



## Agents of Subversion: The Fate of John T. Downey and the CIA's Covert War in China

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## Book Review

**John Delury.** *Agents of Subversion: The Fate of John T. Downey and the CIA's Covert War in China.* Cornell University Press, London, 2022. pp. 376. Hb. \$34.95. ISBN 978-1501765971

Ostensibly the story of CIA officer John T. Downey, who was dropped into China during the Korean War to catalyse and foment counter-revolution, this book is really a sweeping indictment of Washington's addiction to secrecy and its steely faith in the anti-communist fairy tales spun by chancers, charlatans and the credulous. Downey was captured by the Chinese in November 1952 when he and a fellow CIA agent, Richard Fecteau, flew in on a C-47 aircraft to exfiltrate Li Junying, the liaison officer of a guerrilla band they were running, who had been parachuted into China's Changbi mountains two months earlier. Li had good news. He wanted to report in person his contacts with a disaffected ex-National Army general. The bad news was that it was all a trap. Li had been captured long before he'd even linked up with 'Team Shen' and turned so fast it was a blur. Downey and Fecteau, unlike the two pilots, survived the shooting down of their plane as it attempted to land. Downey was to spend twenty years and four months in a communist cell before his release in March 1973 in the wake of the Nixon-Mao rapprochement.

As Delury details, Washington's problems were comprehensive, failing the tests of politics, process and product. The American experience of the European theatre during the Second World War, with teams of guerrillas operating behind Nazi lines, just didn't translate to Northeast Asia, especially when Chiang Kai-shek's hapless supporters were written out of the script. Instead, the key role was to be played by a hesitant and dwindling anti-communist, anti-Chiang 'Third Force' that existed on paper, with CIA-funded newspapers and magazines, but was entirely absent on the ground. As for subversion, in China the CIA's efforts only pre-empted Mao's slamming shut of the already narrow door of pluralism and denying them any purchase. In Delury's account, the programme's start was not contingent on Beijing's intervention in Korea, but rather on Mao's victory in the Chinese civil war and Stalin's bomb. As America searched for who 'lost' China, the CIA was authorised 'to exploit guerrilla potential on the Chinese Mainland' in July 1950, months before the 'War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea' was even a twinkle in Mao's eye.

We see in *Agents of Subversion* how the CIA had total confidence in their programme. The possibility of failure was just not considered, yet the programme failed in China's Jilin borderlands with North Korea, in Yunnan Province with the scraps of Li Mi's National Salvation Army, and in Tibet with the Dalai Lama's brother. Trained partisans, weapons and supplies rained down under CIA parachutes, as often as not straight into the arms of the People's Liberation Army. These debacles – and others around the world – were not the product of a CIA gone rogue. They were all authorised and underpinned by National Security Directives in Washington.

Interestingly, London pushed back. With Hong Kong at the front of UK concerns, British mandarins expressed the view that less US subversion in China might result in less domestic repression. Things turned personal. London warned Zhou Enlai, en route to the 1955 Bandung Conference, of a threat of assassination. Sure enough, the Air India plane he had been scheduled to fly in – before a last-minute change of itinerary – suffered a mid-air explosion and crash-landing with most on board killed. The official British inquiry identified a suspect, a Chinese Nationalist agent, who had conveniently escaped their jurisdiction by 'stowing away' on a CIA plane bound for Taiwan.

Delury convincingly argues that it was Washington's conceit in refusing to accept the limits of power that pulled decision makers into the swamp of secrecy and covert action. If anything, this only got worse when the hot war in Korea turned cold after the 1953 Armistice. It was all reprised in Vietnam. The credibility gap between means and ends was filled with cloak-and-dagger. The intelligence tail wagged democracy's dog. It reached its apotheosis when it was brought home and onshored by Nixon against the threat from the Democratic Party. Watergate, for a moment at least, seemed to bring a kind of closure. As it turned out, Nixon's press conference welcoming Downey home from captivity was overshadowed by questions about the growing scandal. On his return to the US, Downey said merely 'I thought the 20 years were to a large extent wasted'. He could have been less sparing of the process and people that put him there and abandoned him. As America threatens to turn back the clock on China, we can only hope that some lessons of the past have been learnt. *Agents of Subversion* can only help.

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