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David M. Keithly
IAFIE Board Member

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Intelligence Sesquicentennial: Testament of Bleeding War

Introduction: The Substance of the Shadow

The purpose here is to examine human intelligence (humint) and counterintelligence during the American Civil War with an eye to determining effects on military operations and to identifying fundamental shortcomings. The Civil War marked a watershed both in American history and in the annals of warfare. It established the predominance of the Federal government, subordinating states' rights to national authority in various spheres, and finally eliminating assertions of "state sovereignty." Before the Civil War, the United States, primarily an agrarian society, was still a plural noun in common usage (the United States are). Thereafter, it would develop steadily into an industrial power, and would become a singular noun (the United States is).

Likewise, the Civil War represented a turning point in some aspects of warfare. Mounted cavalry was still an important military instrument, and frontal assaults not infrequent, but repeating rifles had become prevalent, and even machine-guns were making an appearance. Rifle-pits, earthworks, and fire-trenches foreshadowed the ghastly stalemate of World War I. At sea, submarines and mines, then known as torpedoes, claimed many victims, further portending twentieth-century maritime conflict. The *Monitor* and the *Merrimack*, renamed the *Virginia* by the Confederacy, fought the first sea-battle between ironclads.

With respect to intelligence and clandestine operations, the U.S. Civil War was a transitional point of time and would begin ushering in substantial changes. Among other things, it brought intimations of the modern national security state. *Habeas corpus* was suspended in the name of public safety in wartime, and civil liberties were curtailed. The notion of "all-source" intelligence was developed by the Secret Service headed in the early days of the war by Allan Pinkerton, whose name remains familiar today because of the detective agency he founded. Intelligence, counterintelligence, and even "disinformation" networks evolved in both the Union and the Confederacy. Pinkerton made his reputation at the beginning of the war by uncovering a plot to assassinate President Abraham Lincoln, an early example of effective counterintelligence. At the war's end, his successor in the Secret Service, Lafayette Baker, ignored information about the plans of Southern sympathizers to murder the President until it was too late, a notable counterintelligence failure. Baker was never able to account satisfactorily for the agent who was absent the night the President was shot. Nor was the Secret Service at a higher stage of readiness at the time.

Live and Let Die

By modern standards, of course, the scope of intelligence in the Civil War was limited, the process *ad hoc*. Yet, intelligence activities would progress into more modern conceptions of operational and strategic intelligence, directed toward "who has what, where, and what they plan to do with it"; technological intelligence, focusing on enemy weapon systems and developments; and counterintelligence, involving protection of crucial information and assets. Today, one associates technological intelligence with missiles and other sophisticated weapon systems, yet one might add parenthetically that technological intelligence was previously the specialty of naval intelligence. It is not

coincidental that James Bond is a British naval officer, or that the “black chambers” of the great powers of the early twentieth century were organized and staffed by naval personnel. The concept of technological secrecy came into its own with the British construction of the *Dreadnought*, the first modern battleship. So secretive was the project and so effective the security surrounding it that little was known of the *Dreadnought* before it was actually launched.¹ Prior to this time, details of warship construction were widely publicized.

With numerous military innovations, such as ironclads, torpedoes, submarines and minefields, the Civil War offered ample opportunity for espionage, even though neither side made much effort to conceal technological advancements. Few troubled themselves much to hide the development of nineteenth-century *Wunderwaffen*. Both sides knew about each other’s development of ironclad vessels, for example, although the South failed to anticipate the rapid deployment of the Union’s *Monitor*. In land warfare, major technological innovations were widely comprehended, and essential elements of operational intelligence concentrated largely on determination of troop movements and dispositions.

Without doubt, the prevailing lack of effectiveness has invited dramatization of Civil War intelligence over the years. Female spies inveigled information from government officials and military officers, and carried secret messages on their persons. Their exploits, clever as these sometimes were, seldom contributed significantly to the outcome of battle, though. Military histories mention such deeds tangentially, but observers do not usually afford these much serious consideration. And although spies tended to emerge and be recruited from the fringes of society, intelligence operatives were to be found in all walks of life.² Elizabeth Van Lew, an aristocratic Southern belle, became a spy for the North. Rose O’Neal Greenhow, a leading Washington society personage, spied for the South. Not generally known, yet all the more remarkable, is that Harriet Tubman, of Underground Railroad fame, also served as a Union intelligence operative, utilizing the contacts and safehouses she developed before the outbreak of hostilities in the Union war effort.³ The continued operation of the Underground Railroad reminds us that the Civil War was, in substance, an ideological conflict. Slavery was at the root of the “states rights” issue, and the extension of slavery into the territories was a direct cause of war. Little room for compromise and moderation existed when passions ran as high as they did by the late 1850s. A consequence of the intense emotions the slavery question aroused was that a pool of recruits for clandestine service was readily available, and many on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line simply appointed themselves intelligence operatives.

