

# “Democratic Imperialism”: Tibet, China, and the National Endowment for Democracy

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*People familiar with Asian history will be aware that during Tibet’s popular uprising against their Chinese occupiers in 1959, his Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama (then aged 23), escaped from his homeland of Tibet to live in exile in India. Subsequently, the Dalai Lama formed a Tibetan government-in-exile, and to this day the Dalai Lama and his government remain in exile. The Dalai Lama’s tireless efforts to draw international attention to the Tibetan cause received a welcome boost in 1989 when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and since then the Dalai Lama has been able to demand sustained media attention (globally) to his ongoing non-violent struggle for a free Tibet. This part of Tibetan history is fairly uncontroversial, but a part of Tibet’s story that less people will be familiar with is Tibet’s historical links to the US’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Indeed, as Carole McGranahan (2006) notes “[t]he case of Tibet presents a mostly unexplored example of covert Cold War military intervention.”[1]*

*While in recent years far more information has been made available concerning the CIA’s violent linkages with Tibetan forces, to date only one article has examined the connection between Tibet’s current independence campaigners and an organization that maintains close ties with the CIA, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).*

## **A Brief History of CIA-Tibetan Relations**

In 1951, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army entered Lhasa (Tibet’s capital) and proceeded to force the Dalai Lama’s government to sign a “Plan for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet”, which effectively ratified the Chinese occupation of Tibet. This action combined with the ensuing Chinese repression of Tibetan activists subsequently inspired a popular revolution, which owing to its anticommunist orientation drew upon strong support from the CIA.[2] As Jim Mann (1999) notes, “during the 1950s and 60s, the CIA actively backed the Tibetan cause with arms, military training, money, air support and all sorts of other help.”[3] Furthermore, as Michael Parenti (2004) has observed at the same time:

“... in the United States, the American Society for a Free Asia, a CIA front, energetically publicized the cause of Tibetan resistance, with the Dalai Lama’s eldest brother, Thubtan Norbu, playing an active role in that group. The Dalai Lama’s second-eldest brother, Gyalo Thondup, established an intelligence operation with the CIA in 1951 [although CIA aid was only formally established in 1956]. He later upgraded it into a CIA-trained guerrilla unit whose recruits parachuted back into Tibet.”[4]

Indeed, according to formerly secret US intelligence documents (released in the late 1990s), it turned out that “[f]or much of the 1960s, the CIA provided the Tibetan exile movement

with \$1.7 million a year for operations against China, including an annual subsidy of \$180,000 for the Dalai Lama".[5] By 1969, however, it appears that covert support for the Tibetan cause had either served its geopolitical purpose (or it was decided that these operations were simply no longer effective), and the CIA announced the withdrawal of its aid for the Tibetan revolutionaries. That said, support for the Tibetan freedom fighters was still provided by the Indian and Taiwanese governments "until 1974, two years after President Richard Nixon normalized U.S. relations with China" (as were the U.S. subsidies for the Dalai Lama, which also continued until 1974): however, thereafter - especially once the Dalai Lama urged the fighters to put down their weapons - the violent resistance collapsed and the "CIA quietly paid to resettle the survivors".[6] With the apparent end of CIA operations in Tibet, John Kraus (2003) observes that although:

"...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."[7]

Thus Kraus adds that in 1979 the Dalai Lama was "finally granted a visa by President Jimmy Carter... to visit the United States" and 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 successive U.S. administrations and a responsive world community on the Tibet situation". As this article will demonstrate, a large part of this freedom work is presently being actively supported by the NED, so the following section will now examine this organization and its anti-democratic history.

