'Wild Bill Donovan' review: Douglas Waller reveals a chaotic, courageous dynamo

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By Special to The Oregonian

WILD BILL DONOVAN
Douglas Waller
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A decorated World War I veteran, Wall Street lawyer, Republican politician and diplomat without portfolio, Bill Donovan understood that knowledge is power. Anticipating that the United States would soon do battle with Germany, Italy and Japan, he persuaded President Franklin D. Roosevelt, his classmate at Columbia Law School, to create an organization to gather, analyze and interpret information about the Axis forces, spread propaganda and conduct "special operations" behind enemy lines.

In July of 1941, much to the consternation of the Army, Navy and FBI, which had their own intelligence gathering operations, Donovan became "Coordinator of Information," with orders to collect data "which may bear on national security" and perform other unspecified "supplementary activities." Starting virtually from scratch, he built the Office of Strategic Services, America's first national spy agency.

In "Wild Bill Donovan: The Spymaster Who Created the OSS and Modern American Espionage," Douglas Waller, a former correspondent for Time and Newsweek and the author of several books about military history, draws on recently declassified material to provide a richly detailed account, by turns juicy and judicious, of the "father of American espionage." A chaotic administrator (who didn't hide his "womanizing"), Waller indicates, Donovan was courageous,
creative, and charismatic. Although his OSS didn't win or even shorten World War II, the agency's techniques and many of its operatives (including Allen Dulles, Richard Helms and William Casey) "permeated" its successor, the CIA.

Waller vividly re-creates Donovan's "try almost anything" approach. The spymaster designed an operation, not disclosed to Chiang Kai-shek, an ally of the United States, to gather intelligence in China. He considered sending death squads to kill Adolf Hitler. He strapped on his helmet, battle kit and Medal of Honor and landed with American troops on Normandy beach. And he sent the White House "transcripts" of meetings inside the Vatican (which included peace feelers from Japan), only to learn that they had been fabricated by Virgilio Scattolini, a "fairly successful pornographic novelist."

Donovan, Waller reveals, played a key role in setting up the legal machinery to prosecute Nazis for war crimes. OSS staffers gathered information for Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, America's chief counsel at Nuremberg, assembled a panel of psychiatrists to assess pleas of insanity and even designed the courtroom. Donovan joined the trial staff, hoping to avoid charges that the Allies were dispensing "a victor's justice" by persuading Hermann Göring to take responsibility for his crimes and testify against other Nazis in exchange for a promise that he would be executed as a soldier by firing squad (and not hanged as a common criminal). Instead, after a falling out with Jackson, Donovan was sent home.

Life was like that for Wild Bill: His aspirations often outran his achievements. And he was willing to cut legal and ethical corners in the service of a just cause. A "Rube Goldberg collection of disparate programs, functions and initiatives," Waller concludes, his OSS made "mistakes and botched missions." Nonetheless, Donovan played a pivotal role in changing, for better and worse, the conduct of modern warfare -- and of foreign policy in peacetime.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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