

A review of information on enemy forces available to the commanders in the first campaigns of the Civil War, its sources and how it was used.

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE 1861-63

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Part I. From Manassas to Fredericksburg

The intelligence officer who has a due regard for his own morale will do well to pass over the history of the American Civil War. In that vast literature are many accounts of critical decisions in which intelligence is given only an incidental role or none at all. If a piece of intelligence is prominently cited, there is often an implausibility about it: it does not seem strong enough, or relevant enough, to account for the decision taken. When clearly decisive intelligence does appear, it is likely to seem more an act of God than the result of organized effort. The tall-tale memoirs of Union and Confederate spies only add new disappointments: they avoid the relationship between espionage and military events so determinedly as to reinforce the suspicion that maybe intelligence *was* a business of little substance and effect.

Obviously, though, information about the enemy—good or bad, firm or fragmentary—must have influenced events in that war about as much as in any other. And a little probing in the records¹ establishes what information (or misinformation) it was in each case. Evidently intelligence has been slighted because of the reticence of the men who knew its inside story. So the story was buried and forgotten almost as soon as the ink was dry on the Confederate paroles at Appomattox, and the battalions of Civil War historians have not thought to dig it up.

Once brought to light, it significantly changes the history of the war. To begin with, it upsets most of the fixed beliefs about Civil

¹ Principal sources of this study are: *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (128 volumes), much used by historians but still yielding new findings on a hundred and one aspects of the war; manuscript records in the National Archives, Library of Congress, and several State collections; and notable among private collections, the papers of Gen. Joseph Hooker, whose prominent connection with this subject is developed in part II of the article.

War intelligence itself (this alone would have been a sufficient reward for the digging). But it also changes accepted views about how battles were won and lost; it sharpens the picture we retain of the principal commanders, raising some reputations and lowering others; it explains the unexplained.

The Bull Run Legend

Exhibit A is the First Battle of Bull Run. It is a common belief that this, the first major engagement of the war, turned on intelligence supplied to the Confederates by Rose Greenhow, a Washington society widow and friend of President Buchanan. Mrs. Greenhow, it is said, sent General Beauregard at Manassas two warnings of the Federals' march from Washington. This information supposedly caused Beauregard to call for reinforcements under J. E. Johnston which arrived from the Shenandoah Valley in the nick of time.

A good story, but it doesn't pan out. Beauregard's dispatches show him sounding the alarm only after his outposts were driven in—half a day or more after he is supposed to have had the second warning.² Thus we begin our search for decisive intelligence by discarding one of the most prominent instances of it in the literature. The records are generous but they are also perverse.

The Confederate commander's hesitation on receipt of this intelligence does not look like the behavior of a Beauregard, the gamecock conqueror of Fort Sumter. So one speculates that he may not have found Mrs. Greenhow's warnings very cogent. But the second one would have been hard to discount, when she and everyone else in Washington had seen many of the blue regiments crossing into Virginia.³

A likelier explanation of Beauregard's hesitation is that the portent of a big war finally starting caused him to freeze a little. No one would deny that that is a hard kind of intelligence to act on. Yet

²Two later accounts by Beauregard heap the credit on Mrs. Greenhow but contain serious discrepancies with each other as well as with his contemporary dispatches. The Creole general was given to romanticizing.

³Of course, Mrs. Greenhow's sources were not all quite so overt as this. Both the Confederates who employed her and the Federals who arrested her evidently credited her with having numerous highly placed contacts, an impression she made no attempt to change, even among her Federal captors. But contacts are not quite the same thing as sources, and the distinction is evident in her surviving reports.

the war that was coming to his doorstep was one he had invited by his action three months earlier at Charleston.

There has also been an intelligence myth on the Federal side. McDowell, commanding at Bull Run, did not receive word that Johnston's brigades had left Winchester until three days after their departure, and by that time he had committed his army to battle on a plan that counted on Johnston's being pinned down in the Valley. Thus Johnston achieved a spectacularly successful stolen march, for which credit has always gone to the two cavaliers Jeb Stuart and Turner Ashby and the cavalry screen they set up.

