

Secret Blows: African American Intelligence Operations and the Defeat of the Confederacy

“Who would be free themselves must strike the blow.” Frederick Douglass, noted African American social reformer and statesman

“I had no educated Negroes in my household.” Varina Howell Davis, 1905, responding to an inquiry that the Confederate White House harbored an African American spy

While the issue of slavery was not the only issue leading to the South’s secession from the United States beginning in December 1860, it played a significant role. In the debate over states’ rights, the right to secede from the Union, and the expansion of slavery as an objective in the conflict, Southerners had to reconcile slavery with Christian faith and the American notion of equality before the law. Many Southerners justified slavery through belief that slaves were not equal to whites, and that they were improving the lives of African-Americans even in their indentured state. As such, when the Civil War began, most Southerners could not fathom that African Americans could be a threat – whether as spies or soldiers. Acknowledging African Americans as equals, and therefore a legitimate threat, undermined the entire notion of slavery in Christian society.

Even those that did not think African Americans were inferior could not acknowledge it without undermining the culture and political institutions of the South, of which slavery was a fundamental component. By 1860, this Southern mindset was pervasive, engrained, and almost subconscious.

In 1862, President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation opened the door for African Americans to enlist in the Union Army and, although not effectively utilized immediately, they participated in every major campaign of 1864-1865 except General Sherman's invasion of Georgia. Sixteen were awarded the Medal of Honor, fourteen as a result of their actions at the Battle of New Market Heights. As one Union commanding officer noted, “they are attentive and enthusiastic....eager to take the field and be led into action.”¹ By the end of the war, 180,000 African Americans in 163 units served in the Union Army and many in the Navy; approximately one-third of those who enrolled lost their lives.

Despite these widely-known contributions, perhaps the most significant yet least reported? influence from African Americans was in the field of intelligence. With a large, disgruntled population with access behind enemy lines, the Union had a valuable resource of information that was largely ignored or underestimated by the Confederates.

In a census completed in 1960, African Americans comprised 40% of the Confederate population and less than 5% of the Union. Of the 4.4 million African Americans in the U.S., 4 million were slaves in the South. When the South called up its military-aged Caucasian males to begin combat against the North,

¹ Report of General Dave Hunter to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, 23 June 1862.

African American constituted a majority of the remaining male population throughout most of the South. As a result, wherever Union forces operated in the South, there was a large slave presence with limited supervision and security to keep them from conducting clandestine operations.

At the outset of the war many Northerners were reluctant to exploit the capabilities African Americans afforded, particularly as many in the North were as prejudiced as their Southern counterparts. For example, Douglass notes that Shiloh and the surprise at Port Royal (1862) could have been avoided "had the alarm given by a Negro, who has risked his life to give it, been taken."² However, as the war dragged on and intelligence operations became more sophisticated, African Americans were recruited with regularity.

African Americans acted as spies, scouts, guides, and covert operatives. According to Union Colonel Rush Hawkins stationed at Cape Hatteras, NC: "If I want to find out anything hereabouts I hunt up a Negro; and if he knows or can find out, I'm sure to get all I want."³

Frederick Douglas noted that "the true history of this war will show that the loyal army found no friends at the South so faithful, active and daring in their efforts to sustain the Government as the Negroes."⁴ Nor were Union intelligence collection efforts using African Americas limited to use in enemy territory. Over 700,000 slaves made their way to the Union during the course of the war, providing fresh intelligence and a pool of potential recruits. Women proved to be extremely effective agents.

Union officers got so many valuable pieces of intelligence from slaves that the reports were put in the special category "Black Dispatches." By the end of 1862, Confederate General Robert E. Lee noted in frustration that "the chief source of information to the enemy is through our Negroes."⁵ Surprisingly, this acknowledgment meant little in terms of appreciation of the threat or implementation of countermeasures; all too often, African Americans involved in operations were ignored where any Caucasian operating in the same circumstances would have been captured as a spy.

