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Grant's Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox (review)

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(Review)

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Grant's Secret Service: The Intelligence War from Belmont to Appomattox. By William B. Feis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8032-2005-7. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xii, 330. \$39.95.

In this carefully researched volume, William B. Feis, assistant professor of history at Buena Vista University in Iowa, traces Ulysses S. Grant's collection and use of military intelligence during the American Civil War. In doing so he attempts to determine whether William T. Sherman was correct in his opinion that Grant was little concerned about "what the enemy does out of his sight" (p. 10) and to show that Grant's respect for the use of military intelligence grew as the war progressed.

In the early western campaigns Grant made only limited use of intelligence and that was often incorrect. His occupation of Paducah, Kentucky, was based on flawed information. He had little knowledge of Fort Donelson's strength, misread information available to him before Shiloh, possessed little information concerning the enemy in the early stages of the Vicksburg campaign, and acted on faulty information in the Chattanooga campaign.

Professor Feis points out that Grant did not fully utilize the services of the Bureau of Military Intelligence (BMI) during his early campaigns in Virginia. Rather, Grant's decisions continued to be based upon his own perceptions and the determination to maintain the initiative. The author believes the near success of Jubal Early's summer raid on Washington was the result of "a monumental intelligence failure" (p. 232).

Feis contends that beginning in late summer 1864 Grant began to profit from having his own intelligence officer, Col. George H. Sharpe, at his headquarters. As evidence Feis argues that intelligence reports concerning the movements of Joseph Kershaw's division allowed Phil Sheridan to defeat Early at Winchester in early autumn. The author does admit, however, that Union intelligence failed to detect the concentration of Confederate troops prior to the surprise attack on Fort Stedman in March 1865.

This is a valuable study which should be of interest not only to Civil War scholars but also to anyone concerned with military intelligence. The author does show that, contrary to Sherman's contention, Grant was concerned about what the enemy was doing. He is, in this reviewer's opinion, less successful in demonstrating Grant's "more pronounced reliance upon intelligence supplied by the BMI" (p. 268).

The excellent maps (twelve of them) accompanying the text deserve special commendation. Their clarity and appropriate placement with the text are a model for all military studies.

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