



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

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Traitors or not? In *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War*, archivist Stephen Towne<sup>1</sup> (Indiana Univ.–Purdue Univ. Indianapolis) considers the US Army's surveillance of domestic enemies in key Midwestern states during the Civil War: "This is the story of the rise of army intelligence in the lower Old Northwest states (Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois) and Michigan during the rebellion. Army espionage operations arose in the multistate region for a purpose: after civilian law enforcement efforts failed to detect and counteract growing criminal conspiracy, including resistance to government war measures, the army stepped in to fill the void" (3).

As in our own present-day disputes about government surveillance measures, there were disagreements during and long after the Civil War about the actual threats posed by individuals targeted by Army spies and how best to balance the exigencies of internal security with the rights of citizens.

Towne's detailed investigation "aims to answer two related historical questions: did secret Democratic conspiratorial organizations exist and pose a threat to order in the North? Or did Republican politicians and politically minded officers conspire to fabricate the existence of such Democratic conspiracies in an effort to smear their partisan foes?" (5). This stress on the home front fills a gap in existing studies of wartime army intelligence, which typically concentrate on field armies or Confederate areas under Union control.

Towne also revisits old arguments about the validity of perceived threats presented by Southern sympathizers—"Copperheads"—in northern states. Many scholars have doubted that the Copperheads represented a clear and present danger; they cite the success of local commanders in tracking the conspirators while refraining from acting against them. Historian Frank L. Klement, for example, views claims that treasonous anti-Union Copperheads were a true menace as an election-year invention of Republican machine politicians, who spawned a myth "that survived the war and remained in circulation for more than a hundred years."<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, through his extensive archival research, Towne shows that such conclusions badly underestimate the constraints faced by local commanders. Despite their accurate knowledge of conspirators' plans, they lacked the resources to confront them. They had to resort to various creative methods of gathering intelligence—intercepting private communications, surveilling conspirators, and infiltrating suspect groups—mostly without the input or approval of the administration of President Abraham Lincoln. Though the president and his War Department were kept informed, the administration was slow to see the danger.

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1. His earlier work includes editions of *A Fierce, Wild Joy: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Edward J. Wood, 48th Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment* (Knoxville: U Tennessee Pr, 2007) and, with Richard Nation, *Indiana's War: The Civil War in Documents* (Athens: Ohio U Pr, 2009), as well as many scholarly articles.

2. *Dark Lanterns: Secret Political Societies, Conspiracies, and Treason Trials in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 1989) 150.

Comprising eleven chapters, *Surveillance and Spies* begins with a summary of civil law officials' enforcement actions early in the war and the problems they encountered. On both the state and federal levels, their investigations were hampered for many months by a lack of funding and other assistance from federal civil authorities. Consequently, Army commanders stepped into the "void left by a civilian law enforcement bureaucracy rendered incapable of pursuing major criminal conspiracy" (37). An initial priority was countering the efforts of rebel sympathizers to thwart Union recruitment of soldiers for the North's growing armies and to encourage desertion from the ranks. When Gov. Oliver P. Morton of Indiana identified the need for an energetic officer to organize troop recruitment, Washington sent Col. Henry B. Carrington. Towne describes the difficulties Carrington faced during what he calls the "Morgan County Incident." The troops he sent to an area south of Indianapolis to recover deserters twice came under fire. Several of the attackers were captured and tried, but Carrington felt the penalties imposed (light fines) were inconsequential and lacked deterrent value. Nevertheless, he had set a precedent for other commanders in dealing with similar troubles. Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside, facing serious resistance to recruiting, illegal trading, and near armed insurrection, acted quickly and aggressively, threatening military action against disloyal elements. When that did not have the desired effect, he set up military commissions and ordered resisters shot.

The biggest impediments to Union efforts to counter rebellious elements were poor situational awareness and the lack of a clear policy by the Federal government. This caused friction between military commanders like Burnside, political leaders like Governor Morton, and the Lincoln administration itself. For example, after successful infiltration of secret organizations, disputes arose about the proper use of the information gained. "The wealth of intelligence created the temptation in a consummate politician like Morton to use it for immediate political effect. The upcoming elections were paramount in his mind. On the other hand, the generals saw the benefits of gathering more information and awaiting the best moment to strike." However, "convincing a preoccupied president to see the threat that existed in his home state and region proved to be an unforeseen hurdle." Appeals to Washington from his general and his political allies to settle the issue failed. Colonel Carrington wrote to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton for a statement of policy, but "no word came from federal leadership" (218–20).

The commander of the Department of Missouri, Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans, could not even get a personal hearing on the rebel threat. Though the general possessed considerable intelligence on disloyal activities, Lincoln refused to receive his report in person or via one of his staff members. Towne speculates that the president wanted to avoid upsetting Gen. Ulysses Grant, who disliked Rosecrans. Ultimately, Lincoln dispatched John Hay to meet with him. When Hay returned, he found Lincoln still dismissive of the threats Rosecrans had identified: "[he] thinks small beer of Rosey's mare's nest. Too small, I rather think.' ... Lincoln was consistent in his responses to [Gov. John] Brough and [Maj. Gen. Samuel P.] Heintzelman, Rosecrans, and ... [Illinois governor Richard] Yates: he would do nothing aggressive but would trust in the wisdom of the people to reject appeals for revolutionary violence by a radical and militant fringe" (225–27).

The book's last two chapters describe how close the conspiracies came to achieving some of their aims before Washington finally awoke to the danger. Though Lincoln remained skeptical of any serious problems in the Northwest until mid-summer 1864, War Department Judge Advocate Gen. Joseph Holt's investigations in the West "laid bare ... the intensely disloyal nature and revolutionary aims" (245) of the conspirators. That August, Western military authorities deployed their new reinforcements to forestall major plots to release Confederate prisoners and foment armed uprisings. Effective intelligence operations continued until the Confederate resistance collapsed in 1865.

Based on a careful analysis of material in state archives, Lincoln's Presidential Library, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress, as well as from regional historical societies, contemporary newspapers, and many secondary sources, Stephen Towne has provided a needed re-evaluation of received wisdom about the role of the Copperheads; he has persuasively demonstrated that, "all told, the army's network of spies, detectives, and informers ... played a significant part in defending the United States from widespread conspiracy in the North during the American Civil War" (306). His work is a salutary reminder that the absence of a successful attack does not mean there were no actual threats or conspiracies. In this regard, successful intelligence operations, by their very nature, eliminate the most compelling evidence of a threat.

Every American war has witnessed an expansion of centralized government authority in the interest of a unified national effort. As *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War* shows, the Lincoln administration was unusually reluctant to exert its power, leaving the initiative with local governments almost to the conclusion of the war. Extraordinary wartime organizations then soon dissolved as life returned to normal. There is cause for optimism in that lesson of history.