African American Operatives

John Scobell

Educated by his former owner in Mississippi and subsequently freed, John Scobell served as an agent for the Army of the Potomac in 1861-62. Scobell posed as a cook and a laborer on his trips south, where he often signed up black couriers for the Union at secret meetings of the Legal League, an underground

² *Ibid.*

³ Allen, Thomas B. *Harriet Tubman, Secret agent: How Daring and Free Blacks Spied for the Union During the Civil War*. National Geographic: Washington, DC. 2006. Pg.96.

⁴ Markle, Donald E. *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*. Hippocrene Books Inc.: New York. 2004. Pg. 63.

⁵ Fishel, Edwin C. *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War*. Kent State UP, 1996. Pg. 419

slave organization. Scobell used the cover of a servant to Union agents Timothy Webster and Carrie Lawton when they operated in Richmond, and though he was with them when they were captured, he was not even questioned. Scobell's services ended when significant changes were made in Union leadership, including the replacement of Alan Pinkerton as the army's intelligence chief. Scobell is credited with providing valuable intelligence on Confederate order of battle, status of supplies, troop morale, and movements.⁶

W. H. Ringgold

Another of Pinkerton's spies, Ringgold was a free man working on a Virginia riverboat moving Confederate troops and supplies. After six months, he returned North and was debriefed by Pinkerton. Ringgold told all he knew about Confederate fortifications on the Virginia peninsula and is described by intelligence historian Edwin Fishel as a source "of the most trustworthy class; he obviously was intelligent, and careful of particulars." When the Army of the Potomac began its peninsula campaign in March 1862, Ringgold provided some of the best intelligence. One of his reports noted that "there are no batteries on the York River Railroad between Richmond and West Point, and no troops except Ordinary Guards at the bridges. That at West Point there is now no Battery [sic] at all, nor any troops, three heavy Columbiads having been removed from there to Gloucester Point, and about 500 troops having been transferred elsewhere..."⁷

Mary Touvestre

A freed slave, Touvestre worked as a housekeeper for a Confederate engineer repairing the CSS VIRGINIA. The CSS VIRGINIA was the first steam-powered ironclad built by the Confederate States Navy in the war, and at the time, outclassed every ship in the Union Navy. Touvestre heard the engineers talking about the ship and realized its significance as a weapon against the Northern blockade. Traveling at great risk with a stolen set of plans, she made her way to Washington and met with officials in the Department of the Navy. Surprised by the momentum of the Confederate project, the officials speeded up the building of the Union ironclad USS MONITOR despite their skepticism of the project. On 8 March 1862, from her berth at Norfolk, the CSS VIRGINIA steamed into Hampton Roads where she sank the USS CUMBERLAND and ran the USS CONGRESS aground. On March 9, the Union ironclad USS MONITOR, having fortuitously arrived to the battle, initiated the first engagement of ironclads in history. The two ships fought each other to a standstill, but the CSS VIRGINIA retired. Shortly thereafter, the Confederate Navy burned the CSS VIRGINIA rather than letting it fall into Union hands. Some historians believe that if the former slave had not carried her warning to Washington, the CSS VIRGINIA might have had several unchallenged weeks for a rampage against vulnerable Union ships, thwarting the blockade long enough for the arrival of desperately needed supplies from Europe.^{8,9,10}

⁶ Markle, Donald E. *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*. Pgs56-62.

⁷ Fishel, Edwin C. *The Secret War for the Union*. Pg. 117-137.

⁸ Markle, Donald E. *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*. Pgs 58.

⁹ Lander, James. *Lincoln and Darwin: Shared Visions of Race, Science, and Religion*. Southern Illinois University Press: IL. 2010. Pgs. 155-157.