You Only Live Twice

More often than not, intelligence and counterintelligence personnel were selected and assumed their duties largely by happenstance. Pinkerton, America’s first spymaster, was

¹ Breyer, Siegfried, *Battleships and Battle Cruisers, 1905-1970*, trans. Alfred Kurti (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1973), 46-49.

² Ind, Allison, *A Short History of Espionage* (New York: David McKay, 1963), 99.

³ Smedley, R.C., *History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 250.

a case in point. Pinkerton made a name for himself as an astute railway detective before the war, and it was in the course of protecting the railroads against sabotage by pro-secession zealots that he stumbled upon the plot to assassinate the President when the latter was traveling to Washington for his inauguration. He contacted Lincoln's staff, and together they arranged for the President to enter the city secretly on the night of February 22, 1861.⁴ Impressed by this initial performance, Lincoln asked Pinkerton to head the Union's Secret Service, founded in 1860 by the Treasury Department. As the war ground on, Pinkerton's organization became a nascent intelligence-collection, counterespionage, and anti-terrorist outfit. Baker, Pinkerton's successor as head of the Secret Service, was an ardent abolitionist who waged clandestine war against the Confederacy with a vengeance.

It is noteworthy, and perhaps a little ironic, that Southern intelligence operatives were less often drawn to service by ideological fervor. The more idealistic of them, as was true of some Confederate military leaders such as Robert E. Lee or Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, were not enamored of the Southern "cause" so much as they displayed a keen loyalty to their native state and people. For example, one of the most colorful of all the Civil War's spies, Belle Boyd, was seventeen years old when a group of Union soldiers occupied her family's farm and attempted to raise the Union flag over it. When an officer insulted her mother, Belle shot the man dead. After a military tribunal released her, she acted largely on impulse to collect intelligence on Union forces, often by using her charms to extract information from unwary Federal officers. On more than one occasion, she warned Confederate units of impending attacks. "Stonewall" Jackson once expressed his debt of gratitude to her.⁵

Eventually, Belle Boyd was arrested for espionage, then exchanged. She traveled to England, and was alleged to have married a Union naval officer. By one account, she was captured on a blockade-runner and applied her feminine wiles to the prize officer, who was later court-martialed and cashiered from the service. Some say she enticed him to spy for the Confederacy thereafter. By another account, the officer was indeed enraptured, but married her only after the war.⁶ However it may be, she went on to make her name and fortune after the war by publicizing her espionage adventures. During her modest stage career, she billed herself "Cleopatra of the Succession" and the "Siren of the Shenandoah." This sequel to her intelligence collection activities during the war brings to the fore a problem inherent in all accounts of nineteenth-century espionage and counter-espionage, that of authenticity. Espionage is an intrinsically difficult area in which to ascertain facts. Before the growth of intelligence bureaucracies, personal memoirs of spies and their contacts were often the chief source of information, and such accounts lend themselves to being spiced and adorned, with no one able to gainsay. Even in the twentieth century, with intelligence operations far more centralized and formally organized, official accounts are often kept secret for many years, and are themselves subject to tampering for a variety of reasons, usually self-serving ones.

⁴ *The Civil War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File, 1982), 365-66.

⁵ Seth, Ronald, *Some of My Favorite Spies* (New York: Chilton Book Company, 1968), 40-41.

⁶ Ind, *A Short History of Espionage*, 107-109.

The dearth of reliable material and sources in part explains the extensive discussion of women in Civil War intelligence collection, and the human interest appeal of their exploits abets romanticizing. Women did, in fact, often assume a prominent role in intelligence collection, sometimes simply by default, since intelligence organizations were in an embryonic stage and centralized intelligence was nascent. Civilian populations were frequently in close proximity to and had considerable contact with military forces, a circumstance conducive to conveying crucial information and timely news. People with intense feelings one way or another had opportunities to undertake actions on their own. Many, if not most, intelligence couriers were women, above all, because they could usually pass through the lines without much difficulty. Throughout the war, women were accustomed to moving about relatively freely, even in enemy-occupied territory. Who was to refute that they were merely out and about visiting their “men folk”?

