

## ***Intelligence in Public Media***

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

John Delury (Cornell University Press, 2022), 408 pages, illustrations.

***Reviewed by Bianca L. Adair***

John Delury sets out in this book to paint the picture of how “unreasonable hopes and irrational fears of subversion aggravated destructive tendencies toward political repression” using US covert action in China as the backdrop. (4) He tackles a complicated period with respect to the US global position after WWII, the creation and evolution of the US Intelligence Community, and the cacophony of opinions about the course of US foreign policy in the 1940s and 1950s. What unfolds is less a narrative on covert action operations in Asia and more an evaluative political history of the difficulties in fusing US intelligence activities, specifically covert action, to foreign policy objectives for the emerging China under Mao Zedong.

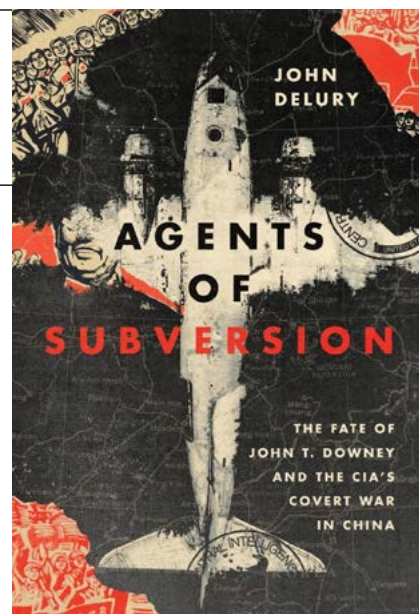
Throughout the book, Delury frequently equates the United States balancing competing global interests of the Soviet threat to Europe and the reconstruction of Germany and Japan to the brutality of the communists led by Mao to oust Chiang Kai-shek in China. This underlying equivocation emerges as part of his stated theme and carries throughout the book. In framing the first two sections, Delury emphasizes his negative views of the policies of the United States and China, while remaining decidedly critical of CIA to the point of mocking covert action operations in Asia as ineffective as they were unsuccessful.

Delury also asserts a causality with respect to the execution of US covert operations in China creating a cycle of distrust and oppression in Mao's China. No doubt the capture of US intelligence operatives fueled counterintelligence investigations, but the causal link repeated throughout reflects more the author's personal views of US intelligence operations than the complex reality of a China only recently embroiled in a civil war. At the same time, in seeking to substantiate this causality, Delury neglects a deeper examination of events surrounding the creation of the CIA combined with protracted infighting in CIA and the burgeoning IC. These elements are discussed in chapters 2 and 4 as an overview and are mentioned periodically, but Delury does not provide a

greater understanding of how White House and National Security Council (NSC) decisions affected CIA covert action in Asia.

Similarly, Delury neglects to contextualize the reason the United States focused primarily on the Soviet Union over China for intelligence collection and operations. He castigates US policymakers for not focusing on China but omits a critical concern that trained US attention on the Soviet Union: the August 1949 detonation of an atomic bomb in Kazakhstan. A mere two weeks earlier, the National Security Act Amendments of 1949 modified the act of 1947 and established the National Security Council (NSC), to provide for a more centralized, modern US Intelligence Community. At the forefront in the writing of the bill was provision of flexibility in the role of CIA not only to collect intelligence but also conduct other operations, eventually categorized as covert action. The momentum for this historic act came from US concerns over the increasingly assertive Soviet Union even before the atomic detonation. After the successful test, US resources focused on countering the Soviet Union. China reached a similar threat status by 1964 when it had its own successful nuclear detonation. The omission of this historic turning point weakens Delury's arguments insofar as they are made outside of history and the countervailing pressures on the United States.

These concerns notwithstanding, the first four chapters frame the underlying theme of the book: the trends of discourse and bureaucratic disagreements that characterized the IC's initial decade. Most important in this section is the presentation of the academic debates and the two theories of intelligence that dominated CIA in its infancy.



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Delury provides an excellent overview of what became competing ideas on the purpose of intelligence by Sherman Kent and Allen Dulles in chapter 4. Despite an admirable discussion of these theories of intelligence, Delury champions Kent's views in the narrative about operations when they serve to critique Dulles as a further justification of the folly of the covert action operations in Asia. For example, Delury presents Kent's equation of "strategic position minus specific vulnerabilities equals courses of action" as a foundation to criticize the use of anticommunist forces to overthrow the communist government in China, a position taken by policymakers and executed by the CIA. (147) What is lost in using Kent to critique Dulles is that CIA in the 1950s (as in the present) was directed to undertake high-risk operations that may not have succeeded by measures of analytic standards. In avoiding this conflict, Delury misses an opportunity to dig further into the tension inside CIA and regarding CIA's role juxtaposed with the White House and NSC. While the latter is referenced, CIA's role for the Truman and Eisenhower administrations was far more complicated than presented in the book.

Finally, the inclusion of John T. Downey in the title appears somewhat misleading. Not only does it imply that Downey alone was central in this fatal operation—he was accompanied by fellow CIA officer Richard Fecteau, who like Downey, would endure nearly two decades in Chinese prisons.<sup>a</sup> In the introduction, Delury admits his coverage of Downey is limited, and a look at the index indicates that coverage of Fecteau is as well. He refers to Downey vanishing and periodically reemerging in the text as akin to following the White Rabbit in *Alice*

*in Wonderland*. (4) His coverage of Downey, however, seems less White Rabbit and more "Where's Waldo?" insofar as the periodic mentions of Downey early in the book do not move forward the broader narrative.

Delury introduces Downey briefly at the end of the first chapter to highlight Downey's attendance at Yale as a student of Asia studies. Yet for most of the remaining text, up to chapter 10, Downey is brought up only briefly as a data point. Chapter 10 explains Downey's capture, although the emphasis is on the approval process for what was supposed to be an exfiltration mission that included a last-minute personnel swap. The detail in this chapter provides ample insight into the bureaucratic obstacles to operational approvals as well as the dangers of last-minute changes. Only beginning in this chapter is the reader also given glimpses into Downey's state of mind as a CIA officer held in captivity. The remainder of the book then focuses primarily on how Downey was finally released with the efforts of the Nixon administration amid opening relations with China.

Delury's work, while laudable in exploring CIA operations and spy swaps not well covered, should be read with some caution. The absence of critical historic events that affected the framing of the IC and the use of covert action presents a misleading underlying narrative that serves as a vehicle of criticism against the use of covert action. At the same time, readers will find the drama linked to the eventual release of Downey compelling, less as an account of covert action and more as a political history of events when the disclosure of covert action becomes propaganda by the target country.



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a. The stories of the men are detailed in former CIA historian and Catholic University of America professor Nicholas Dujmovic's two articles on the case: a. Nicholas Dujmović, "Two Prisoners in China, 1952–1973," *Studies in Intelligence* 50, no. 4 (December 2006): 21–36. (Extraordinary Fidelity is available on CIA's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0Mh7E>); and "Captive in China: President Eisenhower and CIA Prisoners in China," *Studies* 66, no. 1 (March 2022). The first article addresses the events leading to Downey and Fecteau's capture and the death of their pilot and copilot. The second addresses the process of negotiating their release.