There is history the way Tolstoy imagined it, as a great, slow-moving weather system in which even tsars and generals are just leaves before the storm. And there is history the way Hollywood imagines it, as a single story line in which the right move by the tsar or the wrong move by the general changes everything. Most of us, deep down, are probably Hollywood people. We like to invent "what if" scenarios—what if *x* had never happened, what if *y* had happened instead?—because we like to believe that individual decisions make a difference: that, if not for *x*, or if only there had been *y*, history might have plunged forever down a completely different path. Since we are agents, we have an interest in the efficacy of agency.

Stories of intelligence operations, of espionage and covert warfare, sabotage and assassination plots have a lot of "what if" fascination about them. There is always the hope that one ingenious plan, one stolen document, or one successful assassination might change the course of history. And few men in American political history have been more devoted to that hope than Wild Bill Donovan.

William Donovan was a bold, charismatic, prescient, sometimes ridiculous, and potentially dangerous man. There is some dispute about the origins of his nickname, but there is no dispute about his willingness to try anything. He had enthusiasm by the boatload, and people loved to serve him. "He was exasperating but adorable," wrote Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a man who was in some respects his human opposite, "and he was generally forgiven and adored."

Schlesinger had worked, during the Second World War, in the great, and virtually only, success story of Donovan's life, the Office of Strategic Services, which he created ex nihilo, staffed imaginatively, and directed with gusto. Donovan's career with the O.S.S. lasted, like the O.S.S.

itself, just four years. Given his hopes—Douglas Waller, in “Wild Bill Donovan” (Free Press; $30), says that it was Donovan’s ambition to be the first Roman Catholic President of the United States—most of what came before and after was failure and frustration.

Donovan was born in Buffalo in 1883, the son of the teetotalling son of teetotalling Irish immigrants. (Donovan, too, largely abstained from alcohol; that was not where the reputation for wildness came from.) He graduated from Columbia College in 1905 and from Columbia Law School, where Franklin D. Roosevelt was a classmate, in 1907, then returned to Buffalo to marry the heiress of a local millionaire, practice law, and plot a political career.

When the United States entered the war in Europe, in 1917, Donovan joined the 165th Infantry as commander of the First Battalion. The regiment was descended from the legendary Fighting 69th, a historically Irish unit that traced itself to the time of the American Revolution. He and his men fought with distinction in France, where the 165th lost almost half its number in dead and wounded. Sixty were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross; three, including Donovan, eventually received the Medal of Honor. He was also awarded the Légion d’Honneur, the Order of the British Empire, the Croce di Guerra, the Order of Leopold, the Order of Polonia Restituta, and a Croix de Guerre with Palm and Silver Star. He returned to Buffalo a war hero.

In 1922, he was appointed United States attorney for western New York. The same year, he ran for lieutenant governor on the Republican ticket, but lost in the election won by Alfred E. Smith. His career in Buffalo went south after he undertook an ill-advised raid on a speakeasy popular with the city’s élite. He was appointed assistant attorney general in the criminal division of the Justice Department by President Coolidge, with

his old law-school professor Harlan Fiske Stone as Attorney General. But when Coolidge named Stone to the Supreme Court, in 1925, Donovan was passed over for the Attorney Generalship. His wife said later that it was the greatest disappointment of his life. It was not the last.

Donovan proceeded to set up a law practice, moved it to Wall Street, and soon acquired a fortune. He made another try at elected office, in 1932, running for governor against Herbert Lehman. He was a hapless campaigner, despite calling on the services of the father of public relations, Edward Bernays (who decided that the situation was irremediable and quit after a week). Lehman coasted to victory on F.D.R.'s coattails. Donovan even lost Buffalo, by seventeen thousand votes. He went back to Wall Street.

A compulsive traveller—he had two children, but spent little time with his family—he went all over the world, combining the cultivation of overseas business connections for his firm and its clients with semi-official intelligence gathering. This was a common practice among some American businessmen and lawyers before the Second World War, and their reports were gratefully received in Washington, because the government did not have a serious nonmilitary intelligence operation. Many diplomats considered spying unnecessary, ungentlemanly, and un-American.

By 1940, Wall Street Republicans like Donovan had begun to warm to Roosevelt. They found that they could tolerate the creeping socialism of his domestic programs because they liked his internationalism and interventionism. If there was turmoil somewhere in the world, they wanted the United States to be in the game. This was not just because they wanted access to overseas markets where American investors could

enjoy favorable terms—an Open Door policy—although they unquestionably did. They also believed that nations that trade with each other are less likely to go to war against each other.

