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John Paul Jones

*University of Richmond*, [jjones@richmond.edu](mailto:jjones@richmond.edu)

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 H-CivWar


## Jones on Fishel, 'The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War'

 H-CivWar    Author: Edwin C. Fishel    Reviewer: John Paul Jones

**Edwin C. Fishel.** *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996. xiv + 734 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-395-74281-5.

**Reviewed by** John Paul Jones (University of Richmond)  
**Published on** H-CivWar (July, 1997)

Edwin Fishel is reported to have worked for more than thirty years in the field of secret intelligence. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the jacket of his book is short on specifics about his background, noting only that he directed the National Security Agency's National Cryptological School Press. Notwithstanding how little publisher and author have chosen to supply by way of credentials, it is clear from what Mr. Fishel has written in *The Secret War for the Union* that he knows a fair amount about the science of secret intelligence, particularly that branch associated with military operations. Military intelligence involves both "substance and process." The expression refers to information about the enemy, its whereabouts, its capabilities, and its plans; the expression also refers to the process by which such information is introduced into a commander's planning. Mr. Fishel's book addresses both the substance and the process of military intelligence for the Army of the Potomac.

A fair amount has already been written about the spies Rose Greenhow and Belle Boyd, as well as about Allan Pinkerton's field operatives and Lafayette Baker's spy catchers. Mr. Fishel, too, addresses these icons, paying them precisely their due. Greenhow and Boyd get short shrift because of a shortage of reliable sources about their activities. Pinkerton is not so much rehabilitated as a counter of opposing troop strengths as shown to be but the accomplice of a far greater exaggerator, George McClellan. Baker's efforts, most conspicuously those in counter-intelligence, are set aside as largely irrelevant to the protection of the army's military secrets. But these characters, who have so greatly preoccupied much of the genre until now, play but bit parts in Mr. Fishel's story. His book is different from the run-of-the-mill work on secrets of the Civil War, both because its reach never exceeds its grasp and because he writes about more than just espionage, sabotage, and assassination. While Mr. Fishel often impeaches conventional wisdom, he never asserts more than the sources to which he meticulously refers can persuade. For example, he discounts Greenhow's contributions to the first Confederate victory at Bull Run by showing both that her reports were general and stale and that they probably stemmed from sources no more informed than common gossip. Later, he demolishes General Alfred Pleasonton's claim to have induced General Joseph Hooker north in time to halt the Army of Northern Virginia at Gettysburg. Both refutations are precise, persuasive, and well supported by the author's research, as well as being consistent with his general approach.

Intelligence failures are likely to be reported long before intelligence successes. An ironic twist to this truism appears in *The Secret War for the Union*, in which Mr. Fishel offers new intelligence characters as interesting as Greenhow or Pinkerton but more likely to have contributed significantly to intelligence accomplishments. Certainly deserving to be named the American father of order-of-battle reporting is John C. Babcock, architect, cartographer, and a most extraordinary private in the Union army--or any other, for that matter. Displaying exceptional leadership, resourcefulness, and judgment, George Henry Sharpe was all that an army officer can aspire to be. From lawyer and cavalryman, he evolved into the archetype of an intelligence manager.

It is Mr. Fishel's comprehensive exploitation of apparently hitherto overlooked records of the Bureau of Military Information of the Army of the Potomac that

brought to light these unsung heroes and the details of their service. Perhaps the most misleading statement in the book appears nearly 600 pages into it: "This book violates one of the canons of modern works on the Civil War: it is not drawn from an enormous list of sources" (p. 595). That the list is less than enormous should not suggest it is anything less than comprehensive for its purpose. In a "Comment on Sources" and separately in "Sources and Acknowledgments," Mr. Fishel is as painstaking in describing his methods and materials as he is in presenting his conclusions and their foundations.

If Mr. Fishel's approach to the commonplace aspects of his subject is refreshingly critical and scholarly, his attention to its broader dimensions is equally commendable. *The Secret War for the Union* addresses the full range of activities intended to produce military intelligence on the one hand or to frustrate its use on the other. His account of intelligence operations by the Army of the Potomac offers detailed and exciting stories not only of espionage but of scouting and picketing, of various sorts of reconnaissance and screening, and of signal interception and disinformation. For example, he reports numerous episodes of picketing and screening, both good and bad, and coolly pillories cavalry commanders on both sides for dereliction in these less glamorous but vital functions.

The big pictures are exhibited as ably as the small. For military intelligence information to contribute to victory, its processing must not be interrupted: it must be collected by various methods, communicated promptly and accurately, analyzed carefully, and involved in timely decision making at the appropriate level. Mr. Fishel shows how succeeding commanders from Irvin McDowell to George Meade contributed to the serial forging of a complete chain of intelligence processing but at the same time exhibited flaws frustrating its full exploitation. McClellan established the first unit dedicated to intelligence collection, but listened more to his own intuition. John Pope insisted that his cavalry pinpoint the enemy but exhausted these assets prematurely. Hooker intuitively integrated input from various sources but failed to exploit what he got. Meade used intelligence better than his predecessors but failed to preserve the institution that supplied it.

Comprehensive in scope, *The Secret War for the Union* is limited, however, in time and space. Only in this regard may the title be said to suggest more than the book delivers. This is not the secret war for the Union everywhere, but only the secret war for the Union as waged in the eastern theater from first Bull Run to Gettysburg. Operations in support of Union forces in other theaters are not mentioned. From Gettysburg to Appomattox warrants only a chapter among twenty-four. Nor is much said about the secret war *against* the Union, even in the eastern theater. There is, therefore, plenty left to write about, deserving similar treatment. It awaits only discovery of a lode as rich as the records of the Bureau of Military Intelligence, and to be reported by as skillful an author as Edwin Fishel.

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