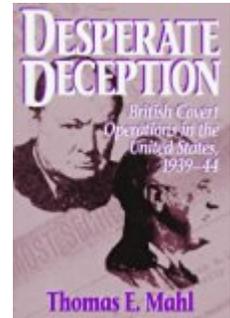


Thomas E. Mahl. *Desperate Deception: British Covert Operations in the United States 1939-44.* Washington, D.C., and London: Brassey's, 1998. xiv + 256 pp. \$26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57488-080-9.



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Thomas Mahl's *Desperate Deception* provides a fascinating account of British intelligence activities in the United States, focusing primarily on the years 1940 and 1941. The center of these operations was British Security Coordination (BSC), led by the Canadian-born William S. Stephenson (code-named Intrepid), who arrived in the United States in April 1940. Stephenson's instructions were to "assure sufficient aid for Britain, to counter the enemy's subversive plans throughout the Western Hemisphere and eventually to bring the United States into the War" (p.10). Mahl describes the lines of communication that existed between BSC and the FBI and later the State Department and details the efforts of British intelligence to encourage the creation of the Coordinator of Information, (COI), an American counterpart to BSC, in July 1941. (The COI became the Office of Strategic Services in June 1942.)

In Chapter Two, Mahl outlines the efforts of various interventionist organizations, which he designates British fronts, including the well-known "Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies" and the "Fight For Freedom Commit-

tee" (FFF), as well as the less prominent "France Forever" and the "Irish American Defense Association." These fronts were the center of activity for Britain's American friends, the Anglophile elite in the Northeast. Most of the discussion focuses on the FFF, which had close ties not only to British intelligence but also with the White House, and was the most extreme of the interventionist organizations, calling for direct U.S. intervention in the war. "FFF was always trying to give the public the impression that important people or a large segment of the public supported the president's interventionist policies" (p.30). Mahl goes on to identify key individuals as "agents, informers, and collaborators" (p.47), many of them in the news business, including columnist Walter Lippmann, Arthur Hayes Sulzberger, president of *The New York Times*, and Henry Luce, publisher of *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune* magazines.

Mahl then addresses the question of public opinion polls, arguing that "The most prominently published polls were all under the influence of British intelligence, its friends, employees, and agents" (p.69). He notes that British intelligence

officer David Ogilvy worked for Gallup, and that Hadley Cantril, a social psychologist and director of the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton, was a close friend of Roosevelt. Moreover, the polling organization, Market Analysts, Inc., was run by British intelligence and routinely provided polls demonstrating public support for interventionist policies. Citing Michael Wheeler's *Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics*, Mahl discusses the various ways in which poll results can be skewed, including the wording and order of questions. In particular, Mahl focuses on the campaign for the passage of the Selective Service Act in the summer of 1940 and the striking shifts in polling results that occurred simultaneous to the launching of this campaign. He concludes: "So the polls of World War II should be seen for what they were: at worst they were flatly rigged, at best they were tweaked and massaged and cooked advocacy polls without the advocate being visible" (p.86).

Market Analysts, Inc. was run by British agent Sanford Griffith, who was also a prime mover in campaigns against Standard Oil of New Jersey (because of its contacts with I.G. Farben) and German propagandist George Sylvester Viereck. Mahl also describes in considerable detail the attempts of British intelligence, American interventionists, and even the Roosevelt administration to end the career of isolationist Congressman Hamilton Fish of New York, both before and after U.S. entry into the war. These included accusations of misuse of his franking privileges, the threat of a libel action over his response to these charges, and a series of polls showing that his isolationist views were out of step with his constituents, particularly on the question of the Lend-Lease Bill. Despite these activities, Fish held on to his seat until 1944, when the chief cause of his defeat seems to have been redistricting, which eliminated his constituency and forced him to run against an incumbent.

Another prominent target of British intelligence was isolationist Senator Arthur Vandenberg, who appears to have been provided with a

series of mistresses courtesy of the British. Mahl describes these women as "agents of influence" (p. 138) and suggests that Vandenberg's abandonment of isolation was the product of their efforts. Perhaps even more significantly, Mahl argues that the Republican nomination of Wendell Willkie in 1940 was the product of a dedicated campaign by British intelligence and its American friends to prevent an isolationist challenge to Roosevelt in the election. As a result of a wide-ranging and carefully orchestrated effort, Willkie emerged from anonymity late in the day to challenge isolationist party leaders, Robert Taft, Arthur Vandenberg, and Thomas Dewey. His campaign was vitally assisted by Sam Pryor of Connecticut, who succeeded Taft supporter, Ralph E. Williams, as chair of the convention arrangements committee after the latter's sudden and, Mahl suggests, suspicious death. Pryor packed the galleries with Willkie supporters and sabotaged the microphones to prevent Herbert Hoover's isolationist speech from being heard on the floor.

