

# “To Use This Word ... Would Be Absurd”: How the Brainwashing Label Threatened and Enabled the Troubled-Teen Industry

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From the early 1960s to the early 1990s, a range of concerns about “brainwashing” in youth reeducation programs obfuscated professional and political discourse, influencing key outcomes that shaped the development of the troubled-teen industry in the United States. The most significant historical developments related to this controversy involved three different youth programs. In response to accusations of “brainwashing,” program executives created elaborate counterarguments and public-relations campaigns. Instead of working to address inherent risks associated with therapeutic reeducation, the brainwashing label obscured the potential for harm and enabled an unethical teen program industry.

This article poses a two-part question about the troubled-teen industry (TTI).<sup>1</sup> How did stakeholders invoke the brainwashing label when criticizing American teen treatment programs and how did program directors, and those financially and ideologically invested in them, respond? Using three examples of historically significant TTI programs in the United States that operated between the early 1960s and the early 1990s – the Pinehills

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<sup>1</sup> The TTI is defined here as the collection of private-pay intervention agencies and institutions that marketed their services to address problematic youth behaviors. The industry included institutions known as therapeutic boarding schools, residential treatment centers, wilderness therapy programs, and intensive outpatient facilities, as well as the agencies that serviced such institutions with advertisements, referrals, and contracts for parent-arranged extrajudicial arrests and forcible transport operations. I use the past tense to define the industry because this article focusses on the formative historical period of the industry’s postwar emergence and the decades of its most rapid growth, which occurred between the early 1960s and early 1990s. Kathy Moya coined the term “troubled-teen industry” in the early 2000s in her work for the organization known as Fight Institutionalized Child Abuse. Oral history interviews with Kathy Moya, 9 May and 7 June 2022.

Center, The Seed, Inc., and Straight, Inc. – this article argues that accusations of brainwashing impeded effective communication and action to mitigate harm by shrouding the real threat of injury in an ill-defined, mysterious, and distracting fictional concept.<sup>2</sup> In other words, evolving fears of “brainwashing,” construed as a fundamentally un-American practice and a threat to national security, obscured the history of therapeutic reeducation in the United States, and accusations of “brainwashing” that drew on fictionalized and sensationalized representations drowned out the constructive critiques that might have held institutions that employed these methods to account.

Many histories of “brainwashing” focus on how the American public overreacted to an imaginary communist threat. A scholarly consensus offers a simple storyline beginning in 1950, when journalist Edward Hunter popularized the term through his reporting on Maoist propaganda techniques, civilian social control in China, and forcible political reeducation at the North China People’s Revolutionary University, all of which were described in his first book, *Brain-Washing in Red China* (1951).<sup>3</sup> After the Korean War, in Hunter’s second and more sensationalized book, *Brainwashing: The Story of Men Who Defied It* (1956), he focussed on prisoners of war (POWs) and Chinese attempts to elicit false confessions and convert POWs to Maoism.<sup>4</sup> During the Cold War, as the concept was increasingly fictionalized, screenwriters captured the imaginations of Americans who feared covert communist influence portrayed in movies like *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962).<sup>5</sup> “Brainwashing” symbolized an un-American evil and since every citizen was potentially vulnerable it seemed to pose a constant and pervasive threat to national security. The imagery and meaning of the term evolved and persisted in later decades to explain any unwanted form of persuasion, from commercial advertisements to manipulative cult leaders. To denounce the concept, many historians working between the 1990s and the 2010s simply dismissed “brainwashing” as a Cold War hoax that got out of hand and took on a life of its

<sup>2</sup> I agree with Robert J. Lifton’s observation that the term “brainwashing” should be mentioned “primarily to dismiss it,” and that it was problematic because “of the manner in which it has been used in this country.” The term, he said in 1957, “no longer means anything specific.” Robert J. Lifton, “Psychiatric Aspects of Chinese Communist Thought Reform,” in *Methods of Forceful Indoctrination: Observations and Interviews*, Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, Symposium No. 4, New York, July 1957, 233–98, 234.

<sup>3</sup> Charlie Williams, “Public Psychology and the Cold War Brainwashing Scare,” *History and Philosophy of Psychology*, 21, 1 (2020), 21–30; Edward Hunter, *Brain-Washing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men’s Minds* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951).

<sup>4</sup> Edward Hunter, *Brainwashing: The Story of Men Who Defied It* (New York: Pyramid Publications, 1956).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Young, “Missing Action: POW Films, Brainwashing and the Korean War, 1954–1968,” in J. David Slocum, ed., *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 207–23.

own.<sup>6</sup> Such analyses offered an intuitive explanation for the rise of a Cold War scare, and from that perspective "brainwashing" methods were just a fiction that originated in Hunter's mind, a fantasy without real precedents.<sup>7</sup> The most recent historiographical turn led by historian Daniel Pick, who established the Hidden Persuaders research project at Birkbeck University of London, focusses on the shifting social constructions of the term and its intertwined relationship with the psychological sciences, popular culture, and mass media.<sup>8</sup> By taking the brainwashing concept seriously, Pick's team of scholars provide an important intervention, one that is extended by the present focus on American precedents and counterparts in the historical foundations of the troubled-teen industry in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

This article argues that the contested history of "brainwashing" and the shifting uses of the term have muted curiosity about the American origins of therapeutic reeducation. Some of the most controversial methods of teen treatment in the United States pre-date Hunter's first book but were akin

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); Timothy Melley, "Brain Warfare: The Covert Sphere, Terrorism, and the Legacy of the Cold War," *Grey Room*, 45 (1 Oct. 2011), 19–40, 30; Charles S. Young, *Name, Rank and Serial Number: Exploiting Korean War POWs at Home and Abroad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Most scholars writing about the history of "brainwashing" have ignored American precedents, a trend that historian Ron Theodore Robin traces back to the social scientists who studied communist methods of reeducation in the 1950s and 1960s. Robin's history of enemy prisoner reeducation camps in the United States during World War II points out that "many analyses and historical accounts of American reeducation and Chinese 'thought reform' during the Korean War lack a historical dimension" because "social scientists presumed that they were dealing with new methods of psychological manipulation for which there were no meaningful historical precedents." Ron Theodore Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College: Reeducating German POWs in the United States during World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 167.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Pick, *Brainwashed: A New History of Thought Control* (London: Profile, 2022); Marica Holmes, "Brainwashing the Cybernetic Spectator: *The Ipcress File*, 1960s Cinematic Spectacle and the Sciences of Mind," *History of the Human Sciences*, 30, 3, (2017), 3–24. A list of scholars affiliated with the Hidden Persuaders project is available on their website at [www7.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/about](http://www7.bbk.ac.uk/hiddenpersuaders/about).

<sup>9</sup> Future historians can improve the historiography with more focus on the development and impact of therapeutic reeducation for social deviance. In 1945, Kurt Lewin and Paul Grabbe spoke to the therapeutic potential many professionals saw in the capacity to forcibly change deviant hearts and minds. They believed that "the need for re-education arises when an individual or group is out of step with society...[or] out of touch with reality" – a belief that was shared by many military leaders, corrections officials, sociologists, and clinicians during the early postwar period and one that united Western and communist "people changers." Kenneth D. Benne, "The Process of Re-education: An Assessment of Kurt Lewin's Views," *Group and Organization Studies*, 1, 1 (March 1976), 26–42. Kurt Lewin and Paul Grabbe, "Conduct, Knowledge, and Acceptance of New Values," *Journal of Social Issues*, 1, 3 (1945), 53–64, 53; Robert D. Vinter, "Analysis of Treatment Organizations," *Social Work*, 8, 3 (July 1963), 3–15, at 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23708086>.

to the “brainwashing” he portrayed as a communist invention. The primary sources examined here indicate that during the Cold War, the Vietnam War era, and the 1980s War on Drugs, the utility and meaning of the brainwashing label continued changing. Meanwhile, the really existing and mundane American practices – the realities behind the fictional brainwashing label – continued evolving with refinements across decades of experimentation. American methods of therapeutic reeducation, which would have seemed familiar to students at North China People’s Revolutionary University, were developed at Fort Knox during the early 1940s.<sup>10</sup> As the following sections will discuss, those methods were studied and renamed for use in the civilian sector in the late 1940s; valued by progressive prison reformers in the 1950s; applied to experimental delinquency treatment programs nationwide in the 1960s; and promoted since the early 1970s as an effective therapy for adolescents by federal agencies, politicians, professional care providers, parents, and young treatment recipients.

Lacking adequate terminology, critics of and advocates for the TTI used the term “brainwashing” to summarize ethical concerns about institutionalized abuse or to characterize the orchestrated complexity of therapeutic reeducation. Some politicians escalated that concern in Congressional investigations into the way behavioral technologies violated constitutional rights. Other politicians intervened to rally community support for programs that relied on those technologies, convinced that the ends justified the means.

<sup>10</sup> The most influential lineage of therapeutic reeducation programs in the United States were those that originated during World War II and attempted to eliminate delinquency among teenage civilians. Such programs are correctly characterized as examples of therapeutic reeducation to whatever degree they institutionalized “retroflexive reformation,” a three-phase group process that consisted of (1) unlearning old attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to induce (2) new learning for personal changes in a prescribed direction, which were (3) reinforced and internalized within targeted individuals by requiring them to constantly model the process and teach the program content to newcomers and to each other within small or large group interactions in the settings of work, school, scheduled confrontational sessions, and spontaneous moments during time off. Dorwin Cartwright, “Achieving Change in People: Some Applications of Group Dynamics Theory,” *Human Relations*, 4 (1951), 381–92; Donald R. Cressey, “Changing Criminals: The Application of the Theory of Differential Association,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 61, 2 (1955), 116–20; LaMar T. Empey and Jerome Rabow, “The Provo Experiment in Delinquency Rehabilitation,” *American Sociological Review*, 26, 5 (1961), 679–96; Kurt Lewin, “Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Concept, Method and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibria and Social Change,” *Human Relations*, 1, 1 (1947), 5–41; Lloyd W. McCorkle, Albert Elias, and F. Lovell Bixby, *The Highfields Story: An Experimental Treatment Program for Youthful Offenders* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1958); Edgar H. Schein with Curtis H. Barker and Inge Schneier, *Coercive Persuasion: A Socio-psychological Analysis of the “Brainwashing” of American Civilian Prisoners by the Chinese Communists* (New York: Norton, 1961).

Program directors developed elaborate countermeasures in staff training, promotional campaigns, and high-profile endorsements. In these examples, instead of asking how or whether intensive group methods could be made safe for America's young people, key critics and advocates focussed attention on whether such methods were "brainwashing" and therefore unethical because they might be un-American.<sup>11</sup> The ill-defined concept sensationalized and obfuscated the real issues at hand, threatening, yet ultimately facilitating, the development and spread of such methods as treatment in the TTI.

