

Dr. Timothy Leary: Alchemist of the Mind

By Dan McCue

Over the past three decades, it's likely that no two personalities in the public eye have been more diametrically opposed to each other than the "Guru of LSD," Dr. Timothy Leary, and convicted Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy, planner and commander of the historic break-in who refusal to succumb to judicial pressure during his trial made him a political celebrity,

Of the media's fascination with him during the Watergate trials, Liddy once observed "I just seemed unique alongside spectacularly weak people."

While Liddy was headed toward his very public, albeit temporary fall, Leary, a clinical psychologist engaged in pioneering research into the theory of social interplay, and personal behavior at Harvard University, was viewed by many of his colleagues with respect, although some suspected he was a bit too adventurous.

While vacationing in Mexico in 1960, he first took psychedelic drugs, and then introduced them to his research upon returning to Harvard. The following year, Leary "dropped acid" for the first time, and in the process becoming, in his own words, an "alchemist of the mind."

After losing his position at Harvard in 1963, Leary moved to Millbrook, New York and continued developing his theories on the benefits of LSD with a small group of sympathizers and fellow travelers. It was there in March, 1966, that Liddy, then Assistant Director Attorney in Dutchess County, New York, gained considerable attention for his role in a sheriff's raid of Leary's home.

In 1968, due in part by the favorable publicity generated by the arrest of Leary, John Mitchell, then Richard Nixon's national campaign manager, asked Liddy to take charge of the "citizens for Nixon/Agnew" campaign in the mid-Hudson Valley region.

"Liddy and I go back twenty-five years," says Leary today from his California home. "He ran me out of the county, then we were jailed together, so we've been rivals for a long time."

On December 19, [1989], the duo will bring their fast-paced, highly-charged debate to the stage of the Westbury Music Fair. The night is billed as *The Main Event: The State of the Mind vs. The Mind of the State*.

"We don't keep score," Leary laughs after I ask if either has gained the clear upper hand during the series of debates they've held over the past three years. "A lot of people who come, of course, are more sympathetic to one of the other, Liddy for example, and think that I'm a dangerous person. The main thing we're trying to do is provoke thinking.

"Because Liddy and I are so controversial, the audience tends to get pretty rowdy," Leary says. "My supporters yell at Liddy and ROTC guys and jocks shout at me, and there's intense debate. It's a very exciting and electric show."

Asked if they still have much to argue about after three years on the road, Leary says, “Liddy hasn’t changed a bit. He’s an absolutely mouthpiece of the CIA and a tremendous loyalist to the right wing of the Republican party.”

Beyond the rhetoric, the two men’s relationship appears to resemble one of mutual respect between long time sparring partners.

Leary says there’s something to that.

“We’re like McEnroe and Connors,” he admits. “And while I would say that we’re friends; we are solid acquaintances.”

One thing Leary clearly seems to admire about his adversary – it “admire” is the right word for it – is Liddy’s wit.

“There was a time when I was denouncing him for his position on guns – I got him to admit that he felt that any white Christian Republican taxpayer should have a tank in his garage as long as he shows he can use it. I said, “What about chemical warfare, Liddy?” And he said, “That’s your province, Tim.”

Speaking for both, Leary says neither worry that people will say they’re only engaged in an act of show business.

“Oh God, who isn’t? Isn’t?” he exclaims. “Isn’t Gorbechev? Isn’t the Pope? There’s nothing wrong with show business as long as it’s intelligent and sharp, educational and entertaining.”

While much of the current round of Leary/Liddy debates center around the Reagan and Bush administrations’ war on drugs, one shouldn’t be surprised if they find themselves witness to some pointed commentary on a wide range of current events.

“Oh damn right,” Leary says. “We do change the topics of the debate because every time we meet something new has happened, like the Bork thing, or Nicaragua – yeah, I’m going to make a big issue about the Berlin wall and how rock and roll brought it down.

“it was young people that did it and the techniques they employed were our techniques; the use of electronics and video and rock and roll records to pass the word around,” he continues. “Like in China, when the young people had the television inside China, the whole thing was over. Marshall McLuhan was right; it’s all who controls the medium.”

But if the multi-media techniques of the counter-culture are swaying public debate and the fate of millions today, Leary denies he’s completely happy about how it’s evolved since “his day”

“It’s much tougher now. It was a lot easier to get opinions out then; today it’s totally fabricated. That’s why you have the Bush administration’s war on drugs, because they’re just [pursuing this] monolithic, unending propaganda campaign that the counterculture just can’t deal with.”

He draws a fine distinction between himself and others who represented the '60's left when he explains what's kept him vital about his causes while others despaired during the last decade.

"Abbie was political," Leary says of the Abbie Hoffman, the lifelong activist who committed suicide last spring. "However, we're in an age that's post-political. As a result, Abbie was a dinosaur in his last years because political solutions, everybody knows, are not the answer. The thing that keeps me going is that I'm changing all the time, I keep my mind open and keep evolving and keep going."