Mahl's purpose, however, is larger than simply documenting the extent of British intelligence activities in this period. He argues that "the covert operations mounted by British intelligence profoundly changed America forever, helping it become the global power we see today, a power whose foreign policy leaders were freed to make, after the war, a multitude of global commitments unhampered by any significant isolationist opposition" (p.1). Thus, we cannot understand U.S. foreign, or even domestic, policy, without paying attention to British intelligence efforts. "Intelligence is truly 'the missing dimension,' not only of diplomatic history, but of the domestic history dealt with in this book" (p.ix).

This is a dramatic claim, but, unfortunately, the book does not make a strong enough case to compel the rethinking of the era that Mahl calls for. Indeed, one of the most notable weaknesses of the book is the absence of much sense of other events that might have affected the developments

under discussion. For example, when considering British manipulation of the polls, Mahl notes the increasing support for the draft shown by Gallup in the summer of 1940. The figures jumped from 39 percent in December 1939, to 50 percent on June 1, 1940 and to 63 percent by the end of June. While this "astounding" (p.83) shift might have resulted from British intelligence's influence over the polls, it seems at least possible that the German advance through Western Europe and France's surrender had some impact on public opinion about the draft. Mahl, however, does not even acknowledge that this was happening at the same time. The rapid progress of the war seems to be a "missing dimension" in Mahl's thinking.

Another "missing dimension" is the character of the American debate over the war. Mahl makes no attempt to consider the nature of the arguments presented either by the isolationists or the interventionists. Instead, he characterizes interventionists simply as "agents, informers and collaborators" (p.47). "Despite their pro-British bias, these Anglophiles were able to represent themselves as loyal, independent, disinterested Americans at the same time that German-Americans or Italian-Americans were easily belittled as biased 'foreigners.' This image of objectivity was a gross distortion of the facts" (p.7). Mahl never addresses the possibility that a "loyal, independent, disinterested" American might reasonably have come to the conclusion that defeating Germany was a vital *American*- interest, and, in so doing, he dismisses interventionism, almost by definition, as the pursuit of British interests. This idea is reinforced by Mahl's characterization of American public opinion as essentially isolationist, accompanied as it is with the suggestion that polls that show otherwise are unreliable.

In the absence of these two fundamental elements of the story, the reader is left with British covert activities as the primary explanation for the dramatic shifts in American opinion that took place during the first two years of the war--these

shifts were either faked by British-controlled polling or the product of British manipulations of the media. However, one does not have to search very far to find interventionist opinion that cannot be explained in this way. Mahl pays very little attention to women in this book, but a look at the views of some of the major American women's organizations is instructive. Even before the outbreak of the war in Europe, six women's organizations had appealed to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for a revision of the Neutrality Acts to allow the President to discriminate against aggressor nations.[1] These organizations embraced discriminatory powers as part of their commitment to collective security and international law, which they believed was the only way to ensure the maintenance of peace. Once the war had begun, their advocacy of aid to victim nations, combined with their conviction that a German victory would destroy any possibility of creating an international system that could preserve peace, meant that these organizations embraced the interventionist agenda that Mahl would have us believe was confined to British intelligence and its friends and collaborators. They supported the revision of the Neutrality Act in November 1939 and the passage of Lend-Lease in early 1941. Moreover, the "American Association of University Women" took an extremely hawkish position at its biennial convention in May 1941, when it called for "[r]ecognition of a common cause with all nations resisting totalitarian aggression and the furnishing of whatever aid we can give to make this resistance effective." [2] Significantly, the words "moral and economic," which had qualified "aid" in the resolution as presented to the convention, were deleted after the floor debate. Thus Mahl's assumption of a fundamentally isolationist public, unmoved by developments in Europe, needs rethinking. Certainly, some of the leading figures in these women's organizations were members of or connected to the Anglophile elite that Mahl describes, but the policies they pursued had support from branches across the

nation and, furthermore, were a logical extension of the internationalist policies of the interwar period. In other words, one need not suppose that they were duped by British intelligence to understand their position.

