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Heart and Soul for the Cause: Contributions of Three Female Spies During the Civil War

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"Instead of loving and worshipping the old flag of the stars and stripes, I see in it only the symbol of murder, plunder, oppression, and shame!"[1] Rose Greenhow thus explains her decision to become a spy for the Confederate states during the Civil War. By contrast, Elizabeth Van Lew justified her espionage for the North: "How can I describe my feelings when on my way down town, looking towards the Capitol, I saw the flag of treason floating over it."[2] Both flags made these women realize their loyalties. The depth of their convictions led them to pursue as direct a role in the war as a woman could: spying.

At the beginning of the Civil War neither North nor South had a very organized military intelligence system. The United States Secret Service, which dealt with espionage during the war, organized on June 23, 1860, and was a branch of the Treasury Department set up to curb counterfeiting.[3] The Confederate Secret Service, on the other hand, was not officially established until November 30, 1864, with the war nearly over.[4] But if the Confederacy lacked an organized intelligence service, it did have an espionage network that

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[1] Rose Greenhow, My Imprisonment and the First Year of Abolition Rule at Washington (London: R. Bentley, 1863), 4.
[2] Elizabeth Van Lew, A Yankee Spy in Richmond, ed. David D. Ryan (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1996), 31.
[3] Philip Van Doren Stern, Secret Missions of the Civil War (New York: Bonanza Books, 1959), 16. The U.S. Secret Service did not have an official chief until July 5, 1865, after the war was over.

reached well into the Federal Government. Many times the Confederacy knew what the Federals were going to do almost as soon as the plans were made.[5] The Union took longer to infiltrate the newly established Confederate government, but they got better as the war progressed.[6] But at the beginning of the war both sides of the conflict were "so incredibly naïve" as to matters of secrecy that spies could collect information "right under their noses."[7] Women especially had an easier time spying at the beginning because they were not suspected of doing more than sewing shirts or darning socks for the soldiers.

Among the many women who were involved in spying during the Civil War, three stand out: Rose Greenhow and Belle Boyd for the Confederacy, and Elizabeth Van Lew for the Union. There were many other women involved in spying during the war, known and unknown, but there is the most information about these three women. Rose Greenhow and Belle Boyd each wrote her own autobiography during the war and made no attempt to remain in the background; and Elizabeth Van Lew kept a journal and was personally recognized by Ulysses Grant for her service to the Union. All three women were

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[4] Stern, 18.
[5] John Bakeless, Spies of the Confederacy (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 2.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Stern, 19.

Southerners, but they did not all share loyalties to the South.

What did they contribute to the outcome of the war? There is some debate on the answer to this question. Some sources believe there were many significant contributions to the war effort, while others question how truly important some of the celebrated exploits were. If these women did not ultimately decide which side was victorious, they at least all made contributions that helped their side and showed their dedication to the cause they believed in.

I.

Rose Greenhow was the first of the three to begin work as a spy. A widow at the outbreak of the war, she moved among the highest circles of Washington society. Her friends included such men as President James Buchanan, Secretary of State William Seward, and Senator Henry Wilson, chairman of the Military Affairs Committee of the U.S. Senate. She was the aunt of Mrs. Stephen Douglas and a relative by marriage of James and Dolly Madison.[8] Colonel E. D. Keyes, military secretary to General Scott, called her "the most persuasive woman that was ever known in

[8] Edwin C. Fishel, The Secret War for the Union (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 58.

Washington."[9] Philip Van Doren Stern says she was the most qualified for spying of any of the other women spies because of her position in Washington society.[10] Besides being well established in Washington society, she was well traveled in North America and, thanks to her late husband, Dr. Robert Greenhow, well educated in medicine, law, diplomacy, and history.[11]

Born in Maryland to wealthy slaveholding parents, Rose was a Southern woman who never tried to hide her loyalty to the Confederate cause. When she was still a child her father was killed by one of his slaves, instilling a vehement anti-abolitionism within her.[12] In 1835 she married Dr. Robert Greenhow, a Virginian. He is described as being "handsome, erudite and much beloved by all who knew him."[13] He was educated in medicine and law, working as a writer and traveler for the State Department concerning foreign policy. It seems to have been a happy marriage. But early in 1854, Robert, who was in California at the time, slipped on a walkway and fell six feet down an embankment. He did not realize at the time the severity of the accident, but six weeks later he was dead. Rose, who

