

TIBET AND THE UNITED STATES

[extract]

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Over 15 years ago I wrote that of all of Tibet's political associations "... I believe that understanding the United States-Tibetan relationship is most crucial for understanding the history of Tibet over the past three decades."¹ To be sure the relationship with China is the most consequential but the ties to Washington shaped this period and this association was "... to be the most elusive to understand;"² I lamented then. Nothing has transpired since then to change my mind for although we now have access to more information the documentation historians need remains largely classified and secret.

Early U.S.-Tibetan experiences were superficial. America's first official encounter with Lhasa came early in the twentieth century when explorer, scholar, author, and American Ambassador to China, William Woodville Rockhill, began exploring areas populated by ethnic Tibetans.³ In 1908 he met with the thirteenth Dalai Lama and spent the rest of his life championing the Tibetan cause. "We are greatly pleased," wrote the Dalai Lama to Rockhill in 1911, "having learnt from your letter that you exert yourself for the sake of Tibet. The relations between our Tibet Government and [the United States] are as untroubled as before."⁴

There would be no other contacts between Washington and Lhasa for decades.

In May 1942 Chinese forces under the command of American General "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell were defeated by the Japanese in Burma thereby cutting off the

¹ A. Tom Grunfeld *The Making of Modern Tibet* (London, England: Zed Books, 1987), p. 79.

² Ibid.

³ William Woodville Rockhill, *Diary of a Journey Through Mongolia and Tibet in 1891 and 1892* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1894).

Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia* (New York, NY: Counterpoint Press, 1999), pp. 397-424.

⁴ Quoted in Meyer and Brysac, p. 422.,

major supply route (the "Burma Road") to the Chinese Nationalist (Guomindang-GMD) government in Chongqing. To compensate, the United State began flying supplies into China over the Himalayan mountains ("The Hump"). One of these flights crashed some 96 kilometers (60 miles) outside Lhasa with all five crewmen surviving. The US airmen were rescued by the Tibetans, treated hospitably and escorted back to India.⁵

But, the real problem for the United States was not the occasional lost aircraft but the inability to provide sufficient war materiel to China by air. One possible alternative was a land route north from the Indian plains, over the Himalayan passes into Tibet and then eastward across more formidable passes into the plains of Sichuan Province (or Xikang Province as the western part of Sichuan was then known; Kham to the Tibetans). With this route in mind, the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS, the forerunner to the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]) assigned Captain Ilia Tolstoy and First Lieutenant Brooke Dolan to undertake a mission to ascertain the viability of such a route as a supplement to the flights over the Hump. The men were in Lhasa from December 1942 to March 1943

While their mission produced nothing of substance, they were the first officially sanctioned American mission to Tibet. They even brought presents from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the 7 year old fourteenth Dalai Lama.⁶ In addition, the Tibetans asked for and received three fully equipped, long-range radio transmitters "for use for broadcasting within Tibet."⁷

I believe there is still much to learn about this mission. Although CIA officials assured me in the mid 1980s that OSS records were then completely declassified, newly released OSS documents continue to appear; the latest as recently as June 2000. Questions remain unanswered; such as why would the U.S., at the time closely allied to the GMD (who believed Tibet to always have been a part of China), risk alienating Jiang Jieshi by dealing directly with the Tibetans implying some form of autonomy for the latter? The mission itself was unnecessary; aerial reconnaissance or discussions with British officials in Lhasa could have shown that a new route for the stated purposes was untenable. Moreover, there already was a trade route of sorts from

⁵ "So This is Shangri-la," *Newsweek* 31 January 1944, pp. 24-25. William Boyd Sinclair, *Jump to the Land of God. The Adventures of a United States Air Force Crew in Tibet* (Caldwell, Ohio: Caxton Printers, 1965).

⁶ OSS, "Outline of Journey and Observation Made by Ilia Tolstoy, Captain, AUS and Brooke Dolan, First Lt., AC," September 1943. Central Intelligence Agency, Roslyn, VA, pp. 1-2. Public Records Office, Kew, UK: PRO FO 371/93002. IOLR L/P&S/12/4229 Ext. 731/43.

R. Harris Smith, *OSS. The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley CA/London, UK: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 254-255.

Ilia Tolstoy, "Across Tibet from India to China," *National Geographic* 90:2 (August 1946), 169-222.

Meyer and Brysac, pp. 546-553.

⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1943. China* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1967), p. 624.

India to Lhasa and another from Lhasa to Kham/Xikang Province which was already moving up to three thousand tons of goods each year. In contrast, the United States Army Air Corps was flying three thousand tons of supplies each month over the Hump. So what was the real purpose of the mission?

In 1946, the Tibetans dispatched a “goodwill” mission carrying messages of felicitations to the British and the Americans for their victory against the Japanese. The delegation never made it past New Delhi when London and Washington refused to grant the required visas. Letters addressed to President Harry S. Truman were presented at the United States Embassy in New Delhi in March 1946. The congratulatory letters also complained that the gasoline generators sent in 1943 to run the radio transmitters were ineffectual in Tibet's rarefied air. The United States Army was instructed to procure three diesel generators and in December 1946 these generators were sent from Calcutta to Kalimpong, where they were handed over to the Tibetans.⁸

To American policy-makers the new generators were seen as token gifts--of limited expense and readily available technology--that could easily be shrugged off if the Chinese complained. But to the Tibetans--to whom electricity had only recently been introduced, and then only in Lhasa for a few hours a day--these gifts had symbolic value far surpassing their technological worth. They were seen as further symbols of American concern and support for the government of the infant Dalai Lama in Lhasa.