The restrictive lives women tended to lead in the past would not seem to have equipped them either with the requisite self-confidence or the professional skills for conducting intelligence operations. Herein lies a paradox, though.⁷ Archaic nineteenth-century notions of chivalry, especially in the South, rendered women above suspicion and often protected them from severe punishment, hence heightening their value as spies immensely. Rose Greenhow and Belle Boyd survived arrest. Men in a like situation were often summarily executed. The nurse-spy Emma Edmonds, an abolitionist Southerner determined to serve the anti-slavery cause, fit the pattern neatly as well.⁸ While working as nurse, she volunteered to replace a male Union spy in Richmond who had been hanged. She made numerous trips across the lines, at times disguised as a black man. Her cover was nearly blown when she was set to hard labor. Thereafter, she would usually disguise herself as a black woman, and occasionally as an Irish camp-follower. Edmonds came and went as she chose, arousing few suspicions, even when crossing the lines. To boot, she demonstrated no lack of cunning in her endeavors.

Close civilian-military contacts coupled with almost astonishing laxity in security sometimes resulted in remarkable espionage sagas. “Rebel Rose” Greenhow, society lady and social climber of humble origins, who had married into a prominent Richmond family and later entertained Washington’s elite, is legendary. After becoming a widow, she also became a sort of high-class courtesan. Among her frequent visitors was bachelor President James Buchanan. Her political connections, strong Southern sympathies, and outright contempt for Lincoln and the Republicans, compelled her to serve as a Confederate spy. “The Rebel Rose” was instrumental in establishing a Confederate spy ring in Washington prior to the outbreak of war. In conjunction with Thomas Jordan, a military officer of Confederate persuasion stationed in Washington in 1861, she proceeded to recruit Confederate operatives in the Federal bureaucracy, including in the War Department.⁹

In the early phases of the war, the “Rebel Rose” continued to receive gentlemen callers including senior officers, congressmen, and even members of Lincoln’s Cabinet. From

⁷ Newman, Bernard, *Epics of Espionage* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 64.

⁸ Singer, Kurt, *Three Thousand Years of Espionage* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1948), 122-30.

⁹ Ind, *A Short History of Espionage*, 80-87.

such high-level contacts, she gleaned information that was initially of considerable value to operations. Her courier, for example, kept Confederate generals posted on Union troop movements on the eve of the First Battle of Manassas. She even acquired a genuine copy of Union General Irwin McDowell's order-of-battle. Partly through her efforts, the Battle of Manassas turned into a critical Confederate victory, and it certainly represented a sobering experience for her Washington social acquaintances, many of whom turned out in holiday spirit fully expecting to see the rebels run. Since the engagement was such a near-run affair, and Union victory at Manassas might well have precipitated a moral collapse of the Confederacy, one should not make light of "Rebel Rose" intelligence.

Notwithstanding widespread suspicions about her, the "Rebel Rose" continued to operate fairly openly even late into 1862, and counterintelligence efforts were feeble and largely ineffectual. When Pinkerton's men began to close the net around her, she circulated petitions denouncing such "persecution," and availed herself of high-level political connections. She could not simply be apprehended and put on trial, because arrest was a politically delicate issue in this instance. The "Rebel Rose" had befriended too many important people. When the Secret Service endeavored to use her house as a "mousetrap," that is, as a counterintelligence instrument, by keeping track of comings and goings, Greenhow developed her own countermeasures.¹⁰ She also used coded correspondence, apparently even after her eventual internment. Pinkerton made arrangements to read her mail, some of which consisted of vapid and seemingly innocuous high-society chit-chat addressed to one "Aunt Sally."¹¹ Some of the correspondences were certainly encoded, but Pinkerton and his agents made no effort to discover the identity of "Aunt Sally," or to determine whether she existed at all.

Greenhow understood the need for timely intelligence, utilizing at least three female couriers, Betty Duval, Lillie MacKall and Antonia Ford, to carry messages through the lines. It was Duvall who carried a packet of information to the Confederate forces on the eve of the First Battle of Manassas. Later, as the war dragged on with no end in sight to the appalling slaughter, feelings hardened, the Federal government became less fastidious about respect for civil liberties, and Greenhow was imprisoned. Nonetheless, security in Washington remained slack, and lips were often loose. Counterintelligence operations still had a long way to go, and in the case of "The Rebel Rose," apparently no one thought of planting disinformation on her. Had this been done, she could have become a valuable Union asset. Perhaps nothing, though, could better demonstrate counterintelligence amateurism than Greenhow's arrest at her residence. A basic maxim of counterintelligence tells one to avoid under all circumstances apprehending a suspected spy at home. As it turned out, "The Rebel Rose" used one of her female couriers to smuggle out the most compromising evidence, right under Pinkerton's nose. By no means, though, did Washington have a monopoly on lax security. Critical information often flowed out of Richmond and other Southern cities as sand through a sieve. If Union counterintelligence operations were at best rudimentary, Confederate ones were, if anything, worse. The cardinal reason is to be found largely in the decentralized nature of the Confederate polity. The Confederacy's constituent parts were

¹⁰ Newman, *Epics of Espionage*, 40.

