

**Elliot Carlson.** *Stanley Johnston's Blunder: The Reporter Who Spilled the Secret Behind the U.S. Navy's Victory at Midway.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2017. 352 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-59114-679-7.

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The friction between American military authorities and the field of journalism has a long historical tradition. During times of war, this tension takes on an even more pronounced urgency. Fearing compromising leaks that can cost the lives of untold numbers of service members, the US intelligence community and military establishment has held journalists to the highest standards of both secrecy and censorship. Yet even with these rigid safeguards in place, members of the Fourth Estate occasionally overstep their ethical and legal bounds in the pursuit of interesting stories. One such account of a journalist exceeding his professional mandate during World War II is expertly portrayed in Elliot Carlson's monograph, *Stanley Johnston's Blunder*.

On June 7, 1942, the *Chicago Tribune* published a breaking news article specifying the size, strength, and intentions of the Imperial Japanese Navy that the United States engaged at the Battle of Midway. The American public was not yet allowed to be privy to this information. An affable war correspondent by the name of Stanley Johnston penned the provocative story. His presumed source was highly classified Office of Naval Intelligence dispatch on decrypted Japanese military communiques, known to scholars as Message 311221. More than a simple intelligence leak, however, Johnston's story in fact threatened the very

foundations of the American Pacific war effort. The *Tribune* article publicly, though indirectly, exposed the fact that American cryptanalysts had cracked the main Japanese operational code for all military and diplomatic communications traffic. They principally accomplished this through the top secret "ULTRA" and "MAGIC" projects by the spring of 1942. Keeping this fact secure was of paramount importance to the American strategy. Carlson himself contends that "next to the Manhattan Project, [ULTRA and MAGIC] were easily the U.S. military's most closely guarded secrets" (p. 2). If discovered by Japanese intelligence agents, Johnston's story would most likely have compelled Tokyo to change their codes, thereby demolishing this American advantage and potentially setting the war effort back years.

The *Tribune* scoop launched a seventy-day battle in Washington over its legality. At the heart of the matter was whether Johnston or the paper's editors had violated the 1917 Espionage Act by willfully revealing American military secrets to the enemy. If convicted, members of the *Tribune* staff faced significant jail sentences and fines. Carlson highlights the antagonistic history between the *Tribune* and the FDR administration that further intensified the situation extremely well. President Roosevelt himself, who had a rancorous relationship with the conservative

*Tribune* publisher, Robert McCormick, was quick to support prosecution. The same could be said about the US secretary of the navy, Robert Knox, whose office was directly affected by the leak and who also happened to be the publisher of the *Tribune's* crosstown rival, the *Chicago Daily News*. But beyond the paltry partisan rivalries, the gravity of Johnston's story could not be understated at the time. This is only punctuated by the fact that, as Carlson notes, "Johnston was the only mainstream journalist the government sought to prosecute under the Espionage Act during World War II" (pp. 5-6). The end results of these political inquiries, and of Johnston's and the *Tribune's* legal fates, are best left to the findings offered by Carlson himself. Still, by pointing to the strengths of the author's efforts, the value of this work becomes immediately evident.

Carlson begins by painting a vivid picture of a man who often exuded a larger-than-life personality. A World War I veteran, Johnston joined the Royal Australian Navy at the age of fourteen. Though not seeing any combat during the Great War, Johnston nevertheless spent much of his adult life as a dedicated braggart, falsely claiming that he fought at the Battle of Gallipoli. He later used his contrived exploits to great effect with the American naval brass during his time at sea. His first journalistic assignment brought him to England during the German blitz in late 1940. As Carlson explains, he survived the bombing of a Dover hotel "by riding a bureau down to the ground level as the building collapsed" (p. 17). After arriving in the United States after a drawn-out visa struggle, Johnston landed a job with the *Tribune* and was eventually sent to Pearl Harbor to report on the American war effort. By April of 1942, he had gained access to the aircraft carrier the USS *Lexington* and began serving as a fully sanctioned war correspondent. During the ferocious Battle of the Coral Sea, the *Lexington* was damaged beyond repair, but a conscientious Johnston answered the call. He was later recommended for a civilian citation after saving one blinded

sailor and pulling "nearly sixty" more out of the treacherous waters in a rescue boat. As a telltale sign of his mettle, the *Lexington's* officers further noted that he was also "among the last off the ship." (p. 37) Though sometimes enigmatic and often controversial, Carlson skillfully demonstrates that Stanley Johnston was far from insipid.