Until World War II America had little interest in Tibet. It's Nationalist ally considered Tibet historically a part of China that would, after the war, be duly reunited with China Proper and official U.S. foreign policy agreed. In 1943 Washington, for the first time, declared its official position on Tibet.

For its part, the Government of the United States has borne in mind the fact that the Chinese Government has long claimed suzerainty over Tibet

and the Chinese Constitution lists Tibet among areas constituting the

territory of the Republic of China. This Government has at no time raised a question regarding either of these claims.⁹

⁸ Office of Intelligence Research “Tibet,” No. 4731, 19 July 1948, National Archives, Diplomatic Branch, Washington, DC. (Hereafter OIR “Tibet’’) George Merrell to Secretary of State, New Delhi, 9 December 1946. Main Decimal File (1945-49) Box 7024, 893.00 Tibet/12-946, National Archives, Diplomatic Branch, Washington, DC.

⁹ *FRUS, 1943*, p. 630. and Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *United States Army in World War II. China-Burma-Indian Theater. Stilwell's Mission to China* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1953), p. 287.

With most of East Asia in disorder the Charge d'Affaires of the United States Embassy in New Delhi, George R. Merrell, in January 1947, sent a lengthy cable to Washington expressing his view that the 1946 Tibetan Goodwill Mission should be reciprocated by a mission to Lhasa. Good relations are important, he argued, for “Tibet is in a position of inestimable strategic importance both ideologically and geographically.” As a result, he continued, it would be in an excellent position to act as a buffer against Soviet influence. Moreover, Merrell believed, there was a real possibility that hostile governments might come to power in India, China, Burma, or Indochina. Faced with the possibility of anarchy in East Asia, Tibet and its highly conservative people could act as “a bulwark against the spread of Communism throughout Asia...an island of conservatism in a sea of political turmoil...[and, moreover,] in an age of rocket warfare might prove to be the most important territory in all Asia.” Anticipating Washington's possible concern, Merrell concluded by arguing that the benefits from such a gesture of friendship toward Lhasa would easily outweigh any political difficulties it might cause with Jiang Jeishi.¹⁰

The State Department was not convinced. Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson replied that the U.S. army's assessment was that Tibet would not be a suitable launching pad for rockets and that a visit at this time would be of no use. However, the United States did want to keep communications with Lhasa open and would be “disposed to regard with favor” trips to Tibet by Foreign Service officers if these trips could be kept “unobtrusive and unofficial.”¹¹

In 1947 the Tibetan government sent a “Tibetan Trade Mission” to India, Britain, the United States, China, and several other countries.¹² Tibet indeed had trade difficulties. Traditionally the only significant trade carried on was with the Chinese interior and India. The imports from China were the most crucial since they consisted of an estimated yearly total of ten million tons of tea. Other imports from that area included silk, cotton goods, brocades, and satins--all in insignificant amounts compared to the tea. Exports included wool, yak tails, hides, furs, musk and deer horns. From India, Tibet imported Western-manufactured consumer goods such as soap, matches, buttons and needles; while exporting the same items as those sent to China.

The key for Tibet, apart from the tea, was the export of wool. The wool, coarse and dirty, was shipped through India to the United States for use in manufacturing automobile rugs. Before World War II this trade amounted to about

¹⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947. Volume VII. The Far East. China* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), pp. 588-92.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 595-596, 599.

¹² Tsepon W. Shakabpa, *Tibet. A Political History* (New Haven, CT and London, UK: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 294. Shakabpa claims the decision to send the mission was made in October; but as early as August, American and Indian officials were discussing the proposed trip. *FRUS, 1947*, pp. 598-600. Amaury de Riencourt recalled that when he was in Lhasa during the summer of 1947 Shakabpa was already planning an overseas trip. Amaury de Riencourt, *Roof of the World: Tibet, Key to Asia* (New York, NY: Rinehart, 1950), p. 130.

three to four thousand tons per year.¹³ Since 1941, however, because of the war, the United States had not purchased any; the wool had been stored in Kalimpong and was beginning to rot. The Tibetans were also having difficulties with officials in India who permitted Tibetan use of the port of Calcutta to export their wool but prohibited Tibetans from acquiring the hard currency these exports generated. The Indian government received the U.S. dollars and exchanged them for Indian rupees, which were then handed to the Tibetans. To add insult to injury, the Indians charged the Tibetans customs duties on goods imported through the port at Calcutta. Since Tibet is landlocked, and without commercial airports, railroads, or roads, Lhasa was at the mercy of Indian officials.

Despite these difficulties the “trade” mission was not all it seemed to be. Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa, the leader of the delegation, claimed some two decades later that while the purposes of the trip were to obtain aid for their efforts to ease Indian restrictions on Tibetan trade, to expand Tibetan trade - especially with the United States, to purchase some gold bullion to back up the Tibetan currency, it was also intended “to demonstrate Tibet’s independence and sovereign status.”¹⁴ Not everyone agreed.

