About a decade ago I’d gotten a little friendly with the late Alexander Cockburn[1], one of America’s premier radical journalists and the founder of Counterpunch, a leading leftist webzine. With virtually all of America’s mainstream media outlets endlessly cheerleading for the total insanity of our Iraq War, Counterpunch was a port in the storm, and gained considerable credibility in my eyes.

Although Alex lived in the far northern reaches of the Golden State, the rural North Coast close to the Oregon border where much of the local cash economy was based on illegal marijuana growing, he periodically took trips down to the Bay Area, and sometimes dropped by Palo Alto to have lunch with me when he did. Often as not, he brought along a book that he was in the middle of reading, and based on his strong recommendations, it usually ended up on my own list.

Sometimes my appraisal differed sharply from his own. For example, Shlomo Sand’s international best-seller The Invention of the Jewish People[2] was very widely praised in left-liberal and anti-Zionist circles, and attracted considerable attention in the mainstream media. But although I found many parts of the history extremely interesting, the central claim appeared to be incorrect. As far as I’m aware, there seems overwhelming genetic evidence[3] that Europe’s Ashkenazi Jews do indeed trace much of their ancestry back to the Holy Land, apparently being the descendants of a few hundred (presumably Jewish) Middle Easterners, mostly male, who settled in Southern Europe some time after the Fall of Rome and took local Northern Italian wives, afterward remaining largely endogamous for the next thousand-plus years of their growing presence in Central and Eastern Europe. However, being a historian rather than a genetic researcher, Prof. Sand was apparently unaware of this hard evidence, and focused upon much weaker literary and cultural indicators, perhaps also being somewhat influenced by his own ideological predilections.
On the other hand, some of Alex’s other recommendations I found absolutely fascinating and quite persuasive. Once, he mentioned he was reading a book about the foreign spy network that had seized considerable control of the American political system just prior to our entry into WWII. “Oh,” I said, “you mean the Soviet Communist spy network?” I had recently become better aware of the volume of evidence revealed by Venona decrypts. “No,” he answered with a smile, “the other foreign spy network, the one run by Britain.”

He explained that British spies had played a massive hidden role in getting America involved in the Second World War despite the overwhelming opposition of the citizenry, and very possibly had murdered a top Republican Party official as they secretly gained political control of the GOP and its presidential nominating process. Being himself from a family of British Communist Party members, he found it quite amusing that rival networks of British spies and Communist spies had quietly competed or cooperated for control of our own national government during that era, even while the totally ignorant and oblivious American sheep grazed contently, emitting an occasional “Baa!” now and again, and never noticed that the direction of their flock periodically changed in seemingly inexplicable ways.

So I went ahead and ordered the book, *Desperate Deception* by Thomas E. Mahl[4], and put it in my stack, though being busy with software work, it was a couple of years until I finally got around to reading it. Unfortunately, by that time, Alex was no longer among us, so I couldn’t drop him a note of thanks for the recommendation. As someone with merely a cursory knowledge of twentieth century American history, largely acquired from high school textbooks and newspaper articles, I found the material quite shocking, but based on a few conversations I’ve had, I suspect that many Americans, including those far more knowledgeable than myself, would react in much the same way.

These days, informed observers have grown a bit blasé at the notion of our country being manipulated by agents of a foreign power together with its influential domestic allies, and although the endless, Stalinesque standing ovations given by Congress to Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu last year[5] raised a few temporary eyebrows at the time, the incident was quickly forgotten. But back in the more innocent era of the 1930s, there was still a naive feeling that American elected officials should act in service to what they perceived as America’s own national interests, and if the facts of Prof. Mahl’s book had become known at the time, there surely would have been a serious political backlash.

Indeed, at numerous points the author notes that the puzzled political opponents of our involvement in the Second World War sensed that there seemed to be some unseen coordinating hand behind the individuals and forces arrayed against them, but they never guessed that it was simply a foreign intelligence service.

The history was that Britain and France had entered into a war against Germany, and soon found themselves at a stalemate or actually overmatched. Only America’s entrance into World War I had turned the tide of that conflict, leading to an allied victory, and the same factor seemed necessary in the even more difficult second round. However, America’s involvement in WWI had come to be seen by the American people in hindsight as a disastrous mistake, and the
notion of going to war in Europe a second time was enormously unpopular. Hence a heavy secret campaign of political subversion and media manipulation was necessary to undermine the public figures opposing intervention and ensure that America would go to war even though very few Americans actually wanted to do so.

This task was rendered considerably more difficult by another factor only lightly touched upon by the author. During the period in question, an enormous amount of political influence was held by a network of Communist agents loyal to the Soviet Union, as conclusively demonstrated many decades later by the declassification of the Venona decrypts. However, Stalin and Hitler had become allies just prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, and until the German invasion of Russia in June 1941, Communists were generally opposed to any American support for Britain or France, let alone direct military intervention. So for nearly the entire period in question, the British spies and agents of influence pushing for America to go to war sometimes encountered resistance from the Communist spies and agents of influence pushing in the opposite direction.