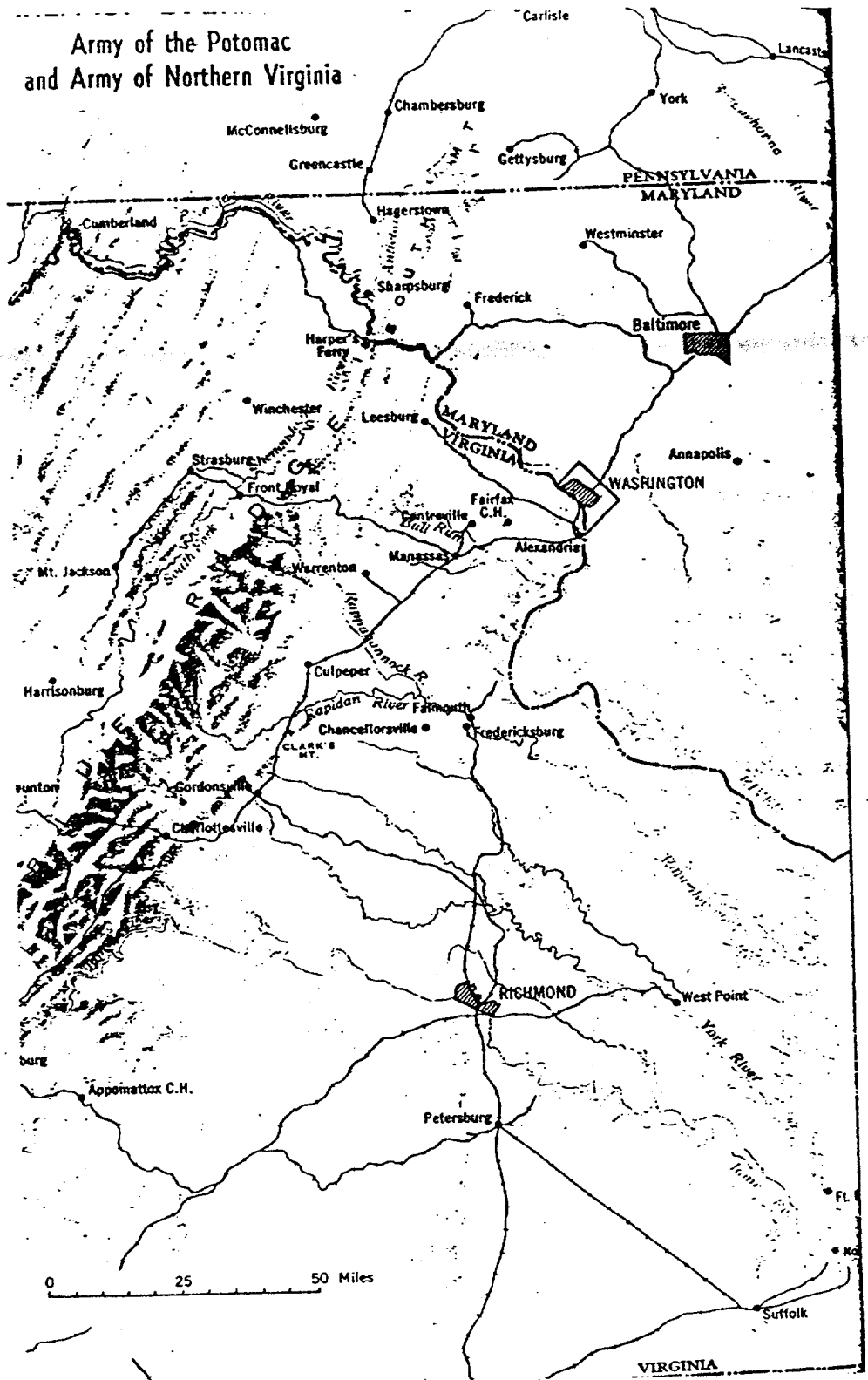
What Happened

The fact is that by the time Johnston's rearmost units left Winchester, word of the movement had already reached the headquarters of the Federal commander in the Valley, General Patterson. It came through channels operated by a civilian member of Patterson's staff, a Valley native who was then and thereafter able to get news, usually via Negro messengers, from Unionists beyond the Confederate lines. But this, his first important report, was not accepted by Patterson until corroborated (presumably by reconnaissance) two days after Johnston was gone. Communicating the discovery to McDowell through Washington consumed a third day, even though the telegraph lines were in order all the way to Fairfax Station, within a few miles of McDowell's headquarters.

