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Through Adversity, It Became Strong: The Establishment of the OSS, The Opposition It Faced, and Its Overall Success

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Abbreviations

(CIA)- Central Intelligence Agency

(COI)-Coordinator of Information

(FBI)- Federal Bureau of Investigations

(G-2)- War Department’s Military Intelligence Division. Also known as MID

(JCS)- Joint Chiefs of Staff

(JPWC)-Joint Psychological Warfare Committee

(MID)-War Department’s Military Intelligence Division. Better known as G-2

(ONI)- Office of Naval Intelligence

(OSS)- Office of Strategic Services

(SIS)- British Secret Service of Intelligence

(SOE)- Special Operations Executive

(WWI)- World War I

(WWII)- World War II
Through Adversity, It Became Strong:
The Establishment of the OSS, The Opposition It Faced, and Its Overall Success.

Fulfillment of the United States’ need for intelligence research and analysis during World War II came through William Donovan’s leadership of the Coordinator of Information (COI) and its offspring, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), despite the early problems both agencies faced. Donovan and the OSS would later play a major part in the Allies’ victory over Axis forces. By overcoming the bureaucratic and procedural issues at home and abroad, The Office of Strategic Services firmly established itself as a necessary force in the world of information during the war against the Axis.

In 1940, the United States government handled military intelligence inefficiently. The officials working with America’s foreign policy, the Department of State, and the military all dealt with information gathered overseas. The ambassadors and diplomats collected the knowledge and then turned it over to the “Office of Naval Intelligence and the War Department’s Military Intelligence Division.”¹ Military and State departments developed their own methods for collecting foreign information. The Army and Navy would separately analyze it. While various governmental agencies had access to any vital information, they rarely cooperated, and so failed to fully utilized the intelligence.²

Initially, America held a position of neutrality between Britain and Germany; however, Col. Donovan warned the American Legion that America would eventually send soldiers to aid the British effort while encouraging America to prepare for war. In Nov. 1939, he further recommended the government form a committee to examine problems concerning America's

² Ibid.
"foreign and military policy." He believed the existing organization could not adequately deal with the approaching conflict. The few agencies that dealt with foreign policy and intelligence did not know how to fight a war against the darker and more covert actions of the enemy.

After WWI, inventions like the radio had provided newer and more advanced ways to communicate information between locations. These inventions made the methods of secreting, analyzing, communicating, and decoding intelligence of greater and more critical importance. The United States had never before dealt with this level of covert operations and needed to become highly sophisticated in it quickly.

Col. Donovan recognized the problem and realized the old methods of using trenches and standing ground would not win the day as it had in WWI. He believed the enemy needed to be attacked at its every weakness and “unconventional” methods would be the best way to do so. Roosevelt agreed but did not act until July 11, 1941, when he caved to pressure from the British and created a coordinating department to handle all counter-intelligence. This department, the COI, would “collect and analyze all information and data, which may bear upon national security: to correlate such information and data” and to have it ready when needed.

On previous visits to London, Donovan befriended Colonel Menzies, head of the British Secret Service (SIS), and Sir William Stevenson, the representative of British Intelligence to the

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4 Ibid.
6 Allen Dulles, The Craft of Intelligence, 26-27.
9 Central Intelligence Agency, "The Office of Strategic Services: America's First Intelligence Agency."
Roosevelt asked Col. Donovan to head the agency, in part due to these British contacts, but Donovan demanded the agency be completely “civilian” and answer only to the President. Roosevelt agreed, and gave the orders. The COI did not include the “unconditional warfare” Donovan believed it should; however this symbolized a start in that direction. Sir William Stevenson, delighted at the nomination of his old friend and a promising beginning to the COI, supported Donovan’s efforts whenever possible.

America officially entered the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 Dec. 1941, forcing Roosevelt to reconsider the COI’s job and position in the government. In December 1941, the new COI, still attempting to organize, did not have its own intelligence branch. The agency, relying on the Army and Navy, found itself denied information and Donovan could not provide needed analysis. The agency faced distrust and resentment from those governmental agencies who dealt with intelligence, including the newly formed Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Unlike others, the JCS believed the COI might prove useful, but only if Roosevelt placed it under their control. Donovan agreed to the idea and President Roosevelt placed the COI under JCS authority but with added changes. To keep official propaganda and overt communications from military hands, Roosevelt established the COI’s Foreign Information Service under the War of Information, completely separate from the JCS. On June 13, 1942, one year after establishing the COI, Roosevelt moved the covert aspects of the COI, such as espionage and clandestine

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14 Anthony C. Brown, 4.
15 Anthony C. Brown, 235-236; Central Intelligence Agency, "The Office of Strategic Services: America's First Intelligence Agency."
operations, to the JCS under the new title Office of Strategic Services. This created the agency Donovan initially imagined, including authority for enacting unconventional warfare.  