This article features three programs that relied on a form of therapeutic reeducation known as guided group interaction (GGI): the Pinehills Center, The Seed, Inc., and Straight, Inc. They were selected because they are well-documented, consequential examples that reveal how the brainwashing scare impacted the development of the troubled-teen industry and how discourses around "brainwashing" evolved over time. At each of these sites, from 1961 to 1992, accusations targeted the similarity between "brainwashing" and "treatment." During the early 1960s, the methods used at Pinehills were experimental, and optimism about the ability to harness positive peer pressure was compared to the new ability to harness nuclear power. Sensationalized fears about communist brainwashing threatened their legitimacy. As the Cold War subsided and popular disillusionment with the federal government intensified during the Vietnam War era, The Seed, Inc. became part of the Congressional investigation into the ethics of behavior modification and mind control. The Cold War context changed as domestic cultural wars and murderous cults were frequently in the news and high-profile legal debates hinged on whether a "brainwashed" victim was culpable for their crimes. In the 1980s War on Drugs, as the threat of teenage drug use took the spotlight during Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign, the number of parent-pay programs increased and Straight, Inc., America's most highly esteemed program, was repeatedly accused of "brainwashing." Many professionals and politicians characterized therapeutic reeducation as the nation's best hope for treating delinquency and substance abuse, but comparisons with "brainwashing" also characterized them as the most controversial.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> An underexamined fiction underlying America's brainwashing scare is Hunter's claim that the methods of forcible reeducation, which he labeled "brainwashing," originated within communist settings. This article contributes toward that needed correction. By the second half of the twentieth century, many American leaders in the field of criminology believed that methods of forcible therapeutic reeducation could make America's correctional system more effective. Zoe Colley, "Erasing Minds: Behavioral Modification, the Prison Rights Movement, and Psychological Experimentation in America's Prisons, 1962–1983," *Journal of American Studies*, 57, 1 (2023), 84–111.

<sup>12</sup> Larry K. Brendtro and Arlin E. Ness, *Re-educating Troubled Youth: Environments for Teaching and Treatment* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1983).

Historically, the brainwashing label evoked strong emotions of concern because the boundary between ethical and unethical degrees of coercion eluded objective definition. Today, the subjective nature of harm and the problems defining institutional abuse still defy clear articulation and impede effective strategies for prevention. A better understanding of this history and a concerted effort to adopt more accurate terminology could help scholars, policymakers, and professionals conceptualize, communicate, and respond to historical and contemporary issues related to the troubled-teen industry in the United States.

Published and unpublished primary sources illuminate both public and professional engagements with the brainwashing label. Newspaper articles, government reports, and academic journal articles show how fears of “brainwashing” entered public debate and how the term shifted over time. Additionally, unpublished archival materials and materials released under authority of the Freedom of Information Act help to explain how state and White House officials understood and responded to the brainwashing critique. The evidence collected here expands and revises histories of the fears and discourses of “brainwashing” in the twentieth century, while also illuminating American precedents and counterparts to Maoist methods of political indoctrination. Current policymakers, concerned parents, clinicians, and advocates who hope to prevent harm in the troubled-teen industry may also benefit from a historical perspective on the brainwashing concept and a better understanding of the way imprecise or contested terminologies can impair prevention efforts in unanticipated ways.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Journalist Maia Szalavitz wrote the first book on the TTI, which led to Congressional hearings soon after its publication. Maia Szalavitz, *Help at Any Cost: How the Troubled-Teen Industry Cons Parents and Hurts Kids* (New York: Penguin, 2006). Historical scholarship on the TTI is limited. Mark M. Chatfield, “That Hurts You Badder Than Punchin’”: The Troubled Teen Industry and Therapeutic Violence in Group Rehabilitation Programs since World War II,” *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs*, 37, 2 (Fall 2023), 268–92. Deborah Doroshow’s *Emotionally Disturbed: A History of Caring for America’s Troubled Children* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), a history of children’s psychiatric centers, devotes five pages to the troubled-teen industry, beginning at 227. Claire Clark’s *The Recovery Revolution: The Battle over Addiction Treatment in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017) provides the most historical context for understanding some of the early private-pay teen programs in a history of Synanon. Social-science scholarship is also limited. Mark M. Chatfield, “Totalistic Programs for Youth: A Thematic Analysis of Retrospective Accounts,” *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*, 3, 2 (2019), 44–71; Mark M. Chatfield, David C. Diehl, Tracy L. Johns, Suzanna Smith, and Sebastian Galindo-Gonzalez, “Quality of Experience in Residential Care Programs: Retrospective Perspectives of Former Youth Participants,” *Child and Family Social Work*, 26, 1 (Feb. 2021), 132–43; Sarah Golightley, “Troubling the ‘Troubled Teen Industry’: Adult Reflections on Youth Experiences of Therapeutic



This article is organized into four sections. The first describes interest in American methods of therapeutic reeducation during World War II and how they were tainted by fictional representations of "brainwashing" during the Cold War. This context helps to illustrate the stakes in defending what contemporary practitioners, administrators, and their allies called a new "technology" of reform, and why it was difficult yet important to protect the legitimacy of those treatment methods. Three additional sections consider key events at the Pinehills Center, The Seed, Inc., and Straight, Inc. Together, they explain how politicians, parents, and professionals took drastic actions either to condemn or to defend these methods. In each of the programs examined here, stakeholders worked to refute a fictional but consequential concept. The troubled-teen industry grew and expanded as these Americans focussed more on the ideological implications of "brainwashing" than on the real potential for harm.

## DISCOVERING THE POWER TO CHANGE BEHAVIOR

American methods of therapeutic reeducation pre-date use of the word "brainwashing" in the United States. They began with a militarized form of group therapy invented by American psychiatrists and sociologists during World War II.<sup>14</sup> At nine different army garrisons located across the United States, military clinicians worked to develop effective methods for retraining soldiers who had been arrested and shipped back from the front lines after going AWOL, shirking battle, or defying their commanding officers. Beginning in 1942, clinical sociologists and psychotherapists stationed at those bases were ordered to develop new ways to reform as many soldiers as possible "within the shortest time practicable."<sup>15</sup> Because those orders were received within

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Boarding Schools," *Global Studies of Childhood*, 10, 1 (2020), 53–63; Heather Mooney and Paul Leighton, "Troubled Affluent Youth's Experiences in a Therapeutic Boarding School: The Elite Arm of the Youth Control Complex and Its Implications for Youth Justice," *Critical Criminology* 27 (2019), 611–26. Legal scholarship and analyses of the regulatory landscape are also limited. Key examples include Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, "Speaking Truth to Power: Challenging 'The Power of Parents to Control the Education of Their Own'," *Cornell Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 11, 3 (2002), 481–501; Lenore Behar, Robert Friedman, Allison Pinto, and Judith Katz-Leavy, "Protecting Youth Placed in Unlicensed, Unregulated Residential 'Treatment' Facilities," *Family Court Review*, 45, 3 (2007), 399–413; Doug Magnuson, Will Dobud, and Nevin J. Harper, "Can Involuntary Youth Transport into Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare Treatment Programs (Wilderness Therapy) Ever Be Ethical?," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, July 2022, at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-022-00864-2>.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Abrahams, *Turning Lives Around: Wartime Treatment of Military Prisoners* (Bloomington: Author House, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> "Undersecretary of War Conference on the Rehabilitation of Military Prisoners, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 14–16 November 1944," 3, Sanford Bates Collection, Sam Houston State University Archives, Austin, Texas.

severely understaffed prison camps, they demanded a new approach to rehabilitation. And because the officials at each garrison were expected to improvise with whatever resources they had at hand, each of the nine centers took varying approaches to group therapy. The army clinicians at Fort Knox combined their prior experiences in a unique way and named their invention the “total psychotherapeutic push method,” an approach designed to increase the prisoners’ willingness to follow orders, to participate in their own rehabilitation, and ultimately to embrace their redeployment for battle on the front lines.<sup>16</sup> The soldier inmates, called “rehabilees,” were each held accountable for their peers’ rehabilitation as well as their own. They were forced by armed guards to patrol each other, to confront each other in group sessions, and to rehabilitate themselves by therapizing each other.

Inspired by what they saw at Fort Knox, correctional officials in New Jersey were the first to adapt that invention for use in the civilian sector after the war and first to work as policy entrepreneurs to market the idea to funding agencies and youth court officials. By 1949, after three years of trial and error with adult prisoners, those military methods of reeducation had been refined sufficiently to be promoted with confidence to grant administrators at the New York Foundation and the Vincent Astor Fund as a new method of “human engineering” for adjudicated boys aged fifteen to seventeen.<sup>17</sup> The Highfields center, the first experimental treatment program in the United States to apply that “engineering” to delinquent boys, opened in 1950. Highfields’s director, the sociologist Lloyd McCorkle, had pioneered the wartime efforts at Fort Knox to develop the total psychotherapeutic push method. For civilian settings he renamed his program design “guided group interaction” to distance its collection of methods from psychiatric models of mental illness, emphasizing the social and environmental causes of delinquency to avoid any stigma associated with the term “psychotherapeutic.”<sup>18</sup>

Instead of relying on either long-term punishment within a training school, or ineffective surveillance by probation officers, GGI represented a third way, one that promised rapid and genuine personality changes through a social learning process in a short-term intensive milieu. To youth court officials, that seemed ideal because it promised to avoid the harms associated with incarceration as well as the risks of further criminality among under-supervised

<sup>16</sup> Joseph L. Knapp and Frederick Weitzen, “A Total Psychotherapeutic Push Method as Practiced in the Fifth Service Command Rehabilitation Center, Fort Knox, Kentucky,” *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 102, 3 (1945), 362–66.

<sup>17</sup> F. Lovell Bixby, “A Plan for Short-Term Treatment of Youthful Offenders,” Nov. 1949, 2, High Fields (Reformatory), Box 2, SINCO001, Department of Institutions and Agencies Commissioner’s Office Institution and Subject Files, c.1920–1964, New Jersey State Archives, Trenton, NJ.

<sup>18</sup> McCorkle, Elias, and Bixby.



probationers. Because GGI programs seemed to provide a cost-effective solution to delinquency, during the 1950s the most prominent leaders in corrections believed it could be implemented within every American community to reduce social deviance and youth criminality nationwide.<sup>19</sup> Financial and political support during the 1960s by the Ford Foundation, the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) helped to establish GGI programs across the United States for delinquency treatment, behavioral problems in schools, parenting programs, and, beginning in the late 1960s, programs for "pre-addict" adolescents diagnosed with the disease of chemical dependency.<sup>20</sup> Those developments were successful, in part because key stakeholders overcame the threat posed by loud concerns about the communist nature of "brainwashing."