Arthur J. Hopkinson, British/Indian Political Officer for Sikkim from 1945 to 1948, believed that the sole purpose of the mission was to buy gold and silver, a feat Shakabpa had been attempting to accomplish for over a year--mainly “for the joy of the chase.”¹⁵

The Tibetans travelled on official passports issued, for the very first time, by the government in Lhasa. However, visas were issued, for the most part, in special circumstances which allowed each nation not to accord recognition to these passports. For example, the Department of State informed the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi that if the delegation arrived without Chinese passports, then visas were to be issued on Form 257, “standard procedure [in] cases where applicant presents passport of [a] Government [the] United States does not recognize.”¹⁶ Moreover, the United States Embassy in Nanjing was instructed to inform the Chinese government that there should be “no reason whatsoever to believe issuance of visas indicated any change in American policy on [the] question of sovereignty over Tibet.”¹⁷ In the end the mission failed in its attempt to end Tibet’s isolation or to win many adherents to their cause.

¹³ Tolstoy, “Outline of Journey,” no page numbers, see chapter titled “Economic Report.”

¹⁴ Shakabpa, p. 295.

¹⁵ *FRUS 1947* pp. 598-600. Shakabpa was not universally liked or trusted, see George N. Patterson, *Requiem for Tibet* (London, UK: Aurum Press, 1990), p. 103.

¹⁶ *FRUS, 1947*, p. 604.

¹⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948. Volume VII, The Far East. China* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1973) pp. 760-761.

There had been other small gestures at ending Tibet’s isolation as well. As early as 1944 Arch T. Steele, a foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News*, was permitted to visit Tibet for three weeks. If Steele’s function was to favorably publicize the notion of an independent Tibet then the trip served its purpose.¹⁸ The most important such unofficial visit came in autumn 1949 when American journalist, explorer, author, and broadcaster Lowell Thomas and his son managed to get permission to visit through the good offices of U. S. Ambassador to India, Loy Henderson, and India’s Minister of External Affairs, Sir Girja Shankar Bajpai. When the Thomases returned to the United States they held an airport news conference calling for American aid against the communists in China, advice on guerrilla warfare for the Tibetans, and the immediate dispatch of an official American mission to Lhasa.¹⁹

But it would be the Cold War and Mao Zedong’s 1 October 1949 proclamation of victory in the Chinese civil war and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China that would draw American attention to Tibet. Earlier that year, with a Chinese communist victory almost certain, U. S. officials began a reappraisal of their policies toward the region. The reassessment began with a lengthy review of American attitudes by Ruth E. Bacon of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs, Department of State. Ms. Bacon argued that a communist securing of Tibet would grant the region “ideological and strategic importance” so that in the event of a communist victory in the Chinese civil war, the United States should no longer consider Tibet under Chinese authority. Further, the U.S. should establish a covert relationship by sending American officials to Lhasa immediately but “inconspicuously” cautioning against “giving rise to speculation that” the United States might “have designs upon Tibet.”

In New Delhi, Loy Henderson concurred with Ms. Bacon’s analysis, describing the possibility of communist rule in Tibet as “disastrous.” Henderson urged haste in sending a covert mission to Lhasa and leaving some Americans there for an indefinite period. U. S. Ambassador to China, Leighton Stuart, agreed to the urgency of the matter and the recommendations.

Washington was convinced informing its ambassadors, on 28 July 1949, that it was “considering ... [a] ...covert mission.” The plan called for the Second Secretary in the Embassy in New Delhi, Jefferson Jones, to travel to Tibet with either his counterpart from the British High Commission or with an American “explorer-scholar” such as Schuyler Cammann. To date there is no evidence that such a mission ever materialized because after some inquires Henderson discovered that a British attempt at a similar mission the year before had been discouraged by the Indian government.

¹⁸ A.T. Steele in the *Chicago Daily News*. A seven-part series in the Pictorial Section; 18, 25 November 2, 9, 16, 23, 30 December 1944. A.T. Steele, “The Boy Ruler of Shangri-La,” *Saturday Evening Post* 13 April 1946, p. 14

¹⁹ Lowell Thomas, Jr., *The Silent War in Tibet* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), p. 21. “Lowell Thomas Back from Tibet,” *New York Times*, 17 October 1949, p. 25.

Indian concurrence was considered essential, since India--in Henderson's words, had a "practical monopoly on Tibet's foreign relations."²⁰

On 19 November 1949, American diplomats in New Delhi met with Tibetan government representatives including the Cabinet official Surkhang and a member of the powerful aristocratic Pangdatsang family. Surkhang told the group that America was the "greatest and most powerful country" and Tibet's only hope.²¹ Henderson was instructed to tell the Tibetans that the United States was sympathetic to their predicament although it could not publicly demonstrate any concern or involvement. Secret talks between the Americans and the Tibetans continued throughout 1950 and 1951, often with British missionary George Patterson acting as the liaison.²² But no aid was actually sent, according to the available documentation.