Roosevelt established the OSS without providing a defined purpose or goal beyond the ambiguous order to gather and examine intelligence information and using it to plan and execute operations.  The two S’s in the acronym OSS stood for ‘Strategic Services,’ signifying in military terms “unconventional warfare, commandos, support of partisans and guerrillas and the exploitation by covert means of all the weaknesses” found in the enemy. Roosevelt chose to leave establishing the limits of OSS authority, work, and ground rules to the JCS. The OSS had to organize quickly due to its late establishment, meaning the OSS could not assist the military for some time, as Donovan recruited and trained agents and the JCS established various operating procedures.

Like the COI, the OSS faced enemies from nearly every direction including extreme opposition from other governmental agencies. This lack of cooperation kept it from operating efficiently for several years. Many governmental agencies worried the OSS might encroach on their territory and attempted to stop the agency in its tracks. These agencies posed a greater threat to the survival of OSS than the Axis powers did. Problems began to surface when the JCS took nearly eight months to establish the limits of OSS authority, range of work, and to lay out ground rules. The OSS struggled with forced “procedural rules, cloudy authority, and

16 The Central Intelligence Agency’s Center for the Study of Intelligence, "Directors and Deputy Directors of Central Intelligence;" Anthony C. Brown, 237.
17 Allen Dulles, The Craft of Intelligence, 42.
18 Ibid.
20 Anthony C. Brown, xvi, President Roosevelt created the OSS one year after Pearl Harbor and it did not operate for several months after
supervisory committees,” and it took the JCS until the winter of 1943 to settle on a clear purpose and guide for future operations.21

The relationship between the OSS and the Joint Psychological Warfare Committee (JPWC), an off branch of the JCS, became another issue. Roosevelt hoped the three agencies, JCS, JPWC, and OSS, would work together, but, on August 15, 1942, the JCS attempted to place the JPWC in charge of the OSS. A directive stated that before each action the OSS made, it first had to receive permission from the JPWC. This left both the JPWC and the OSS in a difficult position, because the JPWC could not handle the administrative issues surrounding the OSS and the OSS did not have time to deal with the JPWC’s issues. The resentment the OSS faced from the JPWC only added to the problem. The command structure, though eventually resolved, exemplifies the magnitude of the problems OSS dealt with in its first year.22

In this organizational process, the OSS confronted other agencies as well. Only one month after OSS’s creation, the State Department and the military successfully promoted a Presidential decree prohibiting the OSS from accessing and deciphering intercepted intelligence from the Axis. They could not obtain intelligence from Japan and could only access specific information from Germany. In addition, the FBI, the War Department’s Military Intelligence Division (G-2),23 and the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) omitted the OSS from intelligence operations within America. Overtime, the OSS created its own contacts, agents, and methods of gaining information throughout the world, with the exception of the FBI and the Coordinator of Inter-American Affair’s monopoly on operations in the Western Hemisphere.24

23 Central Intelligence Agency, "The Office of Strategic Services: America's First Intelligence Agency," Lesser known by the acronym MID.
24 Ibid.
Col. Donovan, a staunch advocate for the OSS, frequently fought against the JCS’s bureaucratic limitations, most of which contrasted with how he thought the office should act. Impulsive in both in thinking and acting, he did not have patience for processing paperwork and permission slips.\textsuperscript{25} No fear of death, extreme courage, determined stubbornness, a violent temper which he tightly controlled—these are the characteristics, found in both his personal and business life, which earned him the title, ‘Wild Bill Donovan.’\textsuperscript{26} He understood the methods of fighting and winning a war had changed from previous conflicts, but did not focus on "winning by gross production," as happened with D-Day. He preferred "speed, deception, cleverness, and nerve." \textsuperscript{27} JCS looked toward the factories for equipment; Donovan turned to scientists and technological advances for tools to secretly gather and communicate information. The JCS and OSS approached the war from two different viewpoints. The JCS became ordered, structured, and strictly militarily minded, with an equally ordered view of fighting a battle. Donovan thrived on disorder and confusion and felt the military should exploit these same things in the enemy the way to succeed. Both wanted to win, but clashed over methods.\textsuperscript{28}

Col. Donovan had the “vision and drive to build swiftly an organization of sufficient size and competence to play an effective part in the war.”\textsuperscript{29} In June of 1942, OSS and Britain’s Special Operations Executive (SOE) divided the world into two sections with both agencies taking half.\textsuperscript{30} OSS covered China, Manchuria, Korea, Australia, the Atlantic Islands, and Finland. SOE claimed India, East Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East. SOE kept Europe, but the OSS agreed to provide aid if needed. This developed the first treaty between British

