

**Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland**

Stephen E. Towne (Ohio University Press, 2015), 430 pp.

**Reviewed by Clayton Laurie**

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One of the factors that makes history a living and changing discipline is that new evidence often revises older interpretations. Facts of history remain the same, of course, but fresh information often changes how we view events or the actions or motivations of historical figures. Stephen E. Towne's *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland* convincingly revises one long held view of anti-war dissent in the North and contains much of interest to today's intelligence officer. As an associate archivist at Indiana and Purdue Universities, Towne has "uncovered and recovered Civil War-era records that had been lost for generations or perhaps had never been examined by either archivist or researcher." (ix)

Historians have often noted the darker side of Abraham Lincoln's presidency: the suspension of habeas corpus and many other civil liberties, especially freedoms of speech and press, and the wholesale detention without charge of dissenting citizens. The traditional narrative of the last 50 years has supported this view of a later much-beloved and martyred president acting during a time of crisis in an arbitrary and capricious manner against those questioning him, the Union war effort, and government policies regarding conscription and emancipation. On the latter, as one group protested, they were decrying "illegal measures taken by 'King Abraham' Lincoln's administration and the perversion of the war to save the Union into a war to abolish slavery." (63) That most of those incurring Lincoln's wrath happened to be members of the opposition Democratic Party only reinforced the arguments of his critics that executive actions were out-of-bounds—politically motivated attacks meant to squelch debate for ideological purposes rather than remove any real threat to the conduct of the war or stability of the North. Copperheads led by Ohio's ex-Congressman Clement L. Vallandigham and his allies such as Daniel W. Voorhees of Indiana, as the most cited examples, were only exercising First Amendment rights to question government policies and conduct, and in no way posed an existential threat to the United States. These views have

predominated since the 1960s, when the first of many studies on the Copperheads and wartime dissent by historian Frank L. Klement appeared. Towne's work overturns this accepted view, and reinforces newer interpretation by academic scholars such as Jennifer L. Weber.<sup>a</sup>

Towne's book contains 87 pages of multiple-source, discursive footnotes, and a 15-page comprehensive bibliography listing largely untouched government records, manuscripts, private papers, and correspondence of participants in some 20 separate state archives and historical societies. The author lists contemporary books and newspaper accounts, many not previously available or reviewed, and many scholarly and popular histories published during the last 150 years. As the author's notes, and as his bibliography shows, little has appeared on this subject since the 1960s.

Based on his extensive research, Towne demonstrates that Democratic Party dissenters against federal policies, be it the draft, the war, or emancipation, were more than mere conscientious objectors, or loyal citizens exercising their Constitutional rights, but were actual traitors and conspirators. They worked covertly with Confederate civilian and military agents hoping to foment a rebellion with the goal of establishing a Northern Confederacy in the Old Northwest states of Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan, as well as in neighboring Missouri and Kentucky. While the records show no military-Republican

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a. Histories depicting Civil War Democrats and Copperheads as traitors and subversives predominated for nearly a century until Frank L. Klement's *The Copperheads of the Middle West* (University of Chicago Press, 1960) appeared. See also Klement, *Dark Lanterns: Secret Societies, Conspiracies, and Treason Trials in the Civil War* (Louisiana University Press, 1984), *The Limits of Dissent: Clement L. Vallandigham and the Civil War* (University of Kentucky Press, 1970), and *Lincoln's Critics: The Copperheads of the North* (White Mane, 1999). Jennifer L. Weber, in *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North* (Oxford University Press, 2006), presents a view of Democratic dissent in the North very similar to Towne's and is representative of the current historiography.