The Dabny Family

The Dabnys were a husband-wife team living along the Rappahannock River in 1863 at a period of gridlock during the war. Confederate forces held the southern side of the river on high ground, blocking a Union drive south. Both Dabny's entered Union lines as(?) refugees, but despite the risk Mrs. Dabny returned to Confederate lines to act as a "servant" to collect vital intelligence on Confederate order of battle and movements. Using a system of telegraphy, she sent her husband information of rebel troop disposition using clothes hung from a clothes-line near the river – a grey shirt represented forces under General Longstreet, white represented General Hill's, and red represented General "Stonewall" Jackson's troops. In one case when questioned by a Union intelligence officer what the shirts were conveying, Mr. Day noted "do you see those two blankets pinned together at the bottom? Why, that her way of making a fish-trap'; when she pins the clothes together that way, it means that Lee is only trying to draw us into his fish trap." During the Chancellorsville campaign, where Union forces sought to move around the Confederates, Union intelligence identified which Confederate corps were moving, in what direction, how long they had been on the march, and in what force within an hour of their movements. The Dabny's reports always turned out to be true. Combined with intelligence provided by two negro servants from a North Carolina regiment who escaped to Union lines and provided details of Longstreet's movement, African American's played a key intelligence role during the Union's Rappahannock operations.¹¹

Gettysburg Campaign: Contraband Intelligence

After the Union defeat at the Battle of Chancellorsville from 30 April – 6 May 1863, General Lee devised an operation to invade the north. Known as the Gettysburg campaign, Lee maneuvered from his defensive positions at Fredericksburg to the Shenandoah Valley and, using the Blue Ridge Mountains to mask his movements invaded Pennsylvania.

The Union intelligence effort in the campaign demonstrated one of the most successful in history; between 24 June and 1 July Union intelligence provided more than 130 substantive reports on the movement, strength and activities of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. African Americans provided a significant share of this information. On 30 May, a Mulatto boy claimed he was the servant of General A.P. Hill, and passed on what he heard of Lee's invasion plan. In late May a Union spy found out about large rebel cavalry build-up at Culpeper, VA through from a runaway slave. Captured slaves gave specific information on the movements of all three Confederate infantry corps. On 12 June Charlie Wright, a runaway slave from Culpeper, reported to Union spy that he saw a corps pass through for the Valley in route to Maryland, and that Longstreet was close behind; this was corroborated by another runaway slave. Wright gave details on more than a dozen units in Ewell and Longstreet's corps. Edwin Fishel

¹⁰ Winkler, Donald H. *Stealing Secrets: How a Few Daring Women Deceived Generals, Impacted Battles, and Altered the Course of the Civil War*. Cumberland house: Naverville, IL. 2010. Pgs. 297-298.

¹¹ Markle, Donald E. *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*. Pgs 60-62.

notes that “contraband intelligence played a vital role in identifying initial movement of Lee invasion – the Army of the Potomac beat Lee across the Potomac as a result.”¹²

Harriet Tubman

Several months after the Civil War began in 1861, Governor Andrew of Massachusetts – a passionate abolitionist – recruited Tubman to join with Union forces occupying Beaufort, South Carolina to provide support as a spy and scout. Upon her arrival, she was provided a military pass, access to Secret Service funds, established relationships with local slaves for the collection of information, and rapidly recruited a team of scouts who knew the region intimately. She was tasked in 1862 into 1863 with mapping the region and identifying Confederate outposts and vulnerabilities, which bore fruit when a black unit of Union soldiers – using intelligence provided by Tubman – conducted successful raids throughout the region.

Tubman’s most renowned clandestine activity came in mid-1863 with her direct support to the Combahee Raid. Union General Dave Hunter asked if Tubman would be willing to travel with several gunboats up the Combahee River to disrupt Confederate logistics and identify the locations of mines placed in the river. She gave an ultimatum that she would only participate if Colonel Montgomery – a confidant and associate of Tubman’s – would lead the expedition. Hunter approved. Tubman and Montgomery would effectively act as co-commanders, and Tubman had authority to act independently to collect intelligence. Using honed clandestine tradecraft, she identified the slaves who placed the mines and offered them freedom if they would identify where the mines were located. With the river cleared, the gunboats steamed safely up the river on 2 June 1863. Undetected, the Union forces destroyed a Confederate depot, burned the homes and holdings of Confederate sympathizers, seized crops, and liberated nearly 800 slaves from local plantations. Many of the freed slaves, recruited by Tubman, joined Union 2nd South Carolina Colored Infantry. A Confederate report after the raid highlighted “[T]he enemy seems to have been well posted as to the character and capacity of our troops and their small chance of encountering opposition, and to have been well guided by persons thoroughly acquainted with the river and country.” Colonel Montgomery, in a letter to General Quincy Gilmore on 6 July noted, “I wish to commend your attention Mrs. Harriet Tubman, a most remarkable woman, and invaluable as a scout.” Tubman actively supported military efforts for another year until becoming ill while on leave to visit her family.¹³