¹¹ Ind, *A Short History of Espionage*, 87.

jealously protective of their sovereignty; “states rights” remained the rallying cry; and to the bitter end Confederate leaders were unable or unwilling to impose the sort of societal discipline necessary to conduct a protracted conflict for the highest stakes. Effective wartime counterintelligence, with its attendant restrictive measures, requisite investigations and curtailment of civil liberties, might not have been possible in the Confederacy.

The Confederacy’s designated spycatcher was General John Henry Winder, who headed the “Safety Committee,” which passed for a counterintelligence organization, but was notoriously inefficient and corrupt. One of Winder’s chief detectives, Philip Cashmeyer, was a double agent and in the employ of Elizabeth Van Lew. Union operatives regularly reported how Winder and his subordinates could be bribed to issue travel passes. Few questions were asked when the money was right.¹² Five Pinkerton agents made a total of fourteen trips to Richmond from October 1861 to April 1862, serving as couriers and entering the city fairly easily.¹³ In the spring of 1862, with huge Federal armies poised to strike the Confederate capital from the east, more astute intelligence operatives might have ascertained how weak the Confederate defenses were. To be sure, a more enterprising Union general than George McClellan would have insisted on better intelligence, accepted the risks, reconciled himself to the casualties, and pushed forward.

Of Vexation and Vanity

Elizabeth Van Lew of Richmond took it upon herself to spy for the North, and on her own initiative established an intelligence network in Virginia. Van Lew turned against slavery at a fairly early age, so great an impropriety in a proper Southern lady that she was widely referred to as “Crazy Bet,” and became a pariah. The openness of her sympathies, but above all, the common perception she was not quite sane, to which she contributed by a disheveled and untidy appearance, served as suitable cover for her activities. Despite all the evidence, few harbored genuine suspicions about “Crazy Bet,” and a counterintelligence operation was never seriously considered.¹⁴

Her espionage network in the very heart of the Confederacy would spread its tentacles wide, and, moreover, Van Lew would assist with escapes of Union prisoners-of-war, in one instance, arranging a breakout of over one-hundred men. On these activities she spent much of her fortune, and what should have been suspicious eccentricities became merely a matter of public record. An article in a Richmond newspaper spoke of “two ladies, mother and daughter, living on Church Hill...who attracted public notice by their assiduous attention to Yankee prisoners.”¹⁵ Such behavior in the North after 1863 would in all likelihood have landed the perpetrators in jail. One cannot be certain that her espionage had much operational effect, though in terms of sheer amounts of information delivered expeditiously she was one of the most proficient female spies in

¹² Markle, Donald E., *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994), 4.

¹³ Fishel, Edwin C., *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 564.

¹⁴ Newman, *Epics of Espionage*, 42.

¹⁵ Markle, *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*, 181.

history. From a humanitarian standpoint, the significance of the prisoner escapes she helped organize speaks for itself. As with Greenhow, it is remarkable that a fairly well-known woman, with plain-spoken enemy sympathies, was able to collect intelligence in the capital city with little hindrance. Like the “Rebel Rose,” she understood intuitively the importance of timely intelligence. Establishing a series of courier safehouses reaching to the Union lines, she collected intelligence in the Confederate capital, then dispatched it quickly to the Federal commanders. So efficient did the operation become, that toward the war’s end, fresh flowers arrived at General Grant’s headquarters almost daily with encrypted messages inside, care of the Van Lew network. After the war, a grateful Federal government rewarded Van Lew by appointing her Postmistress of Richmond. Some precautionous officials in all likelihood thought she would be able to keep track of potential vengeful adherents to the “lost cause” in such a public office. Her customers for the most part distained her as a turncoat, though, and she was finally demoted to a minor clerkship. When she died in 1900, the only mourners at her funeral were former servants and the relatives of Union soldiers she helped to escape from Southern prisons. Several were kinfolk of Colonel Paul Revere, the grandson of the Revolutionary War hero, whom she had concealed in her home after he had bolted captivity.¹⁶ They arranged to have a gravestone with the following inscription placed at the burial site: *She risked everything that is dear to man—friends, fortune, comfort, health, life itself, all for the one absorbing desire of her heart—that slavery might be abolished and the Union preserved.*

Lafayette Baker made his military intelligence debut by gaining an interview with General Winfield Scott and volunteering to collect information on Confederate positions, weapons and troop movements. He determined that his cover should be an itinerant photographer, in the manner of the well-known, professional photographer Matthew Brady, and in fact, photographic espionage originated in the Civil War.¹⁷ On the Confederate side, A.D. Lytle would photograph Federal units in the Louisiana area, providing some useful information to Southern commanders. Pinkerton would employ Alexander Gardner as a photographic covert operator, and General William T. Sherman used photography to develop maps and assess terrain in his Georgia and South Carolina campaigns.