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collusion to persecute Democrats, there was “copious evidence of conspiracy and treason” on the part of the political opposition. (308) These pro-rebel Northerners favored a victory of the Southern slave-owning aristocracy, joined secret political societies such as the Order of the Secret Knights, Knights of the Golden Circle, and the Butternut Society, eventually numbering 125,000 members, and in one state, Indiana, counting chapters in 85 of 92 counties. These groups colluded to stockpile arms; plotted with notorious rebel agents, such as Thomas Henry Hines and cavalry commander John Hunt Morgan, to attack communities; and developed schemes to hijack warships on the Great Lakes, destroy military depots, sabotage rail lines and bridges, and attack prisoner of war camps. Hines, for example, from his Canadian base close to Vallandigham’s initial residence in exile, plotted to attack Chicago’s Camp Douglas, arm the released prisoners from secret weapon stockpiles, and then carry on to target other POW camps such as Camp Morton, in Indianapolis, Indiana. While Klement’s earlier work dismissed the Camp Douglas plot as Republican-created fiction, Towne’s research reestablishes its validity. As Hines later confessed, 70 Confederate agents waited in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention of August 1864 for the signal to liberate the camp and attack the unwary city. (274–275) Other groups plotted to liberate officer POWs at Johnson Island near Sandusky, Ohio, hoping to release a potential rebel army of thousands into the Union heartland. Other Democratic groups protested conscription and emancipation, seeking to disrupt both, harbored draft dodgers and deserters, and actually skirmished with Union military and civil authorities in armed bands numbering upwards of 150 men. They smuggled rebel mail, engaged in a brisk contraband trade, counterfeited the new Greenback currency, and established a secret communications line into the Confederacy.

Civil law enforcement proved inadequate to meet the threat and responsibility shifted to Union Army officials. Although commanders counted recruitment, administering the draft, training, and guarding prisoners as their primary tasks, they soon added surveillance and intelligence collection and analysis to their already heavy burdens. They hired networks of military investigators and paid-civilian informants, one officer employing some 2,300 agents operating throughout the Old Northwest. As a result, “Army intelligence officers amassed significant evidence of the existence of conspiracy, seized records from the secret groups, opened the private correspon-

dence of participants, obtained numerous confessions of members, collected reliable information from informants, and inserted spies into the organizations to learn their secrets and their plans.” (5) Working in close cooperation with civil officials over the course of three years, military officers such as Henry Carrington, Paul Schofield, William Rosecrans, Ambrose Burnside, Joseph Hooker, and Samuel Heintzelman kept the peace, but also constructed an effective intelligence collection and analysis capability.

Military and civil authorities in Washington, DC, including the president, hesitated to act in the face of the mounting evidence until the summer of 1864. At that time, concerns increased that the Democratic opposition in the person of the popular former commander of the Army of the Potomac, George B. McClellan, running as the Democratic presidential candidate on a “peace ticket,” could end the war short of victory through negotiation, leaving the Confederacy and slavery intact. At that point, in league with loyal citizen groups, civil law enforcement, and what military forces they could muster at the height of the war, federal officials moved. Through Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, and Ohio, they conducted mass arrests, confiscated arms caches, and arrested leaders of the secret societies and as many members as they could reach. In addition, they published and denounced in local newspapers the names of those arrested, the size and location of their organizations, and the papers and correspondence of their memberships, providing evidence to substantiate treason charges. (244) The threat largely ended with Lincoln’s reelection, even though detentions and legal prosecutions continued through the end of the war.

What are the lessons for today’s intelligence officer from Towne’s study of events from 150 years ago? The history provides insight into the origins of the controversies that fill the news headlines today. The same arguments concerning rights of the individual and the state in times of peace and war, over privacy, freedom of speech, or dissent, all heard then, are still with us. In addition, Towne details the creation of a comprehensive federal domestic intelligence collection and analytical capability of a size, sophistication, and scope unlike anything seen before, which would not reappear until World War I, but which would become a permanent fixture during the Cold War. Towne’s history brings to mind even larger and more important lessons for today’s intelligence officer. Then as now, the accepted view may not always be the correct one

or even the full story. What may initially seem insignificant, on further investigation might just be the smallest, barely visible sign of a much larger and more significant threat. Each generation has had them, often dismissed by critics or ideological opponents at the time. The FBI's J. Edgar Hoover warned Cold War-era Americans of a communist threat from within, while OSS founder William J. Donovan did the same before World War II regarding Nazi espionage networks working with disloyal Ameri-

cans. History later confirmed the overwhelming validity of their claims. In our own time, especially since the fall of 2014, a succession of intelligence and homeland security officials have warned of "lone wolf" terrorist attacks, not from abroad, but from sympathizers within the United States. In spite of naysayers, critics, or opposition ideologues, then as now, and as Towne has revealed, the internal threat is often very real, extensive, and capable of inflicting significant harm upon the unwary.