In April 1961, Edgar Schein presented his CIA-funded "brainwashing research" at a conference for the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP).<sup>21</sup> At the event, titled *The Power to Change Behavior*, Schein hoped to promote coercive reformation as something genuinely therapeutic. He tried to disabuse his audience from popular fictions surrounding the brainwashing concept.<sup>22</sup> Whether in Maoist China or the United States, he explained, coercive reform programs in both nations applied systematic social pressures,

<sup>19</sup> The methods of GGI were endorsed by Sanford Bates, Austin H. MacCormick, and the director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, James V. Bennett, who announced that GGI was "the only thing we've found that offers hope of changing a criminal's inner drives and attitudes ... nothing else ever has." MacCormick was director of the Osborne Foundation at the time, and was quoted saying, "Any convict can follow prison rules, then break the community's when they get out. So many criminals always do. That's where the group idea marks an enormous change in prison thinking." In James Finan, "Inside the Prison: A New Spark of Hope for Remaking Men," *Reader's Digest*, May 1950, 61–72, 61, 71. <sup>20</sup> Chatfield, "That Hurts You Badder Than Punchin."

<sup>21</sup> An internal CIA memo referred to Schein's study of coercive persuasion as "brainwashing research." His funding source was classified until 1977. See Central Intelligence Agency, 27 Sept. 1977, CIA Operations Center, News Service, *Central Intelligence Agency FOIA Reading Room* (website), at [www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp88-01315r000300550019-2](http://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp88-01315r000300550019-2). This research included MKULTRA MORI ID# 184447 through 184452, *The Black Vault* (website), at <https://documents.theblackvault.com/documents/mkultra/MKULTRA2>.

<sup>22</sup> Edgar H. Schein, "Man against Man: Brainwashing," *Corrective Psychiatry and Journal of Social Therapy: Official Publication of the Medical Correctional Association*, 8, 2 (1962), 90–103. Schein worked as an army research psychologist in the 1950s, interviewing American civilians just released from Chinese thought reform prisons during the Maoist revolution. He applied this research to a theory of coerced change, which he published in his book *Coercive Persuasion: A Socio-psychological Analysis of the "Brainwashing" of American Civilian Prisoners by the Chinese Communists* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961).

nudging deviants to unlearn antisocial personality traits through a process of mimicking and eventually internalizing prosocial behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. When communists used these methods Americans called it “brainwashing,” but to Schein and other social scientists the electric hype around that label caused a serious problem.<sup>23</sup>

After World War II, anticommunist rhetoric helped conservative politicians refute the validity of Progressive and New Deal policies and concerns. A long American tradition of paranoid politics cried out the infiltrating risks that threatened national security and identity, especially during times of intense social conflict and cultural change.<sup>24</sup> Many Americans feared communism, and the idea of “brainwashing” provided a vague but symbolic reference to their fears about subversive influences and irresistible powers described in newspapers, science fiction, and motion pictures. During the 1950s and 1960s, politicians and activist groups saturated the airwaves with such rhetoric.<sup>25</sup> The House Committee on Un-American Activities, John Birch Society members, J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI’s propaganda department, and leading McCarthyites all aimed to persuade voters toward the right, hoping to undermine growing social movements that called for racial equality, civil rights, and labor interests. By invoking the “Red Scare” to invalidate democratic desires for social change, they hoped to convince a primarily white polity that such movements represented communist intentions to agitate, divide, and degrade society.<sup>26</sup> Working like a missing puzzle piece, “brainwashing” meant that there was no legitimate way to become a communist; they were lured in by this sinister force.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Edgar H. Schein, “From Brainwashing to Organizational Therapy: A Conceptual and Empirical Journey in Search of ‘Systemic’ Health and a General Model of Change Dynamics. A Drama in Five Acts,” *Organizational Studies*, 27, 2 (2006), 287–301; Robert J. Lifton, “Psychiatric Aspects of Chinese Communist Thought Reform,” paper presented at Methods of Forceful Indoctrination: Observations and Interviews, New York, July 1957; and Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1961); Albert D. Biderman, “The Image of ‘Brainwashing,’” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 26, 4 (1962), 547–63; Raymond Bauer, “Brainwashing: Psychology or Demonology?,” *Journal of Social Issues*, 13 (1957), 41–47.

<sup>24</sup> Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writer’s Project* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 198–99.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan M. Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American 20th Century* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001); Gerard Horne, *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> Scott Selisker, *Human Programming: Brainwashing, Automotons, and American Unfreedom* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

Unfortunately for American reformatories and treatment centers, Schein argued, the political atmosphere injected reactionary emotions into the brainwashing label and unfairly threatened the value of coercive persuasion with misguided ethical questions. Since the 1950 opening of Highfields, as New York's director of state institutions W. F. Johnson remarked, the development of reeducation methods had triggered "something of an explosion in the training school field."<sup>28</sup> Albert Elias, the former director of Highfields, described that explosion as "a basic shift in the field of correction."<sup>29</sup> The ethical questions emerging in response to that "basic shift" or "explosion" in corrections are what pushed Bertram Brown, the coordinating official at NIMH, to help organize the conference with the BOP where Schein argued his points. Brown's introductory remarks explained that the purpose of the event was to reconcile ethical concerns with new breakthroughs in coercive treatments for imprisoned adults and adjudicated young people. Brown emphasized that along with increasing knowledge about the power to change behavior came an escalating obligation to clarify its appropriate uses.<sup>30</sup>

To address this obligation, Schein's presentation explained why "brainwashing" methods were perfectly ethical and potentially therapeutic when applied toward prosocial ends. Schein developed his theory of coercive persuasion to explain reeducation in communist military prison camps during the Korean War as well as prosocial uses, such as "the indoctrination of a businessman into a corporation, and the rehabilitation of a juvenile delinquent in a corrective institution."<sup>31</sup> Contrary to popular Hollywood images of evil communist powers, he argued that such methods were concentrated doses of morally neutral processes. Schein urged correctional officials to reject the popular belief that these methods were inherently communist. This, he argued, would allow them to resolve a pressing ethical question: "If we find similar methods being used by the Communists and by some of our own institutions of change ... should we then condemn our own methods because they resemble brainwashing?"<sup>32</sup> The point of Schein's presentation was to flip that question around as he defended those methods with an assertion: "it could just as well be argued that the communists are using some of our own best methods of influence."<sup>33</sup> In debunking the hype surrounding the term, Schein validated

<sup>28</sup> Highfields opened in 1950. Elias citing W. F. Johnson, "The Training School in Transition: A Search for Values," Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference of New York State Training Schools, Sept. 1964, New York State Department of Social Welfare, Albany, NY, pp. 16–17. Albert Elias, "Innovations in Correctional Programs for Juvenile Delinquents," *Federal Probation*, 32, 4 (Dec. 1968), 38–45.

<sup>29</sup> Elias, "Innovations in Correctional Programs," 39.

<sup>30</sup> Bertram Brown, "The Power to Change Behavior: Introductory Remarks," *Corrective Psychiatry and Journal of Social Therapy*, 8, 2 (1962), 60–63.

<sup>31</sup> Schein, "Man against Man," 91. <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 92. <sup>33</sup> Schein, *Coercive Persuasion*, 269.

the American precedents that had been swept up into the brainwashing scare. But what triggered the timing of the BOP conference, and which American methods was he referring to? At the time of Schein's presentation in April 1961, professional controversy over the use of guided group interaction was growing, and as that controversy entered public discourse it threatened operations at the Pinehills Center, an experimental delinquency treatment program for youth in Provo, Utah.<sup>34</sup>

## THE PROVO EXPERIMENT

Judge Monroe Paxman, founder of the Pinehills Center, wanted to divert adjudicated youth toward community-based treatment alternatives and away from the state industrial school. Serving Utah's Juvenile Court District III in Provo, he worked with a citizens' advisory council in 1956 to secure a modest grant for a more humane option that would inculcate prosocial values instead of merely incarcerating young Utahans. The Provo experiment at the Pinehills Center grew from that benevolent desire. With initial guidance and funding from the Ford Foundation, new innovations in GGI were to be implemented and studied for their effectiveness in reforming troublesome teenage boys who lived in the Provo area. The program sparked enthusiastic interest as well as controversy.

A 1961 program description, published in the *American Sociological Review* by Pinehills's directors, LaMar Empey and Jerome Rabow, helps to explain why some county and state officials opposed the experiment.<sup>35</sup> At Pinehills, two groups of ten boys studied and worked at manual labor during the day and engaged in group discussions every evening. These fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds slept at their own homes, riding to and from the center with Brigham Young University graduate students who transported them by automobile each day. The design of the program ensured that this peer group of teens was "the primary source of pressure for change." Resistant youth were threatened with a stint at the Utah State Industrial School, and to the authors this meant that, for each boy, participation was optional. To help boys choose the correct option, the Pinehills system included four main "techniques" to "impel involvement."<sup>36</sup>

First, no one was released until everyone got completely honest about their "total delinquent history." Anyone who resisted a full public confession could

<sup>34</sup> Lamar Empey to David Hunter, 20 Jan. 1961, Brigham Young University (05900324), 1959 July 20–1965 July 19, Reel R0051, Ford Foundation Records, Grants – A to B (FA732A), Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York (hereafter BYU FF RAC).

<sup>35</sup> Empey and Rabow, "The Provo Experiment."

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 686.

"either choose involvement or relentless attack by his peers." Second, each group enforced "the norms of the treatment system," and each boy either made "serious attempts to change" or was "sent away." Third, the peer group judged each individual's progress and voted on their movement from the extra-intensive first phase of treatment to the less restrictive and less insular second phase. The fourth technique involved peer group sanctions. To correct an individual's resistance, the group could "employ familiar techniques such as ostracism or derision" or it could "deny him the status and recognition which come with change."<sup>37</sup> The paid staff at Pinehills were deputized as probation officers and instructed the boys to wield unusual amounts of power, even granting them authority to sentence resistant newcomers to weekends in the county jail.

Treatment required the manipulation of the social environment to coerce "retroflexive reformation."<sup>38</sup> Empey and Rabow claimed that their approach demonstrated Donald Cressey's innovations in the sociological theories of differential association and symbolic interaction, which built on the work of Edwin Sutherland. To coerce retroflexive reformation in person "A," the Pinehills Center required person "A" to change person "B."<sup>39</sup> In other words, by performing the role of reformer, the acting messenger would internalize the program's message. With its four techniques to impel participation, the design of Pinehills forced youth into serious attempts to reform others so they would "automatically accept the common purpose of the reformation process."<sup>40</sup> This sociological innovation in harnessing the power of peer pressure is perhaps the central defining feature of therapeutic reeducation in multiple types of GGI programs.