Nevertheless, Henderson's urging of U.S. support for the Tibetans began to be heard with more sympathy back home as the Cold War intensified. In the summer of 1950 instructions were given to the Office of Policy Coordination, the bureaucratic arm officially in charge of covert operations, "to initiate psychological warfare and paramilitary operations against the Chinese Communist regime."²³ The purpose--in the words of a National Security Council memo of a year later--was to "foster and support anticommunist elements both outside and within China with a view to developing and expanding resistance in China to the Peiping [Beijing] regime's control, particularly in South China."²⁴ Or, as succinctly expressed by an American involved in the clandestine

²⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, Volume IX. The Far East. China* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1974), pp. 1065-1080. In the current HarperCollins catalogue a book is advertised which claims that such a mission did indeed occur. Thomas Laird's *Into Tibet. America's Last Secret Expedition to Tibet* was scheduled for publication in the summer of 2000 and has now been pushed back several months. The catalogue describes the book as the story of a 2 person mission into Tibet in 1949 based on documents which "remain classified top-secret." It also promises "...a true story of adventure, international intrigue among atomic intelligence agents, nomads, princes, bandits and the warring armies of central Asia." My efforts to obtain the manuscript or get in touch with the author were unsuccessful.

²¹ *FRUS 1949*, pp. 1980-1982.

²² Memo of conversation in Kalimpong, June 7, 1951, between one of the Pangdatsang brothers, Rev. G. Tharchin (a converted Christian Tibetan and editor of *Tibet Mirror*, the only Tibetan language newspaper of that time), George Patterson and Fraser Wilkins, First Secretary, U.S. Embassy, New Delhi, #3030, 14 June 1951, declassified to author. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950. Volume VI. East Asia and the Pacific* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1976), pp. 272-273, 275-276, 330-331. "Department [of State] would not wish Tibetans misinterpret our failure [to] accede [to] their requests as disinterest or lack [of] sympathy [for] their predicaments or difficulties."

²³ Harry Rositzke, *The CIA's Secret Operations: Espionage, Counterespionage, and Covert Action* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1977), p. 173.

²⁴ Weissman, "Last Tangle," p. 5.

Tibetan operation, "the theory was that by creating chaos in China's rear we could blunt Chinese aggression elsewhere."²⁵

It was also during this period, and most likely a result of this mind set, that an unusual pamphlet appeared, entitled *Armed Forces Talk No. 348: Tibet--Roof of the World*. It was published by the United States Department of Defense and "intended as a lesson plan for military unit commanders or their representatives to use in conducting troop education and information programs," and, according to Washington sources, was a "part of a continuing program on international awareness." The files which could answer such questions as why this rather curious publication was written, who wrote it, or what its purposes were, are now lost or destroyed, according to the Department of Defense.²⁶

The governments of the U. S., India and Tibet were faced with a serious diplomatic quandary. Tibet's ambiguous status only contributed to the uncertainty. All three governments recognized that whoever ruled China would wish to control Tibet. They were aware that the slightest evidence of overt support for an independent Tibet could trigger an attack by the newly victorious People's Liberation Army (PLA). This eventuality had to be avoided at all costs. On the other hand, Tibet, the United States, and even India--albeit to a lesser extent--were all anticommunist. Their activities worldwide were designed to deny any territorial gains to any communist regime. It should also be kept in mind that in 1950 it was generally accepted that "Moscow" controlled the communists in Beijing. To allow the Russians to come as far south as the northern boundary of India, after having just "gobbled up" China, would be seen as allowing a dangerous tipping of the balance of power toward the Soviets. Moreover, the geographic realities of Tibet made any major military incursion highly impractical. Then, as if all the prophets of doom were correct in their assessment of the Soviet Union's plan to control the world, the Korean War broke out in June 1950.

Now the U.S. was ready to act. Acheson cabled that the "Department [was] now in [a] position [to] give assurances [to the] Tibetans re U.S. aid to Tibet." The plan called for Henderson to tell the Tibetans that the United States was "ready to assist procurement and financing." There was a catch, however--a stipulation that India had to agree to the plan first. If India refused to aid the Tibetans, Washington instructed the Tibetans to ask New Delhi for permission to transport aid across India from a third party (the United States). Shakabpa, when informed of these plans, asked for clarification on the type of aid to be expected. Were they getting American troops and

²⁵ Quoted in T.D. Allman, "A Half Forgotten Conflict," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 February 1974, p. 27.

²⁶ Letter to author from J.S. Evans, Capt. USN, Chief, Directorate for Print Media, Department of Defense, Washington, DC, 3 July 1979.

planes, he wanted to know. No, the Tibetans should expect only “war materials and finance.”²⁷

In response to U. S. tutelage the Tibetans also turned to the United Nations with the help of Ernest Gross, a former deputy U.S. representative to the UN and personal counsel to two UN secretaries general who had been introduced to the Tibetans by the U.S. government, and a public relations firm also secretly paid for by Washington. The Tibetan issue was sponsored by El Salvador, the only country willing to put it on the agenda. Washington instructed its representative to urge his Indian counterpart to vote in support of the Tibetans, promising that the United States would follow suit. The crucial issue, as seen from the American perspective, was not necessarily Tibetan independence but, in Acheson's view, to convince the Indians of communism's “true nature,” in an on-going effort to get New Delhi to disavow its proclaimed neutrality in world affairs.