During most of those three days McDowell was busy forming a plan of attack on the basis of reconnaissance which had to be conducted after he reached Bull Run. His march had been forced by pressures on the Federal Administration, and among the things he had not had time to get around to before leaving Washington was an adequate intelligence preparation. Later in the war it turned out there had been no lack of Union sympathizers in the locality who could have pinpointed in advance the undefended fords McDowell had to find while his army was kept waiting.

The plan he developed sent his main force on a wide turning movement to the right. He would have taken the Confederates in the rear had they not had their embryo Signal Corps on the field. A signal observation post spotted the turning column and sped a warning by flag to Beauregard in time for him to wheel about and meet it. Thus, after each side, through espionage, had had notice of the other's movements in good time, the decisive intelligence at First Bull Run was a mere report of visual observation on the battle-

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field. The only particular interest attached to it is that the means by which it was communicated was novel at the time.⁴

Decisive intelligence, but unspectacular—so its importance has been almost unnoticed while the Greenhow story goes on accumulating fame. Which illustrates the general point that in order to win a place in the literature a Civil War intelligence story had better have about it either the scent of magnolia blossoms or the odor of horseflesh.

Not surprisingly, the war for which each side was ill prepared opened with blundering application of intelligence on both sides. Beauregard's poor use of his advance information would have earned him defeat had not the Federals been busy reconnoitering up and down Bull Run for three days, making up their homework. It was at the end of those days that Johnston's troops began arriving at Manassas.

Pinkerton Assessments

The Federal defeat at First Bull Run led directly to the elevation to high command of Major General George B. McClellan. The history of the fifteen months that passed before Lincoln washed his hands of this commander suffers from no lack of references to intelligence, and to McClellan's intelligence officer, the famous, or notorious, Allan Pinkerton, a successful Chicago detective. The standard view of McClellan runs like this: He was a superb organizer and administrator but was afflicted with a Napoleonic complex and a vast hesitancy to use the great army he built. His super-caution and the failures that flowed from it were largely the result of Pinkerton's fantastic overestimates of Confederate strength.

This view stands up only as long as it takes to read a few of Pinkerton's reports. Pinkerton did habitually credit the opposing army (led by J. E. Johnston and then by Lee) with two, three, and even four times its true strength. In this much the standard accounts are correct. What the historians have failed to notice is a fraudulence

⁴Alphabetic signaling by flag had been possible for many years (the telescope dates from the early 1600's), but it remained for Albert Myer, a U.S. Army surgeon, to invent a practical system in the late 1850's. The Confederate officer who detected the Federal movement across Bull Run happened to have been Myer's chief assistant in his early experiments, and Myer was on the field with McDowell—with no signalmen. The Federals had counted on using a balloon for observation, but the bag, which had to be inflated before leaving Washington, was caught in roadside trees and abandoned.

in Pinkerton's reports so transparent that it is impossible to believe McClellan could have swallowed them.

Pinkerton's basic order-of-battle compilation was good enough. For example, at about the time of the Seven Days' Battles (June-July 1862), in which Lee drove the Army of the Potomac from the eastern environs of Richmond, Pinkerton had listed about 220 units of regimental size. This was some 40 too many, but the list included every one of the 178 that the Confederates did have.⁶ And his assignment of these to brigades and divisions, though less complete and correct than his list of regiments, was good enough to refute the charge that he and his bureau were totally incompetent.

But if he quizzed his sources to get an average strength for a brigade or regiment, he did not extrapolate this into a figure for the entire army. Instead he derived what he called a "medium estimate" or "general estimate" by striking a round average of numerous gross estimates of the total enemy force. These gross figures he obtained from everyone who would hazard a guess—prisoners (whose source was almost never better than mere camp gossip), citizens and refugees (source: rumor or pure imagination), deserters (frequent source: careful instructions from a Confederate general), and spies (who seldom if ever came by any halfway official figures).

