

# Official Policies and Covert Programs: The U.S. State Department, the CIA, and the Tibetan Resistance

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## A New American Policy on Tibet

In March 1951 the U.S. ambassador to India, Loy Henderson, informed his superiors in Washington of a step he had taken that began the U.S. government's active involvement in the affairs of the Dalai Lama and Tibet—an involvement that persists to this day. Without consulting the State Department, Henderson advised the fifteen-year-old ruler of Tibet to seek asylum abroad and not to return home “while the danger exists that by force or trickery the Chinese Communists [will] seize Lhasa,” the Tibetan capital.<sup>1</sup>

Henderson's effort to thwart Beijing's bid to reincorporate Tibet into the Chinese domain was a significant break with the policy adopted by the United States almost a hundred years earlier. In 1867 the U.S. envoy to Beijing, Anson Burlingame, had resigned his commission so that he could head a Chinese delegation to the “Christian Powers” to warn against actions that might jeopardize the territorial integrity of China under the authority of its declining Manchu rulers.<sup>2</sup> Four decades later in 1910, another U.S. ambassador to China, William W. Rockhill, advised the thirteenth Dalai Lama, who was then in exile in India, that Tibet “is and must remain a portion of the Ta Ts'ing Empire, for its own good . . . [and] because the Great Powers of the world deem it necessary for the prosperity of their own peoples.”<sup>3</sup> Even the

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1. New Delhi Embassy message to Department, 29 March 1951, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1951, Vol. VII, pp. 1610–1611 (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume numbers). The Dalai Lama, born Tenzin Gyatso in July 1935, is the fourteenth in the line of Dalai Lamas. He was enthroned in February 1940.

2. Frederick Wells Williams, *Anson Burlingame and the First Chinese Mission to Foreign Powers* (New York: Scribners, 1912).

3. Letter from Rockhill in St. Petersburg to the 13th Dalai Lama in Darjeeling, India, 30 September 1910, in Houghton Library, Harvard University, Rockhill Papers, file 49M-284 (90).

*Journal of Cold War Studies*

Vol. 5, No. 3, Summer 2003, pp. 54–79

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usually daring Franklin Roosevelt heeded the advice of his more cautious State Department in December 1933 not to acknowledge a message from the Tibetan Kashag (Cabinet) informing him of the death of the thirteenth Dalai Lama. The department feared that a minor courtesy of this sort might imply official recognition of the independent status of Tibet.<sup>4</sup> Roosevelt accepted similar advice a decade later when he sent a message to the fourteenth Dalai Lama introducing Ilya Tolstoy as the head of an Office of Strategic Services mission assigned to Tibet during World War II to investigate the possibility of finding an alternate supply route through Tibet to the besieged Nationalist (Goumindang) government led by Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek).<sup>5</sup>

As long as Jiang and his government had any prospect of holding on against Mao Zedong and his Communist forces in the struggle for control of China after World War II, Ambassador Henderson had toed the line set by his predecessors in refusing to support Tibetan independence. By April 1949, however, the State Department was reassessing its policy concerning Tibet in the face of what appeared to be Jiang's imminent defeat. The pragmatic Henderson then counseled that if the "Communists succeed in controlling all of China, or some equivalent far-reaching development takes place, we should be prepared to treat Tibet as independent to all intents and purposes."<sup>6</sup>

State Department officials were well aware that Jiang's days on the mainland were numbered, but they were reluctant to provide any ammunition for critics who were accusing Secretary of State George Marshall and the Truman administration of having "lost" China. The department therefore temporized and decided to keep its policy flexible by avoiding the issue of the legal status of Tibet. A memorandum concluded that only if the Communists succeeded in gaining control of the mainland and the Nationalists disappeared would it be "clearly to our advantage" to deal with Tibet as an independent state.<sup>7</sup> Not until twenty months later did the State Department face the issue again and inform both the British and the Canadian governments that "should developments warrant, consideration could be given to recognition of Tibet as an independent state."<sup>8</sup> These "developments" never happened, as the exiled Nationalist government on Taiwan remained highly sensitive and vocal about

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4. Memorandum to Kermit Roosevelt, 1 January 1934, in Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, P.P.F. 4596.

5. Memorandum from Secretary of State to President Roosevelt, 3 July 1942, *FRUS*, 1942, Vol. IX China, p. 625.

6. Memorandum from State Department, Office of Chinese Affairs, 12 April 1949, *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. IX, pp. 1065–1071.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Memorandum, dated 30 December 1950 but delivered 3 January 1951, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp. 612–613.

any threat to its plans to “return to the mainland.” The Nationalists’ definition of the “mainland” included the whole of the old Chinese Empire, including regions like Tibet over which the Nationalist government had exercised only nominal control. The Truman administration finessed any public declaration of Tibet’s legal status and thereby avoided a public rift with Guomindang leaders. In the meantime, U.S. officials quietly moved forward with their plans and actions to challenge the Chinese occupation of the Dalai Lama’s country.

## **The Henderson Cable**

When Ambassador Henderson sent his cable to Washington on 29 March 1951 describing the actions he had taken on his own initiative to aid the Dalai Lama, the young ruler had been ensconced in a monastery in the small town of Yatung in southern Tibet for the previous four months. He had fled there after Chinese troops occupied the administrative capital of Tibet’s eastern border area in a mercifully short battle with the outmatched Tibetan forces. The Chinese troops had then paused to allow their political counterparts to negotiate for the “peaceful liberation” of the rest of Tibet. Panic-stricken Tibetan officials sent a futile appeal to the United Nations to restrain the Chinese occupation, and they moved to invest the teenage Dalai Lama with full governing powers.

After an intense debate, the Tibetan cabinet and the abbots of the three leading monasteries decided that the young leader should be moved to safety, out of the reach of the incoming Chinese troops. Accordingly, on the night of 16 December 1950 the Dalai Lama, accompanied by his cabinet, slipped out of Lhasa and made his way to a historic monastery one day’s mule ride from the Indian border. There he joined his mother, two brothers, and two sisters, all of whom had fled two days earlier.<sup>9</sup> They had sent messengers to the U.S. consulate in Calcutta and the embassy in New Delhi to ask for assistance. Hence, the approach to Henderson by one of the messengers did not come as a complete surprise.

The emissary chosen by the Tibetans was Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian mountaineer who had fled into Tibet from a British prisoner-of-war camp in India seven years earlier. He was fortunate in making his pitch to a most will-

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9. The Dalai Lama’s elder brother, Takster Rinpache, had told him of a frightening experience the previous year when the Chinese had approached him with an offer to make him a Quisling-like governor of Tibet if he would persuade the Tibetan government to welcome the Chinese troops as liberators. They had suggested that if the Dalai Lama resisted, fratricide would be justified. (Thubten Jegme Norbu, interview with author, Bloomington, IN, 16 May 1995).

ing recipient. Loy Henderson was one of the State Department's staunchest anti-Communists; when serving as an envoy in Riga and Moscow in the 1930s, he had witnessed the show trials orchestrated in the Soviet Union by Josif Stalin. He was not a man to hide his opinions, and this had resulted in his removal as chief of the East European desk in Washington in 1943 under pressure from the Soviet envoy, Maksim Litvinov. Although Henderson was admired by his colleagues, he did not remain out of trouble in his new post for long. He was assigned to New Delhi because the Truman administration had wanted him out of town, fearing that his presence would hinder the 1948 presidential campaign because of his outspoken opposition to the creation of the state of Israel.