On 24 November 1950, the UN voted unanimously to postpone the vote on Tibet -- in effect killing it. But Washington was not to be deterred. Henderson was now instructed to continue to work for an Anglo-U.S.-Indian joint effort to aid the Tibetans. As late as June 1951, and perhaps later, Fraser Wilkins, the First Secretary of the United States Embassy in New Delhi, met with prominent Tibetans in India on such issues as the further release of gold by the United States and the continued purchase of Tibetan wool. George Patterson was once again the liaison.²⁸

In December 1950 the Dalai Lama fled Lhasa for a Tibetan town just north of the Indian border. A month earlier Washington and New Delhi had discussed sending an American pilot to Lhasa to fly the Dalai Lama out. New Delhi had let Washington know that the Tibetan pontiff would be welcomed in exile, although he would not be permitted to live near the Tibetan frontier. New Delhi also informed the United States that it did not expect the Chinese to have much trouble regaining control over Tibet.

The secret U.S. Department of State-Tibet talks lasted to at least 1952 using such intermediaries as George Patterson, Heinrich Harrer, Surkhang Rimshi, and especially Tsepon Shakabpa of whom the Americans were wary. American diplomats were sent to Kalimpong on “vacation” with their families as cover for the secret negotiations. At first the United States wanted to spirit the Dalai Lama out of Lhasa. After the Tibetan leader fled to Yatung, U.S. policy was to lure him across the Indian frontier. But this was not to be for America's Tibetan allies were “unable to counterbalance the tremendous weight of superstition and selfish officialdom, including

²⁷ *FRUS*, p. 376, 378-618. For an excellent discussion of this period using the mostly recently available sources, see Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows. A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp.71-82.

²⁸ John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War. America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1999), pp. 71-82, 201, 204. Fraser Wilkins to Secretary of State, New Delhi, 7 June 1961 and 14 June 1951. Declassified to author.

delegates from monasteries, oracles of incredible influence, and the misguided wish of the Lhasa Government itself to preserve...the religious integrity of Tibetan life as personified and symbolized by the Dalai Lama.” So wrote an American diplomat accusing the Tibetans of putting their own culture above the interests of Washington's worldwide anticommunist crusade.

In their efforts to enlist the Tibetans, Washington frequently appealed for assistance from Britain asking them to intervene with the Tibetans and the Indian government. But Britain was not part of the anticommunist crusade and it regarded the situation with a somewhat less jaundiced eye. It did not like the Tibetan representatives: Pangdatsang “from personal experience,” was regarded in Whitehall as “an unscrupulous rogue”; Shakabpa was a “slippery customer” who feared reprisals from the Chinese for his especially brutal treatment of his serfs; Surkhang was “a complete cipher and an opium eater.” Whitehall was also dissatisfied with Washington's tactics. They felt the Dalai Lama's denunciation of the Seventeen-Point Agreement (the “treaty” signed by Beijing and Lhasa in 1951 to allow the “peaceful liberation” of Tibet) would be nothing but a “propaganda stunt” and meaningless to Tibetans. Moreover London argued that the Dalai Lama's influence was exclusively within the boundaries of Tibet and that his departure would be more harmful than beneficial.

When the Dalai Lama returned voluntarily to Lhasa from Yatung, Washington continued to pursue him laying out a plan for him to follow in a secret letter in 1951. The Dalai Lama would have to “disavow” the agreement with Beijing and appeal for aid from the United Nations and the United States. The United States would then publicly support him and arrange for his exile in Thailand, India, Ceylon, or the United States. Then, when he had arranged for resistance to Chinese rule, the United States would be “prepared to send...light arms through India” and money directly to him. Lastly, arrangements would be made to have Thubten Norbu, one of his older brothers, travel to the United States.²⁹

While another of the Dalai Lama's older brothers, Gyalo Thondup, went off to Taiwan to confer with the GMD, Thubten Norbu “slipped quietly into Kalimpong” with a letter authorizing him to negotiate on behalf of the Dalai Lama. He began almost

²⁹ B.N. Mullik, *My Years with Nehru: The Chinese Betrayal* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1971) pp. 80-81.

Public Records Office, Kew, UK:
PRO FO 371/84468 FT 1621/2

PRO FO 371/84450 FT 1015/44

PRO FO 371/84450 FT 1015/19

PRO FO 371/92997

PRO FO 371/92998 FT 10310/79

Considerable cable traffic between the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi on this subject. See 793B.00/7-2151. For plans see 7936.00/7-7151. National Archives, Diplomatic Branch, Washington, DC.

immediately to meet secretly with the Americans who agreed to raise the Tibet issue at the UN again and provide funds for the struggle against Beijing, on the condition that the Dalai Lama repudiate the recently signed Beijing-Lhasa agreement. The question of military aid would be left to discussions with the Dalai Lama when he arrived in India where he would be expected to first ask India for aid and then, if turned down, ask for permission to approach another nation. Norbu then flew to the United States under the auspices of the American Committee for Free Asia, a CIA-funded anticommunist organization.³⁰

THE CIA

No aspect of the Tibetan-United States relations is more controversial than the role of the Central Intelligence Agency.³¹ So sensitive was this issue that for years the Dalai Lama and his followers denied that this relationship even existed. When China accused the rebels of receiving help from the outside, the Dalai Lama retorted that the reports were “completely baseless.”³² In 1961 he was quoted as saying that “the only weapons that the rebels possess are those they’ve managed to capture from the Chinese. They have guns but they’ve even been using slingshots, spears, knives, and swords.”³³ In 1974 he was quite unequivocal.