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[9] Bakeless, 5.
[10] Stern, 55.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ishbel Ross, Rebel Rose: Life of Rose O'Neal Greenhow, Confederate Spy (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 3.
[13] Ross, 12.

was in the East recovering from the birth of their fourth daughter, could not even attend the funeral.[14]

By the outbreak of the war Rose was in her early forties. Though not a young woman anymore, she had always been reputed for her beauty and had a way with men that helped her to gather information from some of the top men in the Union government.[15] Her hero was John C. Calhoun, whom she later called "the best and wisest man of this century." She credited him with greatly influencing her life and helping to form her political beliefs.[16] President Lincoln, on the other hand, she referred to as "the Abolition Leader"[17] and called Union soldiers in Virginia "barbarous invaders."[18] So when the war came she did not hesitate to do all she could to help her beloved South.

Rose was committed to the Southern cause from the very beginning, and, being very outspoken in her support, was soon approached by Colonel Thomas Jordan who had resigned from the U.S. Army to become General Beauregard's adjutant-general. He was cautious at first, but in finding such a "willing accomplice" he set up a cipher system with her.[19] She quickly became the head of a Confederate spy ring in

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[14] Ross, 44.
[15] Stern, 55.
[16] Ross, 5.
[17] Greenhow, 12.
[18] Greenhow, 3.

Washington, with her home as its headquarters. It seems she got most of her information from people she called scouts. They gathered information by walking around, picking up rumors, and observing such things as troop movements and building of fortifications.[20] Edwin Fishel states that what she gathered from her scout's observations was by far her most reliable information.[21]

Her most important contribution to the war effort accompanied the Battle of First Manassas in the summer of 1861.[22] Ishbel Ross calls her involvement "a substantial coup in the history of wartime espionage," but goes on to say that she never equaled it again.[23] She got a copy of General McDowell's marching orders from an unknown source and sent it on July 10 to General Beauregard. Her messenger, Betty Duvall, carried the message (sewn into a piece of silk) in her hair, securing it with a comb.[24] The message alerted the Confederates that the Federals were

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[19] Ross, 104. It seems that Mrs. Greenhow was doing some gathering of information on her own before she began doing any official spying, 100.
[20] Fishel, 62.
[21] Fishel, 63. An example of some seemingly mistaken information was a report she sent to Colonel Jordan, telling him that Senator Wilson was going to be joining General McClellan's staff. But nowhere in any records does Wilson appear as a member of McClellan's staff, and his support of abolition opposed to McClellan's would make it unlikely for him to work for McClellan, 64.
[22] Bakeless, 18.
[23] Ross, 113.
[24] Bakeless, 20.

going to march on the sixteenth. This information proved to be accurate, resulting in First Manassas.[25]

But this was not the end to her involvement in the battle. She sent a second message telling the number of McDowell's troops and the route he would take, and confirmed her first message as to the marching date.[26] Then there was a third message stating that the Federals were planning to cut the railroad between Winchester and Manassas, which would delay General Johnston in coming to reinforce General Beauregard. The Union failed at the attempt, perhaps because of Rose's warning.[27] After the battle she received a message from Colonel Jordan, saying that President Davis and General Beauregard sent their thanks for her help and that they were relying on her for more information. He concluded with the tribute, "The Confederacy owes you a debt."[28]

Concerning her involvement in the Battle of Manassas, Edwin Fishel questions how truly valuable her messages were. He agrees that her first message confirming that Union troops were going to march was useful, getting Beauregard to prepare for battle. But he believes her subsequent messages did not actually affect what the Confederate army did or how

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[25] Bakeless, 22.
[26] Bakeless, 23.
[27] Bakeless, 24.

the battle went. He believes the Confederates reacted the way they did because of other information they had already obtained from other sources.[29] Whether or not her messages were actually timely and valuable, she was credited at the time for providing a great service to the South.

