

The Executive Wallet

Your business essentials in a slim leather case

SHOP NOW

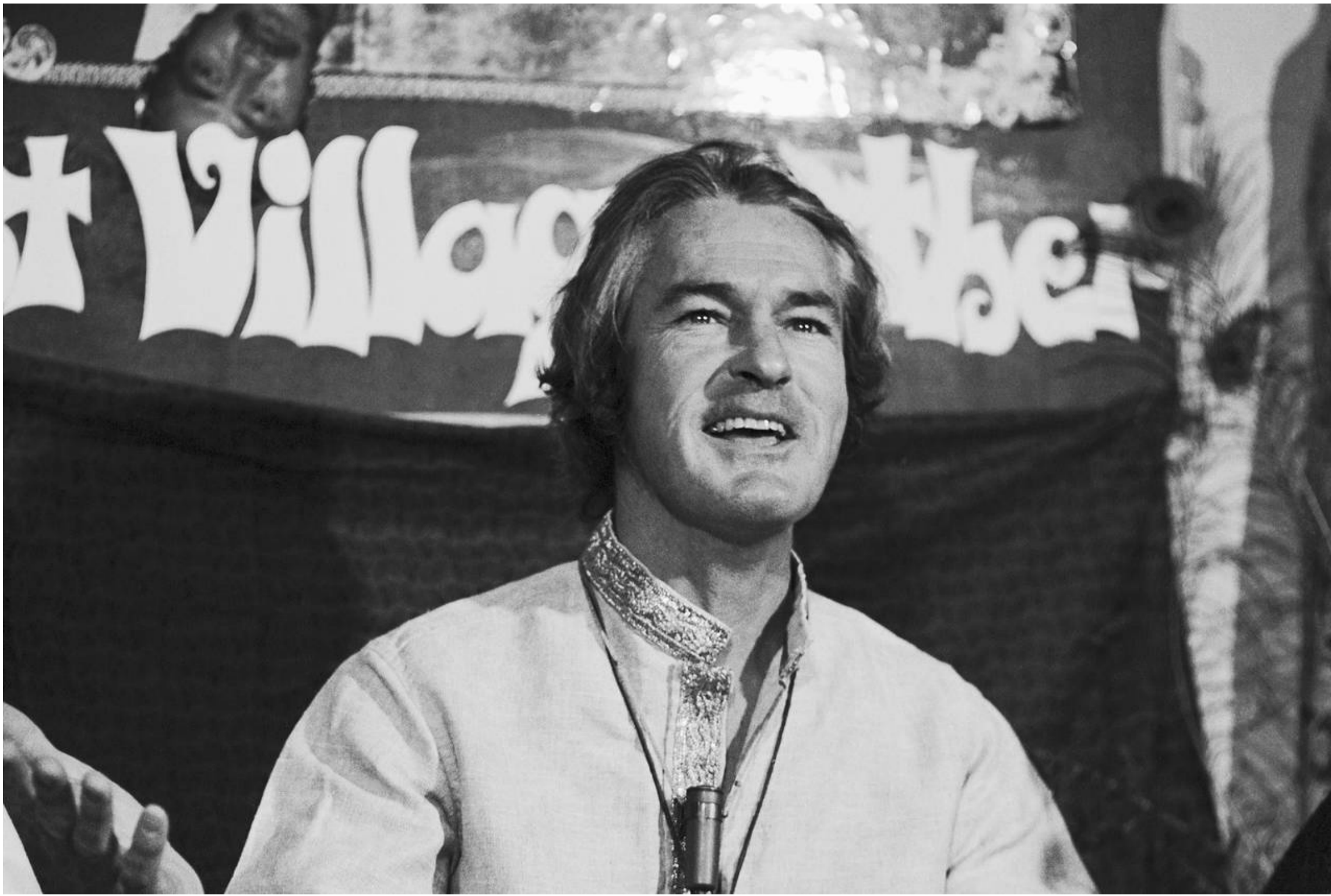


bellroy

BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

Review: Timothy Leary, 'The Most Dangerous Man in America'

The LSD apostle's escape from jail took him to Afghanistan, Algeria, Switzerland—and back to a cell in California, next to Charles Manson's. Edward Kosner reviews 'The Most Dangerous Man in America' by Bill Minutaglio and Steven L. Davis.