The audacity of the British spy ring was really quite remarkable, and partly explained by the enormous degree of control that they and their American allies exerted over most of the leading media outlets, which largely protected them against risk of damaging public disclosures. Under this umbrella of media immunity, documents were forged to embarrass political opponents, leading public opinion polls were manipulated or possibly even faked, and attractive women were deployed to sway prominent elected officials.

For example, I’d always seen the name of Sen. Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan cited as the Republican leader whose remarkable conversion from “isolationism” to interventionism and internationalism laid the basis for decades of bipartisan American foreign policy. And in a full chapter, Mahl provides persuasive evidence that Vandenberg’s ideological shift was heavily facilitated by three successive women who served as his primary paramours over a number of years, all of them acting on behalf of British intelligence.

Mahl devotes another chapter to chronicling the repeated, ultimately successful attempts by these outside forces to defeat Rep. Hamilton Fish, entrenched for decades in his Upstate New York district, who served as the ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and was one of the nation’s leading opponents of foreign intervention. Large amounts of outside money regularly flowed into his district along with massive, coordinated attacks by every available media outlet, levelling the most absurd accusations, including that he was backed by Nazi agents or even one himself, with these charges sometimes based on simple forgeries. In fact, the only foreign agents involved in his campaigns were the British spies secretly coordinating the anti-Fish effort.

Interestingly enough, among the top arguments advanced to stampede ordinary Americans into regarding Germany as a dangerous national threat was the claim that Hitler planned to violate the Monroe Doctrine by seizing control of Latin America, as proven by a secret Nazi map indicating the eventual zones of military occupation. But Germany possessed a surface navy of negligible strength, so any attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean then invade and conquer half the Western Hemisphere would have been a remarkable undertaking indeed, and naturally the map was fabricated by the British, possibly at the behest of the Roosevelt Administration. The
individuals who forged the “Niger Yellowcake papers” to promote the Iraq War were mere pikers by comparison.

Another fascinating historical detail regards the creation of the OSS, the American intelligence service that served as the ancestor of the CIA. The FBI already existed as did America’s military intelligence service, but those entrenched organizations were obviously much less vulnerable to external political influence, let alone foreign control. Therefore, most of the impetus behind the creation of the new OSS apparently came from elements of British Intelligence, who also helped select the top leadership, leading to interesting questions about where the primary loyalty of those latter individuals actually lay. Indeed, British agents often described OSS Director Bill Donovan as “our man” in their internal communications.

But perhaps the most remarkable story, totally unfamiliar to me, was the bizarre nature of the 1940 presidential race. Franklin Roosevelt had partly won his landslide reelection in 1936 by running as a strong opponent of intervention in any future European war, but in 1937 the economy had once again collapsed, including a new stock market crash, a return to near-record unemployment, and a widespread perception that despite unprecedented government spending, the vaunted New Deal had ultimately been proven unsuccessful. In addition, FDR’s attempt to “pack” the Supreme Court had suffered a major bipartisan defeat in 1937, further undercutting his popularity and raising perceptions that his presidency had been a failure. As an indication of Roosevelt’s unpopularity, the Republicans gained 80 House seats in the 1938 mid-term elections, one of the largest swings in U.S. history.

The 1939 outbreak of war in Europe provided a huge, welcome boost to the American economy, and also a potential excuse for Roosevelt to break every American political tradition and seek a third presidential term. But Roosevelt’s support for military involvement in that conflict posed a major obstacle to such plans since all the leading Republican contenders were strong anti-interventionists, Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio foremost among them, as were the American people. So Roosevelt would apparently either have to risk an election defeat or once again heavily commit himself to maintaining America’s future military neutrality, thus restricting his future course of action if elected and also perhaps alienating some of his key backers, who were focused entirely on the need for America to quickly enter the war against Germany.

Obviously, the ideal situation would be if Roosevelt’s Republican presidential opponent somehow happened to be his ideological twin on “internationalism,” thereby giving the probable majority of “isolationist” voters no choice whatsoever in the voting booth. Powerful figures in the East Coast WASP Establishment wing of the Republican Party, including Henry Luce of the Time-Life media empire and Thomas Lamont of J.P. Morgan & Company, eagerly sought this exact result, but without either a potential Republican candidate or significant popular support, the effort seemed hopeless.

Yet when the 1940 party convention finally drew to a close on June 28th, the unexpected Republican presidential nominee, Wendell Willkie, exactly fulfilled that unlikely goal. He was also a rather strange choice in many other respects, being a somewhat politically obscure lifelong Democrat who had never previously held any elective office, nor had he even competed
in any Republican primary. Experienced political observers at the time regarded the Willkie nomination as being among the most bizarre and baffling in American political history, with the redoubtable H.L. Mencken suggesting that Divine Intervention was the only possible explanation.

