

## ***Intelligence in Public Media***

---

### ***Disciples: The World War II Missions of the CIA Directors who Fought for Wild Bill Donovan***

Douglas Waller (Simon and Schuster, 2015), 592 pp., notes, index.

#### ***Reviewed by Nicholas Reynolds***

---

Douglas Waller is known to many readers of these pages as the author of *Wild Bill Donovan: The Spymaster Who Created the OSS and Modern American Espionage* (Simon and Schuster, 2011). It is, for most students of OSS history, the most successful, accessible, and up-to-date biography of William J. Donovan ever published. In *Spymaster*, Waller shows how, in the history of American intelligence, Donovan was the prime mover. He was the man who conceived the idea of a centralized, full-service, independent agency responsible to the executive, and then created the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in that image to help the United States fight World War II.

Between 1942 and 1945, OSS made a respectable, but not decisive, contribution to the war effort. Even though the organization only outlasted the war by a few weeks, it also left its mark by introducing a number of remarkable younger leaders to the work of intelligence. In *Disciples*, Waller has written a group biography of four of those men—William J. Casey, William Colby, Richard Helms, and Allen Dulles—all of whom went on to become directors of central intelligence (DCIs) during the Cold War.

The book is divided into three parts: what Waller's subjects did before 1941, World War II, and the Cold War. World War II, for 19 of the 27 chapters, is at the heart of the book. Waller does an excellent job of recounting the wartime careers of each of the four. Not much of this is new, but Waller has clearly mastered the material and tells each man's story with verve and energy. Based on extensive research in original sources, which he lays out in endnotes, the chapters are literal page-turners, in spite of the fact that many similar books have been written about OSS over the years.

Dulles emerges as the diplomat, Wall Street lawyer who shines on independent duty as the OSS chieftain in Switzerland—running spies who bring priceless information from Nazi Germany, following the ins-and-outs of the German Resistance to Hitler, and even orchestrating the secret surrender of German forces on the Italian front.

Casey is the brilliant young lawyer who starts his career by bringing order to Donovan's own office, and then moves overseas to London, where he conceives and executes operations to parachute agents into Germany in late 1944 and early 1945. With Donovan's support, he overcomes British and American resistance to this kind of operation. Casey also emerges as the family man who misses his wife and daughter more than many other Americans who went overseas during the war. Helms works with Casey in London—they even share an apartment—before going on to forge his own identity as a practitioner of classical espionage from bases in France and later in Germany itself, where he hunts war criminals and, early on, sees the need to spy on the Soviets.

The only one of the four to actually serve at the tip of the spear, Colby is the paramilitary officer who over-achieves, driving his men—and himself—ever harder as they prepare for, and then conduct, operations in France in 1944 and Norway in 1945. In both countries, he fights a lonely, dangerous war, taking enormous risks. Particularly moving are descriptions of the hardships that Colby and his men faced in the bitter cold of the Norwegian winter as they attacked German rail lines.

Once the war was over, none of the four disciples found it easy to adapt to peacetime conditions. It was not that any of them had PTSD—on the contrary, Waller depicts each as having been energized by the war and, for that reason, unable to settle back down to peacetime pursuits. They were, he writes, “strong, decisive, supremely confident men of action, doers who believed they could shape history rather than let it control them. They returned from World War II not emotionally drained or scarred . . . but rather invigorated and ready for the next battle. The OSS, which had interrupted their lives, now delineated them” as intelligence officers. (Prologue)

Helms, the former journalist who once interviewed Hitler, showed no interest in returning to his pre-war profession and stayed on as OSS morphed first into the Strategic Services Unit and then CIA. The three law-

---

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

---

yers—Dulles, Casey, and Colby—returned home to practice law after the war, but could not drain the wartime adrenaline out of their systems. Starting at or near the top, all eventually joined Helms at CIA. Dulles was director during the Eisenhower years in the seminal 1950s. Helms ascended to the directorship in 1966 and managed to stay in office until 1973. After serving in Europe and Vietnam, Colby followed Helms as director, serving until 1976. Casey waited to return to spy work until Ronald Reagan appointed him director in the 1980s.

Waller gallops through the disciples' post-war careers in three chapters, with only one chapter for their tenures as director. He sums up each man's time at the helm without delving into much detail and points out all of the unhappy endings: President Kennedy fired Dulles after the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961; Helms was tried in federal court for perjury; Colby became a pariah at CIA for collaborating with congressional investigators; Casey did not understand the limits of covert action, and almost brought down the Reagan administration in the Iran-Contra affair.

Though Waller set out to write about World War II, he could have devoted more time on his four subjects' tenure as directors, and explored more fully the extent to which they had truly been disciples in the long run. They all started in OSS, and they all believed the gospel of central intelligence that Donovan had preached—but beyond that connection, one may question how meaningful it is to analyze their service during the Cold War in terms of their OSS origins. Readers may be left wondering to what

extent each man found himself responding to new challenges and growing to meet them (or not).

With a portrait of Donovan literally watching over him, Casey seems to have stayed closest to his wartime roots, which may help to explain his management style and his legacy—but this may not necessarily be said of the other three disciples. Dulles developed his approach to operations in Bern during the war—like his predilection for covert action and his loose management style—but he did go on to run an agency that did many things well, to include the amazing overhead reconnaissance programs that allowed the United States to understand Soviet capabilities. Helms comes across in Waller's book as a solid but somewhat colorless professional, the spymaster who perfected the art of charming his interlocutors without really ever saying anything. But he also developed a sophisticated feel for classical Cold War espionage that was quite different from anything that the OSS was involved in. Colby was perhaps the man who progressed furthest from his wartime debut in intelligence and arguably took on greater challenges than any of the other three World War II veterans, from firing his old OSS comrade-in-arms James Angleton (whose roots were showing, but not in a good way) to trying to understand and deal with the threats that CIA faced after Vietnam. He may have been a pariah to many of the old guard for showing the Family Jewels to Congress, but he also proved that CIA was about much more than its OSS origins.

These minor observations aside, *Disciples* is a worthy addition to the library of any intelligence officer.