One can scarcely think of an activity less subtle than an intelligence agent going about his business with a bulky camera in tow. Photography was still a novelty at the time of the Civil War, however, and officers and troops were only too happy to pose for portraits.¹⁸ Simple vanity in some cases presented itself, and Confederate cavalry General J.E.B. Stuart and other high-ranking officers once posed for Baker. Celebrated as the “last cavalier,” Stuart was courtly and high-headed, but not one of the hard-eyed men the war would later produce. His sense of the need for operational security left something to be desired, and the cavalier displayed little grasp of counterintelligence fundamentals. The dust on antique time would lie unswept.

¹⁶ Newman, *Epics of Espionage*, 184.

¹⁷ Markle, *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*, xviii.

¹⁸ Singer, *Three Thousand Years of Espionage*, 104-10.

It even borders on the farcical that Baker's camera was not functional, but merely a means to acquire access to the Confederate Army. Granted, he could exploit the vanity of Confederate officers well enough, but it seems not to have dawned on him that with a functioning camera he could have taken photographs which themselves would have been of intelligence value, as others had already been doing. Instead, he found himself forced to move on when his customers requested non-existent portraits.

The game was finally up for him, though, when he fell under suspicion and was arrested. What followed was one of the more bizarre episodes of the entire war, when Baker was taken to Richmond and personally interrogated by Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Perhaps nothing can better demonstrate the crying want of counterintelligence or the absence of adequate staff work generally than the specter of the Confederate President personally interviewing a suspected enemy spy. Black chambers and hard-bitten counterintelligence agents still lay in the future, in more worldly-wise societies. Baker thoughtfully invented a cover story, posing as one Samuel Munston, of Knoxville, Tennessee, who supposedly had spent some years in California. A prominent citizen of Tennessee was produced to check this alibi, and Baker was able to learn by glancing at the man's visiting card placed in the President's appointment schedule that his name was Brock. When Brock entered the presidential office, Baker preempted by greeting Brock with his name. He then managed by sheer bluster to convince Brock they were old acquaintances. Baker secured his release, and returned to Washington to focus on counterintelligence work.

His exploits eventually resulted in his selection as Pinkerton's replacement. Pinkerton had proved to be an erratic and largely ineffective spymaster, above all, because he endeavored to handle intelligence collection, counterintelligence, and secret service work concurrently. In a word, Pinkerton and his cohorts were overextended, their efforts unfocused. Pinkerton bore chief responsibility for the safety of the President, among other duties, even when he was serving in the field as General McClellan's chief provider of tactical intelligence, a task in which he hardly excelled anyway. Moreover, few of Pinkerton's men had any prior military experience, and military intelligence operations differ significantly from detective work. The latter usually necessitates maintaining underworld contacts and tracking criminal groups, but such an approach is of limited value for wartime intelligence. For starters, espionage agents are drawn from a broader spectrum of society than the underworld, and their motives differ from those of common criminals. Many are moved by patriotism, rather than personal gain, for instance. Furthermore, accurate insight into an enemy's plans is vital to assure war's efficient conduct. Frederick the Great is credited with having said: "Great advantage is drawn from knowledge of your adversary, and when you know the measure of his intelligence and character you can use it to play on his weaknesses."¹⁹ Intelligence is a tool for preserving a regime; in the case of the American Civil War, the Union. Grasping the import of certain information, in the trade jargon, separating the "wheat" from the "chaff," presupposes considerable sophistication and expertise. Rigidity and frivolousness are traits that do not spell good fortune in intelligence. Pinkerton's men were negotiating a steep learning curve.

¹⁹ Freeman Jr., Chas W., *The Diplomat's Dictionary* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1994), 180.

Baker's dogged resolution as head of the Secret Service was punctuated by occasional bursts of ingenuity. One of his agents, Timothy Webster, was established in his cover by feigning arrest as a Confederate spy, then escaping from pretended imprisonment. With his credibility thus secured, he was soon able to move in the highest Confederate circles. Unfortunately for this lucid scheme, Webster fell ill, then became incapacitated. A failed rescue attempt led to his exposure and proved his undoing. He was arrested and hanged. Northern popular reaction to what was widely perceived as a cruel outrage roused anti-Southern sentiment at a time of Union reversals on the battlefield and of subsequent flagging public morale. Hence, Webster did more for the Union cause in death as a martyr for freedom than he had done in life as a spy.²⁰ Malicious tongues even spread the rumor that Union intelligence operatives had "thrown him to the wolves" for this very purpose.