Henderson also was one of the department's most experienced diplomats and was well-versed in the inner workings of the U.S. foreign policy establishment. He knew what to do to secure approval for his decision to involve the U.S. government in the affairs of Tibet. In presenting his case, he described the Dalai Lama as a young man who is much more intelligent and is better informed regarding world affairs than any of his advisers . . . [and who] is deeply conscious of the need for social and other reforms in Tibet. He trusts the United States more than any other country and has been disappointed in the ability [sic] of Tibet to establish closer relations with the United States.<sup>10</sup>

The ambassador reported that the Dalai Lama was caught between the conflicting advice of his advisers. The "young man" feared that if he returned to Lhasa rather than seeking asylum abroad he would "fall into the Chinese Communist trap" or be in a difficult position in India, which so far had not promised to give him asylum. The Dalai Lama warned that if he went back to Lhasa "with his treasures [the funds belonging to the office of Dalai Lama, which he had brought with him] both he and his treasures will eventually fall into the hands of the Chinese Communists." Henderson added that if the Dalai Lama were to leave the funds in Sikkim, there was a risk that they would be frozen by the Indian government in the same way that the accounts of the Chinese Nationalist government had been.<sup>11</sup>

"On his own initiative," the ambassador wrote, he had prepared a message urging the Dalai Lama to leave for a foreign country if it appeared that the Chinese might try to prevent his escape. Henderson suggested Ceylon as an appropriate refuge, but if the exiled Tibetan ruler could not find safe asy-

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10. New Delhi Embassy message to Department, 29 March 1951, *FRUS*, Vol. VII, pp. 1610–1611. The context leaves no doubt that "ability" should have been "inability."

11. When the Dalai Lama did return to Lhasa that summer, he left the treasury (which was in the form of gold coins and bars, currency, and precious stones) in the stables of the maharaja of Sikkim. It was kept intact until the 1950s, when it was converted into Indian funds and invested, with disappointing results.

lum there, “he could be certain of finding a place of refuge in one of the friendly countries, including the United States, in the Western Hemisphere.” Henderson also suggested that the Dalai Lama send a mission to the United States that could “make a direct appeal to the United Nations . . . [and] that favorable consideration will be granted to the applications made by members of a Tibetan mission to the United Nations for United States visas.” These assurances were contained in an unsigned note, written on paper purchased in India and bearing no indication of origin. An embassy officer was to carry the note by hand to a designated member of the Trade Mission in India, who would deliver it personally to the Dalai Lama and tell him orally to expect such a note from the ambassador.<sup>12</sup>

## **The Policymaking Context**

Henderson’s cable arrived in Washington at a time when the U.S. government was only beginning to recover from the gloom of the previous winter, which had been one of the low points in the Cold War. China’s massive intervention in Korea against U.S. and allied forces in late October had come as a real shock. Moreover, Soviet MiG-15 jets had begun flying missions over Korea. Dean Acheson records that he believed the United States was closer than it ever had been to a wider war.<sup>13</sup> President James B. Conant of Harvard University, who had close contacts with the highest officials in Washington, began wondering aloud whether he had been too optimistic in assuming there would be no war “for a year or more.”<sup>14</sup> For many, World War III seemed imminent. Memories of World War II were still vivid, and U.S. officials desperately wanted to avoid another such cataclysm. The head of the State Department’s policy planning staff, George Kennan, advised Acheson that although the United States had suffered “a major failure and disaster” in Korea, it must “accept with candor, with dignity, with a resolve to absorb its lessons and to make it good by redoubled and determined effort.”<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, Acheson and others in the Truman administration were mindful that they were still being accused of having “lost China.” These

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12. The content of the note and the description of how it was to be delivered can be found in New Delhi Embassy message to Department, 29 March 1951, *FRUS*, Vol. VII, pp. 1610–1611

13. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), p. 471.

14. “Memorandum for the File: Conversation with Dr. James B. Conant,” notes by William T. Golden, 14 December 1950, in Archive of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, DC, Folder for Memoranda of William T. Golden; also available on-line at ([http://archives.aaas.org/golden/doc.php?gold\\_id=34](http://archives.aaas.org/golden/doc.php?gold_id=34)).

15. Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 476.

domestic political concerns became all the more relevant when Truman abruptly relieved General Douglas MacArthur of his command that spring for insubordination. The general and his supporters accused the administration of thwarting the more aggressive actions he had been proposing to take against the Chinese Communists. In this context action taken to challenge Mao's efforts to expand Beijing's territorial control could be expected to find approval not only within a determined administration but even among its critics.

The climate within the national security bureaucracy was also propitious for such actions. Within the State Department a debate began between the Office of Chinese Affairs and officials responsible for United Nations affairs. The former argued that even if the United States could not prevent the Chinese occupation it should "lay the groundwork for keeping Tibet stirred up."<sup>16</sup> Henderson could also count on support from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), who had concluded on 15 January 1951 that the Korean War posed "one of the greatest dangers in history." The JCS claimed that the Chinese had intervened with the assurance of Soviet support in what would be the first phase of a global war with the United States. They recommended a military buildup to support the policy of containing Communism, plus propaganda, psychological warfare, and special operations "against Kremlin-dominated communism everywhere."<sup>17</sup>

This proposal for a campaign of political and psychological warfare came at a time when a new organization had been set up for precisely this purpose. The Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), administratively housed in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) but supervised by the State Department and the military, had been established three years earlier to conduct covert operations, partly in response to the urging of George Kennan. Kennan later regretted his role in creating this capability,<sup>18</sup> but in the early Cold War years he was a proponent of aggressive covert action. The recommendations of the Joint Chiefs led to what Franklin Lindsay, the chief of operations for OPC, later described as a worldwide "explosion" of covert anti-Communist operations, including one in Tibet.<sup>19</sup>

Henderson might also have been counting on appealing to the strain in U.S. foreign policy evidenced in the Truman Doctrine, which called for the

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16. Robert C. Strong memorandum to Oliver E. Clubb, 3 January 1951, in National Archives and Records Administration (hereinafter NARA), Record Group (hereinafter RG) 59 NND 822910, box 4227.

17. Memorandum, 15 January 1951, in *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, pp. 61–68.

18. George F. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), pp. 208–209.

19. Franklin Lindsay, interview, Cambridge, MA, 31 January 1996.

United States “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure.”<sup>20</sup> As head of the department’s Office of Near Eastern Affairs in 1947, he had been one of the architects of the Truman Doctrine. He was therefore well-suited to argue that the Dalai Lama and Tibet should be brought under the umbrella of the doctrine.

