

CIA Put Nuclear Spy Devices in Himalayas

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The Central Intelligence Agency recruited 14 American mountain-climbers to place nuclear-powered instruments on two peaks of the Himalayas to spy on Chinese atomic tests and missile firings in the 1960s.

The magazine *Outside*, which is published by Rolling Stone, reported that one of the nuclear power packs was lost on a mountainside in India whose snowpack feeds the headwaters of the Ganges River, which is sacred to the Hindus.

"Until the plutonium [the source of the radioactivity in the power pack] deteriorates, which may take centuries," the magazine said, "the device will remain a radioactive menace that could leak into the Himalayan snow and infiltrate the Indian river system through the headwaters of the Ganges."

Outside reported and The Washington Post confirmed that the first expedition took place in 1965 and ended in the loss of the instrument and that the second foray happened two years later and ended in what one former CIA official termed a "partial success."

"It was an ingenious system and was backed by sound ideas," the former CIA official said yesterday. "But what I have to say is that it paid off a little bit but not spectacularly."

The article in *Outside*, which was written by Howard Kohn, an associate editor of *Rolling Stone*, said that the first expedition involved the carrying of a 125-pound instrument to the summit of Nanda Devi, a mountain of 23,645 feet in the Uttar Pradesh region near India's northeastern border with China.

A year before the expedition, China had exploded its first nuclear bomb and was confronting India along its mountain borders. China was also mounting what one CIA official called "hostile acts" in Laos, Vietnam and the Straits of Taiwan.

"We needed to know what the Chinese were testing to figure out their intentions," the former CIA official said. For political and geographic reasons, "the U2 [reconnaissance plane] was of no use to us there and our reconnaissance satellites were not yet up to the task so we tried this scheme."

Outside reported that the first time American mountain climbers tried to carry the instrument to the summit of Nanda Devi, storms turned them back short of the mountain top. The climbers stashed their device and its power pack in a "sheltered cranny" on the southern lee of the mountain.

The same climbers returned to the shelter in the spring of 1966 only to find that the device

and the plutonium power pack had been carried away, apparently by an avalanche.

Some of the same climbers and a few new ones were recruited by the CIA for a third attempt in 1967. This time, an identical device was to be placed at the summit of Nanda Koi, a 22,400-foot mountain adjacent to Nanda Devi.

This time, the attempt succeeded, *Outside* said. The climbers left the instrument on the north ridge of the 21,000-foot level of the mountain, where it had a line-of-sight view of China's secret nuclear and missile test ranges in Sinkiang Province 500 miles to the north.

"It worked," the article said. "The nuclear battery, still warm to the touch in the frosty air, hummed and vibrated as the antenna scanned the northern horizon. The climbers celebrated briefly, then retraced their path downward."

Outside said that 14 American mountain-climbers were recruited for all three attempts. The magazine reported they were paid \$1,000 a month for work on which most of the climbers spent a year. The article said the CIA had the cooperation of India's Central Bureau of Investigation each time its climbers scaled the Himalayas.

None of the American mountain climbers was named in the article, which said that the 14 included some of the "premier climbers" in America.