Timothy Leary at a press conference in 1968. PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner

Updated Jan. 18, 2018 7:12 pm ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT

60

It's fashionable these days to proclaim the Trump era the weirdest interlude in modern American history. But it's almost an Augustan Age compared with the first few years of Richard Nixon's presidency. For those too old or too young to recall that period in the early 1970s, nearly a half-century ago, here's a cheat-sheet:

Nixon was carpet-bombing Hanoi, secretly invading Cambodia, covertly recording White House conversations, compiling a list of enemies (including Sen. Ted Kennedy, Barbra Streisand and Jets quarterback Joe Namath) and masterminding the Watergate break-in and coverup. The radical Weathermen were blowing up banks, Army recruiting stations and a toilet in the U.S. Capitol. The tuggishly photogenic Black Panthers were ambushing white cops and running day-care centers, and a former Harvard psychology professor named Timothy Leary, the apostle of LSD, was being hunted by Nixon, who called him "the most dangerous man in America."

Leary is one of those oddball Americans who enjoy their evanescent moments of fame and then linger on in memory as prophet or charlatan. But in his time, Leary was a stoned icon to artists and poets, hippie trippers, sybaritic socialites and revolutionary bomb-throwers. "Turn on, tune in, drop out," was his mantra, and he drove Nixon crazy. Already plotting his re-election as a law-and-order crusader, the president craved Leary's scalp.

This was a problem, because in 1970, Leary, sentenced to 10 years after cops found two marijuana butts in his car ashtray, had escaped from a minimum-security compound in California by shimmying along a cable. The saga of his fugitive odyssey and the government's desperate manhunt is told in "The Most Dangerous Man in America," by Bill Minutaglio and Steven L. Davis. It's a rollicking tale that brings to life the antic atmosphere of America in the "Me Decade."

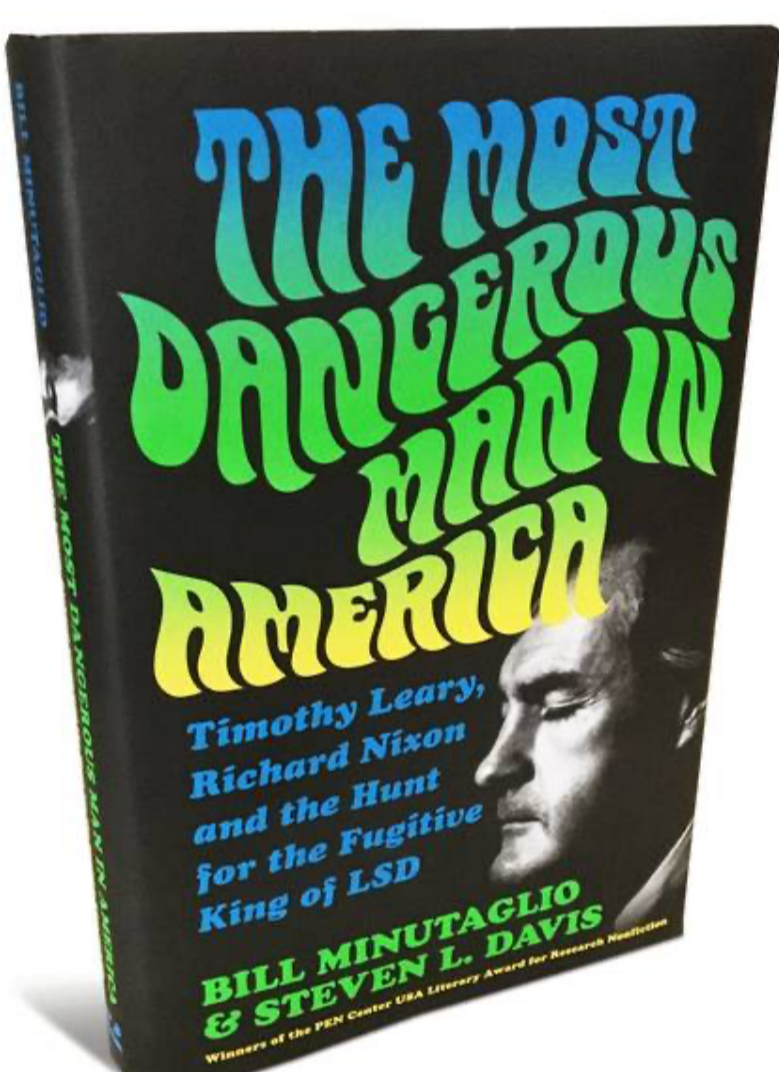


PHOTO: WSJ

THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN AMERICA

By Bill Minutaglio and Steven L. Davis
Twelve, 384 pages, \$30

A rich band of hippie drug smugglers called the Brotherhood of Eternal Love allied with the Weathermen to hustle Leary and his wife, Rosemary, in disguise to Algiers, where fugitive Eldridge Cleaver and a Black Panther posse had been ensconced in an elegant "embassy." It was the beginning of a 28-month adventure that took Leary to Vienna, Swiss ski resorts, Beirut and, finally, Afghanistan, where he was cornered and bundled onto a flight back to California.

