

The FBI's crazy worldwide pursuit of drug guru Timothy Leary

A madcap chase

AMERICA

John Walsh

The Most Dangerous Man in America Timothy Leary, Richard Nixon and the Hunt for the Fugitive King of LSD
by Bill Minutaglio and Steven L Davis
John Murray £14.99 pp385

In October 1970 Dr Timothy Leary, high priest of American hippie counterculture, is visiting the Pyramids of Giza. Alert to ancient cosmic vibrations, he moves towards the Great Pyramid, ready to feel the sacramental core of the universe... Then, out of nowhere, he is grabbed by local vendor-hustlers, manhandled onto a camel and has a turban plonked on his head; with a slap on its rear, the camel is sent galloping across the Sahara with Leary

clinging on for dear life. It's a scam. When the hustlers bring the animal to heel, they demand money for saving Leary's elderly white skin.

It's a tough life being the spiritual leader of a new enlightenment. As this remarkable book shows, the world will misunderstand your elevated intentions, try to enlist you as a terrorist, take your money or use you as a cash cow. And the world's most powerful man will decide you're the world's most dangerous one.

In May 1970 Leary was in a Californian prison, serving a 10-year sentence for

possession of two marijuana joints. He wasn't your typical anti-establishment goon. An Irish dentist's son from Massachusetts, he had been a cadet at West Point military academy, then a career academic at Harvard until, aged 40, he ate psychoactive

mushrooms. "I learnt more in the six or seven hours of this experience," he said later, "than in all my years as a psychologist."

Newly committed to researching hallucinogenics, he discovered LSD and devoted his life to spreading the word that it was the "exact antidote" to nuclear weapons. He told huge crowds that the drug could cure society's ills, empty prisons and give women "several hundred orgasms" in one night. "Turn on, tune in, drop out" was his not-very-threatening hippie mantra.

The times, though, were a-changing. In 1970 anti-Vietnam War radicals were bombing the Capitol. Dynamite was planted in Des Moines and Salt Lake City. A revolutionary cell called the Weather Underground declared a state of war with the cry "Guns and grass are united in the youth underground".

So when it was reported that Leary, the druggy demagogue, had escaped from jail, President Nixon

jumped to the obvious conclusion: Leary was responsible for brainwashing American youth into outright armed rebellion and must be stopped.

Leary's escape had been funded by the Brotherhood of Eternal Love, a woozy confederation of drug smugglers and manufacturers of an LSD derivative called Orange Sunshine, who paid the Weathermen \$25,000 to ferry Leary from jail to Seattle, giving him and his wife, Rosemary, new

passports and new identities. The account of their deliverance is as nail-bitingly tense as a Lee Child thriller.

The absconding Learys' troubles, however, were only just starting. Their saviours

decided they should head for Algeria, where the government had ceased diplomatic relations with America and had given a glamorous two-storey house in Algiers to the Black Panthers to use as an

embassy. The top Panther, Eldridge Cleaver, was a scarily fierce, combative radical whose prison memoir, *Soul on Ice*, had sold millions. "He is the only person," the authors remark, "to appear

simultaneously on America's bestseller lists and the FBI's Most Wanted List."

Unsurprisingly, Eldridge's first meeting with Leary



wasn't a nest of singing birds; one man was a perma-smiling, zonked-out blatherer who wanted to turn Algeria into "an interplanetary way-station for the super-charged super-freaks of Planet Earth", while the other, clad like his lieutenants in black leather with black shades and loaded guns, was dedicated to "driving a spear into the heart of America".

The Most Dangerous Man settles into a madcap chase around northern Africa and Europe, as Leary tries to escape the Panthers' house arrest, find another country to offer him asylum and find a publisher for his trippy memoirs. He cosies up to the Palestine Liberation Front and the Danish and Swiss governments, to no avail.

