



Written by [Beverly K. Eakman](#) on November 20, 2009

## Movie Review: The Men Who Stare at Goats

A recently released film, *The Men Who Stare at Goats*, is based on the 2004 book of the same title by Jon Ronson. Both incorporate actual events in the military intelligence community — psychological experiments used in the service of interrogation, brainwashing, and mind-control.

In this case, however, the focus is on creating a “super-soldier” by tapping into the paranormal — activities such as mind-reading, psychic intimidation, healing, passing through solid objects, and weather-control (“cloud-bursting”). The movie also dabbles in mind-over-matter exploits, such as walking over burning coals without injury, which is closer to self-hypnosis than paranormal, although it is based in psychology and spirituality.



However “real” the original experiments may have been both in the United States and elsewhere, Ronson’s film and book are tongue-in-cheek. There was lots of laughter in the theater, nothing gross like vomit and human excrement that characterize most films of this genre, no torture scenes, and only the occasional profanity, and even that was not gratuitous. The title itself comes from an experiment (apparently real) to impose a fatal heart attack on a de-bled goat that was happily munching away on some morsel, simply by staring at it with the full powers of human concentration. It was this single, apparently successful, heart attack-inducing incident that got the attention of the author — enough to construct an entire story around it.

That “construct” goes back to a real person, Lieutenant Colonel Jim Channon (retired), who in 1977 floated an outside-the-box idea: the United States needed to take a new approach to military combat that combined elements of the psychological, the paranormal, and the spiritual (the latter not to be confused with “religion”). Subsequent forays into psychological abuse and drugging worked; efforts to make use of the paranormal and spirituality didn’t — at least not with any predictable regularity, meaning (in scientific terms) experiments that can be replicated and documented.

Ronson’s romp (both in the book and the film) centers on a troubled journalist, Bob Wilton (actor Ewan McGregor), who is going through an identity crisis of sorts and chances upon a classified story that he thinks will restore his career. Wilton encounters a supposedly psychic soldier reactivated in the wake of 9/11: Lyn Cassady (actor George Clooney). Cassady claims to be a “Jedi Warrior” (of the *Star Wars* films), and the star pupil of a hippie-era team founded by Bill Django (actor Jeff Bridges). Not portrayed (per se) by the A-list cast of actors is Albert “Bert” N. Stubblebine III, a retired major general in the U.S. Army, who picked up on this “new” concept of warfare as commanding general of the service’s Intelligence and Security Command from 1981 to 1984. Jeff Bridges comes across as a composite of the real Bill Django and “Bert” Stubblebine.



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Stubblebine graduated from the U.S. Military Academy and received a master's degree in chemical engineering from Columbia University. Known for his interest in parapsychology, he was convinced he could create a "super soldier" who had "the ability to become invisible at will and to walk through walls." He reportedly encouraged visitors to his office to try that trick, which disappointed, as did his experiments with levitation. Kevin Spacey portrays an officer who disparages the psy-ops program in general, and Cassady and Django in particular.

Essentially, Ronson's book and the subsequent movie is a fanciful look at supernatural warfare experiments that mix the paranormal and the psychological, fact with fiction, for purported use in America's elite Special Forces.

Beyond the entertainment value, however, there are several problems with this quasi-factual story. According to one review of Ronson's book for *The Observer* (Nov. 21, 2004) by Tim Adams, Ronson started out with a hunch. Believing there existed "some deep-seated irrationality at the heart of America's War on Terror, one thing led to another," Adams writes, until Ronson "met up with Uri Geller, who Ronson interviewed ... about claims that he was a 'psychic spy' working for US intelligence." Geller led Ronson to Stubblebine, who in turn put him in touch with Lt. Col. Jim Channon. Channon apparently "had witnessed horrors as a young officer in Vietnam and he believed that the Army required a new approach to combat. Having bought into some of the more extreme California philosophies of the day, Channon approached military top brass with the notion of a 'First Earth Battalion.'" The idea gathered a cult following, in the vein of annual conventions connected to the long-running *Star Wars* series, and took on a life of its own.

Unfortunately, mainstream authors who oppose all wars, regardless of whom or what the fight is about, have — since Watergate — made it their mission to lambast American military intelligence agencies. In the process, they not only have damaged America's counterintelligence capabilities worldwide, but confused psychology with the paranormal — two entirely different undertakings — to the extent that most of the public no longer recognize any difference.

While there is no doubt that elements of our government (including the military) are working to create a climate of psychological intimidation on its citizens in order to promote a socialist-globalist agenda (see "[Psychiatry Goes Back to the Future](#)," and "[Tracking Your Digital Trail](#)"), it is highly misleading to equate Ronson's film with abuses at Abu Gharib; forced enemas of "renditioned" terrorists; or even sleep deprivation, flashing lights, and irritating music. Yet some mainstream reviews have implied exactly that, among them one by Janet Maslin for the *New York Times* and another by Albert Scardino for Great Britain's *Guardian*. Such correlations demonstrate a serious lack of core knowledge and work to turn a few kernels of truth into full-blown, historically accurate events.