The Van Lew Spy Ring

Elizabeth Van Lew was raised as the daughter of a slave owner in Richmond Virginia. When her father died and she inherited the families eleven slaves, she freed them and assisted in their education, including sending them to Philadelphia. When the war began, Van Lew was patently loyal to the Union and, over time, operated a spy ring of 12, including clerks in the war and navy departments and a Richmond mayoral candidate. She developed a cipher system and often smuggled messages out of

¹² Fishel, Edwin C. *The Secret War for the Union*. Pg. 444-519.

¹³ Elder, Gregory. “Harriet Tubman – Intelligence Operative.” Defense Intelligence Agency: Washinton, DC. 22 April 2016.

Richmond in hollow eggs using her former slaves as the facilitators. One of her boldest spies was a former slave named Elizabeth Bowser. When the war began, Van Lew sent Bowser – then in Philadelphia – a request to come back to Richmond to participate in clandestine operations. Van Lew, an acquaintance of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, recommended Bowser for the position of a servant. Once accepted, she went undercover in Davis’s home and gained access to official papers and confidential meetings. Davis thought nothing of her – no operational security was needed because, by law, slaves had to be illiterate. Bowser pretended to be dull, ignorant, oblivious to the world around her, all the while providing all forms of intelligence. Davis became aware of a leak, but never suspected her.¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶ According to Thomas McNiven, a Van Lew agent who posed as a baker in Richmond, suggested that Bowser “had a photographic mind” and “Everything she saw on the Rebel President’s Desk, she could repeat word for word.”

George H. Sharpe, the commander of the Union Bureau of Military Information, credited Van Lew with "the greater portion of our intelligence in 1864-65." On Grant's first visit to Richmond after the war, he had tea with Van Lew and stated "you have sent me the most valuable information received from Richmond during the war." After the war, Van Lew requested that all Union reports associated with her spy ring be destroyed, limiting visibility into her and her spies.¹⁷¹⁸ That said, the value of her and her spies, several of whom were former slaves, cannot be doubted. Both Van Lew and Bowser were inducted into the Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame.

In addition to Elizabeth Bowser, Davis’ coachman, William A. Jackson, crossed into Union lines, bringing with him military conversations that he had overheard. In a letter from Union Major General Irvin McDowell to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, “Jeff Davis’ coachman” is cited as the source of information about Confederate deployments. A butler who served Jefferson Davis also made his way to Union lines. It is not clear if Jackson or the butler were associated with the Van Lew network.¹⁹

Responding to an inquiry in 1905, Jefferson Davis’ widow, Varina, denied that the Richmond White House harbored a spy: “I had no educated Negro’s in my household.”²⁰ If she had only known.

Racial and Cultural Bias Implications

The prejudice and biases of Southern and Northern whites influenced the strategic outcome of the American Civil War. Although it had far greater consequences for the South, the unwillingness of many

¹⁴ Markle, Donald E. *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*. Pgs. 58, 179-187.

¹⁵ Winkler, Donald H. *Stealing Secrets: How a Few Daring Women Deceived Generals, Impacted Battles, and Altered the Course of the Civil War*. Pgs. 51-89.

¹⁶ Feis, William. *Grant's Secret Service: The Intelligence War From Belmont to Appomattox*. Lincoln, NE: Nebraska UP, 2002. Pgs. 156-157, 239-240.

¹⁷ Fishel, Edwin C. *The Secret War for the Union*. Pg. 551-557.

¹⁸ Winkler, Donald H. *Stealing Secrets: How a Few Daring Women Deceived Generals, Impacted Battles, and Altered the Course of the Civil War*. Pgs. 51-89.

¹⁹ Markle, Donald E. *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*. Pgs. 58.

