

# The British Were Coming!

by Justin Raimondo

*"Oh, that deceit should steal such subtle shapes  
And with a virtuous vizard hide foul guile."*

—William Shakespeare

**Desperate Deception:  
British Covert Operations in the  
United States, 1939-44**  
by Thomas E. Mahl  
Washington: Brassey's;  
256 pp., \$26.95



In the midst of his battle to save our old Republic and keep the United States out of World War II, John T. Flynn wondered about the true identity of his enemies. As a leader of the anti-interventionist America First Committee and its outstanding strategist and spokesman in New York City, he had plenty of them. In New York, America First was besieged by a campaign of organized disruption, including infiltration, provocations, pickets, and violence. Flynn sensed a pattern in these attacks, a unifying intelligence, and after the war came to believe that these assaults were not "sporadic or casual" but instead "originated in some central or unified group." Flynn tried in vain to get Congress to investigate, but the post-war rout of the congressional isolationists forced him to launch his own inquiry. The result, as he put it in 1944, was the discovery of "an organization whose name was never mentioned but which . . . sat more or less at the center of this web of propaganda, intrigue and calumny."

Now the evidence is in, and it turns out that Flynn was right. At the center of the web was the British Security Coordination (BSC), the American arm of British intelligence, and it was charged with coordinating a British fifth column in this country.

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*Justin Raimondo writes from  
San Francisco.*



The story of British intelligence operations in America during the crucial pre-war years is a saga of psychological warfare, black propaganda, and Byzantine intrigue at the highest levels of the U.S. government—a gripping tale more fantastic than any fictional thriller. While William Stevenson's 1976 book, *A Man Called Intrepid: The Secret War*, gave us a glimpse of the truth, not until *Desperate Deception* has anyone revealed the extent to which the U.S. was dragged into World War II by agents of a foreign power. In piecing together the story of how British spooks, working in tandem with FDR and other American Anglophiles, sought to "involve the United States in World War II and destroy isolationism," Thomas Mahl encountered two major problems: first, the refusal of the U.S. and British governments to re-

lease the relevant documents, which are still "classified" in the name of "national security"; and second, "the fact that until recently, the study of the intelligence history of World War II has lacked respectability." As Mahl puts it, "The conventional charge is that it smacks too much of *conspiracy*." The author throws his hands up in despair: "How does the historian avoid the charge that he is indulging in conspiracy history when he explores the activities of a thousand people, occupying two floors of Rockefeller Center, in their efforts to involve the United States in a major war?"

Covert intelligence operations are by their nature conspiratorial, and, in any event, there is no need to answer this spurious charge. Mahl's carefully documented chronicle of British interference in American elections, orchestrated smear campaigns against anti-interventionists, and the planting of "agents of influence" in the beds of American politicians is not just an "intelligence history" of how the United States got into World War II: It is the true history of that calamity.

The story of the BSC is wrapped up in the person of its chief, William Stephenson, known today by his New York cable address, "Intrepid." In 1940, Stephenson, a millionaire businessman with a wide variety of business and political connections, was sent to the United States to head up the BSC, where he took over the 38th floor of the International Building in Rockefeller Center, which the Rockefellers had generously donated. The British Press Service and the pro-war "Fight for Freedom" group were in the same building, also rent-free.

One BSC recruit, Bickham Sweet Escott, describes his interview: "For security reasons," he was told, "I can't tell you

what sort of job it would be. All I can say is that if you join us, you mustn't be afraid of forgery, and you mustn't be afraid of murder." Ernest Cuneo, the lawyer and Roosevelt administration insider who served as liaison between BSC, the White House, and various U.S. government agencies, relates in a recently declassified memo how the BSC operated:

It ran espionage agents, tampered with the mails, tapped telephones, smuggled propaganda into the country, disrupted public gatherings, covertly subsidized newspapers, radios, and organizations, perpetrated forgeries, . . . violated the aliens registration act, shanghaied sailors numerous times, and possibly murdered one or more persons in this country.

Cuneo's papers reveal several of the most active interventionist organizations as "formed and acquired" by Stephen's underground apparatus, including the Fight for Freedom Committee, which advocated an immediate declaration of war against Germany and Japan, and the "Friends of Democracy," an anti-isolationist spy and "research" organization that specialized in the art of the smear. The most prominent British front was the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, chaired by William Allen White. These fronts were instruments of the Anglophile propaganda campaign in favor of a peacetime draft, the Destroyer deal, and Lend-Lease. They were especially key in blocking the isolationists in the Republican Party, making certain that in the 1940 presidential elections the American people would have a "choice" between two interventionists.