The shabbiness of this method showed clearly in Pinkerton's presentation, so clearly that even a casual reader should have rejected his conclusions. There also was an external reason for rejecting them—common sense. They reached 200,000 by the time Lee got to his top strength of 88,000. This total, and the earlier ones, could not have looked reasonable to anyone who stopped to consider the total manpower available to the South, and especially the number of weapons that the Confederates could lay hands on. Such numbers in the Richmond area would have left at least a couple of their other key points so lightly defended that the Federal armies should have been able to move in almost at will.

⁶ Evidently none of the scores of writers who have discussed Pinkerton's work, in terms ranging from regret to ridicule, have taken the trouble to compare his O/B tabulation with the actual Confederate organization. Both have been in print for 80 years. Although Pinkerton's tabulation is not available in its contemporary form (it appears in his postwar book, *Spy of the Rebellion*; Chicago, 1883; pp. 587-607) and thus could contain after-the-fact correction, it bears numerous earmarks of authenticity; in fact, it appears to be an unedited version of the kind of working chart that might have been in daily use in his bureau.

And these results—his “medium” or “general” estimates—were not the most revealing transparency in Pinkerton’s reporting. His very reliance on gross estimating suggests a shallowness of which no well-intentioned intelligence chief, even of limited intellect, would be guilty. His language alternates between puerile nonsense and a labored vagueness which it would be hard for anyone to achieve if he had a supportable thesis to present. Finally, there is his logic.

It is best illustrated by his continual insistence on the existence of considerable numbers of unknown forces, over and above those covered in his “general estimates.” His point of departure in this argument was the number of regiments and brigades that he had identified. Early in McClellan’s campaign that number was much smaller than the number the Confederates obviously had. This meant, Pinkerton argued, that the general estimates must also be much too small.* Later on he purged his reports of this non-sequitur only to replace it with another. When he had identified four times as many regiments, he again said the general estimate must be well below the true figure—this time because organizational specifics indicated *so large* a number of regiments.

This line of reasoning led him, by the time his O/B chart was fairly complete, into an even more absurd position. Saying that there was a substantial number of additional troops in units not part of the known enemy force was tantamount to saying there were additional divisions[†]—perhaps even another entire army—in the enemy lines, from which he had never had a single prisoner or deserter and about whose existence he had never received a breath of rumor—while the divisions he did have represented were well filled out with regiments and brigades.

McClellan, Pinkerton Assessed

If any belief in Pinkerton’s estimates remained after the method of arriving at them was understood, it must have been destroyed by this display. The question arises how McClellan could have tolerated such a sorry intelligence job. There is no answer until it is remembered that he was constantly insisting on his need for more men and

* At a time when his general estimate of the enemy in McClellan’s immediate front was 100,000-120,000, Pinkerton had identified about 50 regiments. In equating the strength of these 50 to the 100,000-120,000 total, he was saying in effect that the Confederates had 2000 to 2400 men per regiment—double the T/O strength and 4 to 6 times the actual strength.

† Lee did not organize his army into corps until the fall of 1862.

more time. Then it becomes plain that he was not looking for information about the Confederates so much as he was seeking to justify his demands. In other words, intelligence was to McClellan not primarily a weapon against the enemy; it was a lever against his superiors.

That is a grave charge, but the view it gives of McClellan is of a piece with other behavior—his arrogance, his dissembling in other matters, his belittling of Lincoln—that is by now a historical commonplace.

How he could have expected to exert leverage with such patent nonsense is another question. So far as this can have an answer, the answer must be that his estimate of the credulity of a countrified President was practically unbounded. One doubts that he even had the good taste to give Lincoln only gross figures and withhold the supporting "reasoning." Suspicion of the estimates was not confined to McClellan's superiors; even the Quartermaster General was aware of the fraud, and in fact it was he who rose to suggest that such reporting might be the work of disloyal hands.