One further advantage for Henderson was that he knew the temperament of the main officials who were then in charge of U.S. foreign policy. Acheson, Dean Rusk (who was in charge of East Asian affairs at the State Department), and Robert Lovett had actively participated in one or both of the two world wars and all the major U.S. foreign policy initiatives of their time. They were “can-do” men, open to innovative proposals, and they held their positions because they enjoyed the personal trust of the president. According to Dean Rusk, they all believed that if the Dalai Lama were to seek asylum abroad, particularly in an Asian country, his fellow Buddhists would raise such a cry that it would cause the Chinese to rethink their occupation of Tibet. In any event, it would serve the purpose of “doing anything we could to get in the way of the Chinese Communists.”<sup>21</sup>

Within a week Henderson received a reply to his cable. In the interim he apparently had been having second thoughts about the message he sent to the Dalai Lama and had suspended delivery of it until he received Washington’s approval. As it turned out, the State Department approved his actions and the counsel he wanted to give to the Tibetan leader, aside from the proposal for the Tibetans to send a mission to the United Nations. Henderson also received support for his proposed action from his fellow ambassador in Ceylon, John Satterthwaite, who said Henderson was “to be highly commended for his courageous action,” a sentiment the department seconded, saying “Loy’s project” had “full Department backing.”<sup>22</sup>

## The Negotiations

The note was delivered to the Dalai Lama in mid-May 1951, touching off what was to be a series of lengthy negotiations that summer about the commitments the U.S. government would be willing to make if the Dalai Lama

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20. See the text in U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Recommendation for Assistance to Greece and Turkey: Address of the President of the United States*, Document No. 171, 80th Cong. 1st Sess. 12 March 1947.

21. Dean Rusk, interview, 27 May 1994.

22. Letter from Satterthwaite to Henderson, 13 April 1951, in NARA, RG 59, 793B.11/4-1351; and letter from Matthews to Satterthwaite, 24 April 1951, in NARA, RG 59, 793B.11/4-1351, Ceylon.

sought asylum abroad. The Tibetan ruler was surrounded by many advisers, who offered conflicting counsel. Several members of the old ecclesiastical and lay establishment were prepared to return to Lhasa to find an accommodation promised by the new Chinese regime. Countering this advice was the head of the Dalai Lama's personal staff, Phala Dronyerchemmo, who was urging the young ruler to flee abroad, a proposal endorsed by the Dalai Lama's mother. She had sent both Heinrich Harrer, who had fled Lhasa with her and her family, and a senior Kalmuk monk, Geshe Wangel, to enlist the help of the U.S. embassy in New Delhi and the consulate in Calcutta as part of her effort to persuade her son to flee.<sup>23</sup> The Dalai Lama's elder brother, Takster Rinpoche, also supported this advice. Members of the Lhasa Old Guard, including Liushar (the foreign minister), Yuthok (a former cabinet officer and a relative of the Sikkimese royal family), Shakabpa (a senior finance office official), and Ragashar (the defense minister and Tibetan army commander), wanted to preserve both the person and the office of the Tibetan ruler. They were all soon involved with the State Department and CIA officers whom Henderson organized to shuttle between the embassy, the consulate, and the West Bengal towns of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, where the Tibetan negotiators maintained contact with their leader across the border.

The Tibetan intermediaries' questions reflected both their immediate concern for the safety of the Dalai Lama and the long-term issues of the survival of his office and the country he was being urged to flee. Would the United States approach the Ceylonese government on his behalf? If Ceylon refused to accept him, would the United States grant him asylum, and how would it receive him? Would it pay his expenses? Should they make another appeal to the United Nations? Would Washington provide military assistance and money "when the time is ripe" for resistance groups to rise up against their Chinese occupiers?<sup>24</sup>

Henderson's recommended response was supportive but careful. The United States would receive the Dalai Lama as an "eminent religious dignitary and head of the autonomous state of Tibet" if asylum in Ceylon did not work out. The U.S. government would help him live in a "modest and dignified fashion" and would provide military assistance if the situation warranted and did not violate Indian law.<sup>25</sup> The Tibetans' request for specific commitments had been made on the assumption that the negotiations then being conducted in Beijing by the Dalai Lama's colleagues with the Chinese authorities

23. The information concerning the mother of the Dalai Lama and her use of Geshe Wangel as an emissary was obtained in an interview in November 1994 with the case officer who handled these negotiations. He prefers to remain anonymous.

24. U.S. Embassy, New Delhi, Telegram 3398, 29 May 1951, *FRUS*, Vol. VII, pp. 1687–1691.

25. *Ibid.*

would result in a deadlock. The unilateral announcement by Beijing on 26 May 1951 that an agreement on the “Peaceful Liberation of Tibet” had been signed therefore came as an unpleasant surprise to both the Tibetan and the American negotiators on the Indian border.

While reserving final judgment, U.S. officials assumed that the Dalai Lama’s representatives in Beijing had signed the Seventeen-Point Liberation Agreement under duress. Hence, they tentatively approved the responses Henderson had proposed be given to the Tibetans in an effort to persuade the Dalai Lama to flee while he could. Although the cease-fire negotiations on Korea (a process strongly supported by Washington) had begun, the State Department decided to proceed with the plan to support the Tibetans against China. The war in Korea was winding down, and the threat of a Communist-dominated Korean peninsula had been checked, but China remained an enemy to be challenged, and the administration was still actively defending its record that summer against General MacArthur’s charges of “defeatism” in Asia.<sup>26</sup>

Although parsimonious officials in Washington suggested to the Dalai Lama that he might use some of his own funds to pay for expenses while in exile, they were more expansive in recognizing the Tibetans’ “right of self-determination commensurate with the autonomy Tibet had maintained since the Chinese Revolution [of 1911].”<sup>27</sup> This commitment was reaffirmed to various Tibetan emissaries that summer, arousing the misgivings of the consulate translator, George Patterson, who warned that the Tibetan lexicon made no distinction between the English words for “autonomy” and “independence.”<sup>28</sup> The State Department evaded the question posed by one of the Tibetan negotiators regarding China’s “suzerainty” over Tibet. The department informed the consulate that the government did not “wish to commit itself on what it may or may not say re Tibet’s legal status” at that time.<sup>29</sup> The translator’s use of an imprecise term could have inadvertently reflected the department’s malleable stance on Tibet’s legal status, a position on which it was to continue to seek leeway.

In mid-June 1951 the Chinese announced that they were sending a delegation to “congratulate” the Dalai Lama on the agreement his emissaries had signed in Beijing and press him to return to Lhasa to govern under the new

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26. See the reports in *The New York Times*, 11 May 1951, pp. 1, 8.

27. Department of State Telegram 2051, 2 June 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, pp. 1693–1695.

28. George Patterson, letter to author, 2 April 1996.

29. Department of State Telegram 4, 3 July 1951, in NARA, RG59, 793B.00/7–251, NND 822910, box 4227.

terms of occupation. This added a new sense of urgency to the effort to persuade the Dalai Lama to flee while he could. In Washington the State Department called in Takster Rinpoche, the Tibetan ruler's elder brother, who had been smuggled out of Calcutta. The department offered to make a public announcement of its recognition of "the Dalai Lama's position as head of an autonomous Tibet," and pledged to "persuade other nations to take no action adverse" to the Dalai Lama's position. It also committed U.S. support for a resistance effort against the Chinese, but considered this a "long range problem limited by physical and political conditions in Tibet, and in adjoining areas, over which the U.S. of course has no control."<sup>30</sup>

In the field, Henderson's team dispatched the first of a series of notes containing these pledges—but no signature—to be delivered to the Dalai Lama. The Tibetan ruler's brother-in-law, now back in India after having traveled to China to sign the "Peaceful Liberation Agreement," carried one of these letters along with a surprising offer—a U.S.-backed escape plan with three options: a quiet departure by night with a "small group of faithful followers presumably for India"; a surreptitious departure for India under escort; or a linkup with Heinrich Harrer and the consulate translator, George Patterson, near Yatung, where they would escort him out of Tibet across the border to a tea-plantation airstrip in Bhutan, from which a small plane would fly him to permanent asylum.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the boldness of this offer and the commitments it implied, the Dalai Lama decided in mid-July 1951 to return to Lhasa. Although he made his decision after consulting the State Oracle, who commanded his return, he later explained that he had been worried that his flight might precipitate a war in which Tibet would be crushed. Besides, he said, at that time he had not yet seen any of the American assurances in writing.