Mahl presents irrefutable evidence that Cuneo (codename: "Crusader") wrote many of Walter Winchell's columns and had close ties to Drew Pearson. The BSC also had its tentacles in Hollywood and among the literary set; a key document names Dorothy Thompson, journalist Edmond Taylor, movie mogul Alexander Korda, co-founder and president of the Viking Press Harold Guinzburg, playwright and presidential speechwriter Robert Sherwood, and mystery writer Rex Stout as dedicated agents.

Documents cited by Mahl reveal the names of top British agents in journal-

ism, including George Backer, publisher of the *New York Post*; Helen Ogden Reid, the *de facto* publisher of the *New York Herald Tribune*; Paul Patterson, publisher of the *Baltimore Sun*; A.H. Sulzberger, president of the *New York Times*; Walter Lippmann; Ralph Ingersoll, editor of the leftist tabloid *PM*; and Ingersoll's boss, *Chicago Sun* publisher Marshall Field. The Overseas News Agency, which reached millions of readers, was a wholly owned subsidiary of the Brits. Besides using its journalistic assets to browbeat the American people into war, the BSC sought to undermine and, if possible, destroy those remaining sources of news that could be neither bought nor bullied. Public enemy number one, in their view, was Colonel Robert R. McCormick, whose *Chicago Tribune* was the flagship newspaper and voice of the Old Right. The BSC's Sandy Griffith set Albert Parry of Chicago's Fight for Freedom chapter on a "We Don't Read the Tribune" campaign that culminated in a rally and bonfire of freshly printed newspapers.

While the public stance of the British and their fifth column was "aid short of war," the BSC agitated for a peacetime draft. A key aspect of their campaign was the manufacturing of phony public opinion polls purporting to show overwhelming popular support for conscription. Mahl unmaskes the pollsters, showing that surveys conducted by Gallup, Roper, and Market Analysts "were all done under the influence of dedicated interventionists and British intelligence agents." An even nastier intrusion into the American political process was the BSC operation against Representative Hamilton Fish (R-NY), the feisty isolationist from FDR's home district. Mahl documents the involvement in the election campaign of BSC agents who masterminded newspaper ads linking Fish to Hitler, Ribbentrop, and Fritz Kuhn of the German-American Bund. In a memo after the 1940 election, agent Griffith maps out a strategy of hectoring, harassment, and October surprises. "There were other harsh suggestions made by agent Griffith," writes Mahl, "and most of them happened to Fish over the next four years as his political career lurched from one disaster to another."

**O**f all the operations conducted by British intelligence in this country, none had a more long-range effect

than the turning of Senator Arthur Vandenberg. The Michigan Republican was a staunch isolationist in the late 1930's, when he co-sponsored the resolution establishing the famous Nye Committee hearings on the political influence of the munitions industry. Many historians have remarked on the abruptness of his reversal in the mid-40's, when he suddenly signed on to the whole panoply of post-war globalist nostrums, including the U.N. and NATO. How does one explain the defection of the man who was considered the leader of the Senate Republicans and a possible GOP presidential candidate in 1940? Internationalists have naturally attributed it to Vandenberg's growing "maturity." Mahl puts the Senator's conversion in a new light: "British intelligence operations on Senator Arthur Vandenberg were based on a very simple human assumption—those who are sleeping with a senator are most likely to have his ear."

Mahl documents Vandenberg's romantic attachments to three women with strong ties to British intelligence. In 1940, all Washington knew he was having an affair with Mitzi Sims, wife of British attaché Harold Sims, a monied British aristocrat who ran the code room at the embassy. The glamorous Mitzi, an international jet-setter before the advent of jets, was just the sort of cosmopolitan vamp to enamor the vainglorious Vandenberg, who once said: "I had no youth. I went to work when I was nine, and I never got a chance to enjoy myself until I came to the Senate."