The accusation of CIA aid has no truth behind it. My flight [in 1959] was conditioned by circumstances developing in Lhasa because of Chinese atrocities.... Originally the plan was to remain in South Tibet and from there contact the Chinese...but the Chinese soldiers were let loose upon the innocent peace-loving Tibetans which left me no alternative but to cross over to India.³⁴

When the Dalai’s brother, Thubten Norbu, was asked by *US News and World Report*, “Are you getting any weapons to resist the Chinese?” he replied, “There is nothing at all coming in from the outside.”³⁵

³⁰ “Brother of the Dalai Lama Arrives Here to Study,” *New York Times*, 9 July 1951, p. 8. Steve Weissman, “Last Tangle in Tibet,” *Pacific Research and World Empire Telegram* 4:5 (July-August 1973): 1-18. Steve Weissman and John Shock, “CIA Asia Foundation,” *Pacific Research and World Empire Telegram* 3:6 (September-October 1972): 3-4. David W. Conde, *CIA-Core of the Cancer* (New Delhi: Entente Private, 1979), pp. 111-115

³¹ Although far from definitive, the best account to date of the CIA is by a participant: John Kenneth Knaus.

³² *Asian Recorder*, 6:30 (1959), 2785-2786.

³³ “The Red Terror in Tibet: Interview with the Dalai Lama,” *US News and World Report*, 24 April 1961, p. 79.

³⁴ “Diplomacy and the Dalai Lama,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 March 1974, p. 32.

³⁵ “Interview with the Dalai Lama’s Brother—‘Holy War’ in Tibet—What is it all About?” *US News and World Report*, 13 April 1959, p. 48.

In fact Gyalo Thondup had been receiving arms from the GMD on Taiwan as early as 1952.³⁶ And although he had walked into the U.S. Consulate in Calcutta about the same time, he did not begin getting assistance from the CIA until 1956.³⁷

The impetus for CIA involvement came directly from John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State and his undersecretary, Herbert Hoover Jr. Their goal was not an independent Tibet but rather “...to keep the Communists off balance in Asia.” As a consequence the “Far East Division of the CIA was ready to undertake a full program of support if the initial teams [of trained Tibetans clandestinely dropped into Tibet] found it warranted by the situation on the ground and the capabilities of their comrades.”³⁸

It was Gyalo Thondup who arranged the first CIA training missions and the first teams, picking six Tibetans for that purpose. They were told to walk out of Kalimpong individually; to be picked up by Thondup outside the town and driven to Siliguri. There they were given compasses and told to walk toward East Pakistan (now Bangladesh)—a few hours away. On the frontier they were met by two Pakistani officers, a Chinese-speaking American, and a Tibetan interpreter. They were given turbans and Punjabi pajamas and told to travel to Dacca. From there they were taken on a five-hour flight to Saipan and told to don American military uniforms. At this location they were joined by Thubten Norbu. They spent the next four months learning how to read maps and how to use a radio transmitter, a parachute and weapons. They were then parachuted back into Tibet in the autumn of 1957, from a plane flown by an American pilot. They each carried with them a pistol, a small machine gun, an old Japanese radio that had to be wound by hand, U.S.\$132 worth in Tibetan currency and two small vials of poison to swallow if captured. Their mission was to contact rebel forces and to urge the Dalai Lama to publicly appeal for U.S. assistance.

Upon landing they spread out and contacted Gompo Tashi Andrugstang, the rebel leader. In January 1958 they spoke to the Dalai Lama’s Chamberlain, Thubten Woyden Phala, in the Norbulingka. The Chamberlain offered no help, telling the rebels that half the cabinet was supportive of the Chinese. Moreover, he felt the Dalai Lama could not morally support a movement dedicated to violence. He advised them that rebellion was useless and that they should give it up. But Andrugstang was not one to be deterred. He appealed to Washington for further assistance, only to be told that such help would be provided only if the Dalai Lama requested it directly.³⁹

³⁶ Knaus, p. 136.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138. John F. Avedon, *In Exile From the Land of Snows. The First Full Account of the Dalai Lama and Tibet Since the Chinese Conquest* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p. 47. David Allan Mayers, *Cracking the Monolith. U. S. Policy Against the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949-1955* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), pp. 78-87, 95.

³⁸ Knaus, pp. 139, 140.

³⁹ Chris Mullin, “The CIA: Tibetan Conspiracy,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 September 1989, pp. 30-34. Dalai Lama, *Freedom In Exile. The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (New

Phala's role in these events remains murky. Supporters of the Khampa guerrillas have argued that he played a negative role by protecting the Dalai Lama and by discouraging the revolt. However, Ken Knaus, the CIA official in charge of the Tibet operation for many years argues that Phala did indeed support the revolt while keeping the Dalai Lama uninformed.⁴⁰

There is no doubt that there was a split within the Tibetan ranks. The Khampas were anxious to mobilize Tibetans against the Chinese and to encourage maximum U.S. aid. The Lhasan bureaucracy, on the other hand, was more intent on preserving their privileged lifestyles through compromise with the Chinese.