The consulate made one more effort in the form of another unsigned note spelling out the previous assurances. It was delivered to an adviser of the Dalai Lama who was already en route to Lhasa with the Tibetan ruler. When the note was rejected because of its anonymous nature, the determined Henderson finally yielded to the Tibetans' demand for a signed document. He wrote a letter spelling out all the previous commitments, adding three key assurances: "a public announcement by the United States that it supports the position of Your Holiness as head of an autonomous Tibet; that the United States would also support your return to Tibet at the earliest practicable mo-

30. Department of State Telegram 91, 12 July 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, pp. 1748–1749.

31. George Patterson, interview, January 1995. The plan was outlined in a Calcutta Telegram, No. 103, 17 July 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, pp. 1754–1755.

ment as head of an autonomous and non-Communist country”; and that this position was “fundamental and will not be affected by developments in Korea or by the Chinese intervention in that area.” At the Department’s insistence, the document hedged on providing aid to resistance groups, promising only that it “would be furnished as feasible under existing political and physical conditions.”<sup>32</sup>

The letter, signed by Henderson, was shown to one of the Dalai Lama’s senior officials, Yuthok Shape, at a meeting in the Calcutta consulate on 30 September 1951. Yuthok was allowed to take notes on the letter, and he promised to take the notes to Lhasa, where he would meet with Ngabo, the chief negotiator of the agreement with the Chinese, and Ragashar, the defense minister, as well as with the two Tibetan prime ministers and the Dalai Lama’s brother Lobsang Samten. To make sure that the message got through to the Dalai Lama, the letter was also taken to Kalimpong and shown there to the Dalai Lama’s mother. The Tibetans kept the records they took on this note, and when the Dalai Lama finally fled Tibet eight years later they presented them to officials in the Eisenhower administration, which honored the commitments.

As a further assurance that these provisions got through to the Dalai Lama, the State Department informed another of his elder brothers, Gyalo Thondup, who was then in Washington, that the United States recognized both the Nationalists’ claim to suzerainty over Tibet and Tibet’s claim to de facto autonomy. The State Department officer said that U.S. consideration of events in Tibet would be “qualified by the consequences of continued recognition of the Chinese Nationalist government.” The officer did not spell out whether this meant there was a possibility that the United States would take a new position on Tibet’s legal status if the U.S. relationship with the Nationalist government changed.<sup>33</sup> This equivocal language suggesting the possibility of a change was reminiscent of the hints given to the British and Canadian governments a year earlier.<sup>34</sup> The Nationalist government, however, did not disappear but continued to exert an active influence on U.S. policy affecting Tibet for another decade.

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32. New Delhi Airgram 662, 10 September 1951, in NARA, RG 59, box 4227.

33. U.S. Department of State, *United States Policy Concerning the Legal Status of Tibet*, U.S. State Department Historical Division Study No. 403, November 1957, p. 17, in NARA, RG 59, box 3949. This memorandum also notes that Gyalo Thondup’s wife was Chinese and presumed to be a Chinese Nationalist agent. It is not clear whether the statement about the relationship between U.S. action in Tibet and its recognition of the Nationalist government was intended to reassure or to warn the Jiang government that Washington’s position on Tibetan affairs was not immutable.

34. Memorandum, dated 30 December 1950 but delivered 3 January 1951, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp. 612–613.

## **The Dalai Lama in Lhasa**

On 17 August 1951 the Dalai Lama arrived back in Lhasa where the Chinese occupation forces had established their military and civil administration headquarters. For the following nine months the semicaptive leader continued to receive various communications reminding him that the asylum commitments outlined in Henderson's letter remained valid. Finally in June 1952 he sent an oral reply through his brother-in-law expressing his appreciation for the U.S. concern and his "sincere hopes that when the time is propitious for the real liberation of Tibet from the Chinese, the United States will find it feasible and possible to lend material aid and moral support to the Tibetan government."<sup>35</sup> The young ruler had decided for the time being to seek an accommodation with the new regime overseeing Tibet.

In Washington the ambitious plans to challenge the Chinese occupation of Tibet through the symbolic flight of the Dalai Lama and support for a potential resistance movement were put on hold. Dwight Eisenhower's pledge in October 1952 to go to Korea after the election to seek a truce led to a hiatus in plans vis-à-vis Tibet. Even so, the basic desire to contain and even roll back Chinese Communism was undiminished. Eisenhower, in his opening campaign speech in Kansas in June 1952, had declared the "loss" of China a national disaster; and his administration, prodded by Republicans in the Senate, promised a firm stand against Mao. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's refusal to shake hands with Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai at the Geneva conference on Korea and Vietnam in 1954 symbolized the new administration's intentions.

## **The Resistance**

In Lhasa the occupation was becoming increasingly burdensome for the population. The presence of a sizable number of Chinese troops had severely overtaxed the local food supply, and the residents of the capital were suffering from both shortages of food and high prices for what little was available. Disgruntled Tibetans had held protest meetings, and a small band of dissidents began posting slogans and distributing pamphlets urging the Chinese to go back to China. The Chinese proconsuls forced the Dalai Lama to dismiss his two prime ministers, who had refused to take what the Chinese considered sufficient action to stamp out the protests.

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35. Calcutta Dispatch 5, 2 July 1952, cited in Department of State Historical Division Project No. 403, November 1957, p. 14, in NARA RG 59, box 3949.

The Dalai Lama's elder brother Gyalo Thondup had returned to Lhasa in February 1952 after a long absence from Tibet spent mostly in China and Taiwan. He was determined to join with other young Tibetans who were motivated by their regard for their country and religion in carrying out a program of political, economic, and educational reforms that would beat the Chinese at their own game. The administrators of the Chinese occupation were nervous about, but also intrigued by, this young reformer, who had persuaded his mother and most of his siblings to give up the traditional estates and property allocated to the Dalai Lama's family. The Chinese began first a sustained (but unsuccessful) effort to recruit him as a collaborator and then decided to get rid of him by sending him as a delegate to the Communist-sponsored Youth Congress in Vienna in June 1952. Gyalo Thondup by this time had decided that there was little possibility of putting his reforms into practice and that he could be of more use outside Tibet. Pretending to go along with the generals' plans, he used a trip to one of the family holdings near the frontier with India to cross over into exile.