Even more problematic, perhaps, is the post hoc, ergo propter hoc character of much of Mahl's argument: since the British wanted the United States to enter the war and were engaged in activities intended to produce that end, they were responsible for U.S. involvement. Key elements of the process of causation are missing from Mahl's story, significantly weakening his argument for the vital importance of British intelligence. A prime example is his account of the nomination of Wendell Willkie at the Republican Convention in June 1940. Mahl successfully depicts a cleverly organized behind-the-scenes campaign to get Willkie the nomination--although many of the key players are not explicitly connected with British intelligence--but he brushes quickly over the process of nomination itself. "That night, amid the cries of 'We Want Willkie' from the Sam Pryor-packed galleries, the convention stampeded for Willkie" (p.162). But who were the delegates at this convention? How many were chosen in primary elections and how many chosen by the party? How many came to vote for an isolationist candidate and ended up voting for Willkie? What else influenced their decisions, other than the voices of the gallery and the opinion polls, which Mahl implies, but does not show, were fixed? These questions remain unanswered. Moreover, given that Willkie came third in the first ballot and did not win until the sixth ballot, "stampede" seems like an oversimplification.[3]

Another aspect of the post hoc, ergo propter hoc problem is the frequent failure to connect key actors, for example, Sam Pryor, with British intelligence. Although Mahl acknowledges that there was a triangle of influence here, the other sides of which were the Roosevelt administration and the Anglophile foreign policy elite, there is consider-

able fuzziness about who was behind what. For example, Mahl repeatedly describes FFF as a "British front," but also argues that a "covert White House-FFF connection allowed the White House to coordinate and build a bogus independent demand for interventionist policies that FDR could then follow" (p.29). So was FFF an administration front or a British front? Mahl seems to suggest that such a distinction is not important: "Members of the American elite, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt, were not tricked into the war. They were as eager as the British to fight Hitler. The Americans were eager to dance but did not know the steps; the British knew the steps but needed a rich partner. These elite interventionists invariably worked with and for and through a number of organizations that were fronts for British intelligence" (p.23). Thus, the activities of British intelligence, American interventionists and even, occasionally, the Roosevelt administration are lumped together.

The blurring of distinctions between British and American efforts is exacerbated by the standard of evidence provided to show that certain Americans were working for the British rather than on their own account. For example, columnist Dorothy Thompson, is described variously as "an American spokesm[a]n" (p.171) for British intelligence; a "British intelligence agent" (p.37); "work[ing] closely with major figures in British intelligence" (p.159); and as one of a number of "BSC ties to the world of media" (p.49). To support these characterizations, Mahl alleges that "[d]uring the period under study, Dorothy Thompson exhibited an amazing ability to reflect the British propaganda line of the day" (p.54); notes that certain pages of her FBI file are classified for national security reasons; and quotes a few entries from her diary from January 1942, which show that she had contact with some British intelligence officials. This seems considerably less than compelling evidence, but on its basis Mahl can claim Thompson's role and influence for the British.

A related and bothersome question is that of how we should understand the concept of a British "front." The term implies a bogus organization. Mahl clearly suggests that these front organizations did not represent genuine American opinion, but he also notes that Bill Morrell, a British agent, "contended that these fronts were all unaware 'of British influence, since this is maintained through a permanent official in each organization, who in turn, is in touch with a cut-out and never with us direct" (p.25). If the vast majority of the members of these organizations were not aware of British influence, to what extent were they "fronts"? At the very least, their involvement was a genuine expression of their commitment to interventionism. At the heart of Mahl's work lies the sense that Americans, concerned only with American interests and imbued with a hatred for war, could not have decided that it was vitally important that Germany be defeated and that, therefore, Britain should be given all possible aid unless they had fallen prey to the activities of British intelligence. This seems to me to overrate the effectiveness of British intelligence at the expense of the understanding and sophistication of the American people. This assessment is made explicit by Mahl in his conclusion, albeit in a slightly different context, when he address the problem of genuine American interventionism: "The willingness," he says, "was not the deed. What British intelligence brought to the equation was sharp focus, good organization, technical expertise, and a courageous determination to do whatever was necessary, however illegal or unseemly" (p.179).

Despite the fundamental weaknesses of Mahl's larger argument, *Desperate Deception* does provide a new perspective on the vital questions of American foreign policy formation in this period and encourages a more careful interrogation of the identity and connections of leading characters in the story. Clearly, British intelligence was an active participant in the unfolding drama of American involvement in the Second World War,

something that historians should be aware of. However, *Desperate Deception* does not provide enough evidence to suggest that this awareness should radically revise our understanding of the course of American foreign policy.

Notes

[1]. "Neutrality Statement made by Louise Leonard Wright, April 13, 1939," Box 1712, folder 1, Series IV, Papers of the National League of Women Voters, Library of Congress. Wright spoke on behalf of the National League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, the National Women's Trade Union League, the Young Women's Christian Association, the National Council of Jewish Women and the General Federation of Women's Clubs.

[2]. "1941 Biennial Convention," May 7 - 9, 1941, Series II, Reel 9, *American Association of University Women Archives, 1881-1976*, microfilm, (Sanford, N.C.: Microfilm Corporation of America, 1980). [3]. Robert Divine, *Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections, 1940-1948* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974), p30.

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