But Pinkerton's secret service career persisted; he was McClellan's creature and McClellan was surviving despite his numerous effronteries, of which the use of Pinkerton's intelligence to support his demands was one. McClellan was able to hang on because the country was poverty-stricken for generals and because he was not by any means all weakness and sloth. He built a magnificent army and he won not merely its confidence but its affection. Neither was his secret service all bad: besides conducting comprehensive interrogation that produced good basic O/B data, Pinkerton succeeded in getting several spies into Richmond for extended periods,⁸ and he evidently did a good counterespionage job in the face of almost superhuman difficulties presented by the secessionist population of Washington and vicinity. McClellan, and Pinkerton with him, were each able enough and successful enough to lend a credibility to their efforts that kept them in their jobs for a third of the war. Their intelligence operation, however, must go down to posterity not as a serious effort that through well-meant errors badly delayed the war—the usual

⁸ Pinkerton's account of this espionage in his book is so heavy with imaginary dialogue and other embellishments as to induce strong suspicion that he fabricated whole incidents and episodes. Most of his claims of penetrating Richmond, however, are supported to some extent by contemporary records. Although these do not show missions and results, they do reflect the spies' absence "within enemy lines" at the time Pinkerton's narrative puts them there.

charge against it—but as an essentially corrupt activity consciously aimed at justifying inaction and failure.*

Along the Shenandoah

While McClellan was inching up the Peninsula that spring, Stonewall Jackson was consuming the attention of Federal forces in and west of the Shenandoah Valley. Outnumbered, he relied on fast movement and deception. A ruse for which he has won much praise turns out to have been decidedly less successful than supposed.

While occupied in the Valley with General Banks, he was threatened with an attack on Staunton by other Federal forces back in the Alleghenies. His first act in countering this threat was to send a pseudo-deserter into Banks' camp with a report that he was moving to Richmond. In order to make the story stick, he actually marched his men over the Blue Ridge and put them on a train. It was typical of Jackson to assure that the waiting train would be headed east. Then to the surprise even of his immediate subordinates, he ordered the train's crew to take it to Staunton, whither it steamed in reverse, back over the Blue Ridge and across the Valley.

All this was supposed to set Banks in motion eastward. But Jackson reckoned without the incompetence of Banks' information service. Banks failed to detect the march across the mountains; he

* Soon or late this revelation of shady work in Intelligence's back room will be seized upon as new evidence against McClellan's loyalty, a question that has never entirely abated. The Quartermaster General who saw possible treason in intelligence estimates that were evidently fashioned to McClellan's order was only one of many contemporaries who suspected that the general was motivated by more than a desire for a comfortable advantage in men and materiel. McClellan consorted with anti-war Democrats and nursed political ambitions that were neither open nor well concealed; thus it was easy for his enemies to conclude, from his foot-dragging leadership of the army, that he was plotting a dictatorship or purposely allowing the South to win independence by stalemate. When he ran for President in 1864, however, he repudiated the Democratic peace platform. The view of modern historians, though by no means settled, is generally that McClellan was devoted to the Union, a Union that was to be saved according to his own lights.

To the present writer that view does not seem to be upset by the findings presented here. The discovery of fraud in McClellan's intelligence does not essentially change what has long been known about his character, and the transparency of the fraud is as weighty a factor as the fraud itself. It is hard enough to believe—though we are forced to believe it—that estimates so obviously dishonest were used in an effort to get more men and more time; it is even harder to believe that if McClellan had been plotting treason he would have placed such dishonesty on view, as he did. Thus the transparency of the estimates argues against the disloyalty theory.

noticed only that the Rebels were missing from his front. He sized up the deserter's story for what it was and concluded that Jackson had gone to Staunton. He gave chase, but too late to help the small Federal force west of that place, which had to draw away.

While our attention is directed to the Valley we may as well dispose of the Belle Boyd legend. Belle, barely eighteen at this time, owes her fame to a reckless trip afoot to deliver information to Jackson as he arrived before Front Royal to achieve the main stroke of his celebrated Valley campaign. Banks had a small outpost at Front Royal which Stonewall surprised and overran, thereby outflanking his opponent and forcing him to retire across the Potomac. Miss Boyd is said to have made her way, clad in white, out of the town and across hills and fields, finding the Confederates by the sound of their guns.