In another strange twist of fate, a near-hanging made the career of the condemned, one Reverend T.J. Mann.²¹ A Southerner, Mann was more saboteur than spy. During an attempt to employ an incendiary device to blow up a Union powder magazine, Mann was arrested when the powder failed to explode. Mann is said to have quipped that a lighted cigar would have worked better. When a group of Union soldiers started to lynch him, an officer appeared and ordered them to cut him down. Mann survived the war, and afterwards frequented the lecture circuit, giving his account of being hanged. As might be expected, his renditions were dramatic and emotion-laden. He described the sensations of wonderful light and joyous music that have recurred in accounts of near-death experiences, a great draw in nineteenth-century revival meetings.

More prosaic, but of actual consequence for day-to-day military operations, were the accomplishments of Brigadier Generals Grenville Dodge in the western theater and George Sharpe in the east. These capable men demonstrated how operational and tactical intelligence could improve substantially as the North acquired the attributes of a national security state. Sharpe would, in fact, rise to become chief of the Union Bureau of Military Information, one of the most professional military intelligence organizations of the nineteenth century.²² Dodge, for his part, developed into both a capable military commander and a proficient intelligence officer, earning a reputation as a Jack-of-all-trades. He was instrumental in forming the Union Army's local group of spycatchers and in setting up the central intelligence organization General U.S. Grant urged upon the Union's western-theater forces. Dodge organized and for a time commanded the First Tennessee Cavalry, consisting of Southern Unionists, all the more valuable for reconnaissance purposes and tactical intelligence collection since they knew Southern terrain and "spoke Dixie." Dodge also established the First Alabama Colored Infantry and Cavalry Regiments, both of which assumed some intelligence collection responsibilities. Dodge assembled a large cadre of military scouts in the western theater and was particularly adept at utilizing female couriers, one of whom, Molly Malone, became associated with the Vicksburg Campaign through her intelligence collection activities. During the siege of the city, Dodge even placed a spy in Vicksburg who

²⁰ Newman, *Epics of Espionage*, 39.

²¹ Singer, *Three Thousand Years of Espionage*, 138-40.

²² Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union*, 569.

supplied crucial information about the city's defenses and the condition of the besieged forces there. He pulled off a greater intelligence *coup* the following year when his operatives succeeded in penetrating the staff of the Confederate forces defending Atlanta, and subsequently was able to furnish General Sherman with the enemy order-of-battle and disposition of forces.

In the final year of the war, Sharpe and Dodge were reported to have had hundreds of intelligence operatives in what was left of the Confederacy. Both accomplished much with relatively few resources. Yet both men were reserved, apparently secure enough in their own right not to be boastful of their not insignificant intelligence exploits.²³ Neither endeavored to tell the entire story, much less to dramatize it. The only bluster in which Sharpe ever engaged was to point out occasionally that he had urged General George Meade to attack the spent Confederate army at Gettysburg and to cut off its path of retreat. He was probably offering good advice. Dodge and Sharpe used blacks regularly in intelligence operations, although data and details have been lost to posterity, and Sharpe proved astute at gleaning information from the Pamunkey Indians in Virginia as well.

Dodge's intelligence network eventually operated from middle Tennessee to Richmond and to the Gulf of Mexico. Although designed primarily to collect information on Confederate forces and troop dispositions, it was constantly on the lookout for rebel spies as well. Dodge recruited an old war horse of the army scouts, the intrepid L. A. Naron, who hailed from Alabama and spoke "deep Dixie," but was unflinchingly loyal to the Union. Naron, more commonly known by his nickname "Captain Chickasaw," hunted Confederate espionage agents and ran many of the counterintelligence operations in theater. A cunning military scout, "Captain Chickasaw" would habitually venture out ahead of the cavalry for a preliminary assessment of enemy strength. Such work was particularly dangerous and scouts were known to quip they would rather go into half-a-dozen battles than on one intelligence mission. "The secret service men were braver than the average soldier," Dodge said, and he had a special talent for finding such men.²⁴ His almost uncanny ability to recruit Southerners devoted to the Union cause for intelligence work bespoke his considerable understanding of human character.

