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The Real 007 Used Fake News to Get the U.S. into World War II

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CLOAK & DAGGER

The British ran a massive and illegal propaganda operation on American soil during World War II—and the White House helped.

In the spring of 1940, [British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill](#) was certain of one thing for his nation caught up in a fight to the death with [Nazi Germany](#): Without American support his

nation might not survive. But the vast majority of Americans—better than 80 percent by some polls—opposed joining the fight to stop Hitler. Many were even against sending any munitions, ships or weapons to the United Kingdom at all. To save his country, Churchill had not only to battle the Nazis in Europe, he had to win the war for public opinion among Americans. He knew just the man for the job.

In May 1940, as defeated British forces were being pushed off the European continent at Dunkirk, Churchill dispatched a soft-spoken, forty-three-year-old Canadian multimillionaire entrepreneur to the United States. William Stephenson traveled under false diplomatic passport. MI6—the British secret intelligence service—directed Stephenson to establish himself as a liaison to American intelligence. He went to the White House where the President, [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#), remained deeply concerned about the fate of Great Britain. To Stephenson's dismay, he learned that the U.S. government had no coordinated central command for spies and counterintelligence. Stephenson would have to create one on London's behalf in America. Before long, Britain's lone secret agent in the Americas built a vast clandestine propaganda, counterintelligence, and espionage empire.

Few men were ever so well equipped for [cloak-and-dagger](#) work. Stephenson's life and lore were right out of a book—and before long would become one. Short, thickly muscled as befitted a former boxing champion, with cropped graying hair, hooded, penetrating eyes, and forward-thrusting chin, he had dropped out of high school in Canada and eventually joined the Royal Flying Corps in World War I. An air Ace, he was credited with twelve combat kills. After being shot down, wounded and captured, he made a daring escape from a German prison camp. At the outbreak of the Second World War, he had approached his friend Churchill with the offer to go to Berlin to assassinate Hitler. Before sending him to the U.S., Churchill codenamed him, "Intrepid."

After World War I, Stephenson had returned to Canada where he made a fortune in the hardware business. He then added to his wealth with a photographic transmission system of his own invention. He grew his fortune further through ownership of a long list of other companies, including London's famous Shepperton Studios, the largest film studio outside Hollywood. His circle counted political and military leaders as well as entertainment stars, many of them now in the U.S., such as the producer/director Alexander Korda and his then-wife actress Merle Oberon, playwright Noel Coward, and film starlet Greta Garbo. Other friends included the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and Roosevelt speechwriter Robert Sherwood, FDR confidant and heir Vincent Astor, and 1940 Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie. He also enjoyed close ties with many leading figures in the news business, among them influential columnist Walter Lippmann, the *Time* publishing empire head Henry Luce, and *New York Herald Tribune* publisher Helen Reid. All proved eager accomplices in the effort to elicit sympathy from reluctant Americans for the British plight.

Thanks to the British sympathies of Nelson Rockefeller and his family, Stephenson opened an office in Rockefeller Center in Midtown Manhattan, on the 36th floor of the International Building North, at 636 Fifth Avenue. The sign over Room 3603 read “British Passport Control Office.” However, before long the floor-through office within was teeming with British and Canadian citizens, many in the U.S. on false diplomatic passports, and some Americans, all secretly employed by MI6.

Room 3603 housed two operational arms under Stephenson’s control. The British Information Service (BIS) ran a so-called “white,” or soft, propaganda operation that published magazines and pamphlets, paid for radio broadcasts, including over a New Jersey radio station it controlled, and broadcasted multilingual shortwave programming around the Western Hemisphere aimed at boosting support for the British cause. Stephenson’s operative David Ogilvy, after the war a famed advertising wizard, worked as an assistant director to George Gallup’s influential polling organization where he tracked Americans’ growing support for the British cause. Ogilvy also skewed survey questions to encourage the belief that their support was growing faster than it was.

Decades before the terms “viral media” and “fake news” were on anybody’s tongue, the BIS began subsidizing Overseas News Agency (ONA), a branch of the Jewish Telegraph Agency, to feed manufactured stories, often couched within factual material, about German atrocities, British pluck under the German bomber onslaught, and Hitler’s threats against the Americas, to its New Jersey Radio Station, which tagged them with the news agency label. That enabled friendly American newspapers and radio stations to report them as “news” from a reliable press source. Wire services, other radio stations and newspapers would then pick up the stories, which were soon being broadcasted and reported around the country.

For example, BIS writers supplied stories for its New Jersey radio station based on reports in friendly newspapers that originated with the Overseas News Agency. The gullible American press even reprinted the anti-Hitler predictions of a bogus Hungarian astrologer named Louis de Wohl. More effective still was a concerted campaign aimed at undermining morale on German U-boats. The ONA put out a story stating that the British had invented a new superexplosive for filling depth charges. The story appeared on the front pages of all the leading American newspapers, which were known to be regularly monitored by the Germans. Nobody suspected they were emanating from Rockefeller Center.

Stephenson also tried to influence American politics, sending rabble-rousers to spark fighting and riots at meetings of isolationist organizations such as the Committee for America First, and providing funds to pro-interventionist organizations and candidates for political office. Newspapers reported on the violence as much as they did on the political speeches.

Those relatively kid glove efforts went on along with a hidden, iron fist with which Stephenson punched at the Germans from deep within Room 3603, as well as out of the British Embassy in Washington and a school for spycraft known as Camp X he set up across the New York State border in Ontario, Canada. Known as the British Security Coordination (BSC), the clandestine intelligence empire Stephenson spawned battled Germany throughout the Western Hemisphere. He purportedly ran a network of upwards of 3,000 secret agents, counterintelligence operatives, forgers, burglars, codebreakers, and killers.