The Senator had such a good time that, at one point, his wife returned to their Grand Rapids home because the randy Vandenberg had practically moved Mitzi into their Washington flat. Harold Sims proved far more tolerant of his mate's infidelity. While Washington tittered over the scandal, the Senator continued his close friendship with the Simses until May 1940, when Harold Sims died of a stroke. Vandenberg took charge of the funeral arrangements, and shortly afterward Mitzi departed for Montreal. Mitzi made a dramatic reappearance, however, just as the crucial vote on the Lend-Lease Act was coming before the Senate. Another *femme fatale* appeared on the scene at this time. Betty Thorpe, the elegant spouse of a worldly British diplomat, was sent to Washington from Buenos Aires to catch the senator's eye. Mrs. Thorpe was no ordinary housewife but the famous British

Mata Hari known by her *nom d'espionage*, "Cynthia." In her biography of Cynthia, *Cast No Shadow*, Mary Lovell relates that both Vandenberg and Senator Connally were targeted for seduction; while Connally told Cynthia, "You're wasting your time, my dear," Vandenberg was easier prey.

Yet another of Vandenberg's BSC romances was with Eveline Paterson, a charming, statuesque blonde and a professional publicist for the cause of Great Britain: *Chicago Tribune* Washington bureau chief Walter Trohan, the FBI, and Drew Pearson all had her correctly pegged as a British intelligence operative. As an "agent of influence," Eveline's success can be measured by the senator's 1946 vote for loans to Britain and legislation forgiving British war debts. Mrs. Paterson's scrapbook con-

tains a number of Vandenberg items, among them an article from the April 30, 1945, issue of *Time*, which featured the senator's picture on the cover. The article praised him in his new role as chief of the Republican internationalists. The Office of Naval Intelligence also kept a file on Vandenberg's dalliances with foreign agents. In his memoirs, Walter Trohan relates how, at the 1948 Republican convention, where Vandenberg was a major contender for the nomination, Joseph Pew, head of the Sun Oil Company and a heavyweight contributor to party coffers, somehow got his hands on a copy of the ONI file. Pew threatened to take to the floor and read aloud the sordid details of Vandenberg's betrayal.

Too bad Pew was dissuaded from doing so. If only he had revealed the lascivious details of Vandenberg's treason:

Such a bombshell might have blown the cover of the fifth columnists in our midst, and exposed the truth about the internationalist Republicans. If Pew had taken to the microphone, Wendell Willkie might have remained in the obscurity from which he was plucked.

How an unknown lawyer for J.P. Morgan & Co., without having held any previous political office, and without even being a registered Republican, could come to be the GOP presidential nominee is a mystery pondered long and often by conservative commentators over the years. In her classic book *A Choice, Not an Echo*, Phyllis Schlafly attributes Willkie's nomination to the decision of the "secret kingmakers" and mentions the influential role played by Lord Lothian, the British ambassador, and Thomas W. Lamont, the chief enforcer of Morgan interests. With the *New York Herald Tribune* as his house organ, and Wall Street putting heavy pressure on the delegates, the dark horse Willkie stampeded the isolationist conservatives before they knew what hit them. Mahl shows that the "secret kingmakers" were nothing so vague as the "Eastern Establishment," and he amasses considerable evidence that British intelligence was directly involved. Apart from re-electing FDR, the BSC was working to ensure congressional approval of conscription and of a deal giving the British a part of the American fleet. These were the "secret kingmakers," or, as Schlafly calls them, the "hidden persuaders," who reached into the bag of dirty tricks—possibly including murder, as Mahl tantalizingly speculates—all too familiar to students of intelligence history.

It is not an unusual view that identifies the Roosevelt administration, an Anglophilic elite, and the Rockefeller-Morgan financial interests as the three groups whose agitation eventually dragged a reluctant nation into World War II. Mahl's great contribution is to identify the BSC as the puppet-master behind American interventionism. What the author of this invaluable volume calls "intelligence history" has not been considered "respectable" precisely because it penetrates the propagandistic pieties promulgated by the court historians and exposes the ruthlessness and utter immorality of ruling elites. This is not "intelligence history," but real history without illusions, if not without regrets.

## A House in Milo

by Robert Beum

### 1

Cherry and maple  
carved from the sun and climbing  
in the time of hands—

we woke there climbing  
into the past still morning  
cherry and maple,

a child's play of years  
in rooms above everything  
too low for morning.

### 2

Cherry and maple  
turret and gable children  
ask about who carved,

grow into the hands  
that could hold such morning, wear  
into stories, fall

to those fresh ruins  
another sun to wake to,  
all finders keepers.