The story is true enough, but her information could have had little or no value; it is unfair to Jackson to credit any part of his success to her supposedly fortuitous appearance. Jackson believed in Providence and good planning. What happened at Front Royal was exactly what he had planned, and the basis of his plan was some careful intelligence work. For two weeks he had been diligently collecting information from cavalry, citizens, prisoners, deserters, and spies. Evidently his conclusion from this was that he could probably strike Front Royal with complete surprise.

Belle Boyd may have contributed to this information, but that is not what she is famous for. It would be hard to establish that she was not a Confederate spy, but equally hard to say that the foolhardy act for which she is chiefly known was one of espionage.

Miss Boyd literally flouted the fire of the Yankees. Mrs. Greenhow had done the same thing only figuratively, but so brazenly that she soon received a visit from the gentlemen of Pinkerton's bureau. Both women seem to have been ruled by an impulsiveness that ill suited them to espionage. The main point of interest in the Boyd case is the fact that the Front Royal story has survived as a hair-raising example of Civil War intelligence operations. Such is the poverty of the literature.

John Pope vs. Lee

It has been shown that McClellan was an even greater non-user of intelligence than history has made him. John Pope has also had the reputation of being an abominably informed commander; in his

case the verdict must be considerably softened and his campaign reevaluated.

Pope became Lee's victim at Second Bull Run because he lost command of the situation once the armies were at close grips. This much has been known, and it would be hard to overstate the extent of Pope's misunderstandings on the battlefield. But it has not been noticed that up to that point he had provided himself with excellent information and had handled his army very skillfully on the basis of it.

Pope in June 1862 was given command of the various forces that Jackson had kept so well occupied in and near the Valley. The new commander moved his army east of the Blue Ridge, as if to threaten Richmond, while McClellan was engaged with Lee on the opposite side of the enemy capital. Lee, after driving McClellan away from the gates of the city, began detaching forces against Pope, who was maintaining an exposed position with a none too numerous army.

Pope had given his subordinates stern orders to use spies and maintain an active search for information. Though he had the same small cavalry force from which Banks had got so little results, he drove it to the limit. Through this insistence and persistence he kept track of the Confederate buildup in his front as each new detachment arrived. His possession of firm information does much to explain his willingness to expose his army, a subject that has brought puzzled or critical comments from many historians.

In August, when McClellan's army was ordered back up the Potomac, its initial embarkations at Fort Monroe gave Lee the signal to turn on Pope in full force. By rail he suddenly moved out, taking the bulk of the army then still at Richmond. He concentrated, well covered behind a mountain, directly across the Rapidan from Pope.

Moving from Richmond with the Confederates was one of Pope's spies, a sergeant in an Indiana cavalry regiment. In the role of pseudo-deserter he had landed a job as locomotive engineer with the Confederates. He jumped the train on which he was a passenger at the time, filtered through Lee's camps somehow, swam or waded the Rapidan, and was lucky enough to find Pope visiting a forward headquarters near the river. Pope pulled out of the trap as it was almost ready to spring.

The literature often gives intelligence credit for Pope's escape. This heartening historiographical liberality, however, singles out the wrong piece of intelligence—a dispatch that a Federal cavalry party captured, along with Jeb Stuart's adjutant and Jeb's own famous plumed hat. Actually the dispatch fell far short of the sergeant's

information as an indication of danger to Pope's army and it reached Pope after the sergeant had reported.¹⁰

For a week after leaving the Rapidan, Pope sparred successfully with Lee in the vicinity of Culpeper and Warrenton. Stuart returned the enemy cavalry's favor by a raid on Pope's rear headquarters which turned up dispatches showing that McClellan's divisions were beginning to join Pope. Unable to face a prolonged stalemate in light of this news, Lee broke it not by retreating but by detaching Jackson with 25,000 men on a 55-mile sweep around Pope's right flank, all the way to Manassas, the Federal supply base, directly in Pope's rear. It was this stroke that threw Pope off balance. He never again had a halfway correct sizeup of the enemy's dispositions. Once Lee came up and rejoined Jackson, the Federals were routed.

Lee could not have had any real hope that Jackson's march would go undiscovered, but that was what happened. Nor could he have hoped that Pope would almost completely lose command of the situation in a pitched battle; that also happened. This result raises the question how an information service that had been so effective up to that time could have fallen down on the job so completely.

