BOOK

REVIEW: 'The Most Dangerous Man in America,' by Bill Minutaglio and Steven L. Davis

NONFICTION: A suspenseful account of the escape from prison of Timothy Leary, the High Priest of LSD, and the global manhunt ordered by President Nixon to track him down.

By Glenn C. Altschul, Special to The Star Tribune | January 26, 2018 – 1:19 AM

In October, 1970, William Eagleton, head of U.S. Operations in Algeria, sent a secret cable to Secretary of State William Rogers. Timothy Leary, the High Priest of LSD, who had broken out of jail in California with the assistance of the Weather Underground, had arrived in Algiers, Eagleton reported. Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver had been in arranging Leary’s exit.

Leary eluded capture for more than two years. In “The Most Dangerous Man in America,” Bill Minutaglio and Steven Davis, the co-authors of “Dallas 63,” tell the story of Leary’s odyssey—and the manhunt organized by President Richard Nixon to destroy a union of ‘drugs and dynamite’.

Making effective use of recently discovered primary sources, dozens of interviews and Leary’s personal papers, the authors follow the former Harvard professor from prison (where he was serving a 10-year sentence for possession of two marijuana cigarettes) to Algeria, Switzerland and Afghanistan. Fast-paced and suspenseful, their book captures a mad—and menacing—moment in American history.

Clearly, Minutaglio and Davis have done their homework. In my judgment, however, they compromise their credibility by presenting in italics and sometimes surrounded by quotation marks “insecure thoughts and monologues derived from memoirs and primary sources.” At times, moreover, non-italicized observations contain what appear to be incongruous thoughts. The authors assert, for example, that getting Switzerland to extradite Leary will be for Nixon “like putting Al Capone behind bars.”

That said, “The Most Dangerous Man in America” is swathed in embellished details, by turns outlandish and outrageous, that illuminate 1970s American culture and politics. Afterdowning some LSD, Dock Ellis, a pitcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates, we learn, woke up, wondered “what happened to yesterday,” went to the ballpark, “wouldn’t tell if he was facing Bubba Smith or Mickey Mouse,” and hurled a no-hitter. The FBI’s bag of dirty tricks, the authors reveal, included fake news that brought tensions between Cleaver and Huey Newton to a boil. And, in an exchange in the Oval Office with TV personality Art Linkletter, whose daughter killed herself after ingesting LSD, Nixon opined that the Swedes, Pines, Brits and Irish were “wrong races” even though they chucked too much, while drug societies came apart. “At least with liquor,” the president concluded, “I don’t lose motivation.”

Leary returned to an America less inclined to create a counterculture than to engage in a culture war. Always willing to “adapt,” Leary blamed John Lennon, Bob Dylan and the Weatherman’s “a bewildered, demented band of Rotweilites.” Following his release from custody, the authors indicate, Leary became a celebrity lecturer, coming up with G. Gordon Liddy for debate on college campuses. On his deathbed in 1996, he clerched his fist, asked: “Why?” and then “Why not?”

Glenn C. Altschul is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

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