

What Formed Bill Casey

by Ray S. Cline

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Casey, William. The Secret War Against Hitler. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1988. 304pp. \$19.95.

Bill Casey, who died in 1987 after a spectacular and controversial six-year stint as Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), has left us a literary legacy. It is a historical account of the work of OSS (Office of Strategic Services, precursor of CIA) in the European Theater during the assault on France and Germany at the end of World War II. The fascinating narrative is worth reading in its own right. But it is especially valuable because it illuminates the moral and intellectual qualities that shaped Bill Casey's thinking during his whole life.

Without any element of pretentiousness or forecasting, Casey's book, The Secret War Against Hitler, illuminates the issues that complicate the work of a secret intelligence agency in an open and, on the whole, innocent, democratic society. It is a guide to the multiple dilemmas of those who conduct clandestine intelligence operations to protect national security.

Coming of age during World War II

Casey came to work at OSS in the summer of 1943, a successful young lawyer and economic research analyst who had gotten himself commissioned in the Navy. He was highly motivated to do something to win the war America had so belatedly been forced into by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. His book makes evident the quasi-philosophic bent of mind of the well-educated, upwardly mobile young men of his generation. He does not talk about his generation explicitly, but he demonstrates the outlook by describing what he did for OSS as a natural consequence of his views.

This is also my generation -- and that of John F. Kennedy and George Bush. These two were a few years younger

than Casey and went directly into combat, becoming military heroes at a tender age. They felt, like Casey and nearly all of us in that generation, that our elders had failed in not seeing early on that Hitler and his allies meant to destroy our way of life. Many in our generation believed that Americans could somehow have accumulated the necessary intelligence data and acted on it to prevent the rise to power of the Axis dictatorships.

Kennedy, forthrightly, albeit somewhat flamboyantly, was representing the fighting spirit of this generation when he said in his inaugural address:

"Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world."¹

This credo was certainly congenial for Casey and stemmed from his own wartime and postwar experience.

Pioneering

Like Casey, I moved to Washington shortly after Pearl Harbor, feeling intuitively that we had to learn more about how to cope with the world's dangers. Largely by chance, I went into U.S. Navy codebreaking, an illuminating brush with the interplay of intelligence and military power, before I moved to the pioneering, exciting OSS at about the same time Casey did. While Casey spent most of his time in Europe, I stayed in Washington working for the head of OSS, Major General William "Wild Bill" Donovan and for William L. Langer, one of my Harvard history professors who was Chief of Research and Analysis.

- The Washington Post _____
- The New York Times _____
- The Washington Times _____
- The Wall Street Journal _____
- The Christian Science Monitor _____
- New York Daily News _____
- USA Today _____
- The Chicago Tribune _____

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Thus Casey and I shared in different arenas the stressful experience of trying to invent a new and obviously vital component of national strategic decision-making in the face of uncertainties, pressures, and hardships. It was a searing experience because so few knew how to do what was needed. And so few outside the OSS understood how helpful good information could be for top officials. Many chiefs of bureaucratic empires resented any invasion of their turf by a new and hard-charging intelligence organization.

Casey says flatly in his book:

"You only had to be around the OSS a few days in the summer of 1943 to realize how embattled an organization it was....It is no exaggeration to say that Donovan created the OSS against the fiercest kind of opposition from everybody -- the Army, the Navy, and State Departments, the FBI, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, regular army brass, the whole Pentagon bureaucracy, and, perhaps more devastatingly, the White House staff." (p. 5)

Throughout his book, he tells stories of the few more far-sighted men who developed good ideas for getting information or formulating concepts about

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how to shorten the war or prepare a better political outcome at its end. These men seemed nearly always to meet opposition in the military and political bureaucracies, to get their ideas shot down, or be forced to proceed with grave handicaps unless they could sell their thinking at the top. They had to have a good case, but they also had to bring their wisdom to the attention of men with power.

Donovan's Role in OSS

There is an adumbration of Casey's relationship to Reagan when Casey writes of Donovan:

"Yes, he had access to the President and could preach to him about the importance of clandestine operations....But he had few other sympathetic ears." (p. 9)

This meant that Donovan was severely restricted in what he could do:

"Donovan operated under the restrictions as best he could. At the same time, however, he kept fighting for a broader charter and wider responsibilities. Progress was measured more in inches than in yards, and the OSS was often thrown for a loss." (p. 11)

Plainly to Casey, Donovan was a hero, an often maligned and mostly unsung hero, because he did not give up his sense of mission and national strategic interest in the face of the unseemly political struggles that appear to be an unavoidable part of the democratic process, particularly in a government of divided powers. Donovan simply forged on in the face of hostility and restrictions. Casey's thumbnail of Donovan as a director, accurate in my experience (and not too different from Casey's own style) is succinct:

"Donovan was curious about everything and everyone. And he backed up his curiosity with a sharply-honed lawyer's mind that realized, earlier and better than most, that 'stranded' information was not much good. It had to be analyzed, dissected, and fitted into the larger whole that modern warfare required.