Many citizens in the predominantly Mormon communities around Provo favored the program, which aimed to address problems of truancy, incorrigibility, and vandalism. At the start, Paxman and Empey secured a Ford Foundation operations and research grant, as well as funding from NIMH, the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, and the National Institutes of Health. The research was funded by these institutions, but because state and county budgets funded the Ford-required matching portion of the daily operations, local support was also crucial to its success.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 686, 687.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 686.

<sup>39</sup> Donald R. Cressey, "Theoretical Foundations for Using Criminals in the Rehabilitation of Criminals," in A. Bassin, T. E. Bratter, and R. L. Rachin, eds., *The Reality Therapy Reader: A Survey of the Work of William Glasser, M.D.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 568–87, 581; Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Empey and Rabow, 686.

<sup>41</sup> LaMar T. Empey and Maynard L. Erikson, *The Provo Experiment: Evaluating Community Control of Delinquency* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1972).

The program eventually gained international and nationwide acclaim as well as fierce local opponents who threatened to terminate funding because they compared GGI unfavorably to “brainwashing.” The experiment was eventually completed, but only because staff members agreed to work for reduced wages until its closure in 1965. The director, LaMar Empey, later admitted that his focus on intervention theories distracted him from “the politics of intervention,” and consequently the “ultimate destiny of the experiment may have been determined by this omission.”<sup>42</sup> He failed to anticipate how alarming this relatively new approach to teen treatment could seem to reactionary anticommunists. Controversy over these innovations erupted in 1961 when county and state commissioners invoked the term “brainwashing” and refused to fund or endorse Pinehills because of “ideological resistance to the use of group methods.”<sup>43</sup> In LaMar Empey’s coauthored book *The Provo Experiment*, the authors reported that this resistance started soon after the county commissioner elections in 1960, when a conservative sheriff, Sterling Jones, won the chair and refused to allocate even a few thousand dollars for the experiment because he disagreed with the program’s philosophy. The ideological resistance came first, precipitating the termination of local funding by the State Welfare Commission and the Bureau of Services for Children.

On 8 December 1961, just two months after Empey and Rabow had published their program description, the *Provo Daily Herald* announced the controversy over the program’s funding, prompting the Kennedy administration to publicize its strong support for the new “total community” methods used in the experiment. David L. Hackett, the executive director for the White House Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime, sent an urgent public letter to the Provo County commissioners two weeks after the *Herald*’s article. Hackett’s letter announced his very strong support by explaining the significance of the experiment. Terminating the experiment would be a detriment not only to Provo County but also to the “many others throughout the country who are looking to Pinehills for new techniques” – the operating costs were a small price to pay, he wrote, “for the new approaches you are opening up.”<sup>44</sup>

But Commissioner Sterling Jones, Utah State Welfare officials, and Professor Whitney Gordon publicly compared Pinehills to Maoist thought reform prisons. In a letter to the editor of the *American Sociological Review*, Gordon compared the experiment at Pinehills to a “communist rectification

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>44</sup> “National Official Urges Financial Support for County Pinehills Project,” *Provo Daily Herald*, 26 Dec. 1961, 8.



program."<sup>45</sup> The methods were similar, he wrote, because "one sees the leverage of the group being applied to the individual by way of public confessions, [and] the demand for candor." He noted the combination of "the 'carrot and stick' technique along with the utilization of role disruption and social anxiety as motivating forces." He concluded his letter with an appeal to Empey and Rabow, asking them to consider the precedents they were setting and whether the ends could ever justify the means. Echoing Bertram Brown's conference introduction, Gordon compared the potential benefits, risks, and ethical challenges of GGI to those that haunted atomic scientists. He wanted sociologists to avoid becoming likewise, a group of experts "tortured and troubled" by their "awesome contribution to the modern world."<sup>46</sup>

In April 1962, the journal published Gordon's letter along with a response by Empey and Rabow, who acknowledged that the professor was correct: "there are parallels" between Pinehills and communist programs. However, "a recognition of this fact does not permit any simple conclusion as to what should be done." Like Schein, they argued that these American methods pre-dated Maoist communism and only became controversial when Chinese revolutionaries adopted them. To refute Gordon, they claimed that electric shock treatment, military training, and college freshman hazing rituals were all "brainwashing." They countered with what they called the real question: "What are the ethical, social and scientific consequences" in not conducting experiments on how "such techniques operate?"<sup>47</sup>

Ford Foundation records show that David R. Hunter, director of the foundation's youth program, was a key supporter throughout the brainwashing controversy.<sup>48</sup> Writing to Empey on 30 January 1962, after reading the first, more biting response that skewered Gordon for his spelling errors, Hunter offered this praise and observation:

First, may I compliment you on your skill at propaganda techniques such as hoisting the poor man on his petard because he or his secretary can't spell. This has the immediate effect of devastating him and his entire argument. However, you restore yourself to the highest degree of respectability in your calm and reasoned reply. As a matter of fact, it seems Professor Gordon really offered you a golden opportunity in disguise because your statement is powerful and persuasive. May I have half a dozen copies of the exchange?<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Whitney H. Gordon, LaMar T. Empey, and Jerome Rabow, "Communist Rectification Programs and Delinquency Rehabilitation Programs: A Parallel?", *American Sociological Review* 27, 2 (1962), 256–58, 256.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 256, 257.

<sup>48</sup> Binder and Polan describe David Hunter as a key figure at the Ford Foundation and a primary influence behind the Kennedy Administration's push for community-based youth programs. Arnold Binder and Susan L. Polan, "The Kennedy-Johnson Years, Social Theory, and Federal Policy in the Control of Juvenile Delinquency," *Crime & Delinquency*, 37, 2 (1991), 242–61.

<sup>49</sup> David Hunter to LaMar Empey, 30 Jan. 1962, BYU FF RAC.

In Empey's first draft, which apparently was not preserved, he ridiculed Professor Gordon, and he thanked Hunter for reining in the attack. "I felt so guilty after you wrote me about hoisting this gentleman on his petard then kicking him there also, that I have corrected all mistakes and removed all sics from his letter. You are a force for good!"<sup>50</sup> Apparently, it was because of Hunter's comment that Empey toned down the published response.

However articulate Empey's response may have seemed, it did not stop the controversy. In September 1962, an anonymous organization, the "Citizens Youth Committee," attacked the Provo experiment with a smear campaign that sent out mimeographed flyers denouncing the program. Pinehills staff members Max Scott and Farrell Brown accused these "misinformed or disgruntled individuals" of making completely false statements.<sup>51</sup> They defended Pinehills by reminding the public that the program enjoyed national and "world-wide recognition by judges, educators and professionals in the field of delinquency rehabilitation."<sup>52</sup> They were certainly correct about the many powerful endorsements that spread such optimism about Pinehills. As they spoke to reporters, HEW was processing a \$60,000 curriculum development grant to produce training materials for clinicians and academics to teach the GGI methods developed at Pinehills.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the various forms of support in federal grants, the White House intervention defending the program's methods, and the county's eventual decision to allow Pinehills to continue, soon after the controversy started Empey announced that he would move to Los Angeles to direct the Ford Foundation's Youth Study Center at the University of Southern California, where he would continue experimenting with GGI methods in the Silverlake experiment.<sup>54</sup> Building on lessons learned in Provo, his Silverlake team developed a training manual to help prepare staff for encounters with ideological resistance. The manual's "Ethics of Using Group Work" section addressed personal and social conflicts "about the legitimacy of inculcating and applying group pressure" in treatment settings. It began by acknowledging that, initially, GGI counselors "generally are conflicted" because of the "similarity between the techniques of brainwashing as practiced by the Chinese Communists in the Korean Campaign and the principles of group counseling." But their "internal psychic strife" in using these methods was only the personal side of the problem: "one who does group counselling is subject to criticism from colleagues as well as radical groups in the

<sup>50</sup> LaMar Empey to David Hunter, 10 May 1962, BYU FF RAC.

<sup>51</sup> "Smear Campaign against Pinehills Denounced," *Provo Daily Herald*, 17 Sept. 1962, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. <sup>53</sup> "Third Annual Progress Report, 1962," BYU FF RAC.

<sup>54</sup> LaMar T. Empey and Steven G. Lubeck, *The Silverlake Experiment: Testing Delinquency Theory and Community Intervention* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1971).

community."<sup>55</sup> The training protocol included a series of philosophical quotes about the esoteric nature of democracy, apparently provided as a moral bulwark. Staff had to accept that although coercive group practices were undemocratic to neophytes, eventually they arrived at democratic processes through this benevolent force. After Pinehills, GGI training materials formally prepared staff for the brainwashing critique with a prescribed set of ends-justify-the-means arguments.

Empey and Rabow's program description published in the *American Sociological Review* greatly expanded an already growing interest in GGI, but it also elicited new ethical concerns. Soon after Gordon's critique was published, the authors received more than a thousand requests for reprints of the original article.<sup>56</sup> Officials at the Ford Foundation, HEW, and the White House were anxious to transform America's youth correctional systems, but the brainwashing critique threatened their prospects with ethical questions. The concerns voiced in public discourse were not grounded in whether coercive reeducation methods could result in harm or impair youth development. Instead, they reflected an ethical framework that assumed that if such methods were inherently communist then they were morally wrong, and that if they could strengthen national security and lead to more humane and effective methods of dealing with problematic behavior at a national scale then the ends would eventually justify the means by strengthening American democracy.

### THE SEED, INC.

Some of the precedents that emerged from the Pinehills Center became patterns during the 1970s and 1980s as repeated controversies erupted over guided group interaction at the Seed and Straight programs. In the late 1960s, to many American parents the most alarming and visible symbol of youthful deviance was teenage drug use. To address that problem, delinquency treatment methods were adapted for drug treatment.<sup>57</sup> Beginning in 1970 with federal grants from the OEO and the LEAA, The Seed, Inc. was a nonprofit drug abuse program with facilities located across south Florida in Broward,

<sup>55</sup> Wm. Fawcett Hill, "Ethics of Using Group Work," 166, in Youth Studies Center, "Group Counselling Training Syllabus," The Silverlake Experiment, grant file #05800220, Ford Foundation Records, Grants, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York.

<sup>56</sup> LaMar Empey to Jane E. Hinchcliffe, 10 May 1962, BYU FF RAC.