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{25} Bradley F. Smith, 144.
\bibitem{26} Richard Dunlop, 4, 18.
\bibitem{27} Bradley F. Smith, 144.
\bibitem{28} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
Secret Service and any other organization. It became clear to the people back in Washington, D.C. that Donovan’s connections with London could not be lost. One of Donovan’s first operations, setting into place intelligence stations throughout Europe, including Sweden, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, and the Tangier, proved invaluable over the years. During 1942, the OSS established itself as a foreign intelligence agency. Donovan sent agents to every nation that would accept them. He had previously established agents as “vice consuls” in North Africa while head of COI. These agents and the intelligence they collected proved the basis for the OSS’s first major operation, Operation Torch. In the face of conflict, Donovan’s OSS personnel determined to persevere and Operation Torch went a long way in proving their usefulness.

Operation Torch established OSS credibility. Donovan and the OSS continued to have problems with the JCS system. Donovan realized he had to back up his "bureaucratic" moves with true ability on the field. If they wanted to survive the governmental antagonism, Donovan and OSS had to prove they could assist with and carry out military operations. They “had to work hard to justify to their military superiors their organization’s continued existence.” They succeeded with Operation Torch in North Africa.

The United States officials held the Vichy French controlled area of North Africa to be a vitally strategic location and, during the war, wanted to prevent the possibility of it falling into Axis hands. After America joined the Allies in 1942, Britain suggested America invade North Africa before the Axis forces had the chance. On Nov. 8, 1942, American soldiers invaded

31 Anthony Cave Brown, 236-237; David Stafford, 313.
33 Central Intelligence Agency, "The Office of Strategic Services: America’s First Intelligence Agency."
34 Ibid.
35 Sir William Stevenson, xi.
36 Bradley F. Smith, 144.
38 Bradley F. Smith, 144; David A. Walker, 668.
Morocco and Algeria in a successful campaign. The OSS played a major role in this success, particularly through the training of troops and the collection of intelligence about the enemy.\textsuperscript{39}

When the OSS and SOE divided the world, SOE wanted North Africa as well as Eastern Africa. The OSS refused and the two compromised. Overall control would go to OSS, but SOE could continue to carry out their operations. The OSS thus became the primary force in North Africa, but the military did not understand this, so they never issued “clear military directives on subversive control.”\textsuperscript{40}

The COI had played an active role in Northern Africa during 1941, which continued after the agency became the OSS. They organized guerilla troops in Morocco and Algeria training them as soldiers, thus marking a new area of warfare for the Americans. The new area included “guerilla activities...extensive espionage and intelligence work, especially in the field of assessing enemy motivation, and the conducting of secret negotiations.” The negotiations would provide the initial move toward starting guerilla and resistance groups within neutral and enemy nations.\textsuperscript{41} In Operation Torch, agents gathered military information, while organizing and training guerilla groups to assist the operation. The OSS also gave the military aid from dissatisfied Frenchmen, some militarily trained. The OSS went above and beyond by examining the “motives” that would determine the response of the enemy. The study of an entire nation’s motives had never been done before, but the OSS frequently pursued new avenues of intelligence. Because they had worked in North Africa for some time, the OSS had a wider expanse of resources for gathering intelligence than other organizations and convinced the military to accept its help.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{39} David A. Walker, 667-668. \\
\textsuperscript{40} Bradley F. Smith, 146. \\
\textsuperscript{41} David A. Walker, 667. \\
\textsuperscript{42} David A. Walker, 668-71
Robert Solborg, an agent from Lisbon, spoke with Vichy French officials in Casablanca and they reported General Giraud to be a Vichy French officer capable of claiming leadership of the French army. He promised to use it in cooperation with an Allied attack. Solborg accepted this proposal with the promise that France could re-take control of North Africa once the Axis surrendered. Unfortunately, Solborg operated without permission. Donovan refused to listen to what Solborg had to say and fired him. The Americans did not inform the French of the renouncement of Solborg’s promises. Robert Murphy, a military advisor with Vichy French sympathies, went so far as to tell the French that America stood prepared to cooperate in an invasion against their mutual enemy. However, further miscommunications during the negotiations left the Giraud’s support uncertain. On July 1942, the Allies decided to launch Operation Torch, whether the French assisted them or not. Roosevelt placed Dwight D. Eisenhower in charge, but he and his soldiers, inexperienced and new to war, did not help the efforts.