Despite their inability to get the Dalai Lama to join their cause, the CIA went ahead with plans to train, equip and encourage revolt in Tibet. The CIA's proprietary airline, Civil Air Transport, had several C1118s, and later C130s, modified by the Lockheed Corporation to withstand the rarefied air and make the long, round-trip journey from their bases in Takli, just north of Bangkok, Thailand. Polish and Czech mercenaries were used as pilots with "smoke jumpers" from Montana as parachute dispatch officers. From 1957 to 1961 more than 250 Tons of equipment was dropped into Tibet: arms, ammunition, radios, medical supplies, hand-operated printing presses and more.⁴¹

By 1958 the US had established a training base at Camp Hale, Colorado and over the next 6 years some 170 Khampas were trained there. In December 1961, the Colorado effort was almost exposed when a bus transporting some Khampas to an airport outside the base had an accident, consequently missing a predawn flight. Workers at the airport arrived to find the place swarming with armed troops; some caught sight of the Tibetans. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara successfully persuaded the Washington bureau of the *New York Times* to kill the story, which was not published until twelve years later.⁴²

In March 1959 the Dalai Lama fled Lhasa in a revolt still shrouded in some mystery. The Dalai Lama and his supporters claim that the revolt was entirely

York, NY: A Cornelia and Michael Bessie Book, HarperCollins, 1990), pp. 126-127. Evan Thomas, *The Very Best Men. Four Who Dared: The Early Years Of The CIA* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p.276. Knaus, pp. 137-146.

⁴⁰ Knaus, p. 145. Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang, *Four Rivers. Six Ranges. Reminiscences of the Resistance Movement in Tibet* (Dharamsala, India: Information and Publicity Office of H.H. the Dalai Lama, 1973), pp. 50-51. Michel Peissel, *The Secret war in Tibet* (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1972), p. 94.

⁴¹ Knaus, p. 147, 154-155, 25. Mullin, "The CIA," p. 33. George Patterson interview. T.D. Allman, "Cold Wind of Change," *Guardian* 19 December 1973, p. 11.

⁴² David Wise, *The Politics of Lying: Government Deception, Secrecy and Power* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 239-261.

spontaneous. Unfortunately virtually all the documentation from every possible source remains highly classified. I have argued that the *circumstantial* evidence points to a planned uprising by either the CIA or the Khampa leadership or both.⁴³

The revolt and the Dalai Lama's flight to India was "a windfall for the U.S.," according to President Eisenhower's Operations Coordinating Board who also urged that the U.S. "keep the rebellion going as long as possible..."⁴⁴

But the resistance effort inside Tibet was not going well. By 1961 the last of the Khampas were dropped into Tibet. That marked 49 men since 1957 of whom only 10 made it back out of Tibet; 1 surrendered, 1 had been captured, and the remainder killed.⁴⁵

Then came an additional blow to the Tibetan resistance. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had ordered all clandestine operations--including the flights over Tibet--to come to a temporary halt after the downing of an American U-2 spy plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers in May 1960. According to one source CIA officials involved in the Tibetan operation were "very bitter" about this turn of events, feeling that the crisis with the USSR had nothing to do with their activities.⁴⁶

The suspension of flights did not however effect the planning for a new phase in the CIA operation; establishing a guerrilla base in Mustang, a small, peninsular, semi-autonomous feudal principality on Nepal's northern frontier jutting into Tibet.

It was at this point the Indian government began to be fully engaged in the affairs of the Tibetans by setting up a Tibetan military force called the Special Frontier Force with U.S. support. Eventually 12,000 Tibetans were trained by U.S. Special Forces (Green Berets) and partly funded by the U. S. to operate from bases along the Kashmir frontier where they crossed the border into Tibet planting electronic listening devices.⁴⁷

In early 1964 the Indian and American government initiated a Combined Operations Center to oversee the Mustang operation. The U.S. supplied materials and funds, the Tibetans the manpower while India "controlled the territory and therefore the

⁴³ A. Tom Grunfeld, *The Making of Modern Tibet* (Armonk, NY/London, UK: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996), pp. 134-139, 141-145.

⁴⁴ Knaus, p. 181.

⁴⁵ Knaus, p. 233.

⁴⁶ L. Fletcher Prouty, *The Secret Team. The CIA and its Allies in Control of the United States and the World* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 21, 37-82. Evans, p. 277.

⁴⁷ Knaus, pp. 271-276.

operations."⁴⁸ From 1964-1967, 25 teams were sent into Tibet with little success as they found few Tibetans willing to support them.⁴⁹

By 1969 with very little to show for years of operations, the CIA decided to end the Mustang operation. That deadline was extended briefly but Henry Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in 1971 would mark a sudden shift in U.S. policy towards China and, as a consequence, the end of covert operations in that theater. The Tibetans in Mustang were left to fend for themselves, betrayed by the country that they most relied upon.

In December 1973 Mao Zedong told visiting Nepali King Birendra that the Khampas were a major obstacle to better Sino-Nepali relations. In March 1974 a prominent rebel was arrested and an ultimatum was presented to the Tibetans giving them until July to surrender or face the consequences.⁵⁰ When the surrender did not materialize, Gurkha troops were recalled from their United Nations assignments to undertake a major drive to ferret out the remaining Tibetan guerrillas. The Dalai Lama, hoping to avoid needless bloodshed, intervened, urging the rebels to lay down their arms. Most did and by February 1975 it was all over. Most of the Tibetans surrendered but some refused only to be slain by the Royal Nepalese Army just as they were about to cross into India.