Part of the answer is that Pope's spies were too few to cover as much ground as Lee was then covering. One of them got into the Confederate lines and found plenty of forces to report on, but these constituted Lee's rear, and his advance position—Jackson's—was changing by the minute. The rest of the explanation is that the main reliance for discovery of such a movement, and of enemy positions after battle was joined, was on the cavalry, and by this time Pope's horsemen had only about 500 serviceable mounts. His constant pressure for information had just about exhausted his facilities for getting it. On the battlefield he was not necessarily empty-headed, as so many students of the war would have it; he was simply empty-handed.

¹⁰ Authority for attributing the Federals' escape to this capture is undeniably respectable: it is Pope's own statement. The conflicting version, stronger and more explicit than Pope's, is found in an unpublished affidavit by Gen. McDowell, who was with Pope when the sergeant reported. This conflict and others like it reveal one of the main causes of the obscurity of the Civil War intelligence story: There was no security-classification system, and official dispatches and campaign reports commonly found their way into the press. This possibility evidently caused commanders to hold back the intelligence background of their actions or overstate the influence of overtly obtained intelligence.

Antietam

Because it is impossible to persuade oneself that McClellan had any serious intention of using intelligence in directing his army, the intelligence incidents in his Richmond campaign seem almost irrelevant; hence their omission here. Intelligence is inextricable, however, from the story of his campaign against Lee in Maryland, in September 1862. There the general who was so indifferent to the truth about the enemy received the most stunning piece of intelligence of the entire war, so stunning that even a McClellan had to act on it. An operational copy of Lee's plans fell into the Federals' hands.¹¹

Lee, after his crushing victory over Pope, seized the opportunity to invade the North. He crossed the Potomac to Frederick, at which point he decided to reduce the Federal position at Harper's Ferry so that he could use the Shenandoah Valley as a line of communication. He sent off more than half his army on this mission, and it was the order that directed this movement which a Federal soldier picked up in a bivouac area the Confederates had used at Frederick.

McClellan saw his opportunity but moved so slowly that Lee had time to reconcentrate behind Antietam Creek. Lee's far smaller army fought the Federals to a standstill, but it was so depleted that he had to retire into Virginia.

That much is a well-known story. It reveals McClellan profiting little from a devastating piece of intelligence (which, be it noted, was obtained not by effort but by luck). Had he moved with even moderate speed, he could have caught the Confederates while they were split into four segments, three advancing on Harper's Ferry from different sides and a fourth remaining with Lee.

In fact the wastage of intelligence was even worse than the standard version indicates.

The "Lost Order," comprehensive as it was, left something to be desired. It gave a timetable for investing the Ferry, but there was reason to question whether the movement was up to schedule. It was only partly specific as to the placement of the force left with Lee in the vicinity of Hagerstown (and in fact the one specific position it gave had changed significantly). But McClellan learned something of the progress of the largest of the three detachments, and he also discovered Lee's positions about Hagerstown.

¹¹ See Millican, Gelman, & Stanhope, "Lost Order, Lost Cause," in *Studies II* 1, p. 103 ff.

This information came mainly from a volunteer spy, an itinerant Lutheran preacher whose travels had put him in the Confederates' path near Harper's Ferry. Possibly because the attack on the Ferry was commanded by the pious Stonewall Jackson, the parson was allowed to go his way. His way took him quickly to a Pennsylvania cavalry company picketing north of Hagerstown. He had bypassed the town, so he went back through the lines, filled in that gap in his information, and reported to the cavalry captain, who rode over to McClellan's headquarters by night and gave the story in full. Two days had elapsed since the "capture" of the Lost Order, but it was two more days before McClellan attacked at Sharpsburg, a scant ten miles' march. By that time most of the enemy's detached forces were back with the main body; the remainder arrived during the battle and turned back the Federals' final push.

The best intelligence is seldom good enough. The Lost Order was the best any commander could ask for, and—again through no initiative of his—McClellan greatly improved on it. This was enough to insure the near-destruction of Lee's army. All McClellan gained was a technical victory.

