided himself for not listening and seeking a teaching post elsewhere, as some colleagues were doing. "I was certainly untrue to myself," he admitted. "It was the worst mistake I have ever made.

"At Harvard and Syracuse I was considered a left-winger," Pierce acknowledged. "The label resulted partly from my membership in peace groups and opposition to the Cold War, but it was primarily my criticism of FBI investigations and security procedure in areas of human learning. There was some trouble, for instance, when I described Russian advances in certain fields of mathematics and science, and then urged that Americans wage a more effective, peaceable competition with the Soviet Union."

"Listen buddy," a colleague snapped in response, "'if you don't like your Uncle Sammy, get the hell back to Russia."

Pierce felt that security clearances were out of place in the academic community and didn't hesitate to publicly say so. In April 1953, for example, he spoke out about a Presidential Executive Order establishing new security requirements for government employment that included a "loyalty" standard. To him it looked like a form of profiling, another tool of the notorious McCarthy era blacklist.

Earlier that year Prof. William Martin, head of the Syracuse Math department in the 1940s and then chair at M.I.T., had been called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Once a member of the Communist Party, he buckled under questioning and named others who he claimed had once joined the party.

"My Syracuse colleague Professor Abe Gelbart, Dean of Science and Technology at Yeshiva University in New York, was on the list," Pierce said. "FBI agents moved into Gelbart's situation and questioned him at length. They even asked him about his associations with me, and said they had observed us drinking in local restaurants."

That summer Pierce nevertheless went to Los Angeles to consult for the National Security Agency (NSA) at UCLA. "I had a temporary, low-level clearance for work on S.C.A.M.P. and I suppose a security check was initiated." S.C.A.M.P. was the acronym for the Southern California Applied Mathematics Project, a top secret operation conducted on behalf of the Defense Department. The official purpose was research on numerical analysis, but those

involved focused mainly on cryptology.

It was a summer of suspicion and unsettling Cold War developments. On June 19, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were electrocuted for the alleged theft of atomic bomb secrets. "Your country is sick with fear," wrote Jean-Paul Sartre in response. A month later Fidel Castro led an attack on the Moncada barracks in Cuba, an early attempt to overthrow the Batista dictatorship. At his trial, the future Cuban leader proclaimed, "History will absolve me."

A day after the Moncada attack, on July 27, an armistice ended the Korean War. More than 50,000 American had been killed in what had been designated a "police action," at least 100,000 were wounded, and about 8,000 were still missing. Less than a month later, Mohammed Mossadegh, the elected Prime Minister of Iran, was overthrown. Few people knew it, but the coup had been orchestrated by the CIA.

While Bill Pierce was in L.A. he noticed headlines about Abe Gelbart's HUAC appearance. On television Sen. Joseph McCarthy complained that his colleague was receiving a Fulbright Fellowship "even after taking the Fifth Amendment 47 times." He also noticed reports that McCarthy was "setting out for California on another Alger Hiss case."

Shortly after returning to Syracuse, Pierce's government-funded research was abruptly cancelled.

One reason may have been Pierce claim that advanced technology was being used to control subversive activities. Directional bugging devices "were snooping and spying on undesirables," he said. "Psychological harassment was being widely adopted."

Most of what he said was hard to dispute. The development of nuclear weapons by the Soviet Union, plus the memory of Pearl Harbor, had indeed made intelligence activities a high national priority. "You have to remember, people were desperate about the so-called Communist threat," Pierce noted. "Some of them, although sincere and well-meaning, had a paranoid idea about domestic security that was being encouraged by ambitious opportunists. Vigilante extremism, faked investigations and security procedures sprang up across the country."

A bit harder to accept at the time was his claim that "organized sociology" and "applied psychology" were being mobilized to manipulate reputations, attack the mental reliability of government critics, and conduct systematic psychological harassment. "There were fearsome new ways to attack the mental health, the very sanity, of their victims," he said ominously.

Given that context, his theory was that he'd attracted the attention of some extreme anti-Communists at Syracuse. But it was "impractical to call me before HUAC or file judicial charges," he concluded, "and so instead, they used underhanded psychological harassment to isolate me from the academic community."

In 1955, when his troubles began, and in 1964, when he first committed his experiences to paper, he had no solid proof that mind control projects were being pursued by the federal government. But once the surviving MKULTRA documents were declassified in 1977 - most of them were destroyed before they could be reviewed by Congress - his descriptions and speculation began to look uncannily close to the experiments being pursued at the exact same time by the CIA.

Even prior to MKULTRA, considerable research had been done by the government on amnesia, hypnotic couriers and efforts to create a Manchurian Candidate - a label commonly used after the release of a 1963 conspiracy thriller with that title. The CIA's goal was to develop "brainwashing" techniques and program subjects with a hypnotically implanted trigger, thus turning them into secret agents who wouldn't remember what they had done. In scientific terms, the objective was to deliberately and experimentally create dissociative identity disorders, with associated amnesia barriers, and use this technique in both simulated and actual covert operations.

MKULTRA was officially launched by the Central Intelligence Agency on April 3, 1953, and continued for a decade until it was rolled into another project, MKSEARCH, in 1964. That ran for another eight years, until CIA Director Richard Helms ordered most of the MK documents shredded in June 1972. Despite this, and redactions to most documents that survived, they revealed that there had been hundreds of separate "sub-projects."