Northerners to seek out information from slaves, runaway slaves, or freed African Americans left vital information unexploited. History abounds with many such examples with implications as or more significant, such as the prejudices of the British and Japanese militaries leading into World War II.

Prior to World War II the British perception of the Japanese was heavily influenced by cultural / racial biases. According to one intelligence report, "The Japanese are daring but incompetent aviators...they have as a race defects in the tubes of the inner ear, just as they are generally myopic. This gives them a defective sense of balance." Another British report suggested that the Japanese "do not fire rifles effectively because they cannot close one eye at a time." One British commander noted that "terrified Japanese would flee at the first sight of a white soldier," and another chided to his superiors "don't you think my soldiers are worthier of a better enemy than the Japs?" The Japanese Imperial Army and Navy demonstrated the ludicrousness of such claims as their force of 35,000 soldiers handily forced the surrender of 130,000 British, Australian, and Indian troops in Singapore and their airmen sunk two British battleships...just days after other Japanese forces sunk the bulk of the U.S. battleship fleet at Pearl Harbor. Some point to this defeat as the end of the British Empire. True or not, it spelled the end of any meaningful British contribution to the Pacific theater during the war.²¹

In an interesting corollary, the Japanese were also infected by their own cultural biases that impacted their ability to win the Second World War. Japan's perception of the Chinese military, heavily influenced by a racial and cultural sense of superiority, were akin to Britain's. In 1932 a Japanese observer in China noted "it would appear a gross exaggeration to say that the Chinese soldiers are bandits in official uniforms and that the bandits are disbanded soldiers but this is one of the incredible truth about China. Soldiers to all appearances, in fact are a uniformed rabble....they are untrained, cowardly, unpatriotic, treacherous, mercenary, and everything else a soldier should not be." In 1937 after a minor armed engagement, a Japanese section chief stated "I assure you, the incident will be settled if Japanese vessels loaded with troops merely heave to off the Chinese coast." To be sure, the lack of effective organization in the Chinese military undermined their capabilities, but the Japanese grossly underestimated the Chinese willpower and use of "bandit" (i.e., guerrilla) tactics. By the end of the war, Japan's largest force was stationed in China and retreating on the heels of the Chinese nationalist army. Japan's perspective of Americans was little better – the American soldier being ill-disciplined, drunk, brawling, likely to resign or desert, and unexpectedly coward at heart.²²

In the last two decades, the Intelligence Community has taken effective strides in tackling the issues of racial and cultural biases, but the impact of and lessons from the past are worth highlighting again and again. The case of African American's clandestine contributions in the Civil War and the willful disregard of the Confederates to consider the risks of remaining prejudiced; the cost to the British; and Japan's widely held cultural biases regarding their adversaries warrant continued consideration. It would be easier to dismiss these biases if held by poorly educated individuals without a role in the decision-

²¹ John Hughs-Wilson. *Military Intelligence Blunders*. New York: Carrol & Graf Publishers, 1999. Pgs. 102-132.

²² Cooc, Alvin D. "Flawed Perception and its Effect Upon Operational Thinking: The case of the Japanese Army, 1937-41." Found in: *Intelligence and Military Operations*. Edited by Michael I. Handel. Frank Cass and Company Limited: Abingdon, Oxon. 2005. Pgs. 239-255.

making of their respective nations, but such is not the case. The views held in these cases were prevalent among the most educated, senior civilian and military officials.

The “blind spot bias” suggests a mental perception where a person believes everybody but themselves is biased. In a recent study of more than five hundred people, when asked whether other people are more, less, or equally biased than themselves, the overwhelming majority of individuals noted that others were more biased.....and only one person acknowledged themselves to be more biased. If history and studies like this tell us one thing, it is that we are not immune from biases. Intelligence professionals have an obligation to appreciate these biases and take measures to limit their influence. As President Abraham Lincoln stressed during the Civil War, and which remains as applicable today, “[W]hat has occurred in this case must never recur in similar cases. Human nature will not change. In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this, we shall have as weak and as strong, as silly and as wise, as bad and as good. Let us therefore study the incidents of this as philosophy, to learn wisdom from, and none of them as wrongs to be revenged.”

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