<sup>57</sup> When characterizing The Seed, Congressional committee members defined the program's methods as "guided group interaction" and "peer pressure." US Senate, *Individual Rights and the Federal Role in Behavior Modification: A Study Prepared by the Staff of the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess., Nov. 1974 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office), 188.

Dade, Pinellas, and St. Lucie counties. Each implemented a daily regimen of all-day “marathon” sessions of GGI methods for adolescents aged twelve through twenty. Staff at The Seed required Seedlings to sit in chairs all day while other Seedlings berated them for hours on end. To Seed representatives, this was not only the best way to prevent teenage drug abuse, it was “the only solution.”<sup>58</sup> The brainwashing critique that was directed at The Seed was orchestrated by a Congressional investigation, but instead of protecting teenagers from The Seed’s extreme methods, the retraction of federal funding foreclosed the possibility for federal regulatory oversight.<sup>59</sup>

The brainwashing scare retained its communist associations, but the meaning of the term shifted with concerns about scientific advancements in behavior modification, government interest in mind control technologies, and concerns about “brainwashing” in violent cults. In the Vietnam era, concerns grew around the American military’s use of psychological torture in counterintelligence interrogations, and antipsychiatry activists slandered Skinnerian methods of behaviorism as sinister. Shocking events such as the Manson family murders, Patty Hearst’s kidnapping and conversion to the Symbionese Liberation Army, and Jim Jones’s orchestrated mass suicides and murders at the People’s Temple compound in Guyana also heightened popular concerns about “brainwashing.”<sup>60</sup> The nature of the threat increasingly symbolized the consequences of pathological individuals and government groups that abused their power by infringing [on] human or constitutional rights. Since the 1970s, instead of something that communists might do to Americans, brainwashing symbolized something that deranged Americans did to unsuspecting victims or enemies.

Although a few youth counselors who learned about The Seed’s program design became concerned about the potential for harm, such concerns were overshadowed by rhetoric that invoked the brainwashing label. For example, psychologist Jeffrey Elenewski learned “almost on a daily basis” about teenagers who “suffered ill consequences pursuant to their involvement in The

<sup>58</sup> Thomas A. Walton to Alex Miller, 10 April 1973, Drug Abuse Task Force, Appendix E, Folder 22, Box 4, S351, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee (hereafter FSA).

<sup>59</sup> The possibility for professional oversight regulating the content of treatment in therapeutic reeducation programs was also foreclosed in 1974 with the American Psychological Association Commission on Behavior Modification decision “that issuing guidelines for behavior modification was undesirable.” Alan E. Kazdin, *History of Behavior Modification: Experimental Foundations of Contemporary Research* (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1978), 362. See also Stephanie B. Stolz and associates, *Ethical Issues in Behavior Modification: Report to the American Psychological Association Commission* (Washington, DC: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1978).

<sup>60</sup> Margaret Singer and Janja Lalich, *Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995).

Seed."<sup>61</sup> Working as a clinician in Miami, Dr. Elenewski described his professional concerns in a letter to south Florida's Comprehensive Health Planning Council in 1973. Excerpts of Jeffrey Elenewski's letter and several others written by concerned parents were published in 1974 by the US Senate Subcommittee on the Judiciary in their investigative report on federally funded behavior modification programs. The report summarized such concerns by equating The Seed's treatment methods with the "highly refined 'brainwashing' techniques employed by the North Koreans in the early nineteen fifties."<sup>62</sup> Instead of initiating effective discourse about the causes and prevention of harm in therapeutic reeducation, the committee summed up the problem with the alarming but ineffectual brainwashing label.

The Seed sprang from a chance introduction at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting between Arthur R. Barker, who became president of The Seed, and a newly trained Lutheran pastor, Mr. Connie Sjostrom, who secured the first meeting house for the program and later went into private counseling. Beginning in 1957, Barker worked as an alcohol and narcotics counselor in New York at Bellevue Hospital, the Brooklyn House of Correction, and Long Island's Freeport Hospital. At those institutions, he gained experience working for Veterans Administration and youth court referral programs, which informed his treatment philosophy.<sup>63</sup> Soon after moving to Florida, he was appointed counselor of the court by the Broward County Commission on Alcoholism, which helped him secure his first federal grant for The Seed in 1970.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to federal support, more than fifty "volunteers," also in recovery, helped start The Seed by initiating the prosocial group norms and culture. Those initial volunteers acted as paraprofessional "oldcomers," replicating an insular group culture they likely learned in local programs such as Spectrum House or in other NIMH-funded therapeutic community (TC) programs such as YOUnity III, which were inspired by Pinehills, Daytop Lodge, and the California Narcotic Treatment Control Project.<sup>65</sup> In the

<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey Elenewski to Alex Miller, 2 April 1973, Drug Abuse Task Force: Recommendations Relative to Licensing, Appendix C, Comprehensive Health Planning Council of South Florida, Folder 22, Box 4, S351, The Seed, 1972–1973, FSA.

<sup>62</sup> US Senate, *Individual Rights and the Federal Role in Behavior Modification*, 15.

<sup>63</sup> "Resume, Arthur R. Barker," NIDA Grant Microfiche Collection, Office of History, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland.

<sup>64</sup> Georgia Brucken, "Non-violent Army Assembles at 'Seed,'" *Miami Herald*, 25 Oct. 1970, 123–24.

<sup>65</sup> Miller Davis, "'Needle into Hell' Ride Is Slowing," *Fort Lauderdale News*, 14 May 1972, 125; "Health Institute Grants \$257,000 for Drug Centers," *Miami Herald*, 14 Dec. 1970, 74; Raul Ramirez, "We Start at Bottom of Ladder," *Miami Herald*, 2 Aug. 1970, 18; Joseph A. Shelly, "Halfway House and Testing Program for Drug Addicts," Application for Mental Health Project Grant to US Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 5 Oct. 1962, Folder 46, mso63018, Box 2018, Samaritan Daytop Village

early 1970s, The Seed was one of several programs in Florida that were funded by a combination of parent-paid tuitions, state subsidies for court-referred youth, and grants from the LEAA and NIMH. Federal grant administrators saw The Seed as crucial for stemming the growing population of polydrug “pre-addicts” by diverting youth to private-sector, community-based programs.<sup>66</sup> It was also one of several US programs for young Americans that combined GGI with the intensive marathon sessions that characterized many federally funded programs that were established and coordinated through the Narcotic Addict Rehabilitation Act.<sup>67</sup> Program directors developed different names for regimens using retroflexive reformation, such as positive peer pressure, positive peer culture, reality therapy, tough love, attack therapy, and peer group counseling.<sup>68</sup> As was typical for GGI and TC programs, in The Seed youth forbade newcomers contact with the outside world, and they adopted a special lingo, surveilled and reported on each other, and engaged in interpersonal exchanges with the group or with individual peers during all waking hours.<sup>69</sup>

The confluence of GGI and TC philosophies intensified the social pressure applied to the young participants at The Seed. Seedlings started the first and second phases of treatment with daily twelve-hour marathon sessions. Instead of delinquency treatment, which considered drug or alcohol use as one of many symptoms of deviant maladjustment, The Seed program considered all problematic behaviors a symptom of chemical dependency. The Seed was co-ed, and the group was much larger than Pinehills, with hundreds of youths attending the daily marathon sessions. The Seed was Florida’s most controversial program almost from the beginning, moving parents, professionals, ex-Seedlings, and members of US Congress to denounce the program’s methods.<sup>70</sup> In response,

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records, 1962–2016, University of Kentucky Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky; Alexander B. Smith and Alexander Bassin, “Kings County Court Probation: A Laboratory for Offender Rehabilitation,” *Journal of Addictions & Offender Counseling*, 13, 1 (1992), 11–23.

<sup>66</sup> “The Study of the Advisability of the ‘Seed’ in Dade County,” Nov. 1972, Comprehensive Health Planning Council of South Florida, FF 3, Box 12, S111, Drug Abuse – Seed Program, Social Services subject files, FSA.

<sup>67</sup> Nancy D. Campbell, *Discovering Addiction: The Science and Politics of Substance Abuse Research* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Clark, *The Recovery Revolution*.

<sup>68</sup> Brendtro and Ness, *Re-educating Troubled Youth*, 204, refer to the prevalence, the name change from GGI to “positive peer culture” and “peer group counseling,” and the ongoing comparisons with communist “brainwashing.”

<sup>69</sup> George De Leon, *Therapeutic Community: Theory, Model, and Method* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> Agency Committee and Task Force, Comprehensive Health Planning Council, “Appendix D: Report of the Evaluation of The Seed,” Miami, Florida (Oct. 1972), Folder 3, Box 12, S111, Drug Abuse – Seed Program, FSA.



true believers defended Art Barker and The Seed while claiming that it saved children's lives.<sup>71</sup>

After a three-month study in 1973, Florida's Drug Abuse Task Force advised the state's licensing agency to deny The Seed's Dade County license because Art Barker refused to cooperate with local and state administrative guidelines. The report emphasized Art Barker's total disregard for licensing protocol, and growing professional concerns about the "lasting effect the 'Seed' program [was] having on its 'graduates.'" <sup>72</sup> Taking preemptive action before the report was published, and just a few hours before their scheduled vote on the licensing issue, Florida's governor, Rubin Askew, instructed the lieutenant governor, Tom Adams, to call the Drug Abuse Task Force and order them to grant The Seed its license for the Dade location.<sup>73</sup> Just two weeks prior, Askew had instructed Frank Nelson of the Division of Health and Rehabilitative Services to silence Charles Lincoln, one of The Seed's most influential critics and the state regional director for the Drug Abuse Program.<sup>74</sup> The Seed's size made it a crucial resource for youth court judges, and its federal and parent-based support meant that the program eased state budget concerns.

The Senate investigation during this time, which would culminate in 1974, was led by committee chair Sam Ervin (D-NC), who highlighted Seed parent-advocates' extreme views to illustrate the problem. For example, one defensive Seed parent wrote, "critics who believe 'seedlings' are 'brainwashed zombies' are hard put for an answer when asked if that isn't better than being addicted to heroin, dead, or in jail." They believed it was better to be a brainwashed zombie because "today's pot smoker is tomorrow's hard drug user."<sup>75</sup> This popular belief in the "gateway" theory helped justify Seed practices; without drastic interventions, all marijuana users would progress to heroin addiction, jails, institutions, and death. Ervin's committee also published critical letters from the Drug Abuse Task Force report to the Health Planning Council. In one letter, two parents complained that their court-ordered son experienced "intense ridicule on a practically constant basis, 8 to 10 hours a day, 7 days a week."<sup>76</sup>

<sup>71</sup> In The Seed Collection at the Florida State Archives, more than a hundred pages of personal testimonial letters indicate that Seed parents encouraged each other to defend the program to state licensing agencies and politicians.

