The CIA Betrayal of Tibet: Is the dalai lama on the agency’s payroll?

The dalai lama is no mere spiritual leader. When he fled Tibet in 1959, he was the leader of the country’s feudalistic government. Notwithstanding his public stance supporting non-violence, his monks jailed and tortured dissenters and ran guerrilla operations against the Chinese, funded with $1.7 million a year from the U.S. government, including a personal stipend of $185,000 a year for the dalai lama. The average Tibetan does indeed wish to see “the Roof of the World” independent, but he does not want the land run again by 200 aristocratic families controlling 93% of the wealth of the nation as was the case pre-1959.

By Victor Thorn

Recognized as the 14th incarnation in a line of sacred rulers, the dalai lama, born Lhamo Donrub (religious name Tenzin Gyatso), is bathed in a calming light of peace and spiritual guidance. His followers, including movie star Richard Gere, vehemently defend their guru against anyone attempting to diminish his supernatural status.

Yet, troublesome shadows of darkness tarnish the lama’s radiant halo of holiness. Specifically, from the late 1950s until midway through Richard Nixon’s first term in office, the dalai lama received approximately $1.7 million from the CIA for his role as a paid operative. More importantly, even though he became a Nobel Peace Prize recipient in 1989, CIA money found its way to Tibetan rebels who fought a nearly two decades-long secret war against the Chinese government.

While these “contra” forces were trained and armed by U.S. intelligence agencies, the dalai lama—a man of allegedly simple means—basked in the luxuries provided by a $186,000-per-year annual CIA salary.

These under-the-table payoffs extended further—to direct family members and other relatives, who were appointed to prominent positions at the lama’s publishing companies, charitable foundations and distribution outlets, plus hotels in Geneva, New York and India. In these prominent posts, the lama’s nepotism allowed his in-laws to handle millions of dollars under the pretext of leading a spiritual movement.

When questioned about this lucrative windfall, on Sept. 15, 1998 Lodi Gyari, a dalai lama spokesman, admitted: “It is an open secret. We do not deny it.”

To fully understand the intricacies of this situation, one must first take a cursory examination of how a succession of lamas in Tibet treated their subjects—with little or no regard. In fact, rather than being figures who uplifted the meek and poor while serving as conduits to the Higher Power, these lamas exerted militaristic dominance over their underlings, while remaining removed from them, like royalty.

Not only did they own all property, these holy-roller warlords also collected taxes from their serfs and imprisoned anyone who opposed their dictatorial rule. This situation continued for centuries until Oct. 7, 1950, when the Red Chinese army stormed into Tibet and overthrew the local ruling body. Even under Chinese control, the dalai lama and his inner circle enjoyed a much more luxurious lifestyle than those who were still exploited under a de facto Communist caste system.

Tensions with the Chinese government had been bub-
bling ever since the Tibetans declared their independence in 1913. Moreover, the lama dynasty also faced internal turmoil after rebels assassinated the current dalai lama’s father in 1946 during a failed coup d’état. Then, once the Red Chinese army seized command of Tibet in 1950, Cold Warriors in America began fearing that waves of Communism would sweep across Asia. This mindset eventually led to America’s disastrous war in Vietnam that raged throughout the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, although the lama maintained his aristocratic lifestyle, by 1956—worried that the Chinese intended to invade his palace in Lhasa—he urged his henchmen to collect over 100 tons of gold and jewels from peasant subjects so that he could erect a new throne.

Around this same time, with Chinese aggressions still persisting, the dalai lama’s exiled brother, Gyalu Thondup, laid the foundation for a meeting at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, India between his sibling and CIA agents. Playing on a common vested interest—i.e., defeating the Chinese—the CIA joined forces with the dalai lama to initiate a Tibetan counterrevolutionary army.

Wasting no effort in combating what they viewed as a domino effect of multiple Asian nations falling to Communism, in 1956 the CIA conceived a top-secret project named St. Circus Operation whereby Tibetan guerrilla fighters were trained at Pacific locales such as Guam and Okinawa. By 1958, phase two of this clandestine campaign began under the auspices of the Colorado Program wherein 200 future Tibetan revolutionaries were schooled at Butts Field Air Force Base in Camp Hale, Colo.

The top lama willingly lent himself to the CIA as a pawn in their war against the Red threat. Soon, this seeming practitioner of non-violence allowed his minions to learn the arts of espionage, undermining enemy governments, bomb construction, landmine laying, sabotage and assassination. Militia members also gained knowledge of demolitions, propaganda, small arms weaponry and covert warfare techniques.