Back when Donovan was running for governor, he had called F.D.R. "a new kind of red, white, and blue dictator." But that was standard Republican rhetoric, and F.D.R. was a pragmatist. He understood the political value of having prominent Republicans in his Administration when he was trying to lead the country into a war that most of its citizens didn't want to be a part of—his Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, was a Republican who had served in Herbert Hoover's Cabinet—and when Donovan came around peddling the idea of an intelligence service he was willing to listen.

Roosevelt and Donovan had snubbed each other in law school. They came from different sides of the upstate tracks: Buffalo's Irish-American First Ward was very far from Hyde Park. But Irish-American interventionists were hard to come by in 1940: F.D.R.'s Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, Joseph P. Kennedy, was an appeaser and a defeatist who stated publicly that he thought Great Britain had no chance against Hitler. Roosevelt liked Donovan's outside-the-box style—they were both drawn to crazy schemes. And, in 1940, Warner Bros. released "The Fighting 69th," a James Cagney picture (and not a bad one) based on the regiment's heroics in France. The Irish-born actor George Brent played Donovan as a man of superhuman rectitude. Donovan, now nearing sixty, recovered some of his old war-hero glamour, and Roosevelt decided that he wanted him on the team.

On July 11, 1941, with the United States not yet at war, F.D.R. created the post of Coordinator of Information, and inserted Donovan into the position. The job description was a little vague, which suited both men.

At first, Donovan reported directly to the President. Spying was still regarded with distaste by many people in the foreign-policy establishment: in 1941, while Hitler was overrunning Europe and threatening Great Britain, the State Department had eighteen people working in intelligence.

Pearl Harbor changed that, as it changed the popular mood of isolationism. In 1942, Donovan's agency, renamed the O.S.S., was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Chiefs were not thrilled at being obliged to deal with a man who had a reputation as a rogue operator, but in the end they decided that having Donovan on their leash was better than letting him run around outside their control.

Though the O.S.S. at its peak had no more than thirteen thousand employees, it was conceived as a worldwide operation. Donovan was of the view, as he put it, that "in a global and totalitarian war, intelligence must be global and totalitarian," and there was virtually nothing that he considered off limits, from assassinating foreign leaders to engaging in the most sophomoric kind of propaganda, such as air-dropping pictures of succulent food into Germany to provoke hungry inhabitants to rise up against the Nazis.

American propaganda during the Second World War was supposed to be run out of the Office of War Information. The O.W.I. was one of many agencies whose mandate officially precluded the O.S.S. from engaging in certain activities. Donovan did his best to ignore these bureaucratic boundaries, and the result was continual friction with the O.W.I., the F.B.I. (whose director, J. Edgar Hoover, became a lifelong enemy), the State Department, and the intelligence services of the Army and Navy.

But Donovan loved infighting (as, to a degree, did Roosevelt). His approach was to act first and worry about the broken china later.

Under Donovan, the O.S.S. hatched a scheme to inject Hitler's food with female sex hormones. Following up on a suggestion passed along by F.D.R. himself, it pursued a plan that involved strapping incendiary devices to bats, which would be dropped from airplanes over Japanese cities, on the theory that the bats would nest in the wooden houses in which most Japanese lived and set them on fire. Waller says that when the specially equipped bats were released from a plane in a test run, the animals dropped to earth like stones, and the project was abandoned. (Much later, the United States did firebomb Japanese cities, in the conventional way, with devastating results.)

The O.S.S. burgled foreign embassies in Washington, provoking Hoover, who objected that domestic espionage was the province of his organization. Roosevelt settled the dispute by ordering that only the F.B.I. could break into foreign embassies, but that it was required to share whatever it found with the O.S.S.

Most dramatically, Donovan looked for ways to win the war the Hollywood way, single-handedly—engaging in covert negotiations, fomenting coups and assassination attempts, and supporting underground resistance fighters and militias. They were the kinds of intelligence activity that suited his style. But, with minor exceptions, none of these heroics amounted to much, and it was probably just as well.

Special operations and covert diplomacy were perilous for two reasons. The first was that the Nazis responded with extraordinary brutality to any act of resistance inside the territories that Germany controlled. The S.S. did not merely torture and execute the perpetrators; it exacted a price from the local population, killing or transporting civilians. The balance sheet at the end of a partisan operation, once exposed, was overwhelmingly in favor of the German side. The one generally acknowledged special-operations success was the O.S.S.'s support of the Maquis, the French resistance, before and during the D-Day invasion. Waller reports that the resistance took ten thousand prisoners and distracted German reinforcements dispatched to Normandy—though he adds that, over all, the French resistance amounted to "pinpricks." Eisenhower did say that the O.S.S.'s activities during the landings were worth a division.

