

Lincoln's Spies: Their Secret War to Save a Nation

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Review

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Waller, Douglas. *Lincoln's Spies: Their Secret War to Save a Nation.* Simon and Schuster, 2019 \$35.00 ISBN 9781501126840

Douglas Waller, a former journalist who has written several books on twentieth-century American intelligence operations, here provides a lively and informative treatment of many episodes of Civil War espionage and counter-intelligence, focusing on four Union agents and officials: Allan Pinkerton, Lafayette Baker, George Sharpe, and Elizabeth Van Lew, all active almost exclusively in Washington, Richmond, and the Eastern Theater. In part because there was no unified Union intelligence apparatus, the four rarely cross paths, and Waller finds little to link their stories aside from the larger context of the war. Pinkerton receives the bulk of attention, and it is not pretty. Waller strongly condemns the self-promoting detective for overall incompetence and for cooking his estimates of enemy troop strength to please his patron, General McClellan. Similarly, Baker emerges as a shady adventurer who squandered the opportunity to develop for the War Department a truly national intelligence service. In contrast, George Sharpe, after 1863 the Chief of the Bureau of Military Information in the War Department, is portrayed as by far the Union's most effective intelligence official.

Chapters on Sharpe's role in several of the key battles and campaigns of the Army of the Potomac during 1863 rank among the best in the book. Finally, Waller finds in Elizabeth Van Lew a rich mine of remarkable and eventful stories and a tireless worker for the Union cause. A wealthy and well-connected member of Richmond society, Van Lew mostly self-financed a circle of Union sympathizers and operatives who conspired to help prisoners of war and steal documents from the desk of Jefferson Davis, providing key information about Confederate plans and troop movements. Along the way we are introduced to a wide range of vividly drawn characters, such as Mary Jane Richards, born into slavery around 1840 and an important member of the Van Lew network. Many of the odd tales and incidents detailed here, as when Baker stopped a funeral procession to have the corpse autopsied on the spot (it is a long story) will likely remain with readers.

One particular benefit of this work is the light it casts on the Civil War underworld, because a great deal of espionage, intelligence gathering, and counter-intelligence work in Washington, at least as Pinkerton and Baker conducted it, involved interviewing corrupt quartermasters, shifty bounty-jumpers,

common criminals, and “fallen women.” Waller provides a helpful list of key persons and major events to help readers with these complexities but the unfortunate reference style lumping 6 or 8 citations in one note for each (often long) paragraph presents a serious obstacle for those seeking to follow leads.

Impressively researched but not much interested in large interpretive questions, *Lincoln’s Spies* achieves its greatest successes when illustrating the motivations, activities, and personalities of the four central figures whose sometimes dubious efforts still, Waller concludes on page 416, “made a difference.”

Martin P. Johnson, Associate Professor of History at Miami University and the author of Writing the Gettysburg Address (2013), is currently writing a history of the last year of Lincoln’s presidency.