But Rose's luck did not hold out. "Her greatest strength was also her greatest weakness."[30] She had mistakenly believed she could flaunt her support for the South and her spying because of her important connections, but she had not counted on "the little Scotsman" Allan Pinkerton.[31] Pinkerton later wrote that the Lincoln government did not pay much attention to the actions of women in Washington because no one thought they were a danger. This belief changed after Manassas.[32] Rose made practically no attempt to hide what she did for the South, which resulted in Allan Pinkerton being assigned to watch her house. Her arrest came on August 23, 1861. Enough evidence had been gathered against her. She had been warned earlier in the day that she was being followed. She managed to tell another agent to watch the house, and if she raised

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[28] Ross, 118.
[29] Fishel, 61.
[30] Stern, 55.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Allan Pinkerton, The Spy of the Rebellion (New York: G.W. Carleton and Co., 1883), 250, 251.

her handkerchief to her face that meant she was being arrested.[33]

The arrest was carried out very quietly, as the *New York Times* says on August 26. No one was aware of her arrest until two days later.[34] The nature of her offense was recorded as "forwarding information to the rebels" and being a "dangerous, skillful spy."[35] She was kept under house arrest at first. "I was made prisoner in my own house," she writes in her autobiography, "and subjected to an ordeal which must have been copied from the days of the Directory in France."[36] The Union got hold of some of her papers and letters, but could make no sense of her cipher. In the *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* there is a letter from Colonel Jordan to Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin, telling him that the Union government was offering a reward for a key to her cipher system.[37]

While she was being held under house arrest she still managed to get information to the outside. The *Official Records* has a letter she managed to get out, dated December

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[33] Greenhow, 53, 54.
[34] New York Times 26 August 1861, 1.
[35] Russell A. Alger, et al, ed. War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Government Printing Office, 2nd ser., vol. 2. Washington D.C., 1899, 271.
[36] Greenhow, 11.

26, 1861, telling of 1,200 Union cavalry and four batteries of artillery that were going to be crossing the river near Manassas to cut off the railroad and other forms of communication in the rear of the Confederates, while attacking from the front.[38] Rose thanks the "inadvertent conversation of my gaolers"[39] for this and their "stupidity" in allowing her friends to come and go, taking and receiving information for her.[40] Her home became a prison not only for her, but for other female prisoners as well, and was dubbed by the *New York Times* as "Hotel Greenhow."[41] But in January 1862 she was removed from her home and taken to Old Capitol Prison.

Even from prison Rose continued to get messages out, though it is not clear what kind of information she could get from prison. She apparently took rubber balls that her daughter used as toys, wrapped a message around one, and tossed it out the window to an agent who was waiting outside to take it further south.[42] She spent her time in prison in

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[37] Redfield Proctor, et al, ed. War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Government Printing Office, 1st ser., vol. 5. Washington D.C., 1891, 928.
[38] War of the Rebellion: Official Records. 1st ser., vol. 5, 1038.
[39] Greenhow, 77.
[40] Greenhow, 90.
[41] New York Times 5 November 1861, 1.
[42] Donald E. Markle, Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994), 162. Washington D. C., despite being the capital of the Union, had many Southern sympathizers, so it was not too difficult for Rose to find help getting her messages across the lines.

acts of defiance, such as sewing a Confederate flag and waving it from her window.[43]

In June of 1862, Rose was exchanged for Union prisoners and sent south. She was met in Richmond by President Jefferson Davis, who told her, "But for you there would have been no Battle of Bull Run."[44] In August of 1863 Rose was sent to Europe in an attempt to gain outside support for the Confederacy. It was in Europe that she wrote about her time as a spy.

In the summer of 1864, Rose headed back to America. After crossing the Atlantic, she boarded the blockade runner *Condor* near the coast of North Carolina, but it ran aground and was threatened by a pursuing Union ship. Not wanting to be arrested again, she prevailed upon some of the crew to take her to shore in a small boat. But the water was rough, and a wave overturned the boat. Rose was bringing back gold for the Confederacy and had sewn it into her dress. This added weight dragged her to the bottom, and she drowned. A Confederate soldier who found her body took the gold, but later returned it after she was identified. She was buried in Richmond, and even today on the anniversary of her death

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[43] Ross, 199.
[44] Markle, 163.

the Daughters of the Confederacy put a wreath on her grave, celebrating her as "a true Confederate heroine."[45]

II.