"The Most Dangerous Man in America" is written in the present tense like a thriller. Scenes inside solitary-confinement cells, squalid dope and love nests, and the Black Panther "embassy" are described in pointillist detail: "He steps out of the car, but Rosemary refuses to join him as he darts through the rain toward the embassy. She is smoking, looking very worried, and the weather is adding to her gloom." Readers may wonder how the writers managed to reconstruct these 45-year-old episodes, especially since their protagonist was tripping nonstop. In an authors' note, Messrs. Minutaglio and Davis assure readers that every scene, thought and conversation in the book is based on exhaustive research, though they provide no footnotes to show what came from where. One of their earlier books won a PEN nonfiction research prize, so we'll have to take their word for it.

Leary had proclaimed a Declaration of Revolution ("Listen, comrades: The liberation war has just begun . . .") to get the radicals to help him escape America. But he and the Panthers were a mismatch from the start, although they shared an appreciation of the hashish always on offer at the embassy. Leary generally played the obsequious stooge to Cleaver's macho revolutionary, absorbing diatribes from the author of "Soul on Ice," the only man to appear at the same time on America's best-seller lists and on the FBI's most-wanted list. But Cleaver finally lost patience and had the Learys locked into dingy hotel rooms, fugitive prisoners of the fugitives.

Leary was able to escape to Switzerland, where he came under the wing of a mysterious character rumored to be a fabulously rich arms merchant. Leary and his new British girlfriend lived luxuriously in Lausanne, went to a party with Andy Warhol in St. Moritz, and met the inventor of LSD, who chastised him for touting it to the young. They became chums anyway. Leary managed to write a book that the arms dealer peddled to a publisher for \$250,000. He barely got to enjoy any of the money before he went back to prison, where his next-door cellmate was Charles Manson.

It's hard to find anything to admire about Leary. The man who urged the murder of Nixon and bragged that he'd done "more than anyone else in history to destroy the minds of a lot of white middle-class kids" pleaded LSD derangement at his trial. Convicted, he turned fink and testified against all his old comrades. In prison, his IQ tested at 143, with no sign of degeneration from all those drugs. Later, he entered the witness-protection program, wrote books, had cameos in movies, became a talk-show fixture and lectured to standing ovations. He died at 75 of prostate cancer in 1996, and 7 grams of his ashes were, appropriately enough, rocketed into space.

Cleaver also shared a prison with Leary, became a born-again Christian, converted to Mormonism and turned into a conservative Republican. He was arrested for burglary and twice for cocaine possession before he died at 62 in 1998.

After his pardon by Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon spent 20 years trying to rehabilitate his reputation. He wrote nine books and offered his wisdom about world affairs to anyone who would listen, before his death at 81 in 1994.

It's a toss-up whether Leary or Nixon was the more dangerous man in America in their time, but they plainly deserved each other.

Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

Appeared in the January 19, 2018, print edition as 'Hunting The Acid Man.'

SHOW CONVERSATION (60) ▼

SPONSORED OFFERS

WALMART: Walmart coupon: \$10 off all departments

KOHL'S: 20% off your entire order with Kohl's coupon

EXPEDIA: Expedia promo: 50% off fully-refundable hotel bookings

EBAY: Up to 15% off branded sneakers & more with eBay coupon

HOME DEPOT: 10% off furniture using Home Depot coupon code

TARGET: \$15 gift card with Spectra breast pump - Target offer

THE JOURNAL.

EPISODE #207

What the 1960s Riots Can Tell Us About Today

Listen Now

RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

- Samsung Galaxy Note 20: This Pandemic Sure Changed Smartphone Marketing
- This 30-Ton Robot Could Help Scientists Produce the Crops of the Future
- What Kamala Harris Brings to Biden's Ticket
- Why the U.S. Trip to Taiwan Bothers Beijing
- Coronavirus Pandemic Fuels China's Self-Driving Cars

WSJ MEMBER MESSAGE

WSJ Jobs summit: Job Seekers Anonymous

Hear from a career coach and a therapist on how to emotionally and mentally navigate the job search, plus submit your own questions.

RSVP

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

- White House Says Most Coronavirus Job Losses Likely to Be Temporary
- Israel, U.A.E. Agree to Establish Formal Diplomatic Ties
- A Deadly Coronavirus Was Inevitable. Why Was No One Ready?
- Weekly Unemployment Claims Drop Below One Million for First Time Since March
- Stir-Crazy Travelers Are Ordering Airline Food to Relive the Flying Experience
- Are Florida Schools Reopening During Coronavirus? Parents Can't Tell as State and Districts Fight
- Coronavirus Grips Midwest Rural Areas That Had Been Spared
- Young Wuhan Evacuee Finds No Refuge From Coronavirus in U.S.
- Cities Weigh Cutting Police Budgets and Discover How Hard That Is
- What Happens to All of the Unsold Clothes?

BACK TO TOP ▲