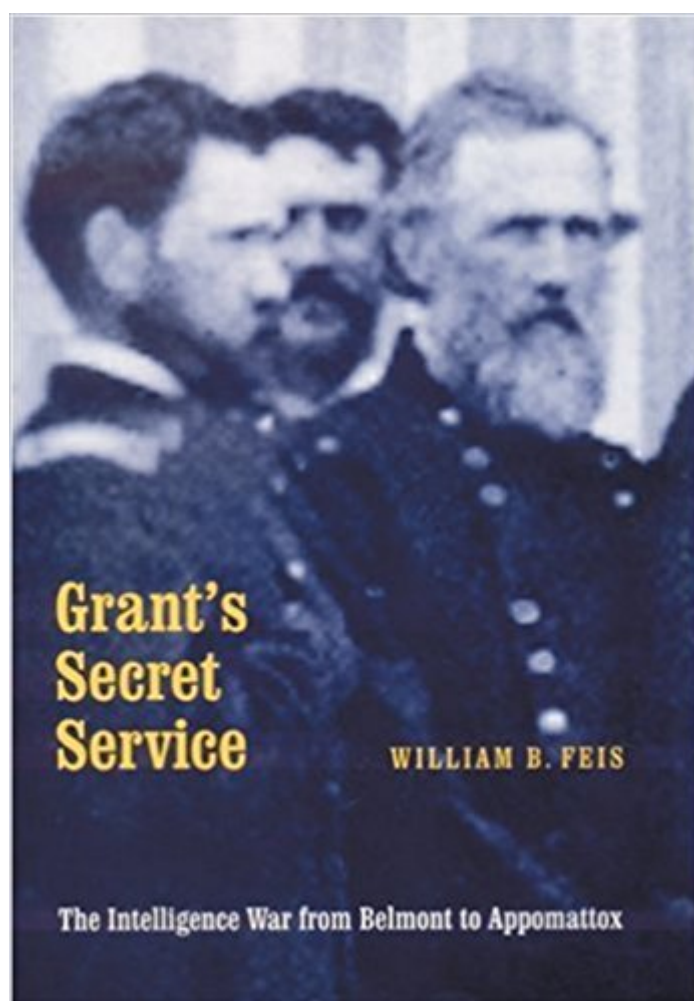


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Grant's Secret Service: The Intelligence War From Belmont To Appomattox



Synopsis

William B. Feis offers us the first scholarly examination of the use of military intelligence under Ulysses S. Grant's command during the Civil War. Feis makes the new and provocative argument that Grant's use of the Army of the Potomac's Bureau of Military Information played a significant role in Lee's defeat. Feis's work articulately rebuts accusations by Grant's detractors that his battlefield successes involved little more than the bludgeoning of an undermanned and outgunned opponent.

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Customer Reviews

The study of intelligence during the Civil War is beginning to emerge from a melodramatic concern with assassination plots and secret agents. Most operationally focused histories seldom go beyond the level of reconnaissance reports, except to excoriate George McClellan for relying on the spectacularly unreliable reports of Allan Pinkerton. Edwin Fishel's pathbreaking *The Secret War for the Union* (1996) has until now been the principal and honorable exception. Buena Vista University historian Feis joins him with this magisterial analysis of Ulysses Grant's acquisition and use of military intelligence from his first days in command to the end of the war in Virginia. Grant's Mexican War experience taught him the advantages of combining his own understanding of a situation with learning an enemy's circumstances before undertaking a particular action. Feis makes comprehensive use of archival and published sources to show how Grant tried to "keep himself posted." He grew increasingly sophisticated in using secret service work, newspaper accounts and reconnaissance reports to understand his opponents their characters as well as their intentions.

Grant never allowed himself to be paralyzed by either not enough intelligence or too much of it. When gaps in his information emerged, as in the early stages of the Vicksburg campaign, he used the initiative wherever possible to shift the burden of uncertainty to the Confederates. Shiloh in 1862, the Wilderness in 1864 and Jubal Early's raid on Washington the same year were reminders that initiative and intuition were not ideal substitutes for information, a lesson well learned as the war entered its final phase. (Apr. 5)Forecast: As the role of intelligence in war comes further to the fore of popular consciousness, this book can be recommended to readers seeking a historical perspective on military decision making, as its selection for the History Book Club suggests. Academic libraries are a lock. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