In an August 1963 "Report of Inspection of MKULTRA," Deputy CIA Director Marshall Carter acknowledged a problem: "Research in the manipulation of human behavior is considered by many authorities in medicine and related fields to be professionally unethical, therefore the reputations of professional participants in the MKULTRA program are on occasion in jeopardy." Beyond that, "the testing of MKULTRA products places the rights and interests of U.S. citizens in jeopardy." As a result, the paper trail was being kept to a bare minimum, operational control was delegated to the Technical Services Division (TSD), and the entire project was exempted from audit.

During the preceding decade the "avenues to the control of human behavior" had expanded to include "radiation, electro-shock, various fields of psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and anthropology, graphology, harassment substances, and paramilitary devices and materials." Under a heading titled "Advanced testing of MKULTRA materials," the 1963 CIA report asserted the "firm doctrine in TSD that testing of materials under accepted scientific procedure fails to disclose the full pattern of reactions and attributions that may occur in operational situations." It added that TSD had "initiated a program for covert testing of materials on unwitting U.S. citizens in 1955," the same year Pierce said that his own harassment began.

The ultimate test for any drug, device or technique, argued the report, was "application to unwitting subjects in normal life settings. It was noted earlier that the capabilities of MKULTRA substances to produce disabling or discrediting effects or to increase the effectiveness of interrogation of hostile subjects cannot be established solely through testing on volunteer populations."

To keep the loop small and secure, "certain cleared and witting individuals in the Bureau of Narcotics" provided various drugs for testing on those "deemed desirable and feasible." Some of the most "feasible" subjects were informers and criminals. But as the report added, "the effectiveness of the substances on individuals at all social levels, high and low, native American and foreign, is of great significance and testing has been performed on a variety of individuals within these categories." After several tests the "subject has become ill for hours or days, including hospitalization in at least one case."

By this time, Pierce was no longer at Syracuse. After a year at West Virginia University, he had moved to Stillwater to teach at Oklahoma State University in September, 1962. But he was still writing letters to prominent people and newspapers about "right-wing extremism"

and “security procedures.”

In mid-October, he was removed from his teaching duties and ordered by the university administration to undergo a psychological examination. According to Pierce, extremists were trying to discredit him. But a few students, along with the manager of a local coffee shop, told President Oliver Willham that Pierce was the one creating the disturbances. Word rapidly spread across campus that he was “psycho.” It was precisely the type of harassment and discrediting tactics described in the MKULTRA documents.

In a letter written by Pierce and published in the Oklahoma City Times on Oct.19, 1962 the focus was the arrest and hospitalization of Maj. Gen. Edwin A. Walker, whose fiery rhetoric had recently helped to spark a violent riot on the University of Mississippi campus. On September 30, after hundreds of people were wounded and two were killed, Walker was arrested on charges including sedition and insurrection.

Attorney General Robert Kennedy ordered Walker held in a mental institution for 90 days of psychiatric examination. But that decision was challenged by psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, who argued that psychiatry shouldn't be a political tool, as well as by the American Civil Liberties Union. After five days Kennedy backed down and Walker was released.

Pierce didn't agree with Walker's politics but did identify with his situation. “Admittedly, Walker's extreme views on ‘liberals’ and his alleged defiance of the government (including alleged incitement to violence) suggest mental unbalance; but the presumptions of enforced mental tests and/or treatment should cause us grave concern,” he wrote. “It is only a short step from psychiatric tests for rioters to psychiatric tests for victims of crime and political persecution. A favorite technique of the latter is clever misuse of the ‘psychopath’ label; and, even worse, revolutionary devices of psychological warfare and brainwashing capable of crippling almost any human being, and in such a manner that the victim's factual description of the attack sounds like mental illness.”

A few days after this letter was published a police officer and sheriff's deputy showed up at Pierce's apartment with a warrant for his arrest, apparently at the instigation of OSU President Willham. Although Sheriff Charlie Fowler had never met Pierce, the detention order claimed that Fowler had “personal knowledge” that he was violent and showed the potential to injure himself or others.

A week later, he was involuntarily committed and, without knowing it, placed in the care of Dr. Louis J. West, one of the CIA's influential MKULTRA doctors.

Ever since Pierce shared his story I have been assembling the missing pieces. Before he died we wrote to many federal agencies, requesting any records they had about him under the Freedom of Information Act. All of them claimed that no such records existed. Yet just last week, as Matthew Green was dealing with his NSA problem, I conducted another online search and found some correspondence between Pierce and the CIA.

Dated August 1, 1960 and addressed to him at the Syracuse Math Department, it included this statement:

“Mr. Dulles (CIA Director at the time) asked me to acknowledge and thank you for your letter of 9 July 1960 enclosing a message to Dr. Glennan of NASA and Mr. D.H. Lewis. The thoughtfulness in bringing our attention to your proposal is

indeed appreciated.”

And what was the proposal? Electronic mental telepathy, Pierce called it. “Though the technical requirements have already been met, the process and application are new,” he wrote. It was basically a fishing expedition, an attempt to discover whether his suspicions were true. In a letter to NASA, he pointed to the work being done at the Aviation Medicine School in Texas, where tiny transmitters were being used for research, as well as cybernetic work underway to assist with space exploration, and “extensive use of various voice analyzers and signal separators.”

Every agency we wrote, including NASA, NSA and CIA, denied ever hearing from Pierce or knowing anything about him. Yet he apparently did get their attention.

Greg Guma’s new novel, [Dons of Time](#), which looks at the dangers of the surveillance state, will be released in October by Fomite Press. More of William Pierce’s story will be released in coming months.

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