Civilian Spies

When the Civil War began in 1861, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) did not exist. The United States government had used spies in other wars, such as the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. In peacetime, however, leaders saw no need for a department for gathering intelligence, or information. When the Civil War began, leaders on both sides of the conflict needed spies.

The spies came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were wealthy socialites. Others were businesspeople. Still others were servants or slaves. Many spies were white men and women, but others were African Americans. One alleged spy, Loreta Janeta Velazquez, was born in Cuba.

Some spied for love of country. Many Confederate spies did not want the Southern way of life to change. Other spies wanted to end slavery. Some people spied mainly for money.

The Confederacy could easily recruit spies in the Union's capital. Washington, D.C., lies between Virginia and Maryland. Both of these were slave-holding states. Maryland remained in the Union, but many Confederate supporters lived there.

Newspaper Spies

During the Civil War, newspapers published information about troop size and location and about military strategies, or plans. Spies delivered newspapers across the North-South divide so that Confederate and Union leaders could gain information about their enemies. Sometimes false information was planted!
In 1861, the United States were divided into the Union and the Confederacy.

Many people who lived in Washington, D.C., also supported the Confederacy. Some of them worked in the federal government. Others had jobs in the military. They had access to military secrets and other valuable information. After war broke out, some of these individuals left Washington to work for the Confederacy. They took their knowledge with them.

The Union recruited spies, too. General Grenville Dodge, the chief for Western Operations under General Ulysses S. Grant, was responsible for gathering intelligence for the Union. He hired more than 100 spies, who were known by numbers rather than names. Numbers offered an important advantage: captured spies could not reveal other spies’ names.
A Confederate Spy Ring

In the spring of 1861, Captain Thomas Jordan told Rose Greenhow that he was resigning from the United States Army. He planned to fight for his home state, Virginia. He asked Greenhow to help him run a Confederate spy ring.

Greenhow was the ideal person for the job. An intelligent widow, she was a popular hostess in Washington, D.C. She had many connections in Washington because her husband had been a high-ranking official at the State Department. Born in the South, she was loyal to the Confederate cause. However, she still invited Union supporters to her home. People liked Greenhow and spoke freely at her parties. She was able to gather intelligence about the Union’s military plans.

Captain Jordan taught Greenhow a cipher, or code. No one would understand her messages unless they had the key to the cipher. He told her to address him as Thomas J. Rayford when writing to him.
As Greenhow gathered information, she sent coded information via couriers, or messengers, to Confederate military leaders. One time, Greenhow sewed a coded message into a black silk pouch about the size of a silver dollar. She gave the pouch to 16-year-old Betty Duvall.

Riding in a wagon, Duvall carried the message past Union troops in Washington, D.C., and crossed the Potomac River into Virginia. On July 10, 1861, she rode to the Confederate headquarters near Manassas. She told an officer that she had a message for General Beauregard. Greenhow’s message informed Beauregard that Union troops would advance on July 16.

In turn, Beauregard sent a message by telegraph to the Confederate capital in Richmond, Virginia, asking for more troops. As a result, the Confederate forces were well prepared and won the first major battle of the Civil War.
Aliases

Some spies used an alias, or false name, as a way to keep their true identity secret. Using aliases was one way to avoid capture. For a spy, capture by one's enemies often meant death.

E. J. Allen

Shortly after the start of the Civil War, Union General George B. McClellan hired Allan J. Pinkerton to gather information from behind Confederate lines. Pinkerton owned a detective agency in Chicago. When he traveled in the South, he used the alias E. J. Allen and pretended to be from Georgia.

In Memphis, Pinkerton learned that Tennessee was in favor of seceding from the Union. He also learned that his life was in danger. A hotel worker anxiously knocked on Pinkerton's door one night. The worker told him that a Confederate spy had recognized him and was reporting him to authorities. Pinkerton fled Memphis.

In Mississippi, Pinkerton had another close call. The barber he went to for a shave was pleased to recognize the great Detective Pinkerton, whom he had shaved in Chicago. The spy protested that his name was not Pinkerton. He claimed that he was E. J. Allen from Georgia and had never been to Chicago. Luckily, Pinkerton was able to convince the gathering crowd that he was a Southern gentleman.
Masters of Disguise

Being a spy was a dangerous business. Spies sometimes wore disguises to avoid being recognized. Disguises helped them blend in with the people around them. For example, Union spies in Confederate states had to look and sound as though they belonged in the South. Mastering a Southern accent and dialect was an important part of blending in with Southerners.