Gyalo Thondup established residence in the Darjeeling/Kalimpong border area, where he began organizing a rudimentary underground network that smuggled pamphlets into Lhasa and brought out intelligence reports on conditions in the Tibetan capital. He shared the reports with his Indian hosts.<sup>36</sup> Gyalo Thondup also was the central figure in the local Tibetan émigré community, which he organized as an informal Tibetan Relief Association. He was thus the natural point of contact when emissaries from resistance groups in the eastern border regions came in 1956 seeking arms from abroad.<sup>37</sup>

Resentment at Chinese interference with Tibetan religious activities, heavy taxation, and Beijing's refusal to release three local Tibetan resistance leaders had been growing in the eastern border regions for some time. The first armed revolt occurred in late February 1956 when a band of semi-nomadic Golok tribesmen attacked a Chinese garrison whose commander had tried to impose administrative controls on them and seize their arms. The unrest soon spread to Litang in the Kham area, where the Chinese again attempted to collect the arms belonging to the monasteries and ended up using an aircraft to bomb two of the principal monasteries. This move proved to have long-term consequences. Avenging the desecration of the important monastery at Litang, where the "Great Fifth" Dalai Lama had been discovered three centuries earlier, became a rallying cry for the growing resistance.<sup>38</sup>

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36. Gyalo Thondup, interview, Kalimpong, India, November 1995.

37. *Ibid.*

38. The origins of the insurrection were described in *Calcutta Dispatch* 828, 27 June 1956, in NARA,

These events and the increasingly tight hold exercised by Beijing caused the Dalai Lama to decide that it was no longer useful for him to remain in Lhasa. He accepted an invitation to attend an international Buddhist celebration in India in November 1956 with the intention of seeking to remain there in asylum. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at that time was hosting a visit from Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, his co-signer of the so-called Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The last thing the Indian government wanted was a prominent defector who would protest the loss of Tibet's independence under the agreement Nehru himself had signed with Zhou two years earlier. Nehru urged the Dalai Lama to return to Lhasa and try to work with the Chinese. He did, however, promise to set up an audience for the Tibetan ruler to present his grievances to Zhou Enlai in person.

The Dalai Lama ended up having two meetings with Zhou, but the results were nil. The Chinese premier was in New Delhi on the first stop of a six-country tour to tout the policy of "peaceful coexistence." The visit came at a delicate time, shortly after China had endorsed the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary to crush a popular uprising. Challenges to the unity of the Communist bloc could not be countenanced. Neither could challenges to the reunification of the Chinese Empire, which Mao was determined to reestablish. Zhou warned the Dalai Lama that the Chinese Army was ready to quash the incipient rebellion in eastern Tibet. He promised that Mao had decided to postpone "reforms" in Tibet for at least six years and even longer if necessary, but he otherwise would not agree to any change in the status of Tibet.

The Dalai Lama decided that he had little choice but to try again to find some way of accommodating the Chinese. He went by way of Kalimpong, where his two brothers sought once again to persuade him to remain in India. They had been actively negotiating with State Department and CIA representatives, who had reaffirmed the pledges contained in Ambassador Henderson's letter five years earlier. They did not tell him that they were arranging to send six young Tibetans to be trained abroad by the CIA and then parachuted back into Tibet to provide on-site reports about the scope of the resistance forces and their potential capabilities and needs. The Dalai Lama's Lord Chamberlain, Phala, who had been informed of the aid being provided by the United States to the resistance, supported the two brothers' recommendation that the young ruler stay in India; this plan was also endorsed by the former prime minister whom the Chinese had forced the Dalai Lama to dismiss, and even by the chief negotiator of the "Peaceful Liberation Agreement." The Dalai Lama, however, believed that indefinite promises made by distant protectors

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RG 59, box 3949; and State Department Intelligence Report 7341, 1 November 1956, in NARA, RG 59, box 312A.

could only lead to further harsh treatment of Tibetans. He therefore reluctantly made his way back over the pass into Tibet in March 1957.<sup>39</sup>

## **U.S. Support to the Resistance**

The U.S. government provided its initial support in 1956 to the grassroots insurgency in Tibet with caution. CIA and State Department officers had been meeting occasionally with Gyalo Thondup since 1952 to hear his reports on resistance activities (primarily in Lhasa) after the Dalai Lama's first return to the capital. When emissaries of the guerrilla movements in the Amdo and Kham regions asked him to seek foreign assistance, he put them in touch with his American contacts. Neither he nor the CIA officers who discussed potential operational support were under any illusion that this home-grown insurgent movement could expel the Chinese Army. But they did believe that a show of popular resistance—and Gyalo Thondup emphasized that this was a local movement initiated by the common people, not by the Lhasa nobility—might help mobilize the international support they had hoped to obtain when they urged the Dalai Lama to flee abroad. At the least, they hoped to pressure the Chinese to moderate their actions in Tibet.

There was little problem obtaining approval in Washington for this modest first investment in the Tibetan resistance movement. Covert operations to contain Communism were at their height. Secretary of State Dulles and Undersecretary of State Herbert Hoover Jr. gave full approval.<sup>40</sup> The only note of caution came later from the CIA operations chief, Frank Wisner, who was consumed by remorse at his inability to help the Hungarian rebels in November 1956. Wisner insisted that no commitments be made to the Tibetans that would arouse unrealistic expectations that the United States could not fulfill. He insisted that instructions to the first six Tibetan operatives specify that their mission was limited to intelligence collection. On the basis of their reports, Washington would judge what further material assistance and training was warranted. Although the cable traffic reflects these limitations, it was apparent from the training given to the six men on Saipan that further material assistance and training would be provided if the exploratory teams found it justified when they reported on-site from Tibet.

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39. Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 122.

40. Evan Thomas, *The Very Best Men: Four who Dared: The Early Years of the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), chs. 11 and 19; and Sam Halpern (CIA Far Eastern Division officer and later executive officer to the division chief), interview, 24 January 1995.

By September 1957 the six men were trained and ready to return to Tibet. Two of them were dropped onto the dunes along the Tsangpo (upper Brahmaputra) River south of Lhasa. Their mission was to reach Lhasa and transmit a message to the Dalai Lama that the U.S. government would provide assistance to the now burgeoning resistance movement if he would solicit it. The State Department had requested this affirmation, but the Dalai Lama never provided it. Based on independent reports of the mounting resistance, the State Department dropped its insistence on a personal request from the Dalai Lama, and the issue of his personal approval became moot.

The second team of operatives was airdropped to team leader Wangdu's home area near Litang. This was the home base of his uncle, Gompo Tashi, who had managed to convert the clannish eastern Tibetans and their home-grown army into a true national army. They were able to locate and join a local guerrilla unit, but they came under a fierce Chinese attack and only Wangdu survived. He escaped and eventually made his way to the resistance headquarters now located in the Lhoka area of central Tibet, five hundred miles away. By the time he arrived there in the summer of 1958, his uncle's Volunteer Freedom Fighters for Religious and Political Resistance commanded the area and were ready to receive the first arms supplies promised by the Americans. The airdrop was made in July 1958 and was followed by a second drop seven months later.<sup>41</sup> These two shipments contained 403 Lee Enfield rifles, 60 hand grenades, 20 machine guns, and 26,000 rounds of ammunition. With several thousand volunteers already massed in the area, the two airdrops did not make an appreciable difference in the battles waged by Gompo and his men that winter for control of central Tibet. However, they were followed by some thirty more airdrops over the next three years.

