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Review, Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies
in America's Heartland, by Stephen E. Towne

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Abstract

Review of Stephen E. Towne's *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland*.

Keywords

Civil War, espionage, intelligence, spying, U.S. history

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Reviewed by Evan C. Rothera

Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015 / 442 pp. / ISBN 978-0-8214-2131-4 (hardback), 978-0-8214-2103-1 (paper), 978-0-8214-4493-1 (ebook) / <http://www.ohioswallow.com/book/Surveillance+and+Spies+in+the+Civil+War>

Edward Snowden's 2013 revelations about U.S. surveillance programs caused an uproar, both domestically and internationally. However, this was hardly the first instance of surveillance programs in U.S. history. During the U.S. Civil War, for example, "the U.S. Army kept a widespread surveillance over many persons in the loyal North" because they suspected that "large numbers of civilians in Northern states acted to impede the government's steps to suppress the Southern rebellion" (Towne 2015, 2). Stephen E. Towne offers a compelling account of army intelligence work in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, and Missouri during the period 1861-1865. Although historians have offered some commentary about the importance of intelligence, they usually focus on intelligence in the field and areas of the U.S. South under occupation.¹ In other words, historians have largely

¹ See, for instance, Edwin C. Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996) and William

ignored military intelligence operations in the Old Northwest. Furthermore, most tend to dismiss fears of fifth column activity as phantoms of overheated Republican imaginations. As an associate university archivist at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, Towne is well-placed to write this book because of his familiarity with regional archives and his access to long-ignored and recently discovered manuscript collections.

The Army “did not hesitate to employ its full gamut of resources to watch citizens, even frequently intercepting and opening private postal communications to read their contents and learn the plans of suspected persons” (Towne 2015, 4). However, the development of military intelligence did not occur from the desire of a leviathan state to monitor people and control dissent. In fact, as with so many elements of the U.S. Civil War, this is more a story of the haphazard birth of intelligence and surveillance operations. Indeed, “army intelligence operations in the Old Northwest arose in an unsystematic, decentralized, and ad hoc manner, without direction from Washington” (Towne 2015, 4). Towne focuses on two specific questions: did secret Democratic conspiratorial organizations exist and pose a threat to order in the North? In addition, did Republican politicians and politically minded officers conspire to fabricate the existence of such conspiracies? Because he answers “yes” to question one and “no” to question two, he challenges the longstanding analysis of Frank Klement that

B. Feis, *Grant's Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

fifth column activity was more or less a fever dream of overzealous Republican partisans.²

In the early years of the war, reports of treason quickly filtered into the hands of officials, who took them very seriously. Unionists sent letters about possible secret organizations in their neighborhoods and became the eyes and ears of their governors. Governors Richard Yates of Illinois, Oliver P. Morton of Indiana, and William Dennison of Ohio received numerous reports about antiwar sentiment and disloyalty. However, despite their ardent desire to halt incipient fifth column activity, governors and federal officers lacked the means to investigate. President Abraham Lincoln, Attorney General Edward Bates, and Secretary of the Interior Caleb Blood Smith failed to offer support. Indeed, Towne does not give readers a triumphal image of the Lincoln administration. He argues that Lincoln's relative neglect of efforts to combat collaboration by northerners with the rebels had a significant negative impact on politics during the U.S. Civil War. Even more troublingly, "having told their law enforcement officers there was no money to support their investigations, Washington authorities perversely pushed officers to increase investigatory efforts" (Towne 2015, 28).

Furthermore, law enforcement officers often had difficulty prosecuting

² See Frank L. Klement, *The Copperheads in the Middle West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Frank L. Klement, *The Limits of Dissent: Clement L. Vallandigham and the Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970); and Frank L. Klement, *Dark Lanterns: Secret Political Societies, Conspiracies, and Treason Trials in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984). Towne offers a spirited refutation of the Klement thesis as does Jennifer L. Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

cases. Although state and federal officials received reports of criminal conspiracies, their efforts to stop them were ineffectual, largely because they had no access to federal funds and could not hire investigators. Thus, facing a seemingly uncaring federal government, officials turned to the army for help. Army commanders developed “a widespread espionage apparatus” to “fill the void left by a civilian law enforcement bureaucracy rendered incapable of pursuing major criminal conspiracy” (Towne 2015, 37). Again, military intelligence activities developed in spite of, rather than because of, the federal government. This should complicate discussions of intelligence and surveillance operations throughout U.S. history.