In this intelligent, informed, and copiously detailed account, Feis (history, Buena Vista Univ.) counters the common view that Ulysses Grant disdained military intelligence and fought on intuition alone by showing that Grant slowly acquired respect for and reliance on intelligence as the complexity and range of war widened and as intelligence gathering improved. Grant cared what the enemy did when he could not see them, but unlike other Union generals, he was not paralyzed by such concerns. He trusted his own judgment, sometimes too much so. Grant's overarching philosophy of war was that the side that held the initiative held the critical advantage. Thus, finding the enemy and then striking him hard and often was Grant's formula for success. Military intelligence allowed him to act and especially guided his strategy in the East in 1864 and 1865, which finally won the war. Feis's book offers the first full-dress study of military intelligence and Grant's command. It also provides an essential primer on the ways intelligence was gathered and assessed during the war. Recommended for major public and academic libraries. Randall M. Miller, Saint Joseph's Univ., Philadelphia Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

I do not regret taking the time to read this book, and it is a well-intentioned worthy effort--however, given a new choice, I would probably go with the alternative, by an intelligence professional, "The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War." I give the author, not an intelligence professional, high marks for the research, the story-telling, and the consistent themes. I give the editor and publisher low marks for the terrible maps (many seem to have lost their unit location markings and other key annotations) and the lack of tables showing "who knew what when..." Three themes stayed with me as I put the book down: 1) A great deal can be accomplished in terms of intelligence with even a very small number of people--as few as 1-2 on staff, 3-5 behind the lines. We in America have substituted billions for technology and a cast of close to 100,000, for

rather poor intelligence and counterintelligence.2) Maps, especially "information maps," are worth their weight in gold. I was reminded by this book that intelligence has in the past been an off-shoot of topographical engineering and map making, and do believe that we must restore the "hard-wired" connection between geospatial information and the "data" that our human, imagery, and signals professionals seek out.3) Deserters, prisoners, and legal travelers are a gold mine of information and must, must, must be systematically exploited. No matter the degree to which they may offer up untruths and deceptions, the bottom line is that any commander who fails to plan for the systematic exploitation of these human resources, and to do so in a timely fashion, is derelict in their duty. As I recall, we do not yet have a proper table of organization or equipment in the U.S. force inventory for handling such individuals--the worst battalion, or the over-burdened military police, or some kludge collection of reservists, seems to end up being the solution each time. This dereliction is even more costly in "low intensity" environments. I will not make too much of it, but I was especially pleased to see how much of Grant's intelligence came from enemy newspapers. The author seeks to make much--perhaps too much--of how Grant did not allow himself to be immobilized by a lack of intelligence, substituting initiative when intelligence was lacking, but I for one don't buy it. What I see in the book is a substantive appreciation by the General Commanding of the role of intelligence, however poorly manned or funded, and that makes all the difference.

I read a great deal of Civil War material. For me this book was okay, not great, not even really good...it's just okay. The material covered is decent enough but the books just meanders along. We learn that more often than not the outcomes of battles and movements are as much a product of good fortune than any military intelligence. I had hope for something more than this book delivers. It is not a difficult read and at some point I may even re-read it but I did/do not find it's content as compelling as many other CW books in my library.. At the moment my wife is reading some CW material and she used this book as supplemental reading. One highlight for me was learning more about how Grant had obtained dispatches from Johnston to Pemberton.

I was fascinated by the story of intelligence gathering that ultimately affected decisions by battlefield generals, including and especially the focus- General Grant. The story as it unfolds does not explain why Grant maintained some views that ran counter to his intelligence. Was it just his 'internal eye' at work. Also very informative was learning that Grant and the higher command were informed almost daily of events occurring throughout the theatre of war. This must have created a tremendous burden for the telegraph service, a relatively new development in warfare. Grant's use of information

gathering stands in stark contrast to Gen. McClellan who was unable to detect false cannon facing Washington DC nor the false cannon on the peninsula. The author carefully reminds us that Grant's memories are not to be taken at face value, as they often contradict the producible facts about certain situations that he faced.

William Feis knows what he is talking about--his doctoral dissertation was on this topic, and it is the most thorough monograph on Grant's use of military intelligence--known at the time as "secret service." The author shows an evolution in Grant's thinking and practice from early in the war through its final days. Grant was by nature aggressive--he was only supposed to demonstrate against the Confederate camp at Belmont, for example, and ended up attacking it. He felt that taking the initiative in battle made up for a lack of intelligence information--make the enemy wonder what you are doing rather than being too concerned about the enemy's situation. But later in the war, after Jubal Early's troops got away from the defenses of Richmond in 1864 without Grant's knowing, and went all the way up the Shenandoah to threaten Washington, Grant realized the importance of intelligence and beefed up his capability. While this book is a contribution to our understanding of Grant's views and practice of intelligence, the text is somewhat choppy, as are many books that are a collection of previously published articles. Other books on military intelligence, such as "The Secret War for the Union," would best be read prior to this one. However, despite its limitations in scope and style, this book is well researched and is certainly worth reading.

This is a fascinating look at how intelligence was gathered during the Civil War. I found it a fast read. It was interesting to see how Grant progressed in his thinking/actions by way of his collecting of knowledge.

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