These operations were put on hold in the spring of 1959 after the Dalai Lama gave up his efforts to find an accommodation with the Chinese and fled to India. Lhasa was in revolt, and the increasingly nervous Chinese military commander was threatening to take drastic action to suppress the unrest—a threat he carried out after he discovered that the Dalai Lama had fled. The CIA's contribution to the Dalai Lama's flight was the presence of the two men

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41. The dates and contents of the airdrops made to the resistance were provided in interviews and correspondence with Lhamo Tsering in 1994 in Dharamsala, India and later in the United States. As operations chief for Gyalo Thondup, Lhamo Tsering had participated in the selection of the men to be sent to the United States for training and in the planning for the subsequent airdrops to the resistance inside Tibet. He had kept meticulous records, which he shared with me. They include dates, photographs of the men, and an inventory of the arms and supplies contained in each airdrop. Because the CIA cable traffic concerning these events has not been released, Lhamo Tsering's notes are probably the best records available. The dates and numbers might not coincide exactly with the personal recollections of other participants in these operations, who recall them from a different perspective and perhaps according to a different calendar.

who had been trained and dropped back into Tibet the previous year. Having joined the escape party after it left Lhasa, they provided daily reports to Washington on the progress of the Tibetan leader as he made his way through rebel-controlled territory to India and formally asked for asylum, a request that Nehru immediately granted.

In the face of this embarrassment the Chinese launched a massive drive to eradicate the rebel strongholds ranging from Lhasa to the Indian border. The Chinese offensive forced a shift in the plans to provide large-scale air support to the main body of the resistance forces. Although the Chinese managed to rout the group, new plans were made to provide more arms and trained men to the remnant insurgent groups that were assembling in the plateaus north and east of Lhasa. The CIA facility at Camp Hale, Colorado, had been in full operation to support the Tibetan resistance movement since the early summer of 1958. A substantial number of men trained in communications and guerrilla warfare tactics were therefore ready to be dispatched to work with the still-sizable bands of fighters prepared to carry on the struggle against the increasing number of Chinese troops who were sent in to quell the rebellion. The CIA's ability to transport these men and substantial payloads of arms was greatly facilitated by new C-130 cargo aircraft, which the Air Force readily agreed to lend to the CIA for this purpose.

The rationale for continuing these operations was that a continuing show of popular resistance would substantiate the Dalai Lama's appeal for international support. The U.S. policy of "doing anything to get in the way of the Chinese" still prevailed, and the CIA's plans to continue its support to the surviving Tibetan insurgents were supported by both the Congress<sup>42</sup> and the State Department.<sup>43</sup> The increasing number of troops and weapons that Mao was sending into Tibet to crush the insurgents had to be sent by trucks along the remote mountainous areas of the Sichuan-Lhasa highway, where they were vulnerable to guerrilla attacks. Moreover the diversion of China's resources to Tibet was thought to be costly to Mao at a time when he was promoting his Great Leap Forward.

Beginning in September 1959, the United States stepped up its airdrops of guerrillas and arms to areas in which resistance bands were thought to be operating; it was a massive effort. At least thirty aircraft, each carrying an aver-

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42. This support was bipartisan. On 17 April 1959 Senator Hubert Humphrey asked the State Department about the possibility of "supporting guerrilla military action against the Peiping regime on the grounds that the Tibetan revolt symbolizes the feeling of the Mongolian and Moslem minorities in Mainland China." Exchange of correspondence, 17 April 1959, in NARA, RG 59, folder 3950.

43. It was still U.S. policy to challenge Mao's control of China. Robert Murphy had informed the Chinese Nationalist government that its program to train 3,000 special forces to help "restore freedom to the mainland by political means" would have full U.S. support. See Special Staff record, 3 December 1959, in NARA, RG 59, Department of State Daily Staff Summary, box 3.

age of 25,000 pounds of arms, ammunition, medical supplies, and food, made drops over the next eighteen months to the waiting guerrillas. The problem was that the recipients were not operating in small bands making hit-and-run raids but were concentrated in fixed locations. They fought as they had for centuries accompanied by their families and herds, making mobility impossible. The men who had been trained at Camp Hale were valued for their ability to communicate with the “warehouse in the sky,” but their advice on guerrilla tactics was ignored. The repeated injunctions sent via radio messages from CIA headquarters to the guerrillas to disperse, accompanied by threats to end the drops unless the fighters complied, also went unheeded. As a result, the Chinese were able to pinpoint the main concentrations and to undertake an unexpectedly large and capable air assault that killed many insurgents and scattered the others. By 1961 the resistance movement in eastern Tibet had been effectively quashed.<sup>44</sup> The U.S. government had made a substantial effort to fulfill the commitments it had made some years earlier to support any self-initiated resistance movement that developed in Tibet, but the effort had been a failure.

## **The Mustang Operations**

When the operations in eastern Tibet were still under way, CIA Director Allen Dulles had briefed President Eisenhower, who raised the question of whether continuing the resistance might not provoke even harsher reprisals by the Chinese. Secretary of State Christian Herter (who had succeeded John Foster Dulles after the latter’s death in 1959) urged that the operations be continued, arguing that “not only would continued successful resistance by the Tibetans prove to be a serious harassment to the Chinese Communists but it would serve to keep the spark alive in the entire area.”<sup>45</sup> The president, apparently convinced by the unanimous recommendation of his advisers, gave his approval. The “spirit of Camp David,” which emanated from Eisenhower’s meeting with Khrushchev in September 1959, did not extend to Moscow’s increasingly estranged ally in the East.

The administration was therefore receptive when the Tibetans approached the CIA in early 1960 with a proposal to revive the resistance move-

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44. According to the records provided by Lhamo Tsering to the author, the fate of the forty-nine trained men who were dropped into Tibet from 1957 to 1961 was equally dismal. Only twelve survived. Ten escaped after formidable treks to India. One surrendered and one was captured. Both served long terms in Chinese prisons.

45. Memorandum for the record prepared by the president’s special assistant for national security affairs, Gordon Gray, 4 February 1960, *FRUS*, 1958–1960, Vol. XIX, pp. 808–809.

ment in a new location in western Tibet. The key proponent was Gompo Tashi, the leader of the resistance movement, who had escaped into India with several thousand of his followers. Gompo proposed that these men, then working on road gangs in Sikkim and northern India, be reassembled to operate in small guerrilla units inside Tibet from a safe haven in the Mustang kingdom in Nepal.

Neither the Tibetans nor the Americans were willing to give up the struggle. The U.S. government could not, however, agree to establish a base in Nepal without seeking the permission of the Nepalese government—a step that was ruled out for political and security reasons. A compromise was therefore worked out calling for the recruitment of 2,100 former members of Gompo's resistance army. They were to be infiltrated in increments of three hundred to Mustang and would then move across the border into Tibet to locate safe areas in which they could receive shipments of arms and operate as guerrillas. Only after the first group had established itself would the next increment be sent into Mustang and onward into Tibet, and the procedure would be repeated until a total of seven bases operating independently of each other were established. The CIA meanwhile would train the leaders of these units and prepare them to interdict Chinese military convoys moving along the highway that was the principal artery for the transport of men and supplies to western Tibet and Xinjiang.

