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Intelligence In Recent Public Literature

Into Tibet: The CIA's First Atomic Spy

By Thomas Laird. New York, NY: Grove Press, 2002. 364 pages.

Reviewed by Nicholas Dujmovic

In April 2000, a meeting convened at CIA to consider whether to roll back the cover on a case that is half a century old. The fiftieth anniversary of the death of Douglas S. Mackiernan, the first CIA officer to perish in the line of duty and the "First Star" on CIA's memorial wall, was fast approaching. The meeting was called because the Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI) sought permission to establish an unclassified exhibit at CIA honoring Mackiernan, which would require acknowledging him as an Agency officer operating in China from 1947 to 1950 under Department of State cover. (S)

I attended this meeting because I had written a classified chapter on Mackiernan for a History Staff anthology, *Fifty Years of CIA* (1998). Along with the curator of CIA's museum and a representative from CSI, I advocated for openness after fifty years, particularly since Mackiernan's status has been publicized in various open forums over the decades. I thought then, and still do, that the concrete benefits to the Agency of officially disclosing Mackiernan's story greatly outweighed the potential damage, which remained speculative and, to my mind, not very persuasive.

(b)(5)

In the end, the opposition to declassifying the Mackiernan story prevailed, and a "compromise" was declared: a classified exhibit on Mackiernan could be placed in a secure facility in Washington or elsewhere. (S)

And that was that. I thought that the decision was shortsighted, a great opportunity missed, but otherwise it was tolerable, even neutral in its results, because the wider world did not know what it was missing in the Mackiernan story. (S)

Now, that decision has come back to haunt us and to hurt us. The publication last year of Thomas Laird's *Into Tibet* demonstrates the cost of not seizing opportunities to tell the great stories that Agency history offers. *Into Tibet* is a deeply flawed book that plays fast and loose with the facts while tendentiously and irresponsibly denigrating CIA. But without the Agency's side of the story, it will remain the last word on the subject. (S)

The real story of Douglas Mackiernan is compelling. A former US Army weather officer and a radio expert, Mackiernan joined the Agency in 1946, when it was still the Strategic Services Unit of the War Department. Operating under State Department cover in the US Consulate in Urumchi, the capital of the northwest Chinese province of Xinjiang, Mackiernan sent back intelligence on Soviet activities in the region—including the mining of uranium—and on the complex interplay of ethnic and political forces there. Mackiernan had extensive contacts with various ethnic leaders,

(b)(1)

(b)(3)(n)

[redacted] After fleeing Urumchi with [redacted] three White Russian assets, Mackiernan led his party across [redacted] mountain and desert [redacted] north of Tibet, [redacted] Mackiernan and his party [redacted] headed south, into Tibet, en route India. While still in northern Tibet, the party was met on 29 April 1950 by Tibetan soldiers who had not learned of their government's promise of safe passage. The soldiers fired on the party, killing Mackiernan and two of the Russians. (S)

(b)(1)

(b)(3)(c)

(b)(3)(n)

Thomas Laird worked for years on the Mackiernan story, piecing together research in the National Archives; documents he managed to get released through FOIA; several key secondary sources; and, especially, interviews with survivors of the Mackiernan party, Mackiernan family members, and other participants in the events described in the book. Laird wants his book to be treated as serious history and says repeatedly that this is “a true story.” Yet his treatment of the Mackiernan saga is notable for its straying from the facts in ways that suggest not only sloppiness (though that is here in abundance), but also a willful desire to tell the story he wants to tell, facts be damned—and a story that hurts CIA as much as possible. (U)

In Laird's hands, Mackiernan becomes a caricature of an early Cold War CIA operations officer—a sort of comic book superhero. In his book and in subsequent interviews on his book tour, Laird asserts that Mackiernan:

- Joined OSS after serving as the chief of cryptoanalysis for the US Army Air Force.
- Penetrated into Soviet territory in late 1945, and maintained daily radio contact with assets he was running within the USSR.
- Acquired and sent back samples of uranium that the Soviets were mining in Xinjiang province, and, using equipment that he had fabricated, verified that it was U-235.
- Directed his assets to mount a raid on the Soviet uranium mine in Xinjiang.
- Knew in 1947 that he would be going to Tibet and started boning up on Tibetan.
- Kept his cover supervisor, the Consul General in Urumchi, completely in the dark regarding his intelligence activities and even his true employer.
- Buried “sonic detectors” provided by the US Air Force to detect a Soviet atomic test.