Generally, though, acts of sabotage or attempted assassination carried a dreadful price—and the worse the Nazis' situation became, the more vicious the reprisals, especially against Germans suspected of disloyalty. The O.S.S., and other Allied intelligence services, encouraged (though did little more than encourage) resistance efforts inside Germany. None had any effect in shortening the war, and all had a terrible end for those involved. Hitler executed almost five thousand people after the failure of Operation Valkyrie, the July 20, 1944, assassination plot led by Claus von Stauffenberg. Allied intelligence had one great German asset,

Wilhelm Canaris, the head of the Abwehr, German military intelligence. Canaris was arrested after the July 20th plot, but he was not executed until the final days of the war. He was hanged with piano wire, to prolong the ordeal.

The main problem, though, was that the Allies did not really want a coup against Hitler to succeed, and they certainly did not want a negotiated peace with Germany. Roosevelt and Churchill, meeting in Casablanca in January, 1943, had committed their nations to "the total elimination of German and Japanese war power." In large part, this was because of the Soviet Union. Stalin lived in perpetual fear that the United States or Britain would conclude a separate peace with Germany before the Red Army had finished "liberating" the nations of Eastern Europe. A revanchist Germany was his greatest nightmare (a French nightmare, too). Complete eradication of the Nazi regime and the war machine it had brought into being was the only safe outcome. A takeover by renegade generals or other disaffected Germans was undesirable for similar reasons. If it succeeded, Germany would remain a power, although controlled by some other potentially dangerous faction. The Allies' goal was to have no one remaining in Germany with whom they would be obliged to make terms, and they achieved it. "What if" Hitler had been assassinated is one of the most common historical thought experiments. It might have saved millions of lives, but it is also likely that it would have put the United States at war with Russia.

As the Wehrmacht weakened, following the defeat at Stalingrad, in the winter of 1942-43, Hungary tried to cut a peace deal, in the hope of avoiding a Soviet invasion. Donovan pursued this opening, but it was not the policy of the American government to negotiate an independent resolution, for it was not a policy acceptable to its Soviet ally. In the end, no Eastern European state was saved from the Red Army. Under the circumstances, they were all probably unsavable.

Meanwhile, Donovan was everywhere. Or nearly everywhere: General Douglas MacArthur wanted no part of him, and managed to keep the O.S.S. out of the Pacific Theatre. But Donovan went to Moscow, where, to F.D.R.'s horror, he proposed that the O.S.S. swap intelligence with the N.K.G.B. (Stalin must have been tickled to death by the idea, but Roosevelt quashed the deal.) He managed to get in the first wave at the Salerno landing, which launched the invasion of mainland Italy, and, in defiance of General George C. Marshall's direct orders, he crossed the Channel with the D-Day invasion forces and was on Utah Beach by Day Two.

O.S.S. stories, in fact and fiction, began appearing as soon as the war was over, in books like "Sub Rosa: The O.S.S. and American Espionage," by the O.S.S. alumni Stewart Alsop and Thomas Braden, and in movies like "O.S.S.," starring Alan Ladd and Geraldine Fitzgerald—a stodgy, docudrama-style entertainment, which carries

Donovan's imprimatur, and in which he is unflatteringly portrayed by a rather stubby actor named Joseph Crehan. A lot of uncorroborated detail has crept into the record—as one would expect in the case of an activity that, by its nature, does not accommodate the presence of disinterested witnesses.

Waller has gone through the archives. He has verified what can be verified and omitted the rest. His is the fourth biography written about Donovan. Its chief predecessor is "The Last Hero," a work of just under nine hundred pages by the British historian Anthony Cave Brown, which was published in 1982. Waller points out that Brown's book was subsidized by Donovan's old law firm, and he says that it contains "numerous errors and instances of wild speculation." "Wild Bill Donovan" undertakes to set the record as straight as the state of knowledge currently allows. It's frustrating, though, that Waller doesn't indicate, in the text or the notes, where he is correcting past mistakes. His book is brisk and believable; he is not in awe of his subject; and he has a great story. He is maybe too prudish about overdramatizing; he leaves out a lot of details that appear in other accounts (like the piano wire). It's not clear whether this is because he can't corroborate them, or because he has an expansive definition of the extraneous.

Donovan was an energetic recruiter. He didn't put much stock in background checks. If he spotted talent, he hired it. The O.S.S. thus had

some ex-convicts and organized-crime figures on the payroll—people who knew how to get into the kinds of places that people are not supposed to get into. It also employed some very distinguished minds. The list of those who served in the O.S.S. is almost a capsule of mid-century American achievement: the future Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, who worked in Secret Intelligence; the movie director John Ford, who headed the O.S.S. photographic unit that documented the landing at Omaha Beach; Sterling Hayden, who won a Silver Star for daring actions in the Balkans, which included parachuting into Croatia, and who later spoofed military bravado as Brigadier General Jack Ripper in Stanley Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove." The United Nations diplomat Ralph Bunche worked in Research and Analysis, as did the Princeton historian Carl Schorske, the Yale historian Sherman Kent, the Harvard historians H. Stuart Hughes and William Langer, and the Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse. The music critic Edward Downes, the poet Stephen Vincent Benét, and the philanthropist Paul Mellon all worked for Donovan. So did the future Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon, the mobster Lucky Luciano, the columnist Joseph Alsop, the major-league catcher Moe Berg, and, of course, Julia Child.