### **The National Endowment for Democracy: Revisiting the CIA Connection**

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was established in 1984 with bipartisan support during President Reagan's administration to "foster the infrastructure of democracy - the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities" around the world.[8] Considering Reagan's well documented misunderstanding of what constitutes democratic governance,[9] it is fitting that Allen Weinstein, the NED's first acting president, observed that in fact "A lot of what we [the NED] do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA".[10] So for example, it is not surprising that during the 1990 elections in Nicaragua it has been estimated that "for every dollar of NED or AID funding there were several dollars of CIA funding".[11]

By building upon the pioneering work of liberal philanthropists (like the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations') - who have a long history of co-opting progressive social movements - it appears that the NED was envisaged by US foreign policy elites to be a more suitable way to provide strategic funding to nongovernmental organizations than via covert CIA funding.[12] Indeed, the NED's 'new' emphasis on overt funding of geostrategically useful groups, as opposed to the covert funding, appears to have lent an aura of respect to the NED's work, and has enabled them, for the most part, to avoid much critical commentary in the mainstream media.

The seminal book exposing the NED's 'democratic' *modus operandi*, is William I. Robinson's (1996) *Promoting Polyarchy*, which as its title suggests, lays out the argument that instead of promoting more participatory forms of democracy, the NED actually works to promote polyarchy. Robinson argues that the NED's active promotion of polyarchy or low-intensity

democracy “is aimed not only at mitigating the social and political tensions produced by elite-based and undemocratic status quos, but also at suppressing popular and mass aspirations for more thoroughgoing democratisation of social life in the twenty-first century international order.” His book furnishes detailed examples of how the NED has successfully imposed polyarchal arrangements on four countries, Chile, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and Haiti; while similarly, Barker (2006) has illustrated the NED’s anti-democratic involvement in facilitating and manipulating the ‘colour revolutions’ which recently swept across Eastern Europe. More recently, both Barker and Gerald Sussman (2006) have provided detailed examinations’ of how the NED works to promote a low intensity public sphere (globally) through its selective funding of media organizations.[13] This article will now extend these three initial studies by critically examining the NED’s support for Tibetan media projects from 1990 onwards.

### **‘Democracy Promoters’ and Tibet**

The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) was founded in 1988 and is a non-profit membership organization with offices in Washington, DC, Amsterdam, Berlin and Brussels. Their website notes that they “fundamentally believe that there must be a political solution based on direct dialogue between the Dalai Lama and his representatives and the People’s Republic of China.” ICT received their first NED grant (of the 1990s) in 1994 to:

“...enhance Chinese knowledge of Tibet by contributing articles about Tibet to newspapers and magazines within China and abroad; translating books about Tibet into Chinese; and facilitating a series of discussion meetings among key Chinese and Tibetan figures, focusing on bringing Chinese journalists and pro-democracy leaders together with Tibetan leaders in exile.”

Since then, the ICT has received regular support from the NED, obtaining subsequent grants in 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003 (all for media work except the 1997 grant). Like many groups that obtain NED aid, ICT are not afraid to boast of their ‘democratic’ connections, and in 2005 they even awarded one of their annual Light of Truth awards to the president of the NED, Carl Gershman. Furthermore, the year before (in 2004) ICT gave the same award to both Vaclav Havel (who had received the NED’s Democracy Award in 1991, and serves on the advisory board of the Project on Justice in Times of Transition), and also to one of the earliest ‘democracy promoting’ organizations, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation. (For a summary of the key ‘democratic’ connections of the Project on Justice in Times of Transition and all the other groups mentioned in this article see, Barker (2007) *Hijacking Human Rights: A Critical Examination of Human Rights Watch’s Americas Branch and their Links to the ‘Democracy’ Establishment*. Due to this article’s heavy reliance on internet sources most links have been omitted from the paper, however, a fully referenced paper can be obtained from the author upon request.)