- Maintained a regular radio channel to his brothers' station in Massachusetts, transmitting encrypted data that were transferred to the Air Force.
- Detected the first Soviet atomic test and radioed the data to the United States, providing the critical information that determined the test's location and the bomb's yield.
- Had advance knowledge of the arrival in Urumchi of fellow CIA officer Frank Bessac, and surprised Bessac with a car and driver at the airport.
- Was "sent" to Tibet to organize anti-communist resistance and keep open a "pipeline" for "atomic intelligence." (U)

Unfortunately, none of these "facts" are true—not one. There are many other lesser falsehoods, but these are the core fictions at the heart of Laird's version of events. (S)

Laird is not shy about reckless speculation, either, as long it sounds good and advances his theories. Relying on his interviewees' hazy memories and his own imagination, he suggests that sometime in 1945-1947 Mackiernan went on a preparatory trip to Tibet (never happened); that he led an attack on a Soviet mining operation (if he had, he kept it secret from CIA); that his agents in the USSR placed detection equipment near the Soviet atomic site near Semipalatinsk and gave him several months' advance notice of the atomic test (sheer fantasy); even that he went to Eniwetok to witness a US atomic test in April 1948 (he actually went to Las Vegas to get a divorce). (S)

Besides these fictions, there are too many sloppy mistakes to count, suggesting an overall cavalier approach to writing—spelling errors; dates gone wrong ("1949" when "1948" or "1950" is meant, and vice versa); the erroneous location of CIA headquarters in Virginia in 1950; a reference to Malaysia, which did not exist in the 1940s; and even getting Mackiernan's birthday wrong. At one point, he says "north" when he means "south." Now, you would think that a careful researcher would get the small things right, but most of Laird's obvious howlers were the result of taking at face value—and not independently verifying—what the people he interviewed told him.^[1] Bessac told Laird that CIA had its headquarters in Virginia in October 1950, so it must be true. Mackiernan was killed on his birthday because that is what Bessac said (he erred by four days). (U)

Laird's sloppy research aside, how could he exaggerate and twist into sheer silliness what, unadorned, is a good story about a brave CIA officer and the Agency doing the best they could in difficult circumstances? There are three main problems with Laird's approach to the Mackiernan story: (S)

First, it is clear that, despite his protestations, Laird is not really interested in what most people regard as the historical method. What DI analysts call "tradecraft"—attention to detail, disinterested marshalling of evidence, weighing the veracity of sources—is unfamiliar, and perhaps anathema, to Laird. (U)

It is telling that Laird in his acknowledgements thanks Oliver Stone for advice regarding the "narrative path."^[2] The reader paying close attention to the footnotes learns that key facts are deliberately bent to serve this "narrative path"—one date, for example, is simply invented "at the convenience of the narrative." Laird also creates dialog and claims the right to use invented speech as a device to introduce the next part of the story. He admits in his footnotes that he has

invented scenes and almost swears he will not do it again, except that it happens more than a dozen times. My personal favorite is: “To the best of my knowledge this is what happened.” The author’s mea culpas show that he thinks he can use footnotes essentially to be absolved of writing fiction. It starts off being funny and then gets tiresome. (U)

Second, Laird, who left America at the age of 19 to live in Nepal because he was so angry at US foreign policy, is still angry and has an agenda. All but calling CIA a rogue elephant, Laird joins the ranks of other purveyors of dark CIA conspiracies by taking a tragic story of courage and devotion to duty and turning it into a morality play (“a shameful chapter of American history”) with CIA as the villain. In the world Laird creates, the flawed superhero Mackiernan works for a cynical, manipulative, and inept CIA:

- CIA, Laird says, was obsessed with obtaining Soviet “atomic intelligence,” and so ordered Mackiernan to stay in Urumchi past the point of safety while the Chinese communists advanced.^[3] (Actually, the Agency’s interest in “atomic intelligence” from Mackiernan was tertiary, and it was the State Department and the Air Force who wanted Mackiernan to remain in Urumchi. CIA gave Mackiernan the option, and he insisted on staying to try to establish an anti-communist resistance force.)
- CIA ordered Mackiernan to supply arms to the legendary Kazakh chieftain Osman Bator, which led to a massacre of Kazakhs by the Chinese communists, consistent with CIA’s cynical use of peoples it ultimately leaves to die. (b)(1)
 (b)(3)(n)
- CIA ordered Mackiernan into Tibet, knowing he was a “blown spy,” on a “mission” to begin covert aid to Tibet.^[4] (Laird refuses to believe the more mundane reality that CIA was doing everything it could to help Mackiernan escape to safety in India or Pakistan. Moreover, the Agency had dropped any plans to aid Tibet in response to the State Department’s policy that Tibet was part of China.)
- CIA (and the State Department) spent the entire winter of 1949-1950 planning by radio with Mackiernan to establish Kazakh and Tibetan resistance. (b)(1)
 (b)(3)(n) most of the Mackiernan-CIA radio dialog concerns how to get Mackiernan to safety.)
- CIA’s blind distrust of “communists” in the State Department—a result of the influence of Senator Joe McCarthy—created friction between the two agencies that delayed the transmission through State Department channels of CIA’s request for safe passage for the Mackiernan party in Tibet. (b)(1)
 (b)(3)(n) the Department expeditiously handled CIA’s request, turning it over in one day to the US Embassy in New Delhi.)
- CIA treated Mackiernan’s widow with gross insensitivity, never telling her how or why he had died, and even denying her Mackiernan’s life insurance. At one point, according to Laird, Mackiernan’s CIA desk officer tried to seduce his widow. (b)(6)
 CIA disclosed to her how he had died without getting into operational information and some gruesome details; (b)(3)(c)
 (b)(6)