Towne has little use for U.S. Grant and William T. Sherman, in part because they seemed overly dismissive of dissent on the homefront. The heroes of this story are men like Henry B. Carrington, William S. Rosecrans, Samuel P. Heintzelman, Richard Yates, Oliver P. Morton, and others, often derided as ineffective commanders, poor administrators, and blind partisans. They had the clarity to discern internal threats and enemies, where others did not. Carrington, in particular, became the most important intelligence officer investigating conspiracy in the Northwest. In December 1862, he received reports “that soldiers in units stationed around Indianapolis had become involved in secret organizations in their home communities” (Towne 2015, 49). Carrington worked hand in hand with Governor Morton to fight secret societies. Furthermore, many soldiers helped fight homegrown

conspiracies, because they deeply resented the treasonous activity of Copperheads, or antiwar Democrats. Interestingly, although he performed very effectively, Carrington and his officers conducted minimal detective and espionage work. However, people harkened to Carrington's example and 1863 proved a critical year in the development of intelligence networks.

Cincinnati emerged as the intelligence center of the Department of the Ohio, a military district comprising the states of Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and parts of Kentucky." In March 1863, General Horatio G. Wright authorized the creation of a detective force. General Ambrose Burnside soon replaced Wright. Political matters quickly took center stage because "increasing evidence of dissent, opposition to the war effort, and open, armed hostility to the government would hinder his [Burnside's] ability to push into Tennessee" (Towne 2015, 73). In addition to highlighting the ad hoc development of surveillance networks and the relatively passive role of the central government, Towne explains how quarrels among people supposedly fighting for the same goals hampered intelligence work. Burnside apparently lost confidence in Carrington because General Henry W. Halleck disliked Carrington who had not attended West Point. Even Governor Morton's strong support could not keep Carrington in Indiana. Carrington's exile aside, intelligence work continued. As "Cincinnati headquarters actively employing civilians and soldiers as detectives, other commands in the Department of the Ohio began to develop their own detective operations"

(Towne 2015, 81). Burnside usually preferred soldiers as detectives, but civilians soon began to serve in this important role. In sum, the Department of the Ohio's intelligence operations were "large, multifaceted, and involved numerous commands" (Towne 2015, 86).

The Enrollment Act of 1863, which provided for a national system of conscription, also "created an intelligence-gathering apparatus throughout the North" (Towne 2015, 89). The work of provost marshals as well as special officers and agents was difficult and dangerous, especially when they arrested deserters in strongly antiwar communities. Reports of violent resistance became legion. In 1863, the army conducted surveillance of the arch-Copperhead Clement L. Vallandigham. Vallandigham had been exiled to the South as a result of running afoul of Burnside's General Orders No. 38. After a trip through the Confederacy, he took up residence in Canada. Many people assumed he planned to cross the border, return to Ohio, and spark a Copperhead rebellion against the federal government. Vallandigham became a candidate for Governor of Ohio in 1863 and ran a virulently antiwar campaign from Canada. Intelligence operations not only provided information about desertion and draft resistance, they also yielded, quite troublingly, reports of plans to attack prisoner-of-war camps to liberate rebel prisoners. Although the prison camps did not fall to saboteurs, they remained a persistent source of worry for officials.

1863 saw tremendous developments in the construction of surveillance and intelligence networks. In 1864, these networks worked at their fullest potential. Samuel P. Heintzelman received command of the new Northern Department (Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois). Contrary to his poor historical reputation, Heintzelman appears here as a capable administrator who grasped "the extent and intent of the secret groups" and "recognized the regional instability that imperiled his ability to protect the prison camps and keep down insurrection" (Towne 2015, 149). Morton and Carrington's intelligence operations impressed Heintzelman. He began to rely heavily on Carrington and placed intelligence matters in his hands. Similarly, another maligned figure, William S. Rosecrans, the commander of the Department of Missouri, proved equally perceptive in dealing with fifth column activity. Rosecrans and Colonel John P. Sanderson "rapidly built a wide-ranging detective force that provided important information on secret undercurrents both in his department and in the Northwestern states that neighbored it" (Towne 2015, 174). After Grant stripped the Department of Missouri of troops, Rosecrans had fewer options, but he shared intelligence with officials in the Northern Department. Rosecrans, Carrington, Heintzelman, and Morton successfully utilized spies to infiltrate secret organizations and ferret out rumors about attacks on prison camps. Sargent Parker Coffin obtained important documents from the Order of American Knights. Felix Grundy Stidger successfully infiltrated the organization, at considerable personal

risk. In sum, as spies infiltrated the secret societies, Union leaders achieved an important advantage over their foes.

