
Spotlight on History:

Jolly West: Complex Contributions to Military Psychology

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Louis Jolyon “Jolly” West remains one of the most interesting figures in the history of psychology and psychiatry. His complex and multifaceted career included military service, civilian research for military and intelligence agencies, and civilian research that addressed similar goals related to influence and identity. In this article, we emphasize his contributions to the Cold War psychology of interrogation and particularly his influence on the Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape (SERE) program that emerged from these studies.

Any discussion of Jolly West raises important questions. The breadth and depth of his career from the early Cold War through his death in 1999 raise difficult questions about what to consider, particularly in the present format. Therefore, we have chosen to emphasize his theoretical and applied work in Cold War psychology of interrogation and to omit consideration of his other activities, particularly his work with returning POWs and his roles in the early development of SERE.¹

Biography. West was born in 1924 in Brooklyn, NY to a family of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants. He served in the USAF 1948-1956, and during this time he completed his medical degree at the University of Minnesota and then—at age 29 in 1954—became full professor and Head of the Department of Psychiatry, Neurology, and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine, positions from which he continued his military service and his research and administrative activities in the

study of interrogation and development of SERE, as discussed below (Weiner & Yamamoto, 1999). He later moved to UCLA, where he served as Chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences until 1989. As an exemplar of his activities at UCLA, between 1971 and 1972, West secured funding for the Violence Project. He planned to nest this project in the greater Los Angeles area with the mandate to better understand and predict violence. This project sought to divert funding away from incarceration and police actions and toward prevention of violent crime (Lemov, 2025). Ultimately, the project lost funding due, in part, to allegations that the program included psychosurgery and fears that it would inappropriately target people of color (Lemov, 2025). West remained active in research and advocacy through the 1990s (International Cultic Studies Association [ICSA], 2014; West, 1993), and he passed away in 1999.

The Cold War

Any examination of Cold War psychology of interrogation must include consideration of the overwhelming fear that gripped the U.S. as well as the impacts of this fear on psychological and psychiatric research and funding (Woody et al., 2022). The return of most Korean War POWs, many of whom faced allegations of collaboration with the enemy or, in some cases, charges, conviction, and long prison sentences (Biderman, 1957; House Committee on Un-American Activities [HCUAA], 1958; Schein et al., 1960; United States Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Government Operations, 1956). In addition to overarching fears of Communism, the behavior of Korean War POWs as well as others who had faced similar threats (e.g., Cardinal Mindszenty, see Meerloo, 1951, 1956) raised fears that the Communists had tools which could convert U.S. personnel to Communism—tools the U.S. and allies lacked. These fears prompted extensive research as well as related funding and collaboration and a training program for U.S. military personnel (i.e., Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape [SERE], Doran et al., 2012). West stepped into these activities in many ways, some of which are described above. Here we examine a narrow portion of his work.

Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape

In this focused examination of West, we emphasize his role in Cold War psychology of interrogation, particularly his scholarly and administrative roles in SERE and related programs. It remains noteworthy that the psychological science which led to the development of the SERE pro-

¹ To illustrate the breadth of West's career, we consider a question: what would we omit if we seek to discuss only his Cold War interrogation research and service? The answer is legion. To clarify, in this article we will *not* discuss his research funded by intelligence agencies into what the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (1956, 1957, i.e., a group to which he belonged and which held meetings in which he was a prominent speaker) called “forceful indoctrination” (p. 205). We will also omit his studies of LSD (Kinzer, 2019; Marks, 1991; West, 1960a, West & Deckert, 1965), sensory deprivation (West, 1963), sleep deprivation (Brauchi & West, 1959; West, 1967; West et al., 1962) and hypnosis (West, 1960b, West & Deckert, 1965; West et al., 1952). Similarly, we will not discuss his known funding sources, such as the Human Ecology Fund, a corporation founded to disguise Central Intelligence Agency funding from observers (Lemov, 2011; Price, 2007), including in some cases the scholars themselves (Lisle, 2025; Robert Jay Lifton, personal communication, May 10, 2019). We will not discuss the funding or other impetus for his hiring and support of colleagues at the University of Oklahoma who were experts in hypnosis, sensory deprivation, and sleep deprivation (Woody et al., 2020). We will also omit West's consistent forays into high profile activities, including some that may surprise readers. These include his involvement in an infamous event at the Oklahoma City Zoo in 1962; he fired the tranquilizer dart of LSD into the elephant, which did not survive (Kinzer, 2019). We will not examine his decision to hypnotize, administer sodium pentothal, and take other steps to induce the confession of Jimmy Shaver, a 29-year-old Airman who was convicted and then executed for rape and murder (Lemov, 2025; O'Neill & Pieperbrink, 2019). Similarly, we will not discuss his research in abusive groups (sometimes called *cults*, West, 1982, 1989; cf. Woody, 2009), his attempts at predictive policing (Lemov, 2025), or his high-profile roles as the psychiatrist for Patty Hearst (West, 1978) or as the assessor of Jack Ruby (West, 1964a).

gram included contributions from psychiatrists and psychologists. Some lines of effort drew solely psychiatrists, others solely psychologists, and others incorporated scholars from both professions in tandem (Air Force Personnel and Training Research Center [AFPTRC], 1956). He engaged in these activities while serving both in the USAF, particularly in his role as Chief, Neuropsychiatry Service at the 3700th USAF Hospital at Lackland Air Force Base (AFPTRC, 1956) and in his concurrent role of Chair of Psychiatry at the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine (Weiner & Yamamoto, 1999). As noted previously, his work in interrogation occurred in the context of his work in support of larger programs, which remain beyond the scope of this article.