(b)(1)
(b)(3)(n)

Laird's anti-CIA animus knows no bounds. If Mackiernan gets his girlfriend to take pictures of Soviet soldiers and their equipment, it is because CIA taught him to use people. Even Laird's assessment of Mackiernan as a "terrible father" is somehow tied to CIA's alleged culture of manipulation. In a deliciously sophomoric passage that reflects the flavor of the entire book, the author speculates that, on the journey to Tibet, Mackiernan began having doubts about his CIA work:

From what we are allowed to know of Mackiernan, he apparently only began to question his use of his family as well as whole tribes and people for the benefit of the United States in the last days before he arrived in Tibet. There, in the heart of the Tibetan wilderness, some part of Mackiernan may have had a bloody glimpse into the future, toward the ultimate result of the policies that guided his actions. Perhaps as he sat there the Himalayan panorama before him faded—replaced by the roofline of Saigon. Perhaps his frozen skin suddenly warmed and a tropical sweat rolled down his back. Perhaps for a moment Mackiernan stood on the roof of the US Embassy as America evacuated Vietnam. (U)

As humorist Dave Barry might say, I am not making this up. It is amusing in this regard to note that, on the last page of the book, Laird quotes Mackiernan's nephew, who observed: "It is not the CIA's place to rewrite history." (U)

Third, as has already been alluded to, Laird's use of interviews is wholly suspect. One would expect discrepancies between still-secret contemporary accounts and debriefings and the memories of people Laird interviewed a half-century after the events.^[6] But the huge gap between, for example, what Bessac says in 1950 in his debriefings and what he tells Laird suggests to me that the author is coaching his interviewees, or at least asking leading questions. Both of Mackiernan's surviving brothers have said that Laird misquoted them and other family members and even fabricated statements they never made. (S)

Why does it matter that Laird has written such a bad book? Other than the obvious violence done to history, everyone concerned with CIA's image should consider the publication of this book a tragedy. It has been extensively reviewed, and the reviews, to my great surprise, have mostly been positive. They generally assume that Laird's gratuitous bashing of CIA has merit. Why should Laird's negative book—or a rumored movie based on it—be the last word on what is a positive story about a CIA officer and CIA operations?^[7] The answer is: It should not. The only review of *Into Tibet* I have come across that saw past his animosity and got it right observed that CIA "carried out daring and valuable work in northwest China." This is the story that we can and should tell. (S)

The Agency should declare the Mackiernan story with pride. The facts can be revealed without damage to sources and methods and without harming US-China relations—the Chinese knew in 1949-1950 what Mackiernan was up to, and, after a half-century, certainly we can own up to the fact that CIA officers worked to fight communism. We owe it to the American people to tell them about the bravery of CIA men and women in fighting communism during the Cold War. We also owe it to the memory of Douglas Mackiernan to describe unashamedly what he and others did

during the long twilight fight against America's enemies. (S)

Disclosing the story of our First Star would demonstrate to historians, scholars, and journalists, and even to marginal hacks like Laird, that CIA can be forthcoming regarding Cold War history. Finally, it would fire the imagination of other adventurers of Mackiernan's type whose talents would be welcome at CIA. (S)

Footnotes:

[1] Grove Press bears responsibility for the apparent lack of competent editing and quality control. (U)

[2] It is also clear that Laird has a movie in mind. Even the shallowest perusal of the book suggests a movie screenplay, with short chapters flitting back and forth between Washington, China, California, and Tibet. (U)

[3] How Laird deals with contradictory evidence is telling: a CIA officer says State ordered Mackiernan to stay behind, while a State officer says CIA ordered it. Laird concludes, on no basis other than his views about CIA, that the CIA officer "was lying." (Actually, the CIA officer was closer to the truth.) Anything uttered by any State officer, by contrast, is gospel: Laird cites a memo between two State desk officers on the desirability of sending a covert mission to Tibet to prove that Washington intended to do so. (S//NF)

[4] Laird ridicules CIA on this score, especially for saying that the Tibetan journey was an escape. (U)

[5] In a radio interview, Laird claims that the "in-house biography" of Mackiernan was written as part of an internal CIA investigation into the Agency's mistakes in the case. It is news to me that that is why I wrote the Mackiernan study! It just shows that Laird will say anything if it fits with his theories. (S//NF)

[6] Laird should not be let off the hook because he did not have access to all the secret documentation extant on Mackiernan. Ted Gup, with no classified access and with fewer open resources than Laird, wrote in his recent *Book of Honor* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000) a mostly accurate and far more responsible account of Mackiernan's work. (S)

[7] On 29 September 2002, for example, the Grand Rapids Press noted: "Until more information is available and verifiable, *Into Tibet* stands as the definitive account." (U)

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