The popular conception of the dalai lama being a missionary of peace turns out to be little more than a myth, especially since, by the late 1950s, tons of ammunition and machine guns had been parachuted from Air Force C-130s into Tibet. Rather than engaging in passive resistance, Lamaist soldiers sought utter destruction, as R. Sen-gupta conveyed in a Feb. 14, 1999 article for Outlook

The 14th dalai lama, Tenzin Gyatso. This would-be feudal ruler of “the Land of Snows” was born in 1935 to a farm family in a small hamlet. At the age of two, legend has it, the toddler, then known as Lhamo Dhondup, was recognized as the reincarnation of the 13th dalai lama. Each dalai lama is considered the reincarnation of the previous one. In addition, the present lama is supposed to be the 74th manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, who is said to have been a boy who lived when Prince Siddhartha Gautama was teaching the “original” Buddhist faith, circa 563 B.C. Theoretically, although Gautama is the historical Buddha, there were a thousand or so buddhas before him, such as Dipankara Buddha, who, being 24 buddhas earlier, lived eons before Gautama. Despite all the public relations, Tibet is no Shangri-La. In 1998, Christopher Hitchens criticized Tenzin Gyatso for a number of reasons, including: the lama’s acceptance of money from the leader of the terrorist Aum Shinrikyo cult; the lama’s proclamation that Hollywood actor Steven Seagal was a reincarnated lama of Tibetan Buddhism; the persecution of followers of the Dorje Shugden deity, whom Hitchens describes as having been “threatened with death following the dalai lama’s abrupt prohibition of this once-venerable godhead”; the dalai lama’s specified sexual norms, which, among other things, explain the proper way to pay for prostitution; and the lama’s support of India’s thermonuclear tests.
magazine entitled “The CIA Circus: Tibet’s Forgotten Army.” Sengupta quoted a man named Tenzin Tsurlim, who negotiated with the CIA. “We had great expectations when we went to America. We thought perhaps they would even give us an atom bomb to take back.”

However, the Tibetan uprising against their Communist occupiers didn’t fare well and by 1959—with resistance fighters thwarted or massacred by China’s army—the CIA decided upon a different role for the dalai lama. Up until that point, throughout their history the lamas never seemed particularly interested in a democratic form of government or human rights for their subjects. But now that the dalai lama failed as a front man for their covert operations, the CIA decided that rebranding their Tibetan asset as a spiritual icon would serve their purposes much better. After all, since his success as a pseudo-general garnered little payback, why not make the dalai lama a symbol of resistance against Communism?

So, on March 31, 1959 under the CIA’s “Operation Immediate,” the dalai lama—disguised as a soldier and toting 60 tons of treasure—scurried from his palace in Lhasa toward the Indian border. During a formidable trek across Tibet’s rugged mountains, with the full assistance of his CIA colleagues, the lama had already commenced upon a public relations offensive. According to a State Department document dated April 2, 1959 obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, the lama’s fellow travelers radioed a message to the CIA:

“Please inform the world about the suffering of the Tibetan people. To make us free from the misery of the Chinese Communist operations, you must help us as soon as possible and send us weapons for 30,000 men by airplane.”

Over two weeks later, the dalai lama—plagued by dysentery—finally entered India. Upon his arrival, one undisputed fact became clear to everyone that accompanied him during this ordeal: without ever-present radio contact with his CIA handlers, the lama would have never survived his escape. Then, over the following months, upward of 80,000 Tibetan refugees fled into India to be reunited with their spiritual master. At that moment a global Free Tibet movement had been born on the heels of a failed CIA-funded uprising directed against the Chinese.

Still, the CIA would continue transferring arms to Tibetan rebels until 1969 as they fought this hidden (and futile) war in the Asian hinterlands. Finally, by 1971—coinciding with President Richard Nixon’s normalization of relations with China—Tibetan guerrillas accepted the inevitable. The cause of reclaiming their homeland had been lost for the time being.

As the war gasped its final dying breath, the Chinese made demands of Nixon: Either cease and desist providing any future weaponry to the Tibetans or forget about opening diplomatic relations with their country. Nixon bowed to these conditions, not wishing to jeopardize this historic event over a few ragtag rebels and a mere 3 million ethnic Tibetans.

In R. Sengupta’s aforementioned article, he interviewed a disappointed resistance fighter named Thinley Paljor who, like thousands of other Tibetans, experienced the bitter taste of defeat. “We felt deceived. We felt our usefulness to the CIA was finished. They were only thinking short term for their own personal gain, not for the long-term interests of the Tibetan people.”

Indeed, as former CIA agent Sam Halpen explained to Sengupta, the U.S. most certainly had ulterior motives. “The whole idea was to keep the Chinese occupied, keep them annoyed, keep them disturbed. Nobody wanted to go to war over Tibet. It was a nuisance operation. Basically, nothing more.”

Today, as an international celebrity, the dalai lama’s net worth is difficult to determine. However, he’s been photographed sporting a $1,000 Longines watch, wearing Gucci loafers, while charging $2,000 per ticket to hear him speak at a 2008 engagement in Aspen, Colorado.

It appears that being the right-hand man of God—and the CIA—has proved quite a profitable endeavor for the dalai lama.

**VICTOR THORN** founded Sisyphus Press in the fall of 2000, and is the author of 20 books, as well as 15 additional chapbooks. He has published the works of numerous writers in the alternative media such as Michael Collins Piper, Adam Gorightly, Mark Glenn, John Kaminski and Joan d’Arc, while also producing CDs and DVDs, one of which is a five-disc collection that covers the John F. Kennedy assassination. Thorn served as the editor of five anthologies, and his political articles have appeared in various newspapers around the country. He has also freelanced for several newspapers and magazines such as American Free Press, Paranola and TBR.