Walter Bowie

Walter Bowie regularly carried messages between Rose Greenhow’s spy ring and the Army of Northern Virginia. In 1862, Union forces captured him in southern Maryland. He escaped from them and resumed his spying.

In 1863, Union troops followed him to the home of his cousin in Maryland. Again, Bowie outwitted Union troops. He disguised himself as an African American woman and left the house. Bowie escaped, but the soldiers arrested his relatives.

Allan J. Pinkerton was Chicago’s first police detective before he opened his own detective agency.
Loreta Janeta Velazquez

Born in Cuba, Loreta Janeta Velazquez was married to a Confederate soldier. She wanted to follow him into war.

Velazquez disguised herself as a soldier. She wore a uniform and cut her hair short. She glued a fake mustache onto her upper lip. Velazquez took the alias Harry T. Buford. She practiced walking, talking, and acting like a man.

As Buford, Velazquez gathered a group of volunteers for her husband to train and command as spies. When he died in an accident, Velazquez decided to fight as a soldier.

After the Civil War ended, Velazquez wrote a book about her life called The Woman in Battle. She described her Civil War experiences as a soldier and as a female spy.
During the Civil War, military officials were unlikely to execute a woman even if she was a spy.
Dangerous Roles

Spies had dangerous roles to play. They lived with the fear of betrayal, recognition, and capture.

Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow

Early in his military career, Private Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow became a Confederate spy. During the war, he worked in Washington, D.C. Stringfellow needed a cover so he would seem to be an ordinary citizen. He used the alias Edward Delcher and pretended to be a dental assistant. He worked from the office of a dentist who supported the Confederacy.

As Delcher, Stringfellow saw "patients" who were actually spies. They brought him news to pass along. One day, a "patient" rushed in holding a towel to his face. Delcher saw the patient right away. A Union officer in the waiting room never knew that two Confederate spies were meeting in the next room.

During the Civil War, some spies disguised themselves as doctors. They carried messages in their black bags.
Pauline Cushman

In 1862, Pauline Cushman was acting in a play in Kentucky. In the play, she drank a toast to honor another character. An audience member dared her to drink a toast to Confederate president Jefferson Davis instead. When she did, Union officials threw her out of the theater.

Confederates loved her for what she had done. What they did not know was that she was a Union spy. She used her popularity to learn the names of Confederate supporters and spies. She was even able to see military maps and drawings of defenses, which she later copied.

Cushman was caught carrying secret papers. A Confederate military court sentenced the former favorite to death. Cushman would have been the first—and only—woman to be hanged during the Civil War, but Union troops arrived just in time. After her rescue, Cushman became famous for a time. When she died, veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic buried her with military honors.
African Americans Behind the Lines

White Southerners generally ignored the African Americans who worked as servants and laborers around them. As a result, African Americans were ideal spies for the Union.

John Scobell

John Scobell was an educated, freed slave who worked as a spy. Scobell played the parts of cook, laborer, and servant on missions behind Confederate lines. He gathered information about Confederate defenses and other matters from leaders in the African American community.

Mary Elizabeth Bowser

Mary Elizabeth Bowser was also a former slave who became a Union spy. Bowser was part of a spy ring known as the Richmond Underground. Her mission was to work as a servant for Jefferson Davis, the Confederacy's president. Bowser's detailed reports included conversations she overheard and documents she memorized.

A Clothesline Telegraph

One African American couple created a code for communicating Confederate plans. On one side of a river in Virginia, the wife worked as a laundress at General Lee's headquarters. On the other side, her husband worked as a cook at General Hooker's Union headquarters. The wife hung the laundry a certain way to communicate Confederate plans to her husband. Then he gave the information to General Hooker.
Mary Touvestre

Mary Touvestre was an African American housekeeper who worked for a Confederate engineer. One day, she overheard him talking about remodeling the USS *Merrimack* to turn it into the first Confederate ironclad warship. Hoping to help the Union cause, Touvestre took a set of the plans to the Department of the Navy in Washington, D.C. The information she delivered helped speed up the construction of the Union’s own ironclad ship, the *Monitor*.

The efforts of spies during the Civil War were important to both sides. Spies faced many risks and dangers in their work, but they all believed they were doing the right thing.