<sup>72</sup> Drug Abuse Task Force, "Recommendations Relative to Licensing of Local Drug Abuse Programs" (April 1973), 5, Folder 3, Box 12, S111, Drug Abuse – Seed Program, FSA.

<sup>73</sup> Jeffrey Elenewski to Governor Rubin Askew, 17 April 1973, Folder 5, Box 12, S111, Drug Abuse – Seed Program, FSA. <sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> US Senate, *Individual Rights and the Federal Role in Behavior Modification*, 196.

<sup>76</sup> Don and Lorna Lund to the Health Planning Council, 12 April 1973, Folder 7, Box 12, Series S111, Drug Abuse – Seed Program, FSA.

Another, by Paul Schabacker, written while he was the senior health planner for the Comprehensive Health Planning Council of South Florida, compared the Seedlings peer policing to that used by Nazis.<sup>77</sup> Such local concerns gathered national attention in the Senate investigation, but also in newspaper and magazine articles that summed it all up by repeating the simple phrase: the critics “call it brainwashing.”<sup>78</sup>

Ervin’s committee investigation reflected several critical turns related to Nixon-era social movements. Leaders in the antipsychiatry, civil rights, and prisoner rights movements all demanded new scrutiny of elected officials, public agencies, and professional authorities that overstepped their ethical bounds.<sup>79</sup> As news stories reported on the casualties of young American soldiers, atrocities against civilians in Vietnam, and the growing antinuclear movement, powerful images of victimized children harmed by America’s anticommunist crusade reversed the face of the enemy and undermined much of the power in Cold War rhetoric.<sup>80</sup> Ervin’s committee joined the ranks of social critics, academics, and activists concerned about totalitarian features of the American state, and demanded new protections from intrusion or attack.

Instead of asking whether GGI methods could be made safe, some of the most vocal critics asked about “brainwashing” but failed to develop effective safety standards. Fears about “brainwashing” contributed to the retraction of federal support for behavior modification programs, and, in doing so, reduced federal authority over the regulatory oversight that could have helped prevent psychological injury in programs that used extreme GGI methods.<sup>81</sup> At the same time, by reducing very real concerns down to a contested or fictional notion, complaints of abuse were perhaps more easily dismissed as mere exaggerations. Political interventions, sensationalized claims, and reactionary letter-writing campaigns worked against professional concerns about licensing, and apparently the brainwashing label served as a proxy for more accurate terminology and an effective understanding about the actual potential for harm. These patterns developed even further when they surrounded Straight, Inc., the nation’s largest and most influential franchise of teen programs during the 1980s.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>77</sup> US Senate, *Individual Rights and the Federal Role in Behavior Modification*, 191.

<sup>78</sup> Eleanor Randolph, “Today the Seed, Tomorrow the World,” *New Times* (n.d.), 35–41.

<sup>79</sup> Alexandra Rutherford, “The Social Control of Behavior Control: Behavior Modification, Individual Rights, and Research Ethics in America, 1971–1979,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 42, 3 (2006), 203–20.

<sup>80</sup> Margaret Peacock, *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>81</sup> Kazdin, *History of Behavior Modification*.

<sup>82</sup> Wanda K. Mohr, “Still Shackled in the Land of Liberty: Denying Children the Right to Be Safe from Abusive ‘Treatment’,” *Advances in Nursing Science*, 32, 2 (2009), 173–85.

# STRAIGHT, INC.

Parents formerly involved with The Seed started "Project Straight" in 1976 at a converted warehouse in Saint Petersburg, Florida.<sup>83</sup> Both programs were originally funded with LEAA start-up grants, and both were almost identical in their daily schedules. Straight, however, was sued for abuse more often than The Seed, and state investigations confirmed more cases of false imprisonment, extreme deprivations, and systematic maltreatment in Straight. Despite the growing number of complaints and lawsuits alleging "brainwashing" and abuse from 1977 to 1980, Straight executives and their powerful allies began plans to franchise the program in a national expansion effort. Straight's parent-pay system fit perfectly with Ronald Reagan's rhetoric about shrinking the government. And as a response to court reforms in the 1970s that were meant to prevent status offenders from being institutionalized, Straight answered parent demands for private-sector, community-based alternatives.<sup>84</sup> Preemptive treatment promised a free-market approach to diverting white middle-class youth away from juvenile justice systems.<sup>85</sup>

In response to persistent criticism and accusations of "brainwashing," Straight program administrators hired a powerful public-relations consultant, Dr. Robert DuPont, to debunk the controversy. His political influence stemmed from his prior roles as founding director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse and as White House drug czar – director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy – during the Nixon and Ford administrations. Working for Straight in 1981, DuPont arranged for an expert endorsement to counter the most important allegation. The primary question at hand was whether the program used "brainwashing." The result was a thirty-one-page report, "An Examination of Straight Incorporated," which provided a favorable assessment of Straight's controversial methods by Canadian psychiatrist Andrew I. Malcolm and his wife Barbara. Program executives sent this endorsement to Carlton Turner, the current White House drug czar, and used it to woo executive branch support for the program's national expansion fund-raiser campaign.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>83</sup> This section includes some edited passages from the author's blog series. Mark M. Chatfield, "The State of the Art: The Malcolms' Examination of Straight, Incorporated," parts 1–4 (2016), *Points: Blog of the Alcohol and Drugs History Society*, at [www.pointshistory.com](http://www.pointshistory.com).

<sup>84</sup> Barry C. Feld, *Bad Kids: Race and the Transformation of the Juvenile Court* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>85</sup> Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Suburban Crisis: White America and the War on Drugs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023); Andrew J. Polsky, *The Rise of the Therapeutic State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Jonathon Simon, *Governing through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>86</sup> Andrew I. Malcolm and Barbara E. Malcolm, "An Examination of Straight Incorporated," 5 Sept. 1981, STRAIGHT (2), Box OAIJ002, Drug Abuse Policy Office: Records, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California (hereafter RRPL).

Just weeks after Reagan's inauguration, on 6 February 1981, Robert DuPont announced the nationwide franchise plan during a formal press conference held at Straight's first "satellite" facility in Sarasota, Florida. "People here have what I call a 'technology' for reversing drug habits," said DuPont. "I have taken it upon myself to do what I can to expand it nationally."<sup>87</sup> In several correspondences with Reagan's Drug Abuse Policy Office, Straight executives described preparations for the expansion and efforts to promote the program despite widespread criticism.<sup>88</sup> A year later at this same Sarasota facility, Florida state attorney James A. Gardner collected sworn testimonies of false arrest, physical abuse, prolonged isolation, and food deprivation punishments.<sup>89</sup> Gardner's year-long criminal investigation, along with "critics who liken the treatment to brainwashing," eventually pushed Straight's decision in 1983 to close the operation there.<sup>90</sup> Many Sarasota "Straightlings" were relocated to the Saint Petersburg facility, and although the state brought no criminal charges, several former clients sued the program or settled claims out of court.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Saint Petersburg facility had attracted even more negative attention than its failed offshoot in Sarasota. The St. Pete program avoided criminal investigations because it operated under a different legal district with a Straight-friendly state attorney, James T. Russell. After three separate state agency investigation reports corroborated numerous accounts of abuse, widespread civil rights violations, and multiple administrative failings in the Saint Petersburg program, an investigation by Russell resulted in no action.<sup>91</sup> Florida state officials indicated that Russell went on to ignore all subsequent official reports of abuse at Straight. Between 1979 and 1982, Florida Health and Rehabilitative Services official

<sup>87</sup> Kathy Tyrity, "Straight, Inc. Urged to Expand Nationwide," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 9 Feb. 1981, 2B.

<sup>88</sup> Correspondences between Carlton Turner and Straight executives, 5 Aug. 1981–6 July 1982, STRAIGHT (1), Box 15002, Drug Abuse Policy Office: Records, RRPL.

<sup>89</sup> "Straight to Review Corrective Measures," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, 25 April 1983, 3B.

<sup>90</sup> Milo Geyelin, "Straight Inc. Shuts Down Its Operation in Sarasota," *St. Petersburg Times*, 21 July 1983, 1B, 12B.

<sup>91</sup> Florida Department of Health & Rehabilitative Services, District V, "Holley Task Force Investigation," Jan. 1978, Folder 18, Box 38, Series S111, Straight Inc., FSA; John Bustle, "Straight Investigation Report: Confidential," 11 Jan. 1978, Task Force for the Florida Department of Health & Rehabilitative Services, Folder 18, Box 38, Series S111, Straight Inc., FSA; "Special On-Site Monitoring Report, Project Straight, Inc.; 76-A4-13-EB01, Confidential," Florida Department of Administration, Division of State Planning, Bureau of Criminal Justice Planning and Assistance, 30 March 1978, Folder 18, Box 38, Series S111, Straight Inc., FSA; William Nottingham, "State Attorney Is Investigating Straight, Inc.," *St. Petersburg Times*, 4 April 1978; William Nottingham, "Officials Held Back Information on Straight, Report Says," *St. Petersburg Times*, 7 May 1978.

Terry Harper sent three or four collections of complaints involving allegations of coercion and abuse at Straight to the district attorney's office, but Russell never responded.<sup>92</sup> Inaction at the state level enabled the Saint Petersburg program, but federal interventions by White House officials enabled Straight's national franchise to expand in the face of allegations of "brainwashing."

As they prepared for national expansion, program directors wanted the Malcolms to quiet the controversy, hoping they would "submit an objective and unbiased report and that Straight, as a result, might benefit from [their] observations."<sup>93</sup> At the time, Straight's executives were developing their "Solicitation Presentation" to raise \$18.2 million for the construction of twenty-six new facilities by 1986.<sup>94</sup> "We suspect that money is going to be forthcoming, from diverse sources, for a programme as enlightened and as nationally necessary as is that of Straight," the Malcolms predicted in their endorsement letter.<sup>95</sup> In preparation for their six-day visit, they spoke with DuPont, who gave them "the distinct impression that it was because of criticism from various quarters asserting that the Straight programme brainwashed the participants that we were consulted."<sup>96</sup> The Malcolms prepared a list of questions based on their conversation with DuPont: "Does Straight engage in brainwashing? ... Is Straight sadistic? ... Is Straight a cult? ... Does Straight turn out zombies? ... Can Straight be transplanted?"

