

King of Spies: The Dark Reign of America's Spymaster in Korea

Blaine Harden (Viking, 2017), 260 pp., notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

Of all the spymasters who have ever practiced the art, few have started as an auto mechanic and embalmer, but Donald Nichols did both and was able to parlay his latent talents into his own postwar Korean spy organization, complete with his own base, secret army, and rules. The fascinating but profoundly disturbing story of how he did that is the theme of Blaine Harden's new book, *King of Spies*.

Nichols did not have the most auspicious start as an intelligence star. Raised in poverty, with a loose-living mother who left him and his siblings at an early age, he dropped out of school in the seventh grade. His salvation appeared in the form of the military—in the spring of 1940 he joined the Army and received orders for Karachi, British India. He would serve in the region throughout WW II. In this environment Nichols learned a foundational lesson—"If you make the bosses happy, they won't question your methods." (21)

In 1947, Nichols transferred to the US Air Force and received orders for Korea, an undesirable assignment for most airmen but a godsend to Nichols, given his dysfunctional life at home. He arrived in Seoul in late June 1946 in the midst of a bloody civil war between the anti-Communist government of strongman President Syngman Rhee and anti-government forces inspired by the young, charismatic, popular leader of North Korea, Kim Il-Sung. Although anti-US feelings in South Korea were rampant, where others saw chaos, Nichols saw an opportunity to conduct "positive intelligence," i.e., infiltrating leftist organizations and sending agents behind enemy lines to find targets and recruit informers.

In his new-found venture, he had a powerful natural ally—President Rhee—with whom he had a "father-son" relationship. The 71-year-old Rhee apparently first met the 23-year-old Nichols in 1946, and each was suitably impressed with the other. More than that, each needed the other—the information that Nichols provided to Rhee via his agents would help the president stay in power, and the

patronage that Nichols received from Rhee would make him a celebrity and key power broker in South Korea.

In the meantime, Nichols continued to build his intelligence empire and satisfy his customers, who rewarded him with unrestricted funding, equipment, and promotions. From Army master sergeant he was quickly promoted in the Air Force to chief warrant officer, then to lieutenant, captain, and finally major. By 1949, the then low-ranking US Air Force NCO had amazingly become the chief air advisor to a foreign head of state—Rhee. That same year, the last US troops left Korea, and Nichols and his six agents who remained became part of the Korean Military Advisory Group, or KMAG.

Also in 1949, Nichols met the one man most responsible for the longevity of his Air Force career—the Fifth Air Force commander, Maj. Gen. Earle Partridge, who saw much of his past self in the portly, undisciplined non-conformist. As Harden notes, throughout his career and life, Nichols had the disarming ability to befriend older, powerful men such as Partridge, who went to great lengths to defend, reward, and keep him happy. When Nichols managed to make what Harden refers to as "an exceptionally powerful enemy" in the person of Maj. Gen. Charles Willoughby, Douglas MacArthur's chief intelligence officer, Ambassador Muccio—for whom KMAG worked—defended Nichols, and Partridge kept Nichols under the shelter of his wing for years to come.

Nichols quickly gained some measure of intelligence fame for providing US authorities with the projected date of the North Korean invasion of the South, which occurred on 25 June 1950. As Harden notes, however, Nichols's report has never surfaced, and the author posits that it might have been imaginary, as Nichols had a lifelong history of making things up, according to family and friends—a trait that would eventually undermine his career. Nonetheless, a jealous rather than vengeful Willoughby then tried to hire Nichols away, as did CIA, but Partridge and the Air Force continued to pamper and

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protect their golden boy from the enticements of rival suitors.

He also proved his worth by feeding bombing targets to the Fifth Air Force, using his network of agents to glean relevant information. In grateful appreciation, Tokyo-based Far East Air Forces commander Gen. George Stratemeyer promoted Nichols, then a lieutenant, to captain. President Rhee, meanwhile, had taken advantage of the invasion to slaughter tens of thousands of South Korean communists in a brutal example of political cleansing that remained largely unknown for 50 years. Nichols, an eyewitness to the largest such massacre, near Taejon, said nothing about it until he wrote his autobiography 31 years later, and even then he purposely changed the venue to disguise his peripheral involvement.

Nichols expanded his operations to include code-breaking after he obtained a North Korean People's Army codebook from a North Korean defector. Nichols set up a unit to monitor the unchanged codes and had the translated intercepts immediately delivered to Eighth Army and Fifth Air Force headquarters, both then in Taegu, by jeep—the gold standard in providing intelligence support to the battlefield. Such actions caused observers to dub him “the King of Codebreaking,” although such inside information did not enable him to foresee the Chinese invasion of Korea in November 1950; as Harden points out, MacArthur and Willoughby were all equally in the dark.

In early 1951, Maj. Gen. Partridge proposed to his boss, Gen. Stratemeyer, the creation of a special unit for Nichols and his men, the innocuous-sounding Special Activities Unit #1, changed four months later to the even murkier Detachment 2 of the 6004th Air Intelligence Service Squadron (AISS), which became much better-known in theater as “Nick’s outfit,” or just “NICK.” As Harden writes, “Nichols was given open-ended authority to gather intelligence, conduct sabotage, demolition, and guerrilla operations behind enemy lines.” (99–100) By late 1952, Nichols controlled a vast empire. NICK consisted of 50 sub-detachments and 52 Air Force personnel and 900 Korean agents and fighters reported to him personally. His personal salvaging of a then-revolutionary T-34 tank and the daring recovery of two downed MiG-15 jet fighters (though South Korean eyewitnesses downplayed his role in both), combined with his extension in Korea, prompted his promotion to major in late 1951. The official US Air Force history of the Korean War described him as “the

most important single collector of air intelligence for tactical bombing of North Korea.” (121) But, although it was not yet obvious, Nichols’s career—as well as his life—had peaked by age 30.

Nicholas would earn one more positive fitness report, including a promotion recommendation in 1956, before he would be engulfed in accusations of fraud, mishandling of official funds, “irregularities” in the handling of sources, homosexuality, and pedophilia. Eventually diagnosed as schizophrenic, he was in and out of psychiatric care, he was medically discharged in 1962. He continued to be accused again of sexual misconduct, including the rape of a teenaged girl, but he managed to stay out of jail, meeting his end under psychiatric care in a VA hospital in 1992.

King of Spies is a well-written page-turner, as one would expect given such a colorful, outrageous life as that of Donald Nichols. Much to the chagrin of historians, journalists often write more readable books, and Harden, a past *Washington Post* bureau chief and author, is no exception. The map and selected photographs are welcome aids to the reader, and the story is an important and neglected one that needs to be told frankly.

By the same token, readers need to be aware of comments the author makes in the book that raise eyebrows if not hackles. For example, he describes the MiG-15 as “blazingly fast” (98), which leads the reader to believe that it completely outclassed the F-86 Sabre Jet, yet the maximum speeds of the two fighters are only one mile-per-hour apart. Perhaps more disturbing is Harden’s thinly-disguised role as North Korean apologist, arguing that it is activity such as Nichols’s that explains why Kim Jong-Un so intensely hates the United States today, a specious conclusion that warps historical perspective to express a political opinion. The most compelling lesson that readers should take away from this story is that, despite his intelligence accomplishments, Nichols was an aberration, not even remotely the norm. Finally, being a consummate spymaster does not necessarily make one a “king of spies,” and even a cursory reading of intelligence history will suggest other individuals more deserving of the book’s title.

In a sense, reading *King of Spies* is like getting an inoculation—the experience is going to hurt initially but ultimately will be beneficial.



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