Mahl, however, points to more mundane factors. There exists enormous evidence of major skullduggery by British agents, including the total manipulation of the nomination process by the convention manager, who was their close ally. Microphones were sabotaged at crucial points and duplicate tickets printed to ensure that all the galleries were completely packed by loud Willkie partisans, whose enthusiasm helped sway wavering delegates. Success might have been very difficult without such illegal machinations, and interestingly enough, the gentleman who arranged them only acquired his position of authority when the original convention manager, an ardent Taft supporter, had suddenly collapsed and died several weeks earlier. This occurrence, seemingly so crucial for Willkie’s nomination, may have been entirely fortuitous, but Mahl notes that the individuals recruited into the local British spy ring were explicitly warned that they might need to commit murder as part of their duties.

Despite Willkie’s remarkable success at securing the nomination, his presidential campaign itself proved a total disaster, with many of his erstwhile supporters quickly dropping away or even transferring their allegiance to Roosevelt. His history as a Democrat and his advocacy of an aggressive internationalism hardly inspired Republican voter enthusiasm, while his Wall Street background constituted a perfect foil for Roosevelt’s populist positions. So despite enormous public doubts about Roosevelt, Willkie suffered a landslide defeat, thereby handing Roosevelt his third term.

The latter proved remarkably magnanimous in victory, becoming very friendly with Willkie, giving him several important appointments, notably to a top American position in Britain, and even considering him as a replacement for pro-Soviet Henry Wallace as his 1944 Vice Presidential choice and likely successor, before ultimately settling upon Harry S. Truman instead. Thus a lifelong Democrat came from obscurity to suddenly capture the Republican Presidential nomination in 1940 before nearly becoming the Democratic Vice Presidential nominee in 1944, which would have put him in the White House upon Roosevelt’s death in 1945.

A glance at Wikipedia[6] suggests that the psychic strain of having come so close to supreme power perhaps became too much for poor Willkie, who soon after being denied the Vice Presidency began suffering numerous heart attacks, finally collapsing and dying at age 52 just before the 1944 election. The entire strange history of these events brings to mind Lenin’s emphasis on the tremendous benefits of creating or at least controlling one’s own political opposition, and perhaps also underscores the possible health risks faced by individuals caught up in such schemes.

Mahl’s monograph, based on his doctoral dissertation in diplomatic history at Kent State University, was published almost 20 years ago in Brassey’s Intelligence & National Security Library, a respected specialty press, received some notable scholarly endorsements, and was briefly reviewed in Foreign Affairs and other mainstream journals. But the only extensive American coverage of this important work seems to have been in small ideological publications
such as the paleoconservative *Chronicles*[^7] and the libertarian *Independent Review*[^8] and *Mises Review*[^9], which conveniently provide much more detailed reviews and summaries of the material than I have presented above. However, despite no sign of a substantial refutation, I also see no indication that the research has ever been substantially incorporated into our histories of that era. For example, Willkie’s 11,000 word Wikipedia entry contains an extensive bibliography and over 150 references, but includes no mention of Mahl’s important research findings[^10].

It is hardly uncommon for a supposedly sovereign nation to have its political system or democratic elections subverted and controlled by the hidden actions of a foreign power, and the last century has been replete with such examples. But while I’m sure that the average educated Guatemalan or Columbian is perfectly aware of the numerous public policy manipulations that his unfortunate country suffered over the decades at the hands of the CIA, I doubt that too many of their American counterparts would guess that much U.S. history might also have been heavily influenced by the subtle interventions of one or more foreign intelligence agencies.

**Book Reviews:**

- [Tricked Into War][11], *The Mises Review*
- [Book Review][12], *The Independent Review*, Justus D. Doenecke
- [The British Were Coming!][13], *Chronicles*, Justin Raimondo

**For Further Reading:**

- [Our American Pravda][14], Ron Unz
- [American Pravda: Was General Patton Assassinated?][15], Ron Unz
- [John McCain: When “Tokyo Rose” Ran for President][16], Ron Unz

**Source References**


[^2]: *The Invention of the Jewish People* => [https://www.amazon.com/Invention-Jewish-People-Shlomo-Sand/dp/1844676234/](https://www.amazon.com/Invention-Jewish-People-Shlomo-Sand/dp/1844676234/)


[^5]: the endless, Stalinesque standing ovations given by Congress to Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu last year => [http://mondoweiss.net/2015/03/netanyahus-consisted-standing/](http://mondoweiss.net/2015/03/netanyahus-consisted-standing/)


[10] but includes no mention of Mahl’s important research findings => https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wendell_Willkie#Dark_horse_candidate