Once set in motion, the plan quickly went awry. It was predicated on being carried out secretly or at least with a minimum of publicity and the ability to drop arms to the units as they established themselves in safe locations inside Tibet. The first setback occurred thousands of miles away quite independently of events in Tibet in May 1960, when the Soviet Union shot down an American U-2 aircraft. President Eisenhower's subsequent order of a stand-down on intelligence operations of a provocative nature posed serious obstacles for the CIA's ability to deliver arms inside Tibet as specified by the plan. Meanwhile, the "secret" infiltration of the men in orderly and timed increments had become a near stampede, as the former warriors dropped their shovels and abandoned the road gangs on which they were employed to make their way to Mustang. This exodus and the destination of the guerrillas were soon widely reported in the Indian press, thwarting any hope that the operation could be conducted in secret. By the autumn of 1960 and throughout the following winter, more than two thousand recruits were jammed into makeshift camps in the Mustang peninsulas, creating serious political and logistical problems for the U.S. government. With the U.S. elections coming up, the operation was put on hold. Eisenhower told the CIA that if Richard Nixon won the election, the operation assuredly would be resumed and the

ban on overflights would presumably be lifted, provided that the arms drops took place inside Tibet.<sup>46</sup>

Although John F. Kennedy, rather than Nixon, won the election, he was equally inclined to support this kind of unconventional warfare for which he had campaigned. Kennedy overrode the strenuous objections of his new ambassador to India, John Kenneth Galbraith, and approved an airdrop in March 1961 of arms and trained radio operators for four company-size guerrilla units to a site inside Tibet opposite Mustang. The shipment was carried out on the understanding that the recipients would use the arms to establish themselves inside Tibet, but this condition was never met. The men did make prolonged forays into Tibet to raid Chinese camps and convoys moving along the target Lhasa-Xinjiang highway. On one of these raids the Tibetans captured what turned out to be a unique intelligence haul of over 1,600 classified Chinese documents. These gave valuable insights into the political, economic, and military problems Mao was confronting, and they provided needed justification for a second arms drop, which was undertaken with the president's support in December 1961, again over the objections of Ambassador Galbraith as well as opposition by Under Secretary of State George Ball.

The continuing standoff between the Mustang leaders, whose men refused to leave their safe haven in Nepal, and Washington, which refused further arms drops until the guerrillas relocated inside Tibet, continued for another year. Although some of the Tibetans were now armed for action, no one in Washington was willing to commit them to an all-out military effort against the Chinese. This holding pattern caused Allen Dulles's successor, John McCone, to ask whether the U.S. government "really wished to pursue the original 1958 objective of freeing Tibet of the Chinese Communist occupation." He expressed concern that a policy vacuum had emerged on this issue.<sup>47</sup>

The situation changed drastically in November 1962 when the Chinese army inflicted a series of devastating defeats on their Indian counterparts in a series of clashes along the Tibetan-Indian border. The Indian government came to regard the Mustang force as an asset on which it could draw to resist further Chinese military expansion. For the next twelve years the command and control of these forces was a combined U.S.-Indian-Tibetan responsibility. Nonetheless, the problem of relocating the force from Nepal into Tibet was never resolved. The third and final arms drop was made in 1965 with the understanding that it would be the last until the guerrillas were able to estab-

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46. This requirement was lifted for one final arms drop made inside Nepal in May 1965.

47. Editorial Note 155, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Vol. XXII, p. 321.

lish themselves inside Tibet. This never happened, and, as a result, the force remained underarmed and underemployed. Although the rebels were able to carry out a series of raids that denied the target highway inside Tibet to the Chinese army for some years, the Chinese eventually moved an overwhelming force to the area, making further guerrilla forays too costly in terms of casualties. Consequently, the raids were discontinued. The Indian government was reluctant to give up this potential tactical capability, but by 1969 the Indians had acquired a more immediately valuable force of several thousand other Tibetans organized as the Special Frontier Force, which served at high altitude locations on the northern frontier. The men at Mustang thus became a force without a mission.

The tripartite headquarters decided in 1969 to begin dismantling the guerrilla force at the rate of five hundred a year for three years, leaving a remnant group of three hundred as a token resistance force to be supported by both the Indians and the Americans. Although several projects, including farming, carpet weaving, a transport business, and even a hotel, were set up and were mostly successful, the peaceful conversion process did not go smoothly. By 1974 the Nepalese government was no longer willing to accept the presence of the guerrilla force.<sup>48</sup> The Nepalese authorities demanded that the Mustang commander order the still sizable number of Tibetan guerrillas to surrender their arms to Nepalese security forces. The Dalai Lama with sadness sent an emissary with a tape directing his followers to comply, and on 23 July 1974 the bulk of the men acceded to the Nepalese demands. Their leader, one of the men dropped into eastern Tibet seven years earlier, escaped with a small band of guerillas still determined to carry on the fight, but he was killed in an ambush as he tried to cross into India. The last organized Tibetan resistance in the field was over.

## **Political Support and Operations**

On the political side of the ledger the United States was more effective in fulfilling the commitments it had made to the Dalai Lama when trying to persuade him to disavow the Chinese occupation of his country and seek asylum abroad. Although these commitments had been made under the supposition that he would leave Tibet voluntarily, they were generally honored when he felt forced to flee in 1959. The Dalai Lama's most immediate concern was

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48. Earlier, King Birendra had been supportive of the guerrillas. He even visited the Mustang stronghold one year to celebrate Tibetan New Year's with his uninvited Tibetan guests.

how he and his followers were to survive physically and politically. The U.S. government immediately reaffirmed its commitment to provide funds for the maintenance of the Tibetan ruler and his entourage. Thanks to the generosity of the Indian government, which took care of the Dalai Lama's physical needs, he was able to use a portion of the U.S. funding to establish his political position. This subsidy was to continue for the following fifteen years, enabling him to establish offices in New York, London, and Geneva. These offices handled his requests to the host governments for political support, delivered his appeals to the United Nations, and coordinated refugee aid.<sup>49</sup>

Within six months of the Tibetan leader's arrival in exile, the U.S. government made good on its pledge concerning the status of Tibet. Under Secretary of State Robert D. Murphy assured Gyalo Thondup of President Eisenhower's personal sympathy for the Tibetan cause and the "great importance" the U.S. government attached to it. He went on to say that the United States had traditionally stood for the self-determination of peoples and believed this principle should apply to the Tibetans.<sup>50</sup> Secretary of State Herter, after informing but not consulting the Nationalist government in Taipei, formally announced this position in a letter to the Dalai Lama. The letter, released to the press on 29 February 1960, read:

As you know, while it has been the historical position of the United States to consider Tibet as an autonomous country under the suzerainty of China, the American people have also traditionally stood for the principle of self-determination. It is the belief of the United States government that this principle should apply to the people of Tibet, and they should have the determining voice in their own political destiny.<sup>51</sup>

A State Department staff summary of correspondence with the Nationalist government included the hedge that the new position did not "necessarily commit us to ultimate recognition of Tibetan independence."<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, after the Dalai Lama's flight the U.S. government had been active at the United Nations in enlisting support for the Tibetans' appeal for a condemnation of the Chinese occupation of their country. China was still a suitable enemy, and Mao was contemptuous of the "spirit of Camp David" and the "peaceful coexistence" that the Soviet Union had promoted. But to avoid the impression that the United States was exploiting the Tibetan appeal

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49. Memorandum for the Special Group, 9 January 1964, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, pp. 731–733.