Attempts to defy physics by walking through walls, "cloud-bursting," and psychic projection (non-visual imaging of an unfamiliar place or event from miles away well enough to accurately draw or describe it) are examples of the paranormal. Using psychotropic drugs to create a hyped-up aggressor who discards the inborn will to live, or super-imposing a mind-set that overrides conscience, compassion, and sympathy via some combination of drugs, hypnotism, and hardball psychiatric techniques are not. *The Men Who Stare at Goats* takes us on a journey to the paranormal via nutty, New Age antics of hippie-era vintage.

Not that the paranormal techniques haven't been attempted. Clearly, there have been many such ventures inside and outside the military, including Bert Stubblebine's. But none apparently panned out with any degree of replicability or consistency. Ronson's book and the subsequent movie provide a



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comedic glimpse into these efforts, with laughable, slip-on-a-banana-peel results.

Psychological techniques, by contrast, have been successfully employed as a weapon. These are associated with terms like “cognitive dissonance,” “artificial disruption of thought,” “disorientation,” positive and negative “reinforcement,” “de-sensitization,” “behavioral reversion,” direct and indirect “stimuli,” and “involuntary attention” — none of which are included in Ronson’s story. Military forces used these in projects like BLUEBIRD, ARTICHOKE, MKULTRA, MKSEARCH, and MKNAOMI, as did their counterparts in the old Soviet Union and North Korea. The aims included interrogation enhancement, memory erasure, and “imposition,” or even running Manchurian Candidates.

According to Colin A. Ross ([Institute for Psychological Trauma](#)), many psychiatric experiments violate our medical ethics. As proof, he obtained some 15,000 pages of documents from the CIA through the Freedom of Information Act and dozens of papers published in medical journals. LSD, for example, made its initial appearance in North America in 1953 under a \$400,000 CIA contract with E. I. Lilly (maker of Prozac) for mind-control experiments, [says Ross](#). It was “first used by psychiatrists, CIA officers ... and then spilled out into the general culture.” The experiments themselves emanated from legitimate, respected medical schools — UCLA, Tulane, Yale, and Harvard — most disguised as medical research.

The newest “kids on the block” are electrode implants, implanted for the past several years in animals and, according to Ross, even in children as young as 11 years of age, with a view to controlling behavior. How long before “handlers” are able to control, or at least monitor, unspoken and unwritten opinions is anybody’s guess, now that “perception management” is a feature of the Department of Defense’s website. Clearly, the nation’s leaders are not particularly worried about anyone’s opinion of such incursions (see [“The New Face of Psychiatry”](#)).

That said, paranormal events encompass a cornucopia of non-replicable, happenstance occurrences — telepathy, extrasensory perception, levitation, clairvoyance, etc. — that can neither be evaluated nor summoned upon demand.

TV shows like *The Mentalist*, *Criminal Minds*, and even movies like *The Exorcist* promote the notion that all things paranormal — from mind-reading to telepathy — are within our grasp. Most viewers don’t even notice the fine line between intuitiveness and telepathy. The former can be heightened with proper training and is standard classroom fare for prospective intelligence operatives. Telepathy, on the other hand, is un-teachable and obscure. One may be able to train oneself to be an optimist or a pessimist, by maintaining certain habits of thinking, and may even learn to pull off stunts like walking over burning coals without injury. But one cannot “learn” how to dream a future event with any certainty, or to physically project oneself five years down the road, much less summon such knowledge about another person by using the force of will.

This is not to say that unexplained, paranormal, events do not occur. The Bible itself alludes to them. The humble canine who crosses hundreds of miles of unfamiliar territory, even through water, to find its former home, definitely qualifies as paranormal. But the key to replicating such events is *volition* — and, so far, that part remains elusive, despite a long line of New Agers, spiritualists, “cosmic humanists,” and military psychiatrists who have tried.

Overall, *The Men Who Stare at Goats* is an amusing caper which intertwines mind-over-matter stunts with pure psychology and the supernatural. Hippie-era “spiritualists” round out the entertainment experience. For intermingling all three facets, Jon Ronson (and his script-writers) deserve three stars.



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*The Men Who Stare at Goats*, Released in the Fall 2009 (Winchester Films, in alliance with BBC Films and Mandate Pictures), based on the book by Jon Ronson, 259 pp. hardback, \$23.95, ISBN 0312304439, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2004.

Relevant Links: Film:

<http://www.themenwhostareatgoatsmovie.com?bcpid=33825420001&bclid=35157211001&bctid=35241938001>

Book sample chapter: [http://www.jonronson.com/goats\\_chapter.html](http://www.jonronson.com/goats_chapter.html)

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Beverly K. Eakman is a former educator and retired federal employee who served as speechwriter for the heads of three government agencies and as editor-in-chief of NASA's newspaper at the Johnson Space Center. Today, she is a Washington, D.C.-based freelance writer, the author of five books, and a frequent keynote speaker on the lecture circuit. Her most recent book is *Walking Targets: How Our Psychologized Classrooms Are Producing a Nation of Sitting Ducks* (Midnight Whistler Publishers).



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