Some of ICT’s directors are also integral members of the ‘democracy promoting’ establishment, and include Bette Bao Lord (who is the chair of Freedom House, and a director of Freedom Forum),[14] Gare A. Smith (who has previously served as principal deputy assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor), Julia Taft (who is a former director of the NED, the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State and Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, has worked for USAID, and has also served as the President and CEO of InterAction), and finally, Mark Handelman (who is also a director of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights, an organization whose work is

ideologically linked to the NED's longstanding interventions in Haiti).[15] The ICT's board of advisors also presents two individuals who are closely linked to the NED, Harry Wu, and Qiang Xiao (who is the former executive director of the NED-funded Human Rights in China).[16] Like their board of directors, ICT's international council of advisors includes many 'democratic' notables like Vaclav Havel, Fang Lizhi (who in 1995 - at least - was a board member of Human Rights in China), Jose Ramos-Horta (who serves on the international advisory board for the Democracy Coalition Project), Kerry Kennedy (who is a director of the NED-funded China Information Center), Vytautas Landsbergis (who is an international patron of the British-based neoconservative Henry Jackson Society - see Clark, 2005), and until her recent death, the "mid-wife of the neocons" Jeane J. Kirkpatrick (who was also linked to 'democratic' groups like Freedom House and the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies).[17]

Next up is the Tibet Fund, who first received NED aid in 1990 to "produce audio cassettes that will bring world and Tibetan news into rural communities in Tibet." They then received continued NED support for this work in 1994 and 1996, whereupon the distribution of the audio tapes was extended to Tibetan exile communities in India and Nepal as well as those in Tibet. In 1996, the Tibet Fund also received NED aid on behalf of the Tibet Voice Project, "for an educational initiative based in Dharamsala, India, aimed at raising the social, political, economic and environmental awareness of Tibetans through audio-visual media." The NED notes that:

"Particular emphasis will be given to speeches of the Dalai Lama on the topics of democracy and human rights. In Dharamsala, it will continue a series of lectures and films emphasizing social issues, politics, the economy and environment for new refugees and Tibetans in exile; and will organize grassroots level dialogues between Tibetans in exile and Indian youth to increase awareness and support for the Tibetan cause in India."

The Tibet Fund's work with the Tibet Voice Project was continued in 1998, and the Fund also received NED aid to run "an electronic media workshop for Tibetan journalists, and to introduce a bi-monthly Chinese language news magazine about Tibet." Tenzing Choephel is the Tibetan scholarship program co-ordinator for the Tibet Fund, and it is important to note that he previously helped "lay the foundation of the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy [a group that was founded in 1996 and received NED funding in 1999], where he worked as an Office Administrator / English Researcher for three years in Dharamsala." Finally it is interesting to observe that three people who are involved with the International Campaign for Tibet are linked to the Tibet fund, these are Lodi G. Gyari (who is the executive chairman of the board of the ICT, and an emeritus director of the Tibet Fund), Gehlek Rinpoche (who serves on ICT's advisory board, and is a director of the Tibet Fund), and Tenzin N. Tethong (who serves on ICT's advisory board, and is a founder and emeritus director of the Tibet Fund).

Another group that has received strong NED backing is the London-based Tibet Information Network (TIN), who between 1999 and 2004 received annual NED grants (excepting 2000) to "provide comprehensive, accurate information about political, social, and economic developments in Tibet to Tibetan audiences, the international community, human rights groups, and the media." TIN was cofounded in 1987 by Nicholas Howen (who is now the secretary general of the International Commission of Jurists) and Robert J. Barnett. Robert J. Barnett was the Director of TIN between 1987 and 1998 and now works at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, alongside fellow faculty member Andrew J. Nathan (who is an editor of the NED's *Journal of Democracy*, and also serves on the advisory board for the NED-funded

*Beijing Spring* magazine). It is important to note that between 1998 and 2002 – the time coinciding with the start of the NED’s support for TIN – the organization was directed by Richard Oppenheimer who incidentally had just spent 22 years working for the BBC World Service. In 2002, Oppenheimer was then replaced by the world famous Tibetologist, Thierry Dodin, who left TIN in 2005 when it was announced that TIN “had to close down for lack of funds”, and he subsequently went on to direct the TibetInfoNet.[18]

The Tibetan Literary Society received NED aid between 2000 and 2005 to publish *the Bod-Kyi-Dus-Bab (Tibet Times)*, a Tibetan language newspaper which was founded in 1996 and is published three times a month in Dharamsala, India. In 1998 and 1999 the newspaper itself also received direct support from the NED. Another group to receive NED support is the Tibet Multimedia Center, which received three grants from the NED between 2000 to 2002 to:

“...provide objective information about Tibet for Tibetans in the country and in exile as well as for audiences in China. The center will produce audio and videocassettes, organize debates among Tibetan high school students in exile and publish a Chinese language magazine to educate the Chinese public about the situation in Tibet and the struggle for human rights.”