50. Memorandum of conversation, 29 October 1959, in NARA, RG 59, folder 3951.

51. Editorial note 401, *FRUS*, 1958–1960, Vol. XIX, p. 809.

52. Department of State, Staff Summary supplement, 3 November 1959, in NARA, RG 59, box 1.

as a Cold War issue, U.S. officials worked through the Irish, known for their historic role as champions of the underdog, and the Malaysians, who had successfully fought a Communist insurgency. However, the British and the French, still concerned about repercussions from issues that might threaten their hold over their dwindling empires, declined to support a formal resolution.

Robert Murphy arranged for his old colleague the former Ambassador Ernest Gross to advise Gyalo Thondup, who was presenting his brother's case. Gross, who since his retirement as the U.S. deputy representative at the United Nations had become a member of an international law firm and acted as personal counsel for two successive UN secretaries general, including the incumbent Dag Hammarskjöld, was intimately familiar with the UN, the diplomats who made it work, and the prospects for raising the Tibet question. After preliminary inquiries, Gross advised Thondup that he found little support for a resolution based on the sovereignty of Tibet and recommended that he base his appeal on the violations of human rights that the Tibetans had suffered. A reluctant but resigned Thondup eventually agreed, and on 21 October 1959 the UN General Assembly voted forty-five to nine, with twenty-six abstentions, to deplore "that the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the people of Tibet have been forcibly denied them." Britain, France, and Tibet's fellow Asian Buddhists—Burma, Cambodia, and Ceylon—were among the abstainers.

This pallid resolution and the failure to gain support from key parties hardly amounted to the international support for which the Tibetans had hoped. It did, however, lay the groundwork for continuing appeals to the UN to take note of the situation in Tibet. These efforts, coached by the indefatigable Gross and aided by the U.S. proclamation of support for the Tibetans' right of self-determination, paid off. On 20 December 1961 the General Assembly called—with fifty-six yeas, eleven nays, and twenty-nine abstentions—for "the cessation of practices which deprive the Tibetan people of their fundamental human rights and freedoms, including their right to self-determination." Even the British voted for the resolution, presumably at the behest of the new foreign secretary, Lord Home, a friend of the new U.S. president.<sup>53</sup>

This was the high-water mark in the United Nations' willingness to go on record in support of the Tibetans. With Gross's assistance, Gyalo Thondup

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53. Home apparently grew impatient with his staff's petty objections. In a curt, handwritten note, he dismissed one aide's argument that a UN resolution supporting Tibet's independence might make the lot of the Tibetans even worse: "It could hardly be worse." Foreign Office, minute "Tibetan Item at the United Nations," 14 December 1961, FO 371/158601.

made annual efforts to get the Tibet issue on the agenda, but it was not until 1965 that the United Nations again considered it. By then the Indians had finally joined in supporting a resolution, but it was a weaker one that merely called for an end to “practices which deprive the Tibetan people of the human rights and fundamental freedoms [this word was made plural after considerable negotiation to meet the concerns of the less stalwart supporters] which they have always enjoyed.”

Despite Thondup’s repeated endeavors, this was to be the last time that the Tibet issue was formally considered by the United Nations. At the State Department the debate shifted to consideration of whether the Dalai Lama would be permitted to make a visit to the United States. After considerable vacillation, the State Department and the White House finally agreed in early March 1971 to approve a truncated visit, with the proviso that the Dalai Lama avoid both Washington and the United Nations. Before the visit could take place, however, the U.S. government had second thoughts and asked the Tibetan leader to postpone his trip until late 1972 or early 1973 to avoid causing embarrassment for the PRC before or immediately after President Nixon’s planned sojourn to Beijing.<sup>54</sup>

## **The U.S. Withdrawal**

By 1971 the premises under which the U.S. government had become involved in Tibetan affairs two decades earlier no longer held. Communism was no longer viewed by President Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, as monolithic, and the strained relations between the two major Communist states had become targets for exploitation. China, the former enemy to be stopped by any means, was now seen as a tactical ally against the Soviet threat.

It is conventional wisdom among the Tibetans that the U.S. government withdrew its support for Tibetan paramilitary and political activities in response to requests made by the Chinese to Kissinger during the negotiations that preceded Nixon’s historic trip to Beijing in 1972. The record does not bear this out. Briefing papers and memoranda of conversations covering Kissinger’s and Nixon’s visits make no mention of Tibet by either party.<sup>55</sup> The

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54. Department of State memorandum, 27 August 1971, in NARA, RG 59, box 2628.

55. Had there been such a tradeoff, it would have been approved at a Special Group meeting attended by the head of the CIA. Yet none of the CIA directors who served immediately before, during, and immediately after this period—i.e., Richard Helms, James Schlesinger, and William Colby respec-

initiative to phase out U.S. involvement in Tibetan affairs came from Washington, not Beijing. Indeed, when Kissinger began his trips to China in 1971, steps were already under way to close down the Mustang operations for want of a justifiable mission. The Chinese undoubtedly knew that the Mustang guerrillas were being phased out, and therefore they would have felt no need to raise the issue with Kissinger, who was obviously doing his best to establish a relationship that they believed would be mutually useful.

It was only in 1975, when the Chinese were miffed about the Helsinki Accords and the 1974 Vladivostok summit meeting between Gerald Ford and Leonid Brezhnev, that a senior Chinese official, Deng Xiaoping, brought up “the question of the Dalai Lama having set up a small office” in the United States. Deng then deprecated this matter as “like chicken feathers and onion skin,” which he explained meant “something of little weight.”<sup>56</sup> For the Americans, this was a welcome change from the bullying tactics that Beijing had used prior to these talks.<sup>57</sup> Ford, in what was apparently an effort to reciprocate his hosts’ rediscovered geniality, assured Deng that “we oppose and do not support any governmental action as far as Tibet is concerned.” The president added that “we do not approve of the actions that the Indians are taking as far as Tibet is concerned.” He and Deng closed out the subject by noting, with apparent amusement, the “burden” that the Dalai Lama’s presence was creating for the Indians.

## Epilogue

With this exchange of sham joviality, President Ford ended the U.S. government’s involvement with Tibet as part of its Cold War strategy. The next phase of the U.S. relationship with the Dalai Lama and his people was to be cast in terms of a contest between human rights and political engagement with China. The Dalai Lama was finally granted a visa by President Jimmy Carter in 1979 to visit the United States (but not the White House or State Department). The Tibetan cause then found new sponsors in a bipartisan group of senators, members of Congress, and congressional staff assistants who worked with the Dalai Lama’s entourage to focus the attention of succes-

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tively—could recall any such meetings. Helms interview, March 1998; Schlesinger, interview, March 1998; and Colby, interview, 22 March 1994.

56. Memorandum of conversation, Deng Xiaoping and President Ford, 4 December 1974, in NARA, PPS, box 373, President Ford’s Trip to China 1–5 December 1975.

57. Richard H. Solomon, *Chinese Negotiating Behavior: Pursuing Interests through “Old Friends”* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1999), p. 69.

sive U.S. administrations and a responsive world community on the Tibet situation. Their efforts proved remarkably successful. This remote, mountainous territory and its extraordinary leader today have attained a unique hold on an articulate and active segment of U.S. and international opinion, ensuring that Tibet as an issue has outlived the Cold War in which it was spawned.