The OSS vice-consuls’s contacts in the Vichy French army told them the opposition to an American occupation would not be very strong. Believing these reports and recognizing the value the Vichy French placed on honor and loyalty to their officers, the OSS continued to pursue the assistance of General Giraud, an officer, to further undermine the opposition. Unfortunately, the OSS had underestimated the opposition’s strength and overestimated Giraud’s influence. The Vichy French, holding mostly anti-Axis values, wanted to first and foremost

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43 Bradley F. Smith, 145 Donovan had ordered Solborg to avoid Northern Africa because the German forces knew of Solborg’s status as an agent.
44 Bradley F. Smith, 145-147.
protect “their own national interests.” 45 Angry at being invaded, the Vichy French troops proved a stronger enemy than the OSS had expected. 46

Regardless of the OSS’s misinterpretation of Vichy French loyalties, Operation Torch ended successfully and brought credibility to the OSS for its excellent collection and analysis of military intelligence. This success firmly established the OSS’s usefulness and gave them the boost needed to equate them with other American intelligence agencies. Opponents now recognized them as a powerful force. One historian writes: “American military leaders…believed that OSS had done a good job, a judgment that helped OSS, with the backing of the military, to establish itself on a permanent wartime basis in 1943.” 47 They secured the future backing of Roosevelt and Eisenhower with this success and firmly ended any risk of being shut down. 48

After Operation Torch, the OSS had the chance to operate as it desired and became a major player in the war effort. The OSS owed its existence and capable agents trained to instantly start work, to William Donovan, a natural leader. His enthusiasm and tirelessness worked well with his ability to use resources efficiently. 49 Although imperfect, the agency became a wonderful success. 50 Donovan’s greatest work centered in the Balkans, Eastern, and Central Europe. 51 Gen. Douglas MacArthur kept them out of operations surrounding Japan, but the undaunted OSS continued to create a global “clandestine capability” aided by Donovan’s old friends, the British. 52 By the end of the war, the OSS equaled Britain’s intelligence operations and their work developed excellent quality—an amazing feat considering the little time given to Donovan to

45 David A. Walker, 669-674.
46 Ibid.
47 David A. Walker, 673-676.
48 David A. Walker, 675.
50 Marc B. Powe, 144.
51 Anthony Cave Brown, xvi.
52 Central Intelligence Agency, "The Office of Strategic Services: America’s First Intelligence Agency.”
develop it and the problems he faced in the beginning. By 1944, the OSS launched operations "every hour on the hour throughout the world" and organized innumerable successful actions including some of the "greatest exploits of human daring and bravery in the history of the United States and of World War II." 

Through Donovan’s persistent and masterful leadership, The Office of Strategic Services firmly established itself as a necessary force in the world of information during World War II. The nation had faced a war it did not know how to fight, and Donovan set out to learn how to successfully wage a war against the new weapons of the enemy. Donovan transformed the gathered intelligence into something useful, and his ideas and methods still survive in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Fulfillment of the need for intelligence research and analysis came through the short term COI and the longer-lasting OSS, despite early bureaucratic and performance difficulties, and the OSS played a major part in the Allies’ victory. When peace finally came, Roosevelt disbanded the OSS on October 1, 1945; however, a few branches remained and would be the basis for the 1946 Central Intelligence Group with became the CIA in 1947. When speaking of the OSS’s contribution to America, Donovan wrote: "(it) lies… in the development of the concept of unorthodox warfare… The experience of OSS showed above all how essential it is for winning the war and keeping the peace to base national policy upon accurate and complete intelligence." None of this could have been accomplished without the vision of William J. Donovan. He believed in the OSS when few did, and he put those beliefs into action. He led it to unimaginable success and his agents forever remembered him as ‘Wild’ Bill Donovan, the “father of central intelligence.”

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53 Sir William Stevenson, x.
54 Anthony Cave Brown, xvii.
58 Richard Dunlop, 4.
Wild he was in heart and in feyness. But more than wild was the man with the wile of Odysseus... we would all die for him. Die for him some of us did, but he died for us all... Hail to Wild Bill, a hero of men and a name to hang myths on. As American as chowder, Crockett, and Putnam. A free fighter's hero, may God give him peace.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. These are lines from a poem written a retired agent, Carleton S. Coon, when he learned of Donovan's death. He later gave it to Dunlop for publication in his book.
Central Intelligence Agency, "The Office of Strategic Services: America's First Intelligence Agency." This chart reflects the organization of offices and personnel within the OSS. Donovan, as Director, answered in part to the JCS, but maintained a certain independence of action and frequently held the final authority.
Bibliography

Books


Articles