The Black Heritage

Perhaps the most important, certainly the least appreciated, group of Union sympathizers and thus potential spies in the South was the black population. Many cases of anonymous blacks providing intelligence to Union forces, as the one who told General Grant where to land his troops below Vicksburg, are documented.²⁵ A black man, John Scobell, through sheer determination, became one of Pinkerton's most trusted agents. Tubman repeatedly turned to good account the skills and experience she gained in her Underground Railroad days, and provided critical information to Federal forces. Memories of the ante-bellum South, hardly fond ones, were a powerful motivating factor for her and others. Familiarity with the Southern states and Southern

²³ Markle, *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*, 15.

²⁴ Bakeless, John, *Spies of the Confederacy* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), 209.

²⁵ Smith, Page, *Trial By Fire* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1982), 391-92.

ways equipped some blacks, probably including Tubman, to assist in counterintelligence operations also. A new Underground Railroad of sorts sprang up, by which black families passed along escapees from Southern prison camps until they reached Northern lines. Tubman's contributions to the war effort have yet to be systematically analyzed, and the complete story might never be told.

Later in the war, other black underground organizations, such as the Legal League, were formed, usually to act as couriers for Federal intelligence operatives.²⁶ Runaway slaves were routinely interrogated once they entered federally controlled territory. Scobell had a large hand in such activities. He and his colleagues encouraged educated blacks to travel to Confederate areas to collect information and to serve as couriers. Black volunteers were often able to avail themselves of the protection and support accorded by relatives in the South, but such intelligence assets were not always utilized to the extent they might have been. Blacks were the unsung heroes of intelligence in the Civil War, and one can fairly assume that more intelligence collection was conducted by blacks than we will ever know about. In the atmosphere of late nineteenth-century America, the exploits of blacks were far less marketable than those of romantic white heroines, and many black accomplishments simply went unrecorded. In the "Jim Crow" South especially, blacks were closely associated with Republicanism, and adherents of the Confederate "lost cause" were given to downplaying the roles blacks assumed in the defeat. The name Nathan Bedford Forrest immediately springs to mind as a case in point.

A Time to Sow, A Time to Reap

Soon after the war, Lafayette Baker completed the scrutinizing *History of the Secret Service*.²⁷ Parts of this tome deal with intelligence collection, and some with rudimentary counterintelligence operations. But much of it discusses other matters entirely, such as drunkenness among army officers and the ease with which prostitutes gained entry to army camps. One is left to draw one's own conclusions about the bearing, if any, such matters have upon intelligence. It is regrettable that few details about the recruitment, training, or handling of Union intelligence operatives are on offer. More has yet to be told.

Agents were regularly recruited for intelligence work, though, and as the war dragged on, people frequently volunteered their services. At least on the Union side, sporadic efforts were made to establish and maintain a security network. Yet, despite such attempts as the cleverly staged arrest of Timothy Webster as a Confederate spy, or the counterintelligence "sting" operation using the Greenhow establishment as a "mousetrap," the systematic counterintelligence and disinformation activities we would now take for granted in wartime were seldom orchestrated. Nor did self-initiated intelligence operations have much discernible effect on the war's end result. We find few major engagements whose outcome was shaped by intelligence collection and analysis as, for instance, Anglo-American access to "Ultra" and the decrypted Japanese naval codes bore upon several World War II campaigns. Slack security, so striking in the case

²⁶ Markle, *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*, 18.

²⁷ Baker, Lafayette, *History of the United States Secret Service* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter, 1867).

of the Greenhow clan, was in truth a recurring theme on both sides, underscoring how disjointed and even droll a business counterintelligence operations could be in the 1860s. Secrets were quite simply not well kept in the first place. Equally disconcerting from a professional standpoint, valuable intelligence was sometimes not acted upon, or revealed in such a manner as to provide no protection to sources, hence choking off the information flow. For example, a young railroad telegrapher, one J. O. Kerbey, who would later become a Union intelligence operative, ascertained before the First Battle of Manassas that some Confederate “masked batteries” were actually fakes built of logs, but Union commanders refused to believe him and ignored the telltale signs. Kerbey would later operate behind Confederate lines, eventually becoming a telegrapher in a Southern railway depot, where he would listen in on telegraphic communications in and out of Richmond. Kerbey also became affiliated with the Van Lew espionage ring. The larger point, though, is that Confederate “Quaker cannons,” harmless wooden objects designed to deceive those, like General McClellan, who were susceptible to deception operations even of the most primitive sort, are now proverbial.