West's scholarship appeared well-regarded in these contexts. Scholars from both the U.S. Army and USAF worked together to address questions raised by the behavior of U.S. POWs in the Korean War (Woody et al., 2022). West worked alongside Margeret Thaler Singer, who was sent from Walter Reed Army Institute to Lackland AFB, to evaluate and treat returning POWs from the Korean War and who, along with other Cold War scholars, would later join West in the study of abusive groups (ICSA, 2014; Woody et al., 2020). The return of Korean War POWs, their unexpected behaviors (e.g., shouting Communist slogans, Lifton, 1954; Schein, 1956, 2016), and the decision of 21 U.S. POWs to stay in China (Biderman, 1963; Pasley, 1955), prompted questions about what at the time was termed *brainwashing* (Holmes, 2017; Hunter, 1956; Lomov, 2025) or, later, *coercive persuasion* (Schein, 1961).

West conducted scholarship in support of the foundations and practices in SERE. He served as the sole author of "Medical and Psychiatric Considerations in Survival Training," one of the many "Reports Prepared for the Working Group on Survival Training" (AFPTRC, 1956, pp. 46-47). Although the AFPTRC (1956) report states that this article is "FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY" (p. 47), it appears in public bibliographies (Woody et al., 2022 online supplement). He also authored publicly available works related to Air Force prisoners of War in Korea (West, 1957, 1958).

Another testament to the positive regard of his peers for his scholarship comes from his addition to an existing manuscript as an author. The AFPTRC (1956) working group lists Harry Harlow and I. E. Farber, respectively, as authors of "Theoretical Analysis of DDI Syndrome (Debility, Dread, and Isolation)" (p. 46). Although in 1956 this manuscript appeared finished, Farber and Harlow brought West into the project for its completion. A year later, this paper was published in a public journal with a new description of the topic (i.e., "Debility, Dependency, and Dread") and a revised list of authors; Farber now came before Harlow with West as third author (Farber et al., 1957). This well-cited work (i.e., 179 citations in Google Scholar as of August 27, 2025) remained influential in Cold War studies of interrogation (Woody et al., 2022; Lemov, 2025), and it appeared to contribute to West's wide-ranging influence in this and related areas (Singer & Addis, 1992).

West also provided administrative support for SERE, serving on the Panel on the Methods of Training (AFPTRC, 1956). In this role, he served alongside psychologists (e.g., E. Paul. Torrance, F. K. Berrien, John T. Lanzetta, Isador E. Farber, Harry F. Harlow, A. F. Zander), many of whom held concurrent military roles. For example, although John T. Lanzetta's academic affiliation at this time was at the Fels Group Dynamics Center at the University of Delaware, his listed affiliation was with the Systems Research Branch, Crew Research Laboratory, AFPTRC (AFPTRC, 1956; Lanzetta & Roby, 1956). The larger project was classified at that time. Despite investigatory journalism (e.g., *Time*, 1955), the SERE program remained secret until 1961 (Doran et al., 2012).

With his scholarship and administrative roles, West had a substantial effect on the development of SERE as well as the larger body of research into POWs' experiences and coercion broadly (West, 1957, 1958, 1964b). He also advocated for POWs in multiple contexts, including his scholarship and administrative work addressed here as well as his public outreach. A consistent myth about Korean War POWs is that they were uniquely weak or vulnerable (Kinkead, 1959). West (1964c) joined Biderman (1962, 1963), Schein (1961), and others who pushed back on these claims and, in writing for wider audiences, argued that these aspersions constituted an unjustified myth about U.S. personnel in Korea. In fact, during the court martial hearings of 36 American prisoners who were coerced into confessing to war crimes during the Korean War, West testified that they were not traitors but rather their false confessions had been induced by torture, solitary confinement, threats, and severe sleep deprivation (Weiner & Yamamoto, 1999).

Conclusion

Jolly West remains one of the most complex figures in the history of the Cold War. This complexity—and related sensationalism from extreme events such as his 1962 actions with the elephant—raises the risk that his scholarly and administrative contributions to military scholarship and training may be overlooked. We hope this examination of his contributions can support recognition of the complexity of his contributions across many fields rather than reduction of his work to the simplistic, sensational, or negative.

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