

13 October 1972

FOIAB3B

Secret and nonsensical

R. HARRIS SMITH:
OSS

458pp. University of California Press (IBEG). £3.95.

General Walter Bedell Smith once startled a postwar dinner party by suggesting the war might have been won much earlier had the United States diverted the time, money and men expended on the Office of Strategic Services "and the rest of that damn secret nonsense" to the regular forces. It was a singular speculation for a man who had been General

Eisenhower's Chief of Staff and, later, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

R. Harris Smith's OSS, however, is evidence that Bedell Smith was displaying his usual horse sense. The picture of the OSS during and immediately after the Second World War is a depressing one. Its successor, the CIA, has its faults. But the OSS, as depicted in this book, was a mixture of idealism, naivety, incompetence and intrigue seldom matched in the annals of government in America or anywhere else.

Mr Smith's wide reading and extensive research have not saved the book from ingenuousness and error. He begins by labelling his work "the secret history" of the organization, but there is little of note in it that has not been written before and often much better. He gets things wrong. It was the American Navy, not the Royal Navy, that was responsible for landing General Patton's forces in Morocco in 1942. The Purple Gang operated in Detroit, not Philadelphia. Stephen Bailey is not, nor has he been, "President of Syracuse University", which is headed by a chancellor.

Mr Smith's main problem seems to be his tendency to write about the OSS and its operations in North Africa, Europe and the Far East in absolutes. Men and organizations are heroic or dastardly, faithful or treasonable. The story is told in blacks and whites, whereas the dirty, dangerous game played by the OSS is best described in varying shades of grey.

Nor does Mr Smith pay enough attention to one of the more important decisions taken at the outset by General William "Wild Bill" Donovan, the founder and director of the OSS. He was determined to consolidate within the organization all operations—espionage, sabotage, assistance to guerrilla movements. This was an error. The OSS planned operations based on intelligence reports produced by the OSS. There was little objective study of these reports; if they were the organization's, the assumption was, then they must be accurate. They often were not, and the operation failed. Oddly, the CIA, despite the sorry record of its predecessor, has continued this organization, "with" depressing re-

sults—such as the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs.

Mr Smith's villains include not only the Germans, Japanese and Italians, but the British intelligence services, any official who seemed to doubt the OSS's competence and its right to order the political end of the war as it saw fit, and, of course, all "colonialists". The style is an extraordinary mixture of exaggeration and parochialism.

Mr Smith writes that "the British Army took a respite of several months from the war against Hitler to suppress the revolt" of the EAM-ELAS partisans in Greece. This was the period when Second Army was fighting bitterly in North-West Europe and the Eighth Army was heavily engaged in Italy.

Perhaps the best chapter in the book is that devoted to the OSS operations in Yugoslavia—best, because it provides a fairly clear picture of the bewildering situation that arose from the presence of two resistance movements and of the naivety of OSS officers. One of these was confident that Tito "was planning no Communist revolution for his country".

Surprisingly, the book is weakest when it deals with the OSS in China during and after the war and with American intelligence operations in Algeria in 1942-43. In both cases Mr Smith tends to adopt the easy explanation of what happened and a somewhat austere attitude towards those officers whose standards differed from his. Association with a New York law firm or bank did not necessarily sour an operator's judgment. In retrospect the OSS probably got more from this type of man than it did from the wild-eyed leftovers from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain.

There are some bright spots; how often Winston Churchill cut through the red tape to save a promising operation; a good story about General Donovan and David Bruce in Normandy; the gradual professionalization of some members of OSS; a good, although incomplete, picture of Allen Dulles, who is dubbed "the master spy". But these are not sufficient to save the book. The OSS must wait for a more objective and sophisticated chronicler.