A theme throughout the book is that Lincoln's seeming indifference to the situation in the Northwest exasperated military and civilian leaders. Rosecrans quarreled with various political factions in Missouri and Lincoln did not allow him to travel to Washington to present a report on subversive activities. Lincoln instead sent John Hay to Missouri to receive the report. Rosecrans was far from the only person warning Lincoln about impending revolution in the Northwest. Governor Yates, one of Lincoln's old friends, was equally concerned. Lincoln responded, rather myopically, that he trusted "the people" (Towne 2015, 225). Although military and political leaders "had developed intelligence networks that supplied them with vital information, they lacked direction and support from national leadership" (Towne 2015, 235). Strikingly, commanders created a watch list, perhaps "the first instance in U.S. history of a comprehensive, centralized, internal-security watch list of persons deemed to be threats to the state" (Towne 2015, 243). Towards the end of July, federal officials changed their minds about the possibility of insurrection. This quite possibly owed something to the fact that Lincoln's reelection bid looked like it would fail. Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt's report confirmed much of what Rosecrans, Carrington, Heintzelman, Morton, Yates, and others had been telling Lincoln.

Officials in Washington began to wake up to the threat of fifth column activity in the Northwest. Nevertheless, the coordination among civil and military officials "produced consensus that action had to be taken to head off feared uprisings known to be in the offing" (Towne 2015, 246). Military officials thwarted uprisings, sometimes due to nothing more than the serendipitous arrival of additional troops, and continued to practice vigilance. Military authorities successfully foiled plots because of their intelligence and surveillance work. However, as the election of 1864 drew ever nearer, rumors abounded of planned uprisings and attacks on prison camps. Shortly before the election, the information gained through the surveillance and intelligence work of soldiers and civilians resulted in the arrest of leaders and the thwarting of a planned attack on Camp Douglas. This, Towne (2015, 301) argues, "was a signal victory for army intelligence efforts in the Old Northwest." It was also intensely embarrassing for many Democrats in the Old Northwest. As 1864 turned into 1865, officials began to conclude their work. With the rebel surrender, intelligence bureaus dissolved. It was not long before "postwar Americans swept the memory of espionage and deception under the carpet" (Towne 2015, 303). Towne (2015, 306) concludes, "the army's network of spies, detectives, and informers was substantial" and that "this hidden army played a significant part in defending the United States from widespread conspiracy in the North during the American Civil War."

Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War is a fascinating book. Towne could probably say a bit more about the importance of race and racial ideas and might conduct more comparative work with other regions. However, anyone interested in the topic should read this book and think about important differences between what occurred during the U.S. Civil War and surveillance programs today. Copperheads were spectacularly unpleasant people. Virulent racism drove many, although not all, of their complaints against Lincoln and Republicans. They clustered into secret societies and frequently employed lethal violence when resisting the draft. They planned to liberate rebel prisoners and begin a revolution on the home front. Most people would agree that these actions justified the surveillance and intelligence work of Carrington, Morton, Heintzelman, and Rosecrans. Interestingly, despite the grave threat they posed to the integrity of the Union, the federal government played a relatively minor role in surveillance and intelligence operations in the Old Northwest. Today, conversely, the federal government is far less squeamish, and perhaps decidedly overeager, to surveil people, many of whom present no threat to the United States. Surveillance during the U.S. Civil War helped curtail fifth column activity and might appear to be a positive element of the Union war effort. However, it is much harder to consider today's secret programs as having any positive impact. They seemingly do little more than erode people's already tenuous trust in the government and make U.S. allies uncomfortable and angry. In

sum, by offering a detailed history of surveillance during one of the most consequential U.S. wars, this book prompts readers to think in a more nuanced manner about surveillance practices throughout the history of this country.