

1983

"Wild Bill" Donovan: The Last Hero

Lloyd J. Graybar

Anthony Cave Brown

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Graybar, Lloyd J. and Cave Brown, Anthony (1983) ""Wild Bill" Donovan: The Last Hero," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 36 : No. 5 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol36/iss5/21>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

as a refreshing reexamination of US national security policy development in the nuclear era.

Dr. Joseph E. Thach, Jr.
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense
for Public Affairs

Cave Brown, Anthony. *"Wild Bill"*

Donovan: The Last Hero. New York:
Times Books, 1983. 891pp. \$24.95

Whether "Wild Bill" Donovan deserves the accolade of "the last hero" given him by Dwight Eisenhower is a matter of debate as are many of the facts about Donovan's career in wartime intelligence. What is not a subject of dispute is that his life was indeed eventful. Born in Buffalo, New York in 1883 to a blue-collar, Irish-Catholic family, William Donovan was taught to achieve—in the Catholic Church, in athletics, and in school—by his disciplinarian father. In 1908 Donovan received a doctorate of laws from Columbia University and returned to Buffalo. He soon prospered and made the right connections with the city's Protestant elite through his marriage and in his legal career. Adding to his stature in World War I, he earned a Distinguished Service Cross and eventual field command of the famed Fighting 69th Regiment.

After the war the Republican Donovan's political prospects seemed bright. However, he was unable to overcome a Democratic trend in the Empire State and twice failed in bids for elective office. He did serve as assistant attorney general in the Coolidge administration but when the chance came to enter intelli-

gence work in 1940, he put aside his lucrative legal practice.

According to this latest biographer, Anthony Cave Brown, a British journalist already known to students of World War II as the author of *Bodyguard of Lies*, Donovan apparently had some dealings with military intelligence as far back as the First World War. Cave Brown surmised that in 1916, while traveling throughout Europe for Herbert Hoover's food relief organization, Donovan did some work for the British intelligence services. Although the evidence for this activity is not strong, what is fact is that in 1919 Donovan was persuaded to interrupt a pleasure trip to the Orient to accompany the US ambassador to Japan on a special mission. It was to travel into Siberia to evaluate the White Russian movement of Admiral Alexander Kolchak during the Russian Civil War.

At the outset of World War II, Great Britain's Secret Intelligence Service began cultivating Donovan, now a successful international lawyer operating out of New York and Washington. Why Donovan was approached is unclear. The British might have overrated Donovan's influence in Washington, or perhaps he had indeed rendered them assistance in 1916. However, the association soon paid dividends to the British, for Donovan's law firm assigned one of its talented young men to find a precedent which would allow President Roosevelt to transfer fifty overage destroyers to the Royal Navy in 1940. Donovan's rapport

with British leaders allowed him to tour the war zones extensively; he found that the British had the will and ability to fight on and reported so to the Roosevelt administration and to anyone else willing to listen. For instance, while Cave Brown appears to take exception to the more exaggerated claims of Donovan's influence, he finally concludes that it was Donovan's reports of British (and American) determination to stop Hitler that helped spark Yugoslav resistance to the Nazis in 1941 and delayed the initiation of Operation Barbarossa; this, Cave Brown asserts, prevented Hitler's forces from defeating the Soviet Union in that fateful year.

At this time Roosevelt was attempting to place American foreign policy and rearmament on a bipartisan basis, and it was natural that he turned to Donovan, whom he had long known, for advice on establishing an agency to gather and analyze information about the war potential of the Axis Powers. On 18 June 1941 Roosevelt followed up by naming Donovan to head what was initially called the Office of Coordinator of Information (COI). Military and naval intelligence officials were by no means eager to see another organization established—even denying it a direct hand in their vital Ultra and Magic programs. J. Edgar Hoover, whose FBI had its own ambitious intelligence plans, was also hostile to the COI. But Donovan succeeded in organizing a viable agency, drawing on a pool of bright young men—his “league of gentlemen,” drawn

largely from the academic, business, and legal professions.

This body grew into the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) achieving by 1942 a charter to serve the Joint Chiefs in the fields of sabotage, espionage, and counter espionage, to raise guerrilla troops in enemy-controlled territories, and to perform the more mundane but essential duties of research and analysis. Bureaucratic rivalries persisted, but for the duration of the war the OSS became involved in a maze of activities, primarily in the European, the Mediterranean, and the China-Burma-India theaters. Many of its efforts were unsuccessful, but there were also triumphs—for instance, Allen Dulles' espionage operation in Switzerland which had access to informants within Germany. The author also argues that OSS activities in Hungary and elsewhere in southern and eastern Europe depleted German strength in the West in 1944 and so materially aided the success of the D-day landings; vindication, Cave Brown claims, of Churchill's peripheral strategy. More readily documented is the success of the OSS in supplying and using French resistance fighters to hinder Germany's ability to contain the beachheads.

Despite its services the OSS was dismembered at war's end—Cave Brown speculates that it was in part because of ill will between Donovan and President Harry Truman that ostensibly dated back to a World War I battlefield—and when the CIA was established in 1947 Donovan was not asked to head it. Even so, the fact that former OSS

agents such as Allen Dulles, William Colby, and now William Casey have directed it for most of its existence makes clear the continuity between the two organizations.

In many ways this is an important book, for Cave Brown has had the advantage over such previous Donovan biographers as Corey Ford in having had access to Donovan's massive files. This had enabled the author to study OSS operations in unparalleled depth; yet it has not resulted in a truly satisfying work. Despite the wealth of detail available to him, Cave Brown has had to infer many of the most important points in his study—Donovan's recruitment into intelligence work, the reasons for his eventual dismissal, the results of OSS operations—and often extrapolates more than the evidence warrants. This profusion of minutiae, along with Cave Brown's florid style, makes the book a chore to read. Many students of World War II intelligence activities will undoubtedly find this a rewarding book, but it is not the definitive book on Donovan or on the Office of Strategic Services. Still needed is a work more broadly based in sources and more convincing in its judgments (admittedly this might not be easy to achieve given the nature of intelligence work). But until such a monograph does appear, Anthony Cave Brown's *"Wild Bill" Donovan* must be reckoned with by those who want to learn about the OSS and its founder.

Lloyd J. Graybar
Eastern Kentucky University

Polmar, Norman. *Strategic Weapons: An Introduction*. Revised 2nd Ed. New York: Crane-Russak, 1982. 176pp. \$16.50 paper \$8.95

Norman Polmar's singular achievement in this brief treatise for the layman is to provide a dispassionate account of the strategic weaponry and delivery systems built by the United States and the Soviet Union over the last thirty years. As an introduction to the subject, Polmar's book is an excellent and useful catalog of the evolution of hardware and force structure on both sides, with some attention to the other nuclear powers—Great Britain, France, Red China, India, and "perhaps" Israel. Most importantly, Polmar has avoided the technocratic jargon that makes so much of the literature on this vitally important subject undecipherable for the concerned general reader. The National Strategic Information Center sponsored this timely revision of Polmar's earlier work, and deserves to be commended for doing so. It is this kind of balanced effort to understand a most complex issue that is conspicuously lacking in the current highly emotional debate over our future nuclear weapons policy.

Polmar has no axe to grind in offering this summary account of strategic weapons development. His central concern is to provide a chronological narrative of key evolutions in delivery systems from 1945 to the present. He is at his best when dealing with the major milestones in the evolution of weapon systems technology and its impact on force