At Antietam intelligence did not simply influence a battle; it caused one. Without the Lost Order and the parson's espionage, McClellan would probably have contented himself with protecting Washington and Baltimore, or at most with maneuvering to get Lee back across the Potomac without a fight.

Fredericksburg

McClellan's successor when Lincoln relieved him in November was Ambrose Burnside, a general who is remembered favorably only by historians of the barber's art. Burnside knew the Chief wanted action, and he delivered it. He moved the army immediately from Warrenton to Falmouth, opposite Fredericksburg, stealing a march on Lee, who couldn't make up his mind what was going on for eight days. The Southern leader was mindful of several courses of action open to the enemy and he had information to support all of them; this, as one author points out, left him "accepting everything as equally credible and equally incredible."¹²

What Burnside had in mind was crossing the Rappahannock and marching for Richmond. But he waited so long for pontoons to put

¹² Kenneth P. Williams, *Lincoln Finds a General* (5 vols.; New York, 1949-59), II, p. 512.

him over the river that he gave Lee time not only to arrive at a correct reading of his intentions but to bring up the entire Army of Northern Virginia from Culpeper and the Valley. When the Federals finally crossed, it was into the teeth of a fortified position on a high, steep ridge. The result was a slaughter, and Burnside's early removal.

Without knowing what information Burnside's plan was based on, his attack looks like pure madness—which in fact is what some explanations of the affair add up to. Others, however, note correctly that it originated in a misunderstanding of the Confederate dispositions. Burnside made his main thrust against Lee's left, behind the town, because he believed that that sector was relatively weak; he thought most of the enemy strength was ten to fifteen miles downriver. In fact the Fredericksburg ridge was more densely defended than the less formidable ground on the Confederate right.

Explaining a decision-maker's ignorance is likely to be a bit harder than tracing a correct decision back to some correct information. Where Burnside's misconception came from is not clear. Wary of the numerous hands through which telegrams to Washington passed, he gave the General in Chief only his conclusion about enemy dispositions and did not say what specific reports led to it, or indicate their sources. Certainly there were interrogations; perhaps some of the subjects were persuasive pseudo-deserters. Certainly there was observation by balloonists and signal officers; perhaps cover and deception were used against it with good success. And certain it is that the Federals enjoyed the advantage of reading the cipher used by the enemy flag stations; evidently the messages that the Confederates put "on the air" were deceptive or of little significance.

In any case, Burnside's problem was not so much having incorrect information as having little information of any kind, good or bad; and the fault was his own. His failures of understanding are far less excusable than Pope's; the front was stable, he had plenty of cavalry and plenty of time, and he also had the initiative, which enabled him to concentrate on finding the enemy's weak spot. The "intelligence explanation" of his disaster consists of a list of omissions:

(1) Pinkerton, who understandably could feel that his service was tied to McClellan's, had left the army. So far, so good. But Burnside did not seize the opportunity to replace him with an effective secret service. The new bureau consisted of one man, John C. Babcock, a 26-year-old ex-private, who had no lack of ability but

could not command even enough support to be sure of getting his hands on subjects for interrogation.

(2) Burnside's plan made sense when it contemplated crossing to Fredericksburg in the face of a small enemy force. He was not sufficiently vigorous in seeking to discover the enemy's gradual reconcentration that made it progressively less feasible. A few of John Pope's "Send out and get me some information" dispatches would have helped, though perhaps not enough to dissuade the impatient Burnside.

(3) Worst of all, Burnside allowed his cavalry to limit its scouting to the enemy's far flanks. Some of his horsemen should have been sent across the river close to Fredericksburg, to take prisoners, reconnoiter, and if necessary probe the Confederates until they revealed where they were strong and where weak.

Some accounts have it that Lee trapped Burnside into attacking in the wrong place. Perhaps so; but it is evident that Lee's considerable abilities in deception were overmatched by his opponent's ability in self-deception.

Part II, to be carried in a future issue, covers the Chancellorsville and Gettysburg campaigns (in which the Federals had a new intelligence bureau that produced information of great value to the commanders), summarizes the principal methodological lessons of the article, and evaluates the commanders most prominently mentioned as intelligence users.