Between 1999 and 2005 the Tibetan Review Trust Society received four grants to publish the *Tibetan Review*, a monthly English-language news magazine based in New Delhi, India, “that covers Tibet-related news and analysis.” The *Tibetan Review* was founded in 1968 and it’s precursor was Lodi G. Gyari’s (see earlier) *The Voice of Tibet*: in the early 1970s the *Tibetan Review* was published by Tenzin N. Tethong (who at the time headed the International Campaign for Tibet), and after passing through the hands of a number of other Directors it is now being edited by Pema Thinley (who is the former Executive Editor of Tibetan Bulletin, the “official journal of the Central Tibet Administration of His Holiness the Dalai Lama”).

Finally, in 2001 and 2002, the Voice of Tibet – a Tibetan-language shortwave radio station which was founded in 1996 – obtained NED aid to provide “regular news about Tibet, the Tibetan exile community, and the Tibetan government-in-exile, for listeners in Tibet and in exile in neighboring countries.” According to their website “[e]very day Voice of Tibet broadcasts a 30 minutes news service in the Tibetan language and a 15 minutes news service in Mandarin Chinese.” Voice of Tibet was founded by three Norwegian NGOs; the Norwegian Human Rights House, the Norwegian Tibet Committee and Worldview Rights. The final group is particularly interesting as it is also known as the Points of Peace Foundation, which is a “human rights organisation based in Stavanger, Norway, with a mandate to support Nobel Peace Prize Laureates in urgent need of media, dialogue and communication assistance in their home countries and internationally.” Crucially, the Points of Peace Foundation’s advisory board includes Jose Ramos-Horta, John Hume (who is a former patron of the British version of the NED, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy), Aung San Suu Kyi (who is a member of the international advisory board of the Democracy Coalition Project, and is an honorary director of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), Wangari Maathai (who is a member of the international advisory board of the Democracy Coalition Project, and is a trustee of World Learning), Mairead Corrigan Maguire (who is a member of the international council of advisors for the International Campaign for Tibet), and Muhammad Yunus (who is on the advisory board of Stockholm Challenge, where he sits alongside NED director Esther Dyson, and US Institute for Peace advisory board member John Gage). (Two other groups to receive NED aid for

communication work in Tibet since 1990 for which no further information could be ascertained include the Tibet Justice Center (which received a single grant in 2002), and the Tibet Museum (which received NED support in both 2004 and 2005).

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the close ties that exist between the Dalai Lama's non-violent campaign for Tibetan independence and U.S. foreign policy elites who are actively supporting Tibetan causes through the NED. This finding is particularly worrying given the high international media profile of many of the groups exposed in this article, especially when it is remembered that the NED's activities are intimately linked with those of the CIA. This funding issue is clearly problematic for Tibetan (or foreign) activists campaigning for Tibetan freedom, as the overwhelmingly anti-democratic nature of the NED can only weaken the legitimacy of the claims of any group associated with the NED. In this regard it seems only fitting that progressive activists truly concerned with promoting freedom and democracy in Tibet should first and foremost cast a critical eye over the antidemocratic funders of many of the Tibetan groups identified in this study. Only then will they be able to reappraise the sustainability of their work in the light of the NED's controversial background. Once this step has been taken, perhaps progressive solutions for restoring democratic governance to Tibet can be generated by concerned activists, so that Tibetan people wanting to reclaim their homeland will be able to be more sure that they are bringing democracy home to Tibet, not polyarchy.

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