Intelligence in Public Media

Need to Know: World War II and the Rise of American Intelligence

Nicholas Reynolds (Mariner Books, 2022), 488 pages, photos.

Reviewed by J.R. Seeger

In summer 1940, war raged from the Low Countries to North Africa to China. As its allies fell, the British Empire mobilized, seemingly alone, while the United States remained uncommitted and isolationist sentiments ran deep. Hoping to shift attitudes, in June and July 1940 President Roosevelt sent Wall Street lawyer William Donovan on two fact-finding trips to the United Kingdom. Donovan was to observe and report back on the chances the UK would survive the Nazi onslaught. Equally important was Donovan's role in selling the importance of the Lend-Lease Program at home, which provided the Royal Navy with retired US Navy ships that could help in convoy duty. By sending an Irish American war hero and well-known Republican, Roosevelt hoped Donovan's assessments would not be considered simply White House propaganda.

Donovan's trip was also played into a much larger effort by London to counter German propaganda in the United States and bring it into the war on London's side. With the assistance of William Stephenson, the senior MI6 officer in the United States, Donovan was given full exposure to the entire complement of British clandestine efforts against the Nazis. He toured commando training and multiple UK military bases, including in Gibraltar and Egypt, and was briefed by the heads of MI6 and the Special Operations Executive. When Donovan returned to the United States, Stephenson and UK leaders used every possible means to make sure that Roosevelt integrated Donovan into the US intelligence establishment.

But what was that establishment? This is where Nicholas Reynolds, for a time the CIA Museum's contract historian and author of *Writer, Sailor, Soldier, Spy: Ernest Hemingway's Secret Adventures, 1935–1961*, begins *Need to Know*. In 1941, a better description of the US intelligence establishment would have been intelligence fiefdoms. The State Department received reporting from its missions abroad. The War and Navy Departments had attachés with the responsibility of reporting on military intelligence. Small cryptographic units in both departments worked on foreign government ciphers. The attorney general and FBI director received reporting from their corresponding field offices—the senior US attorneys in the various states and the FBI divisions. Treasury received information from the Secret Service and Customs. However, none of those offices was obliged to provide raw intelligence or analysis to the White House.[a] And each jealously held their "intelligence" and prevented the other parts of the government from even knowing what types of collection they were undertaking.

Inside the army and navy, there was very little interest in anything but conventional warfare. The Marines had long experience in "small wars" and even produced a manual on the subject in 1940. However, the manual focused far more on what we call counterinsurgency rather than unconventional warfare. As war in Europe and Asia loomed, the services focused on what they could do best in a great power conflict and that did not include unconventional warfare.

Reynolds begins by explaining to the reader why his book belongs on already-crowded shelves detailing US intelligence operations in the 1940s. Reynolds asks: "But hasn't the story been told? What could be missing from the American intelligence bookshelf?" (xix) War's end generated dozens of memoirs and declassified tales of operations by members of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the FBI. A quick search of books published in the first two decades of this century reveals well over 50, again a mix of memoirs and histories based on recently archived documents. Anyone interested in the history of US intelligence in World War II has plenty of volumes to choose from. That said, Reynolds's book is a must for any serious student of the role of intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination in the war years.

Why is this? While most books focus on a single service or a single aspect of US intelligence operations

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[a] President Roosevelt was given to nurturing his own intelligence sources. See Steven Usdin, "Stranger than Fiction: John Franklin Carter's Career as FDR's Private Intelligence Operative," *Studies in Intelligence* 65, no. 2 (June 2021).

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during the war years, very few balance the multiple aspects of the history that must include consumers, managers, collectors, and analysts. Reynolds offers a trove of detail on the interplay among the various consumers of intelligence, including the White House, cabinet members, commanders in Washington and the theaters, J. Edgar Hoover, and Donovan. He balances this history of political intrigue in Washington with exceptional details of the daily challenges faced by army and navy cryptanalysts, headquarters and field officers of OSS, and the FBI Special Intelligence Service officers based in key cities throughout Latin America.

While there are some adventure tales embedded in this story, Reynolds focuses his attention on the interaction among the major players in Washington and between those players and the seniors in the field. In chapter after chapter, Donovan stands out as probably the most important figure in creating the modern intelligence community. In 1941, after his travels, Donovan imagined a unified service that would include intelligence collection and analysis, special operations, and "morale operations" (his term for secret propaganda). Many authors, including multiple Donovan biographers, have detailed this. Where Reynolds's book is critically important is his effort to show Donovan's full persona: visionary but failed administrator; crafty politician but willing to make and nurture enemies in Washington; strategic thinker but a man who focused almost his entire day-to-day attention on tactical issues that should never have been on his agenda. In sum, Reynolds provides an honest assessment of the man. (332)

Many books on strategic intelligence in World War II focus on either the brilliance of UK and US cryptographers or on the derring-do of special operations efforts, but Reynolds provides an excellent blend of both. He provides a clear and concise history of the importance of both army and navy cryptographers in winning the war in the Pacific as well as revealing some of the lesser known OSS operations in Europe, such as the Sussex teams, which focused on tactical intelligence collection behind German lines just ahead of the Allied advances, or the espionage work of Allen Dulles to collect strategic intelligence on the Nazi war machine.

If there is a shortcoming, it is the minimal attention paid to OSS operations in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater and the entirely independent intelligence-collection effort managed by General MacArthur's staff in the Pacific. OSS in the CBI included substantial intelligence analysis for the theater commanders, morale operations against the Japanese army, secret intelligence collection, paramilitary operations, and operations designed at the end of the war to find and free Allied POWs. Other than a brief discussion of the creation and deployment of OSS Detachment 101 in early 1942, the CBI operations are not described with the same focus and detail as the European operations. In the Pacific, probably because of a personality conflict with Donovan dating back to WW I, MacArthur refused to allow OSS in his area of operations. That did not mean he ignored intelligence collection or special operations. Rather, he created his own intelligence network to support the island-hopping campaign synchronized with the US Navy operations.

This is a small point in what is a critically important book for both scholars and intelligence professionals. Few historians have taken on the task of understanding the full complement of US intelligence operations in the war. Reynolds takes the reader through the war years and describes in detail the challenges faced as the community worked to build a cohesive intelligence picture of the world that was changing through the course of the war. Detailed endnotes and an extensive bibliography provide multiple routes to explore after reading his book.

The personalities, the challenges, and the changes in the intelligence bureaucracy described in *Need To Know* shaped the postwar years of US diplomacy and intelligence. Reynolds's conclusion captures this final point: "This was the legacy of World War II. America began the war with little useful intelligence of any kind but was able to rely on improvisers.… By the end of the war, America had many more intelligence resources … but important issues that had cropped up during the war remained unresolved." (340)

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