Belle Boyd, probably the most well-known female spy of the Civil War at that time, may also have been, as Edwin Fishel says, "the Civil War's most over-rated spy."[46] Born in Martinsburg, Virginia, she debuted into Washington society, and as the war broke out was still but seventeen. After Virginia seceded, she went back to Virginia. On July 4, 1861 when Union soldiers came to her home to tear down some rebel flags and put up the Union flag, Belle shot one of the men, who later died of the wound. She claims they were using offensive language and insulting her mother.[47] She was tried and set free, claiming self-defense.[48]

Inspired by the exploits of Rose Greenhow, Belle became a courier for the Confederacy in Virginia. She was arrested, but quickly released. Next, she went to Front Royal, Virginia, where her aunt and uncle had a small hotel, which had been taken over by Union General Shields. Once while the officers were having a council in the dining room,

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[45] Markle, 163, 164.
[46] Fishel, 176.
[47] Belle Boyd, Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison, ed. Curtis Carroll Davis (London: Thomas Yoseloff Ltd., 1968), 133, 134.
[48] Stern, 96.

Belle lay down in the closet over the room where a hole had been bored in the floor. "[I] applied my ear to the hole, and found, to my great joy, I could distinctly hear the conversation that was passing below."[49] When the council was over, she sneaked out, rode fifteen miles to General Turner Ashby, reported her information, and returned home.[50] There is some question about this story though. In Belle's autobiography she relates how she wrote down what she heard in cipher,[51] but both Edwin Fishel and Philip Van Doren Stern argue whether she used cipher.[52] Fishel goes on to say that the whole story is lacking in details, which throws her account into some question.[53]

Belle treated spying like "an exciting child's game."[54] She did not have a particularly pretty face, but she did have a "tall and charming figure"[55] and used it to her advantage. Most of the information she got was from besotted Union soldiers she charmed. Belle Boyd went about her spying "as if the war were a light-hearted game of charades." And she lived like she was "fashioning her days

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[49] Boyd, 150.
[50] Katharine M. Jones, Heroines of Dixie (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1955), 172, 173.
[51] Boyd, 151.
[52] Fishel, 177, Stern, 96.
[53] Fishel, 177.
[54] Stern, 96.
[55] Jones, 173.

into the plot of a romantic story."[56] Instead of the usual female spy, trying to be inconspicuous and unremarkable to look at, Belle "played her own personality to the hilt," wearing bright colors and using dramatic methods to achieve her goal. As one "reluctant admirer" said, Belle had a "joyous recklessness."[57]

Belle's biggest chance to be of help to the Confederacy came on May 23, 1862.[58] A Confederate force under her hero, Stonewall Jackson, was not far from her Union-occupied town of Front Royal, Virginia, and from some of the Union soldiers she had learned of the Union's plan to destroy a bridge that would keep the Confederates from advancing on General Banks. She took off on foot, running across fields between the crossfire of both armies and climbing over fences. The stray bullets missed her, but had come close enough to go through parts of her clothes. As she got close to the Confederate line, she waved her sunbonnet in the air, and the soldiers took her signal to advance. She managed to get her message to Jackson, who after the battle sent her a personal note of thanks for her service to the South.[59]

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[56] Harnett T. Kane, Spies for the Blue and Gray (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1954), 129.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Jones, 173.
[59] Boyd, 167.

Fishel says that this event was probably the only truly important achievement during Belle's spying career.[60] He also argues that this escapade can scarcely be called espionage because of the overt manner she went about it. Moreover, after it occurred newspapers such as the *New York Herald* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* printed articles about the event, and the *New York Tribune* even got an interview with Belle, who wanted to rebut the accusations of other newspapers calling her a prostitute.[61] So, there is some debate on whether to actually call her a spy or not.