"He was one of those men who seems larger than life. He was in perpetual motion and engaged in constant activity and struggle. Yet for all his devotion to the big picture, he always made time for the small one, for lucid and concise analysis of his own views and the views of others." (p. 14)

Here is a useful recipe for Directors of Central Intelligence. Donovan was one of those, although, as the early architect of a centralized American intelligence service, he was able to build only the prototype of a modern intelligence system. The OSS was abolished immediately at the end of World War II, and the logic of its achievements was forced upon the Washington bureaucracy only in 1947 when CIA was established. The cold war between the United States and Stalin's aggressive dictatorship, not dissimilar to that of Hitler, was already being lost in 1947 for want of reliable information. Even after its establishment, CIA did not become the full-fledged central coordinating intelligence agency until the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. The crisis then made the urgent need crystal clear. General Walter Bedell Smith took charge in October 1950 and made CIA the institution it is today, building according to the blueprint proffered earlier by Donovan.

On to London

This history is discussed in the beginning of the book, which moves by Chapter 2, to "London," (pp. 21-33) where Casey was given a high-level job supervising the collection of secret intelligence in Europe by OSS. Beginning in 1943, he worked side by side with British intelligence agencies, including not only MI-6 but also the covert behind-the-lines warfare agency called SOE (Special Operations Executive).

It was necessary for the ill-prepared American officers to learn their trade from the British, even while struggling for and eventually achieving an independent American capability to collect information about the German war machine all over Europe. Casey ruefully describes how necessary it was to provide high-quality information and

strategic analysis as a service to the U.S. military commands so as to be able to siphon the pitifully scant logistic resources needed to support agents and anti-German resistance networks behind German lines.

By winning sympathetic allies in the American upper command ranks, including on occasion a favorable decision from Supreme Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, OSS made a mark for itself. OSS ended up with a generally favorable reputation for an unusually heroic contribution to defeating Germany, although few knew much about exactly what OSS had done, and it had more critics than friends.

Operations Against Europe

The main narrative of this book is a balanced, detailed story of the operations OSS mounted from the Mediterranean and from London to infiltrate Europe. OSS tried to shorten the war by sending out accurate information that enabled coherent reports to be made on German vulnerabilities, and by linking the American armies with the enormous energies of the underground resistance forces in France and Italy.

This history has been put on the public record before, but Casey's treatment is unusually realistic in its recognition of limitations and failures as well as successes. He shows again and again by example that brains, ingenuity, hard work, and courage are essential to make secret operations feasible. Getting information clandestinely and working with guerrilla forces covertly require unique procedures and precautions that demand superhuman vigilance and can only succeed by doing nearly everything the hard way.

Casey quickly learned and his book demonstrates conclusively that routine attention to intelligence operations will produce only routine, comparatively inconsequential results. To win, it is necessary to think imaginatively, dare boldly, and take grave risks for victories - being aware that failures will exact a high price to agents, their supervisors, and the institutions that dispatch them.

Casey describes what OSS officers were able to do to help with the big victories of World War II. The contributions were not always impressive, but some were.

Operations

When six U.S. Army assault divisions landed on the southern coast of France in August 1944, they had been briefed on the location of every defensive pillbox fortification on the landing beach, and more than half of these details had been collected secretly by OSS agents in the preceding months. Later, OSS selected and trained agent teams to parachute into Germany. They relayed information on power plants in key cities like Berlin, on concentrations of German Army tanks, and on congested points at rail junctions that could be attacked by air. OSS agents dispatched wireless messages to special OSS light aircraft circling overhead.

It was all risky, often innovative, and very helpful in pinpointing U.S. and British bombing targets. Often, the targets were hit within a day or two after receipt of the information. The narrative includes the painstaking collection of evidence about German atomic weapons, missiles, and rockets, which were subjected to bombardment as a result. The enormous energy generated by the dynamic people involved is impossible to note with anything but simple admiration of their ingenuity and bravery.

Analysis

The contribution of OSS analysts, working with British and American military establishments, to refine the process of air targeting and interdiction of German military movements by rail, especially in the crucial battles for the liberation of France in 1944, is described in some detail in Chapter 8, "Air, Targeting, Sabotage, and Interdiction." (pp. 76-91) This account shows how many new ideas were inserted into strategic decision-making by the kind of "irrelevant" academics Donovan had recruited for OSS and put to work on economic analysis and target selection with talent the military bureaucracies were unable to match.

This particular OSS contribution to targeting had nothing to do with espionage or paramilitary operations, although it often drew useful evidence from both. It was using brain-power to line up all kinds of evidence in objective study of probabilities in the world of conflict. This was Donovan's gospel, and it was plainly Casey's gospel too.