There's a Keystone Cops feel about the operation's law enforcers, from the FBI to Interpol. They're forever chasing rumours of Leary's whereabouts – he's in Rome, Zurich, Chile, he's en route to

Addis Ababa – and missing him at airports.

Wherever Leary stayed in these crazily peripatetic months, a multitude of his devotees came a-visiting, bringing money, food, drink, supplies of hash and enough LSD tabs to stun an ox.

The record of these visits and his changes of address threatens to become wearisome until the arrival of Joanna Harcourt-Smith. A 26-year-old socialite, born in St Moritz but descended from British admirals, she was very well connected: her godfather was Sir Max Aitken, chairman of Express Newspapers. She moved in with Leary and enjoyed staggering amounts of sex and drugs in between ringing influential friends

across Europe to raise cash

for the runaways' next move.

The course of true love didn't always run smooth. Bewildered by acid, Joanna decided one day that Leary must dye his white hair to conceal his identity. They were too stoned to wash out the dye and it went from black to aubergine. The authors picture the runaway lovers naked in the bath: "She has an Orange Sunshine body; he has a Purple Haze head." That wry, sardonic tone keeps the complex narrative amusing, no matter how insane the events, as Leary ends up back in prison, next door to Charles Manson.

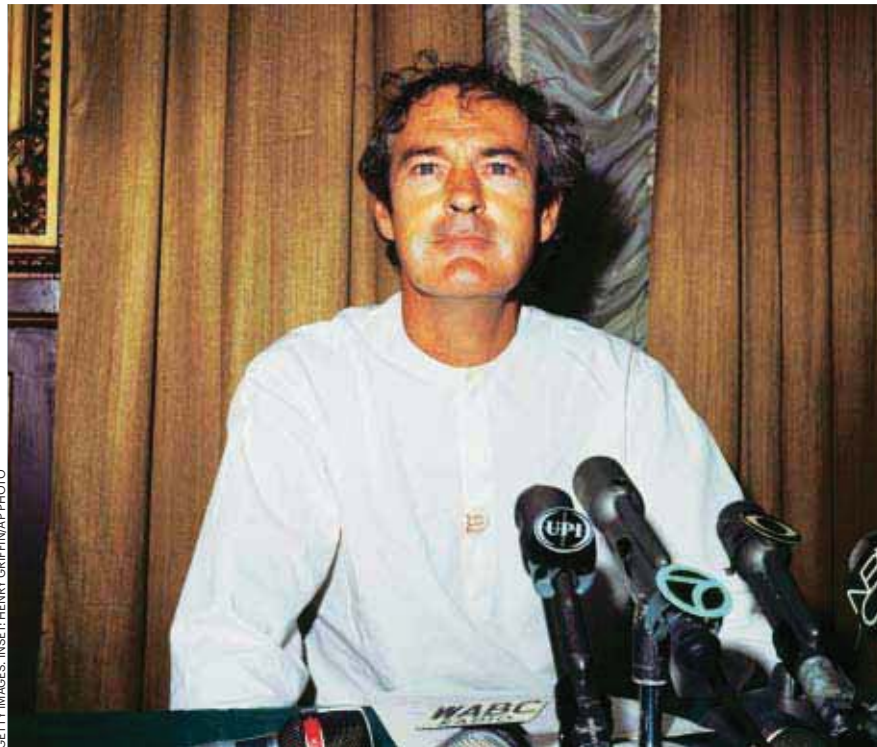
This is a well-written chronicle of 28 months when the world went slightly mad, largely because of a chemical formula – and a charismatic professor who was convinced that it could bring a planetary spiritual awakening. He was influential, though. It's fascinating to discover that Steve Jobs started working on computers after dropping acid at Leary's old college. I'd love to see the authors subject the wizard of Apple Inc to their brand of madcap narrative and sly subversion. c



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**Leary's escape
from jail reads
like a Lee
Child thriller**

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Tuned in
Leary's
championing
of LSD made
him an
enemy of
Nixon, below



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