Andrew Malcolm MD became interested in cults and "brainwashing" in the mid-1960s while working at the Addiction Research Foundation (ARF) in Toronto. As fellow ARF executives promoted sensitivity-training seminars, Malcolm devoted himself to learning about the dangers inherent to these intensive group "brainwashing" methods.<sup>97</sup> In keeping with many of his contemporary antidrug warriors, he was unapologetic about, if not proud of, his self-described biases in studying the problem of drug use. In his monograph *The Case against the Drugged Mind*, he lamented drug and alcohol use because it guaranteed humanity's doom.<sup>98</sup> He feared the future and pleaded

<sup>92</sup> Milo Geyelin, "Statements in Suit Contrast with Glowing Report from HRS' Last Visit," *St. Petersburg Times*, 30 Jan. 1983, 1B, 4B.

<sup>93</sup> Malcolm and Malcolm, "An Examination," 1, RRPL.

<sup>94</sup> Hartz to Carlton Turner (23 Dec. 1981), STRAIGHT (3), Box 15002, RRPL; Milo Geyelin, "Controversial Drug Program Seeks Money for Expansion," *St. Petersburg Times*, 27 April 1982, 1B, 6B.

<sup>95</sup> The Malcolms to James Hartz (26 Dec. 1981), STRAIGHT (3), RRPL.

<sup>96</sup> Malcolm and Malcolm, "An Examination," 4.

<sup>97</sup> Andrew Malcolm, *The Tyranny of the Group* (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, & Co., 1975).

<sup>98</sup> Andrew I. Malcolm, *The Case against the Drugged Mind* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1973).

for drastic interventions against Western civilization's progressive and terminal disease of "chemophilia."

The Malcolms' appraisal outlined several questionable features of the program's design only to conclude that such methods were ethical because they eventually served each child's best interest. The Malcolms created their own ad hoc set of five criteria to answer the main question, "Does Straight engage in brainwashing?" First, the subject must be cut off from their past environment and "made completely dependent on the resocializing institution for the satisfaction of all his needs." To dispel concern, they noted that in "Straight this first requirement is satisfied but this is so for as brief a time as possible." On the first day of the Malcolms' visit, they noted that the most striking aspect of Straight was that aside from occasional stretching exercises, youth in the program engaged in nothing but marathon group sessions. They noticed "no entertainments and nothing to facilitate the improvement of skills other than interpersonal ones," but these conditions were "not dismaying" because reading, working, and recreation were "inessential to the main purpose."<sup>99</sup>

Their second criterion for brainwashing required that all past statuses be removed. And in Straight, since the subject publicly "declares that he is 'a druggie' and ... was out of control and injurious to himself and others," they concluded that the program met this requirement also. Third, "there must be a complete denial of the worth of the old self." They confirmed this criterion as well, but again the ends justified the means because the "old self" of every individual Straightling was "entirely malignant in relation to the values and behaviors" of society. Writing about their fourth criterion, they acknowledged some potential problems. For it to be considered "brainwashing," they opined, each individual must actively participate in their own resocialization, and they noted that in other organizations this can be dangerous. However, they "did not feel that the technique as it was applied at Straight was intrinsically injurious."<sup>100</sup> The fifth requirement was the use of positive and negative sanctions: rewards for compliance and punishments for resistance. In their opinion, since they witnessed no threats of torture and no public humiliation, the group's intensive sanctions were healthy.

They concluded that although Straight implemented all five criteria, they did not constitute "brainwashing" because "one would have to broaden the definition of this word to the point of meaninglessness for it to be applied there."<sup>101</sup> The Malcolms followed up with a personal letter to Straight's executive director, Jim Hartz, reiterating that the main purpose of their visit was to

<sup>99</sup> Malcolm and Malcolm, "An Examination," 2, 3.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 5, 3, 7, 9.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 9.



determine whether Straight engaged in "brainwashing." After confirming all five of their criteria in the report, in their letter they clarified that "Straight simply does not engage in brainwashing ... to use this word in describing the programme at Straight would be absurd."<sup>102</sup> The Malcolms looked beyond the means, found benevolent ends, denied a fictional label, and endorsed Straight's abusive program design.

The Malcolms' report did nothing, however, to suppress the accusations of "brainwashing" leveled against Straight franchises during the first years of national expansion. Soon after the Malcolms completed their report, attorneys affiliated with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in Georgia and Ohio filed three class-action complaints on behalf of former Straightlings who summarized the program's methods as "brainwashing." From 1982 to 1985, almost every newspaper article about these ACLU cases invoked the brainwashing label. The first, against the unlicensed Atlanta Straight facility in early 1982, involved multiple complainants. The court formed an independent panel to "investigate charges that Straight was holding teenagers against their wills, physically abusing them, and brainwashing them." After a three-month investigation, Carroll Benson, an official at the Georgia Department of Human Resources, told reporters that he "found no evidence of brainwashing at Straight," and, being cleared on all charges, the program was issued its first operating license in that state.<sup>103</sup>

Attorneys for the ACLU in Ohio also received at least eight complaints from young people after they escaped or were released from the Cincinnati facility, which opened in January 1982. Reporter David Wells summarized them, writing, "In general, the complaints said Straight coerced teen-agers into signing themselves into the program, forced them to stay at the center against their will, and employed brainwashing techniques."<sup>104</sup> The program's director, Jerry Rushing, dismissed the allegations as false, explaining that "whenever terms like 'abuse,' 'brainwashing,' and 'coercion' are thrown around it perks ears."<sup>105</sup> The *Cincinnati Post* listed affidavits filed in the eastern district of Virginia in late 1982, including one by a former member of Straight who believed that "malicious brainwashing techniques" compelled his younger brother to remain in the Springfield, Virginia facility against his will. The same article quoted the executive director of the Cincinnati chapter of the ACLU saying that the sessions at Straight "run very close to really performing psychic murder," an allegation strikingly similar to Joost

<sup>102</sup> Malcolm and Malcolm to James Hartz, 26 Dec. 1981, STRAIGHT (1), RRPL.

<sup>103</sup> "Drug Treatment Center Cleared of Wrongdoing," *Atlanta Constitution*, 16 May 1982, 45.

<sup>104</sup> David Wells, "State Bureau Approves Straight Inc. Drug Program," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 23 June 1982, 25.

<sup>105</sup> Ramon G. McLeod and Nancy Berlier, "ACLU Says Complaints Prompted Its Request for Probe of Straight," *Cincinnati Post*, 14 May 1982, 9.

Meerloo's ideas about "brainwashing" and "menticide."<sup>106</sup> The newspaper coverage in Ohio prompted Straight executives to announce but then misrepresent the Malcolms' report.<sup>107</sup> Straight, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported, "has been labeled a brainwashing organization that coerces teen-agers to sign up for drug rehabilitation, takes away their rights and forces them to adopt new thought patterns." But contradicting the report, the *Enquirer* reported that Straight met only one of the "several conditions that are necessary for the existence of brainwashing," and "on other points, the Malcolms said brainwashing in no way exists at Straight."<sup>108</sup>

Between 1982 and 1987, the White House also responded with a pattern of highly publicized support, especially when criticisms or civil lawsuits directed at the program's methods coincided with the opening of new facilities. Straight was particularly threatened by the brainwashing label and would have benefited from such boosts of public support when new franchise openings were announced. The January 1982 ACLU lawsuits were filed in Atlanta within days of the Cincinnati facility's opening. Five weeks later, Nancy Reagan made a televised visit to Straight's Saint Petersburg facility. The Associated Press syndicated a story describing her visit to a group session where three hundred "troubled teenagers" made "true confessions" about their drug use.<sup>109</sup> In the spring of 1982, approximately one month after the ACLU filed complaints in Ohio about Straight's "brainwashing" methods, Carlton Turner represented the White House at a fundraising banquet for Straight where he publicly praised the program. Straight director James Hartz thanked Turner for his public support and for arranging Mrs. Reagan's visit, saying, "We are most grateful to your good offices in helping us over some rough spots during the past few months. The visit by Nancy Reagan has been a beacon to us all."<sup>110</sup> At the time, staff in George Bush's Office of the Vice President were coordinating with Turner and "getting politicians on board" to support a new Springfield, Virginia franchise in the DC metropolitan area.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Nancy Berlier, "Regimen at Straight Not for All," *Cincinnati Post*, 17 Dec. 1982, 2; Joost Meerloo, *The Rape of the Mind: The Psychology of Thought Control, Menticide, and Brainwashing* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1961).

<sup>107</sup> Steve Kemme, "State May Probe Complaints Aired on Drug Abuse Program," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 3 April 1982, 39.

<sup>108</sup> Sue MacDonald, "Experts Have Both Praise, Cautions for Straight," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 3 April 1982, 41.

<sup>109</sup> "Tearful Nancy Reagan Visits Troubled Teenagers," *Stevens Point Journal*, 16 Feb. 1982, 20.

<sup>110</sup> James Hartz to Carlton Turner, 14 May 1982, Straight (3), Box OA 15002, Drug Abuse Policy Office: Records, RRPL.

<sup>111</sup> "We are making a concerted, and successful, effort to get the politicians on board." Dave Stottlemeyer, Office of Vice President, George Bush, memo to Carlton Turner, 1 June 1982, Straight (3), Box OA 15002, Drug Abuse Policy Office: Records, RRPL.

As one example of how that support was made visible, ten days after Ohio state officials announced they would investigate the Cincinnati facility in response to the ACLU lawsuit, Congressman Frank Wolf (R-VA) entered praise for Straight in the Congressional Record, mentioning their new facilities and support for their fund-raising campaign.<sup>112</sup>

In July 1984, within days of announcing plans to open a Straight facility in Orlando, and posing a threat to Straight's planned opening in Michigan, the *Detroit Free Press* ran a story about the Cincinnati facility that featured Fred Collins's lawsuit against the Springfield facility, quoting him saying that Straight's treatment "really was brainwashing." In response to that article, readers submitted letters to the editor, one calling Straight a cult, another claiming that "the methods used by Straight Inc. are a failed approach that our society repeatedly tries and discards – as shown with Synanon, the Rev. Moon and a wide variety of other brainwashing programs culminating in Jonestown."<sup>113</sup> Apparently in response, approximately six weeks later, Nancy Reagan visited the Cincinnati Straight, telling the teens there, "You are the ones that are going to be taking over this world ... we need you clear-eyed and clear-minded."<sup>114</sup> The article featuring her praiseful quote was positioned next to one on the same page reminding readers that Straight had "drawn criticism by the American Civil Liberties Union for alleged 'brainwashing' of its clients."<sup>115</sup> In November 1985, when Nancy Reagan brought Lady Diana to visit the Springfield, Virginia facility in the Washington, DC metro area, Straight had recently announced plans to open branches in Detroit and Boston, and the Orlando facility's opening had just been announced, with newspaper articles reminding Floridians of the franchise's controversial past.<sup>116</sup> In Ohio, in two different million-dollar civil lawsuits, filed in July 1986 and in February 1987, the Cincinnati program was accused of denying clients adequate food, using sleep deprivation, and verbal abuse. The following month, George and Barbara Bush made a televised visit promoting the Saint Petersburg Straight.<sup>117</sup>

Straight's many facilities were able to continue operations despite multiple complaints, in part because so much focus was placed on whether their

<sup>112</sup> Frank R. Wolf, speaking on Straight, Inc. on 24 May 1982, 97th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, 128, 64, E 2433.

