



Stephen E. Towne. *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland.* Law, Society, and Politics in the Midwest Series. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015. xi + 430 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8214-2131-4.



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Stephen E. Towne's book, *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War: Exposing Confederate Conspiracies in America's Heartland*, is a welcome addition to the relatively scarce literature on subversion and espionage, and the efforts to counter them during the American Civil War. In spite of its broad title, the book focuses mostly on the Old Northwest—chiefly Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois—which saw substantial activity by subversive groups and Confederate provocateurs during the war. Towne, an archivist at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, argues that Northern authorities, especially the US Army, engaged in a broad program of surveillance across the Northwest, seeking out deserters, subversives, and Confederate agents. They used a combination of military and civilian detectives, paid informants, and other methods, such as intercepting suspicious mail. They were not, Towne argues, chasing phantoms, but a widespread and sophisticated series of organizations, tied to the Democratic Party and antebellum groups like the Knights of the Golden Circle (KGC). They were

bent on resisting conscription, encouraging desertion, and, ultimately, either forcing peace with the Confederacy or secession for the Northwest. He explicitly rejects the conclusions of some earlier historians, particularly Frank Klement and Kenneth Stampp, that fears of subversion and rebellion in the Old Northwest were overblown, or were the product of election-minded conspiracy between army officers and Republican politicians, or both. Beyond this, the book engages only lightly with historiography in the text, although the book's endnotes do contain several more detailed discussions of the literature on subversion and Copperheads.

Over eleven chapters, plus a brief introduction and postscript, Towne narrates the rise of an ad hoc military surveillance system in the Midwest. He attributes its existence first and foremost to the inability of civilian law enforcement to deal with the problem of subversion, citing underfunding and lack of initiative in the US Marshals Service, the Office of the Attorney General, and the Department of the Interior. These early chapters

are perhaps the best in the book, and Towne convincingly describes the bureaucratic and legal hurdles facing civil authorities. The army took on the task of investigating subversives in large part because it had the personnel, funding, and favorable legal climate to do so. Where prosecutors, US marshals, and police departments had lacked (or been refused) the funds to pay investigators, local army commanders had both men and money at their disposal.

The army's surveillance capabilities expanded massively with the passage of the Enrollment Act in 1863 and the establishment of the Provost Marshal General's Bureau to oversee administration of the draft. The system of regional provost marshal offices provided the personnel and bureaucratic apparatus to create a more robust system of surveillance. Detectives and spies infiltrated Northern chapters of the KGC and its successor groups, which commanders and Northern politicians suspected of disloyalty and plots for armed resistance against the government, with Confederate support. That these plots never materialized into serious action Towne attributes to luck and the energy and efforts of the army to infiltrate and break them up, culminating in the failure of the so-called Great North-Western Conspiracy in late 1864—a point that is difficult to evaluate, although he shows substantial evidence of the existence and pervasiveness of these groups in the Old Northwest.

The failure of the KGC, its successor organizations the Organization of American Knights and the Sons of Liberty, and their occasional Confederate collaborators to mount an uprising or liberate Confederate prisoners of war in the fall of 1864 marked, in Towne's estimation, "a signal victory for army intelligence efforts in the Old Northwest" (p. 301). Curiously, the military commission trials of those arrested in these plots receive only passing attention in the closing chapter. At war's end, the army surveillance system was demobilized rapidly, along with the army itself. With no

draft, and no draft dodgers, the Provost Marshal General's Bureau closed its bureaus and dismissed its detective force, as did the other regional commanders. The book closes with some biographical summaries and a brief postscript on the limitations and availability of archival evidence about subversive groups in the North during the Civil War. That Towne does not link the Civil War surveillance program to later developments in domestic surveillance by the US military (beyond a brief mention of the Edward Snowden/National Security Agency case in the introduction) is a missed opportunity, and the reader is left to wonder where the Civil War fits in that broader history.

Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War is packed with detail, and the depth of Towne's archival research is apparent. However, this lavish evidence is occasionally presented in a way that hurts the narrative flow of the book, and sometimes the forest of the argument is lost for the trees of anecdote. Because of this, the book feels utilitarian: an excellent reference, rather than a smooth read. The argument could have benefited from some context as well. For example, while it is obvious that organizations that promoted desertion from the army and sheltered fugitives were unlikely to have helped the Union war effort, Towne presents no statistical comparison of desertion rates to bolster his argument that such campaigns represented a dire threat to the Union. Violent resistance to the draft and to provost marshal officials sent to recapture deserters was common, but whether this was done as a part of some grand conspiracy remains open to question. Similarly, amid the torrent of reports on conspiracies, armed groups, and potential attacks, Towne provides little context on the accuracy of the intelligence provided by army detectives and informants, too often presenting their claims with no follow-up. In some cases these might have been corroborated (or not) by referring more often to Confederate records, particularly regarding supposed coordination with the Confederate

army. Nonetheless, *Surveillance and Spies in the Civil War* is a valuable book, certain to be of interest to scholars and general readers alike who seek to understand the history of government domestic surveillance in the United States.

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