Donovan also recruited a number of young Ivy League graduates, who signed up mainly for the perks, and whose presence gave the organization the nickname Oh-So-Social. And his indifference to background checks led to the employment of as many as a hundred

Communists—Schlesinger noticed that the head of the Latin-American bureau in R. & A. kept a copy of the *Daily Worker* on his desk—and at least twelve Soviet spies. One of them was Donovan's own executive secretary, Duncan Lee, a lawyer he had brought in from his Wall Street firm.

Much of the time, the O.S.S. staff in Washington had little idea what was going on overseas, and little sense that their reports were ever read by anyone, or were contributing to the war effort. Schlesinger wrote to his parents about his "mounting suspicion that the whole thing is a giant boondoggle." But outsiders considered R. & A. a valuable operation. It was the part of the organization that took the Tolstoyan view: it assembled information on which the government could base long-term policy. After the war, it was transferred to the State Department—where it was quickly abolished. Not much of Donovan's creation survived into peacetime.

Donovan had pushed the idea of a permanent government intelligence agency to F.D.R., and he had hoped, naturally, that he might become the director. But Harry Truman was not a fan of Wild Bill. He disbanded the O.S.S. the month the war ended, and dismissed Donovan with barely a gesture of gratitude for services rendered.

In 1947, though, Truman, following the recommendation of members of his Administration, including the foreign-policy guru George Kennan,

established the C.I.A., with an O.S.S. veteran, Frank Wisner, in charge of covert operations. The agency's first director, Rear Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter, disliked the job and did not serve long, and Donovan had reason to hope that he might yet be appointed. He campaigned for Eisenhower in the 1952 Presidential election, but his sole reward was a one-year term as Ambassador to Thailand.

Donovan was now a hardcore Cold War hawk. He thought that Dean Acheson, who was Truman's Secretary of State, was a "pantywaist," and that John Foster Dulles, who was Eisenhower's, was just as pusillanimous—and Dulles was a man who regularly invoked the threat of nuclear war. Donovan could see no reason that policies considered suitable in wartime—covert military action, bribery, and disinformation—were not equally appropriate in the postwar world. He stirred up as much trouble in Southeast Asia as he could manage in a year, among other things promoting the career of Ngo Dinh Diem, the man who, with American sponsorship, became the disastrous first President of South Vietnam.

Donovan returned to the United States in 1954. Almost broke and in debt to the I.R.S., he registered as a lobbyist for the Thai government. His health began to deteriorate, probably an effect of his prodigious wartime travels. He suffered for several years from arteriosclerotic

atrophy of the brain, and he died, in Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in 1959.

Though Donovan failed to realize his dream of running a peacetime intelligence service, four famous C.I.A. directors were men whom he recruited, and who learned their trade in the O.S.S.: Allen Dulles, Richard Helms, William Colby, and William Casey. And the C.I.A. continued Donovan's usually futile and often counterproductive policy of intervening covertly in the internal affairs of other nations. For years, into the nineteen-fifties, the C.I.A. parachuted operatives into places like North Korea and Albania, with instructions to mobilize resistance to the regimes in power. Virtually every agent disappeared.

Totalitarian regimes are not terribly susceptible to individual acts of sabotage or resistance. One thing that even Donovan failed to appreciate was that the United States was relatively inexperienced at a business—espionage and covert political warfare—that its Cold War enemy had been in for three hundred years. For the Russians and for the Nazis, that business was not something that needed to be kept from the eyes of the public. Everyone understood that this was how things were done. Waller concludes that Donovan's operation did nothing to shorten the war, and that "the dull work" of R. & A. "proved to be of far more value than the cloak-and-dagger spying."

Waller believes that Donovan got his nickname from his soldiers in the 165th, one of whom is supposed to have shouted out, during a particularly intense drill, “We ain’t as wild as you are, Bill.” Other writers, such as Tim Weiner, in his eye-opening history of the C.I.A., “Legacy of Ashes,” claim that it came from a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers who was called Wild Bill Donovan in tribute to the number of walks and hit batters he was responsible for. The first story suggests fearlessness, the second recklessness. Donovan had both. It is good that his time onstage was brief. ♦

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