The CIA did more than support a guerrilla army. They also subsidized various activities such the establishment of offices in Geneva and New York to allegedly promote Tibetan handicrafts and to publicize the Tibetan cause but really to establish quasi-diplomatic offices for the Dalai Lama. This was also true for the Tibet House in New Delhi. In conjunction with Cornell University, the CIA also sponsored (at a cost of \$45,000 a year) several Tibetans as students to prepare them for bureaucratic careers in Dharamsala. And then there were direct subsidies to the Dalai Lama himself. From 1959 to 1974 he was receiving funds for his personal use to the tune of US\$180,000 a year.⁵¹

The CIA and the U. S. government did betray the Tibetans. Washington never had any intention of supporting a military force sufficient to achieve Tibetan independence; a salient fact that was, apparently, never conveyed to the Tibetans themselves. They believed the Americans were with them for the long haul. "In the simplistic ethos of the operational world of that era," the CIA agents who worked directly with the Tibetans became enamored of them according to one CIA operative; "the CIA men viewed their Tibetan pupils as Oriental versions of the self-reliant,

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 276.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 281.

⁵⁰ Dawa Norbu, "China Behind Khampa Disarmament," *Tibetan Review* [hereafter *TR*], January 1975, pp. 3-4.

⁵¹ Knaus, pp. 275, 282, 284-285, 287, 310. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968. Volume XXX. China* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), pp. 731-744.

straight-shooting American frontiersmen who were under attack and seeking only the means to fight for their own way of life."⁵²

Meanwhile momentous changes were occurring inside China. In 1971 a split in the top political leadership emerged culminating in the mysterious death of Lin Biao, Mao Zedong's heir apparent. Lin's death led to changes in government policies throughout the mainland, including Tibet. In 1976 Mao Zedong died, a leadership group dubbed "the gang of four" were arrested, and government policies were further moderated.

To Tibetans the changes were welcome; Beijing publicly admitted their past policies to have been harmful, tourism was allowed, Tibetans were appointed to positions with at least a modicum of power and refugees were permitted to visit families in Tibet. Furthermore, in February 1978, the Panchen Lama, second only to the Dalai Lama in the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy, was released from 14 years of house arrest and prison.

The Dalai Lama responded to these changes by calling for the authorities to open Tibet to visitors which the Beijing government almost immediately did.⁵³ The Dalai Lama reacted favorably, tempering his speeches by speaking less of his hopes for achieving Tibetan independence and more about the economic well-being of Tibetans; "if the six million Tibetans in Tibet are really happy and prosperous as never before," he declared in 1978, "there is no reason for us to argue otherwise."⁵⁴ He also began to speak publicly of reconciling Buddhism with socialism. Without international support the Dalai Lama understood that he had to deal directly with Beijing and since total independence seemed out of question some compromise was worth exploring.

In December 1978 the Beijing authorities stepped up their overtures by directly contacting the Dalai Lama's brother, Gyalo Thondup⁵⁵ and a new round of Dalai Lama-Beijing contacts immediately began⁵⁶ resulting in an agreement to send an investigative delegation to Tibet in August 1979; the first such visit since the events of 1959. The Dalai Lama also began to travel around the world more to gain visibility for his cause visiting (in 1979) the Soviet Union, Mongolia and the United States, all for the first time. The trip to the U.S. was significant since he had been denied a visa for 10 years on the grounds that it was "inconvenient."⁵⁷

⁵² Knaus, p. 216.

⁵³ Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile. The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1990), pp. 222-223.

⁵⁴ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Collected Statements, Interviews and Articles* (Dharamsala, India: The Information Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1982), p. 51.

⁵⁵ Dawa Norbu, "China's Dialogue with the Dalai Lama 1978-1990: Prenegotiation Stage or Dead End?" *Pacific Affairs* 64:3 (Fall 1991), p. 369.

⁵⁶ Gyatso, p. 223.

⁵⁷ *TR*, June 1979, pp.8-9. *TR*, December 1979, p. 14.

Although visas were officially issued to the Dalai Lama as a religious figure, Beijing was publicly upset over the Tibetan's trips to the United States and the Soviet Union, then an enemy of China. Yet the negotiations were not derailed and in May 1980 the Dalai Lama sent his second and third delegations to Tibet.

In 1980 Chinese Communist Party leader Hu Yaobang travelled to Tibet and found conditions appalling immediately ordering dramatic changes.⁵⁸ These changes (only partially implemented), and the acknowledgment that there were serious problems in Tibet, continued to set a climate for compromise. In April 1982 The Dalai Lama sent another delegation to Beijing where it was agreed that he would return to Lhasa in 1985 after an advance party prepared for the trip sometime in 1984.⁵⁹ He even publicly announced his imminent return to Tibet.⁶⁰

But the optimism was premature. Talks bogged down, the Dalai Lama did not return to Lhasa. It can be surmised that the Dalai Lama wanted the freedom to travel, to speak openly, to live in Lhasa and gain a very large measure of autonomy (if not independence) for Tibet. Chinese authorities probably wanted him to live in Beijing, to regulate his movements and have him accept limited autonomy for Tibet.

⁵⁸ Norbu, p. 353.

⁵⁹ Gyatso, p. 240.

⁶⁰ It is possible, as has been suggested by some observers, that the talks were not going very well and that the Dalai Lama's public announcement of his imminent return to Tibet was designed to put public pressure on the Chinese authorities. If this was the case, it would demonstrate that the Dalai Lama had very little leverage against Beijing if compelled to resort to this type of action.