BSC Camp X taught operatives to forge documents, break into offices, crack safes, wiretap phones, and kill in silence. Stephenson was purportedly a hands-on operative. One of his U.S. agents, Ian Fleming, later modeled his James Bond character on Stephenson, a man he described as “very tough, very rich, single-minded, patriotic, and a man of few words.” Fleming claimed that Stephenson personally tracked down a British sailor selling information about Allied convoy sailings to the Germans—and killed the traitor with a single blow to the neck.

The murder may have been apocryphal, but Stephenson’s handiwork could be deadly effective even without committing acts of violence himself. BSC operatives delivered documents to the White House they had forged showing a coup by businessmen and officers in cahoots with the Nazis was in the works to topple the government of Bolivia. FDR personally forwarded the information to the Bolivian government. The German Embassy staff was booted from the country, and some 150 Nazi sympathizers named in the document were rounded up, imprisoned, and most were shot.

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The full panoply of Stephenson’s network went to work when his spies discovered that Gerhard Alois Westrick, a German lawyer representing American corporate interests in occupied Europe, had quietly slipped into the country with his family, settling in Scarsdale, outside New York City, and setting up his office in the posh Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in Manhattan. Westrick cultivated contacts in the U.S. business community, including Sosthenes Behn, founder of telecommunications conglomerate International Telephone & Telegraph (ITT), and Torkild Rieber, CEO of Texaco, the oil and gas giant. Westrick urged American businesses to support isolationism as a way to win business in Europe after German victory.

On the day following France’s surrender on June 22, 1940, Rieber sponsored a celebratory

dinner for Westrick at the Waldorf-Astoria, with executives on hand from General Motors, Ford, Underwood and other major U.S. corporations. Westrick promised them that businesses friendly to Germany would enjoy golden opportunities after the fall of Great Britain, which he predicted would come within three months.

BSC intermediaries tipped off reporters a Nazi agent was at work undermining American interests and security on the autocratic Germany's behalf. The *Herald Tribune* ran a series of front-page articles about Westrick—one scandalized headline declared, "Hitler's Agent Ensnared in Westchester." They were picked up by other newspapers and radio stations around the country. *Time* headlined him the "German Tempter." Other pundits including Walter Winchell and Drew Pearson amplified those with claims that Westrick was not just setting up future business ties but plotting a German-administered corporate takeover of America. Texaco's board soon ousted Rieber while Behn, a colonel in the U.S. Army in World War I, held on, managing to hide his close ties to the Nazi government, including ownership through ITT's German holding division of Focke-Wulf Company, which produced Luftwaffe planes that would bomb American troops when they arrived in Europe.

With reporters and protesters camping outside his house, Westrick slipped away in the night. BSC agents followed him and passed information on his whereabouts to FBI agents, who arrested him for driving with an illegal driver's license. He and his family were forced to return to Germany.

In spring of 1941, the FBI received a map from BSC operatives supposedly stolen from a South American diplomatic pouch and showing a secret Nazi plan to occupy and reorganize South America into five vassal states. After Roosevelt got the map from J. Edgar Hoover, he claimed in a speech on May 27, 1941, that this document proved definitely that Hitler was bent on conquest of the Western Hemisphere. He almost certainly knew that Stephenson's services had forged the map.

Some people in the Roosevelt administration found the presence of the BSC unlawful and dangerous. Assistant Secretary of State Adolf A. Berle was in charge of monitoring diplomatic activities in the U.S. He expressed alarm when he discovered what he called "a full size secret police and intelligence service" on American soil that "regularly employed secret agents and a much larger number of informers, etc....[to collect] information...." He called its work covering every aspect of American life "and probably military intelligence...an obvious breach of diplomatic obligation." He wrote of his concerns, protesting, "I do not see that any of us can safely take the position that we should grant blanket immunity for any foreign spy system, no matter whose it is." The President told him in so many words to back off. FDR made clear that he was ready to risk a great deal, even impeachment, to keep England afloat.

As the months went on and eventually the U.S. did join the war against the Axis, the federal

government created its own foreign intelligence and propaganda services, modeled on the workings of Stephenson's operations in Room 3603 Rockefeller Center. Stephenson's and FDR's friend William "Wild Bill" Donovan set up what would become the Office of Strategic Services, America's first centralized foreign intelligence service and precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency. Taking advantage of the BSC's expertise, thousands of agents from the Allied nations including the U.S. trained at Camp X and then infiltrated enemy lands.

As for Stephenson, after the war he was knighted, among other honors. He also received the then highest U.S. civilian award, the Medal of Merit. Although kept secret for many decades, whispers about his exploits took on a kind of mythical cast, sometimes out-James Bonding 007. Today, the [Intrepid Society](#) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, seeks to portray a more realistic view of the man and his achievements.

Stephenson eventually withdrew completely into the shadows, naturally, living the last twenty years of his life in a luxurious suite in a Bermuda hotel, where he died, in 1989, at age 92. He of course lives on in the exploits of the fictional James Bond. However, Ian Fleming admitted himself, "James Bond is a highly romanticized version of a true spy. The real thing is ... William Stephenson."

Marc Wortman is the author most recently of [1941: Fighting the Shadow War: A Divided America in a World at War](#). For more, go to marcwortmanbooks.com or follow him on Facebook at [marcwortmanbooks](#)