<sup>113</sup> David L. Thompson, "Straight Inc. Uses a Failed Approach," *Detroit Free Press*, 29 July 1984, 228.

<sup>114</sup> Nancy Berlier, "Youths Issued Call," *Cincinnati Post*, 18 Sept. 1984, 28.

<sup>115</sup> Janet Walsh, "First Lady Says Commitment Proved," *Cincinnati Post*, 18 Sept. 1984, 28.

<sup>116</sup> Rose Simmons, "Orlando's Straight Inc. Readies Anti-drug Effort," *Orlando Sentinel*, 19 Sept. 1985, 247.

<sup>117</sup> "Drug Center Hit with Second Suit," *Cincinnati Post*, 12 Feb. 1987, 1; "Bushes Visit Straight Inc.," *Tampa Bay Times*, 18 March 1987, 1.

combination of methods constituted “brainwashing.” Lacking adequate terminology to characterize the totalistic approach at Straight, and lacking professional knowledge about how a milieu so intense might affect human development, the discourse rarely focussed explicitly on the potential for long-term psychological harm visited in treatment. Even the few professionals who were concerned about potentially injurious treatment methods were distracted by the brainwashing label and focussed more on political morals and professional ethics than on the prevention of harm. After the franchise’s national expansion, and almost a decade after the Malcolms’ visit, Straight executives handed the Malcolms’ report to two skeptical addictions experts, Bruce Alexander and Barry Beyerstein, who had traveled from the Department of Psychology at Simon Fraser University to the northern Virginia facility in Springfield. By 1990, when they visited, Straight had also expanded from its locations in Florida, Georgia, and Ohio into Virginia Beach, Texas, Michigan, California, and Massachusetts, making it one of the largest teen treatment franchises during the 1980s and 1990s.

Beyerstein and Alexander learned about Straight from their colleague, Arnold Trebach, who published a chapter about the program in his book *The Great Drug War* (1987).<sup>118</sup> Trebach detailed the story of Fred Collins’s coerced treatment, the methods of “brainwashing” he claimed to have witnessed, and his successful lawsuit against the program.<sup>119</sup> While writing about Collins’s experience, Trebach sent a preliminary draft to Beyerstein, who responded by comparing Straight’s techniques to the treatment of American POWs during the Korean War. “The parallels with Straight’s methods are striking,” Beyerstein wrote to Trebach; “the Chinese used techniques that Straight seems to have lifted wholesale,” as if “someone at Straight had read the literature on brainwashing and systematically set out to apply it.”<sup>120</sup>

Wanting to observe these methods directly, Beyerstein and Alexander arranged a visit. Alexander summed up his observations in the book *Peaceful Measures* (1990): “I believe that Straight’s treatment can be fairly compared with brainwashing in prisoner-of-war camps.”<sup>121</sup> He mentioned that Straight’s executives provided him with the Malcolms’ report to prove that their methods were bona fide. Barry Beyerstein published his analysis as an edited book chapter titled “Treatment, Thought Reform, and the Road to

<sup>118</sup> Arnold S. Trebach, *The Great Drug War: And Radical Proposals That Could Make America Safe Again* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987).

<sup>119</sup> *Collins v. Straight, Inc.* 748 F.2d 916 (1984).

<sup>120</sup> Trebach, 43.

<sup>121</sup> Alexander was referring to J. A. C. Brown’s *Techniques of Persuasion: From Propaganda to Brainwashing* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963); Bruce K. Alexander, *Peaceful Measures: Canada’s Way Out of the “War on Drugs”* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 75.

Hell.”<sup>122</sup> Using Robert Lifton’s criteria for thought reform as a framework, Beyerstein’s analysis was the first to go beyond mere sensationalism to soundly negate Straight’s good intentions as so much proverbial pavement. Their “hosts at Straight Inc.,” he wrote, “argued not that their means were so very different from what critics had alleged, but that their noble ends (saving the nation’s children!) justified such harsh and underhanded manipulations.”<sup>123</sup> Similar to Andrew Malcolm’s jeremiad pleading for new interventions to save Western civilization from “chemophilia,” Straight executives supposed that the dire stakes in America’s Drug War justified the means. Like the justifications used in staff training at the Silverlake experiment, Beyerstein reported that Straight’s leaders believed that “the dangers of drugs, especially for youth, are so overwhelming that practices normally forbidden in democracies must be permitted in the all-out battle for survival.”<sup>124</sup> But instead of focussing on the need to study and prevent institutionalized psychological abuse, his powerful and eloquent critique detailed the reasons why Straight’s methods resembled communist “brainwashing,” violated the ideals of democracy, and therefore posed ethical problems.

## CONCLUSION

The above key moments in the history of the TTI help to explain how such controversial methods gained a stronger foothold despite persistent accusations of “brainwashing.” The brainwashing label simultaneously amplified and obscured very real concerns about the potential for harm in group-based programs. But instead of asking whether such methods could be made safe, the controversy spun around a murky and sensationalized concept. Between the early 1960s and the mid-1990s, the brainwashing label hindered and strengthened the teen program industry, swayed the politics of intervention, and reached into the lives of American families with questions about the difference between ethical and unethical forms of treatment. American clinicians and politicians spent more time wrestling with a fictional brainwashing label than working to understand and prevent institutional abuse. Meanwhile, the troubled-teen industry intensified, defended, normalized, and relabeled the methods of therapeutic reeducation.

This history played out differently in each time period. During the Cold War, the Ford Foundation’s vision for transforming America’s youth

<sup>122</sup> Barry Beyerstein, “Treatment, Thought Reform, and the Road to Hell,” in Arnold. S. Trebach and Kevin. B. Zeese, eds., *Strategies for Change: New Directions in Drug Policy* (Washington, DC: Drug Policy Foundation, 1992), 245–51.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

correctional system toward community-based GGI programs was threatened by comparisons with the communist “brainwashing” methods in the People’s Republic of China. An intervention by White House officials publicly endorsed the Ford Foundation’s vision, helping the controversial Pinehills design spread nationally with a new wave of federal funding for GGI programs. During the Vietnam War era, as marijuana, amphetamine, and psychedelic use among high-school students increased, funding through the LEAA, the OEO, and NIMH helped establish a national system of treatment programs implementing GGI for young “pre-addicts.” The controversy over The Seed elicited drastically different federal and state responses. Sam Ervin’s Congressional committee interrogated The Seed’s methods while Florida governor Rubin Askew intervened to preserve the state’s budgetary interests. When programs like The Seed lost their federal funding, they also escaped regulatory requirements and shifted more exclusively to serving private-pay clientele. As a statewide trend this reduced the number of treatment options for families who could not afford to pay tuition and contributed to racial disparities in youth court systems. During the 1980s War on Drugs, the troubled-teen industry epitomized Ronald Reagan’s ideal vision of small government and free-market private enterprise. Theoretically, regulation of the TTI could remain minimal because the capitalist logic of competition would weed out “bad” programs as customers purchased services from “good” programs. In practice, however, Robert DuPont and White House staff protected Straight’s national expansion on multiple occasions with presidential endorsements and televised visits to defend Straight against accusations of “brainwashing.”

In the 1990s, Barry Beyerstein’s intuition told him that Straight executives must have copied Chinese “brainwashing” methods to fight this battle. That was exactly the type of misunderstanding that Edgar Schein had hoped to prevent when he worked to debunk the fictions and to encourage level-headed discourse in the early 1960s by reminding Americans about the nation’s reliance on GGI for therapeutic reeducation. When Edward Hunter popularized the brainwashing label in 1950, he failed to convince everyone that the threat was real, but he convinced many Americans that it was a communist invention. Hunter’s early work prepared the public with an explanation for the disloyal GIs who were about to return home from Korean POW camps after making false confessions, collaborating with the enemy, or refusing repatriation.<sup>125</sup> Hunter sparked fears that threatened American methods of reform, forcing top-level CIA administrators and researchers like Schein and Lifton to address the brainwashing panic as early as 1956.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Hunter, *Brainwashing in Red China*.

<sup>126</sup> See Central Intelligence Agency, “Brainwashing with Attachment Titled ‘Brainwashing from a Psychological Viewpoint’,” Feb. 1956, MKULTRA MORI ID#



At the conference for the Federal Bureau of Prisons coordinated by NIMH officials, Schein continued that effort on behalf of national security interests because the brainwashing scare threatened the legitimacy of American reeducation methods. These new methods promised America an advantage in reforming its wayward youth during the fight against communism at a time when the primary Cold War battle zones were internal and engaged with the minds of young people.<sup>127</sup> Scholars today who focus on brainwashing fictions may miss the historical reality of coercive persuasion in our nation's thought reform programs, and may overlook the scientific innovations, political developments, and social impacts associated with the American methods and facilities that enabled a flourishing troubled-teen industry.

Ongoing efforts by activists and policymakers aiming to prevent institutional abuse in the TTI will be most effective if the concepts debated are defined with precision. The problem of harm in this industry is a "wicked problem," and in keeping with all wicked problems, intuitive solutions can make things worse.<sup>128</sup> The historical figures described here lacked adequate language to characterize the complex "totality of conditions," and the closest word they could find was "brainwashing."<sup>129</sup> By invoking that problematic word they hoped to convey something sinister and dangerous, something that should be stopped. The industry grew despite their best efforts, not because they chose the wrong word, but because the history of America's investment in therapeutic reeducation had been forgotten instead of articulated, studied, and made safer. The best label they could muster conjured up fantastic threats of a fictionalized power rather than the real history of therapeutic reeducation and the real harms that might be perpetrated through such American methods.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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<sup>127</sup> Peacock, *Innocent Weapons*.

<sup>128</sup> The wicked-problems framework is outlined in Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences*, 4, 2 (1973), 155–69. Their framework is applied to harm within helping institutions in Diane Burns, Paula Hyde, and Anne Killett, "Wicked Problems or Wicked People? Reconceptualising Institutional Abuse," *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 35, 4 (2013), 514–28.

<sup>129</sup> John Leach, "Psychological Factors in Exceptional, Extreme and Torturous Environments," *Extreme Physiology & Medicine*, 5, 1 (2016), 7–22.