Beyond his unquestionable strengths in storytelling, another of Carlson's more noteworthy achievements is his inimitable attention to detail. Treating the affair like a crack detective, the author, for instance, painstakingly reconstructs the likely chain of events leading to Johnston's transcription of Message 311221. As the account has it, Johnston came across the dispatch while aboard the rescue ship *Barnett*, the vessel used to transport some of the *Lexington's* crew back to Hawaii. Through a multi-angle investigative lens, Carlson concludes that Johnston acquired the classified communique's information through a combination of luck and his uniquely gregarious personality. In this case, however, the former at least partially influenced the latter, as Johnston used his *Lexington* acquaintances to limit his physical proximity to the types of sensitive materials that he eventually obtained. Carlson perhaps best demonstrates this through the close camaraderie Johnston established with the *Lexington's* executive officer, Commander Morton T. Seligman. Throughout much of his book, Carlson goes to great lengths to show that it was this relationship that had the greatest impact (albeit an indirect one) on the correspondent's sourcing for his story.

The closing chapters of *Stanley Johnston's Blunder* illustrates a third strength of this saga's telling. Namely, Carlson communicates the legal minutia behind the Johnston case masterfully. Although some in the Roosevelt administration ardently sought to indict Johnston and others from the *Tribune* under the Espionage Act, doing so met with significant challenges. The two central issues prosecutors had to explore in this case pertained to Johnston's intentions and the long-term harm

his article ultimately caused. That is, did Johnston clearly and deliberately disregard the navy's censorship regulations in the dissemination of his story, and did his scoop have a discernable effect on the country's Pacific war effort or on the navy's future intelligence-gathering capabilities? In addition to tracing Johnston's and the *Tribune's* intricate claims of innocence, Carlson likewise tracks the punctilious efforts of J. Edgar Hoover's special assistant in the case, the highly capable former attorney general William Mitchell. Owing to its vast complexities and ambiguities, Carlson's dexterous assessment reveals that the Johnston legal fracas was just as much a battle of wits as of wills.

Despite Carlson's many successes, no book is without its limitations. Though the work contains a few minor shortcomings of style and substance not worth noting here, a more substantial fault is found in the book's introduction. Specifically, Carlson provides a truncated but nearly complete summary of the Johnston story within five short pages. Save for the intriguing question of how (and truly if) Johnston procured the contents of Message 311221 while onboard the *Barnett*, by chapter 1, readers have few pressing mysteries left to uncover on their own. Regardless, while the book's overly transparent primer slightly diminishes the deeper explorative experience, Carlson's strengths in narration noted above more than counterbalance this drawback. Given the stamper of facts from cover to cover, the delight of Carlson's book is not necessarily found in its forest, but in its trees.

*Stanley Johnston's Blunder* is a novel academic effort about a relatively unknown chapter of World War II history. Apart from a handful of scholarly articles on the *Tribune* story, Carlson's monograph largely stands alone in its thoughtful treatment of this pivotal event.[1] Yet this book's value transcends the dubious activities of Johnston and his colleagues. Carlson also tacitly addresses the ongoing philosophical questions raised by the affair, particularly those regarding the

press and American democracy. Perhaps most notably, he challenges his readers to consider his work from within the broader context of "secrecy and its place in a free society" (p. 6). For this reason, Carlson's book would provide a wonderful contribution to any college course on the history of modern American journalism, legal studies of the First Amendment, or those concerning the interactions between the Fourth Estate and national security apparatuses. Throughout his retelling of the highly contentious *Chicago Tribune* affair, Elliot Carlson reminds us that under the right conditions, the printed word has the power to change the fortunes of entire nations. And at the epicenter of this affair was the equally contentious character of Stanley Johnston, living proof that this power should not be taken lightly.

#### Note

[1]. For additional background on the Johnston story, see Larry J. Frank, "The United States Navy v. The *Chicago Tribune*," *The Historian* 42, no. 2 (1980): 284-303; Dina Goren, "Communication Intelligence and the Freedom of the Press: The *Chicago Tribune's* Battle of Midway Dispatch and the Breaking of the Japanese Code," *Journal of Contemporary History* 16 (1981): 663-90; and Michael S. Sweeney and Patrick Washburn, "'Ain't Justice Wonderful'—The *Chicago Tribune's* Battle of Midway Story and the Government's Attempt at an Espionage Act Indictment in 1942," *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 16, no. 1 (2014): 7-97.

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