The history of the liberation of France is set forth with due attention to the extraordinary inputs by OSS in Southern France in support of Seventh Army Operations. Here, credit is due in part to the Seventh Army Intelligence (G-2), Bill Quinn, who realized what a mother lode of information OSS was able to provide on tactical military affairs from its basic library research and its net of at least 1,400 agents reporting as of May 1944 - sometimes on short call - from France.

Gradually, most military chieftains in Europe came to exploit OSS assistance, as well as that of British MI-6 and SOE and, of course, the Free French forces. The result in speed of advance and lives saved was too obvious to ignore.

Casey points out: "At most army headquarters, OSS units were either liked or tolerated." (p. 173) And he states with relish, as well as regret, that the First Army G-2 who rejected OSS help on his front was the one who made the "colossal intelligence failure" that permitted Hitler to stalemate the war by his secret assault on the Ardennes in December 1944. (pp. 184-185) Occasionally, Casey was able to report, the good guys get the credit and the dumbbells get their comeuppance.

Penetration of Germany

Chapter 18, "The Penetration of Germany," (pp. 194-216) is a little classic of intelligence history, reflecting Casey's unique knowledge of the subject. (It would undoubtedly be fuller and better had Casey lived longer to polish and embellish it.) In some ways, Joseph E. Persico's fairly recent *Piercing the Reich* is a more comprehensive treatment of the same operations. But the personal feeling of Casey, whom Donovan named Chief of Secret Intelligence for the European Theater at the

end of 1944, illuminates this account. It is not boastful. It suggests much more could have been done and many lives saved if an earlier start had been made, and OSS had found it easier to establish itself in the kaleidoscopic world of foreign intelligence agencies and military commands.

The stories of night parachute drops and wireless communications to overhead aircraft from lightweight transmitters invented by OSS are the stuff spy fiction is made of. But these stories are not fiction, and Casey records them in a matter of fact way. These espionage missions - mostly by carefully selected and trained foreign nationals - are the bread-and-butter of government agencies like CIA, tasks that will be on the intelligence agenda as long as it is necessary to find out things that are being deliberately hidden in areas into which it is dangerous to go.

Casey gives due credit to the extraordinary exploits in Germany of agents handled by the legendary Allen Dulles, who followed Bedell Smith as DCI in 1953 and served longer than any other director. There is much food for thought in this book about the reasons OSS succeeded when it did, and why it often could not persuade high officials to use its extraordinary but somewhat arcane skills. Nobody knew these problems better than Allen Dulles and Bill Casey. Both of them took their political lumps at the end of illustrious careers, Dulles as a result of the 1961 Bay of Pigs disaster, and Casey in the fallout from the 1986 Iran-Contra controversy.

Errors of Judgment

Intelligence agencies seem to get the blame for foreign policy disasters whether or not they really were responsible for the mistakes that were made. The record is clear that Jack Kennedy himself made the fatal decision to withhold crucial air support of the anti-Castro Cuban resistance army that attempted the landing at the Bay of Pigs. But it was CIA's plan, and many errors of judgment were made. In a parliamentary government, Kennedy would have resigned. In a presidential system, the

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blame is shouldered by the senior assistant to the President, and Allen Dulles gave up his post.

It may never be known exactly what Casey's role was in the scandal about selling arms secretly to Iran in hopes of releasing hostages and also using some of the money to finance resistance fighters in Nicaragua. Casey was stricken by a brain tumor just as the controversy was heating up. Certainly the responsibility in this case lay in the White House, mainly in the National Security Council staff. Congress had legislatively prohibited the CIA from doing what President Reagan felt the national security required. Casey may have acquiesced in letting the National Security Council staff do the things CIA should have done and would have handled more skillfully because he thought the legal prerogative of the Presidency was unassailable. In Washington, nothing is sacrosanct. The President was criticized bitterly and so was Casey, with the latter unable to defend himself.

You will not read a word in The Secret War Against Hitler about Iran or Nicaragua, in fact, not a word about the 1980s. Nonetheless, if you are concerned about the role of intelligence and decision-making in Washington, you can learn a lot from this book about the worldview and the political instincts of the Kennedy generation. They believed in bearing "the burden of a long twilight struggle"² against militant dictatorships and accepting responsibility for defending freedom. These issues related to accepting burdens and taking personal risks for national security and freedom are still very much alive in the current political context. This book on OSS makes it very clear where Bill Casey stood.

1. John F. Kennedy, quoted in full in Theodore C. Sorenson, Kennedy, New York: Harper & Row, 1965, p. 245.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

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Ray S. Cline spent 31 years as a career intelligence officer in U.S. Government service, with the U.S. Navy, OSS, the CIA, and the Department of State.

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