Another notable example of the mistrust of intelligence is to be found in General Lee’s brusque dismissal of information supplied by Confederate operatives in April 1863, less than three weeks prior to the Battle of Chancellorsville. According to the intelligence report, the Union Army of the Potomac disposed of nearly 150,000 effective troops with 10,000 reinforcements on the way, which was a fairly accurate estimate.²⁸ Taking little notice, Lee divided his forces and assaulted a superior enemy, winning a brilliant victory. Although no broader significance of the event has been established by historical evidence, Lee did, in fact, reluctantly heed the counsel of another spy the following month after his army had invaded the North. Pure coincidence? Left “blind” in enemy territory when Stuart’s cavalry detached to conduct its own operations, the Army of Northern Virginia was spread out and in danger of being defeated in detail. The operative, who was employed by Lee’s chief lieutenant, General James Longstreet, warned Lee to concentrate his forces, lest they be demolished. The great battle at Gettysburg ensued.

On yet another occasion, the hapless Union General Ambrose Burnside discovered that his orders were being printed *verbatim* in a Richmond newspaper. He had a British reporter arrested as a spy, and would have executed the man had higher authority not intervened. Circumstances surrounding the case remain mysterious. However Burnside’s orders got to Richmond, it is curious that they were printed in a newspaper, the quickest and surest method of compromising information. Union forces were tipped off about the leak almost immediately. It is possible that the newspaper itself, not a Confederate intelligence operation, was responsible for the revelation.

Leaks to the press were incessant. General Lee’s famous compromised Order Number 191, discovered in a field prior to the Battle of Antietam in September 1862, which furnished crucial information about the disposition of the Army of Northern Virginia in western Maryland, found its way into a Philadelphia newspaper that very month. No one has even been able to explain exactly how.

²⁸ Markle, *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*, 3.

The Sweeping Whirlwind's Sway

Reconstruction in the South provides a sober reminder that great military power cannot guarantee control of a defeated country. The ability to exploit the internal political situation within a targeted territory, not mere military might, is a crucial element of conquest.²⁹ European states, for example, enjoyed greatest success when they were able to recruit local collaborators from within the society and exploit divisions among elites. Different configurations of social ties connecting conquerors with elites are central to both the patterns of conquest and the strategies conquerors employ.³⁰ The lack of such ties made it difficult to overcome local opposition to reconstruction. Federal government intelligence about Southern society was woefully inadequate.

Only in a narrow sense was it true that the Union had been preserved. True, the territorial integrity of the nation had been maintained, but this was practically all. In the four years of convulsion through which this end was attained, forces had been generated which rendered impossible a recurrence of ante-bellum conditions. The initial steps in the readjustment after the termination of hostilities were guided by the widespread northern belief that the old Union had been maintained; the final steps in reconstruction revealed with unmistakable clearness the truth of the southern view that a new Union had been established.

The progress of the American nation in the decade succeeding the Civil War involved addressing issues as complex as ever taxed the capacity of government. In the North, the dangerous encroachments of militarism on the domain of civil polity were to be terminated, and the tremendous financial burdens left by the war were to be diminished and readjusted so as to be bearable. In the border states, the passions and feuds of a divided society were to be curbed until time could bring tolerance and reunion. In the South, a wholly new social and political structure was to be built out of the wreckage of what conquest had destroyed, and the foundation had to be laid by some distinct determination of the rights and duties of the freedmen and by the construction of state governments.

Along with these problems of internal policy, and somewhat in the background, lay certain questions of foreign relations, which were forced ominously to the forefront largely by shifting public opinion. Great Britain had won no high favor in either North or South by its policy during the war, and the French forces in Mexico were an incontrovertible expression of the malevolent disposition of Napoleon III. With the fall of the Confederacy it became a seriously debated question in all the political circles of the North whether it would be well, before reducing the military establishment, to have a settlement of the grievances which the European powers had so recklessly heaped up against themselves. Only the imperative and absorbing demands of the home situation prevented major crises in foreign relations.

²⁹ "Recent Books," *Foreign Affairs* 6:93 (November/December 2014), 185.

³⁰ See Paul K. MacDonald, *Networks of Domination: The Social Foundations of Peripheral Conquest in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10-12.

Ultimately, we must attribute strategic and operational intelligence shortfalls to a general lack of preparedness in America for large-scale conflict and political reconstruction, and to a decentralized political system with a diminutive executive branch of government. If President Davis himself could take the time to question a suspected low-level operative, then quite apparently little time and effort and few resources were being devoted to the administration of Confederate intelligence and counterintelligence operations. The Civil War was fought by hundreds of thousands of troops in America's age of innocence. As often as not, it was conducted in an informal, haphazard manner. Fire, sword and war came suddenly to an America that understood too little of such things. Likewise, intelligence was also in its age of innocence. Had it been otherwise, the manner of war's conduct and reconstruction thereafter would not have been so haphazard. Had it been otherwise, perhaps far fewer would have fought, suffered and died. If history offers any lesson, this is it.