In July 1862 Belle was arrested again and held in Old Capitol Prison for a month. She met with General Jackson after she was released, who thanked her again. She recounts how "his fervent 'God bless you, my child,' will never be obliterated from [her] memory."[62] After her interview with Jackson she received a commission as a Captain and honorary aide-de-camp to Jackson. She says that "thenceforth I enjoyed the respect paid to an officer by soldiers."[63]

She continued her spying efforts in the Shenandoah Valley, being arrested in the summer of 1862 and sent to Baltimore for imprisonment. To show her loyalty, she waved a Confederate flag out the train window in every town she

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[60] Fishel 177.
[61] Fishel, 176.
[62] Boyd, 209.

passed through. Once she got to Baltimore, she "charmed" the prison warden into releasing her with only a warning and went right back to spying. She was then arrested four more times, but always managed to get out of serious imprisonment.[64] But she became "flamboyant to the point that she lost her true value to the Confederacy."[65] Her weakness was her "amateurishness," as she hardly ever used any code or cipher in her messages, and did not even try to disguise her handwriting.[66] Donald Markle says that her notoriety is not because of her success, which was "dramatic and marginal at best," but because of her "love of publicity and fame," which is something professional spies do not seek.[67]

At the end of July 1862 she was arrested and again imprisoned in Old Capitol Prison in Washington. Like Rose Greenhow, she showed her defiance of the Union by high decibel singing of "Dixie." She also revealed the location of Confederate safe houses to an escaping prisoner (who turned out to be a Union spy). Amazingly, she remained in

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[63] Boyd, 210.
[64] Markle, 157. It seems remarkable that she was arrested so many times and so easily released again. But during the war, there was a definite reluctance to deal harshly with women, and apparently Belle made good use of this reluctance in convincing her captors to release her time and again.
[65] Markle, 158.
[66] Stern, 96.
[67] Markle, 155.

prison until December of 1863, when she was sent back south in exchange for Union soldiers.

She had not retired yet though.[68] While on the blockade runner, *Greyhound*, headed to England on a courier mission, she was captured again and put on a Union ship back to America. Belle charmed a Union naval officer, Lt. Hardinge, and convinced him he should change sides in the war. Belle was deported to Canada, and Lt. Samuel Hardinge was put in prison for switching sides. From Canada Belle went to England where she wrote her autobiography. Lt. Hardinge was court-martialed and proceeded to find Belle in England where they were married in August of 1864. But the marriage did not last long because Belle convinced her new husband to return to America and work as a Confederate spy. He was captured and died in prison.[69]

After the war Belle became an actress, calling herself the "Cleopatra of the Secession," loving the attention she received. She married two more times during her life, dying in 1900 in Kilborn, Wisconsin.[70]

III.

[68] Markle, 157.
[69] Markle, 157, 158.
[70] Markle, 158.

The third of the women, Elizabeth Van Lew, spied for the Union from her mansion home in Richmond, Virginia. Markle calls her "the most successful spy," North or South,[71] in part because she was never arrested. Unfortunately, the extent of her service will never be known because in 1866, she requested the War Department to send her all their files of communication with her. They did, and she burned them for fear of what the Southern people would do if they learned the extent of her betrayal.[72] Though she kept a journal throughout the war, she was always afraid that she would be arrested and it would be found. In her journal, she wrote, "I always went to bed at night with anything dangerous on paper beside me so as to be able to destroy it in a moment."[73]

Elizabeth was described as "prim and angular, nervous in movement." She was in her forties during the war and an old maid. And in contrast to the charming, seductive tactics of her fellow spies, Rose and Belle, she used other measures to achieve her goals.[74] Strongly opposed to slavery and secession, she began by going to visit Union soldiers in prison and trying to see to their comfort. "How joyful was I," she confided to her journal, "to be put in

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[71] Markle, 179.
[72] Van Lew, 110.
[73] Van Lew, 25.

communications with what to me was most sacred - Federal soldiers in prison and in distress!"[75] And while visiting the soldiers she could also get information about Rebel plans. Once, when a number of prisoners escaped from Libby Prison through a tunnel, she hid some of them in her house until they could safely get away. And this while she had invited the new commander of Libby Prison to stay in her home until he and his family found a place.[76]

Living in Richmond, Elizabeth (code name "Babcock") could send messages on the strength of Richmond defenses, possible plans for evacuation of the city, lack of food and supplies, and the decay of morale in Richmond.[77] It seems she bribed clerks in the war and navy departments for military information such as troop and supply movements.[78] Also her contact with Union officers in prison gave her some information on Confederate forces. One man, Thomas McNiven, said that she "had bribed workers at the Richmond arsenal to sabotage munitions."[79] Another source of information was a black servant of hers, Mary Elizabeth Bowser. She had been sent North to be educated, and was now placed as a nanny and

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[74] Kane, 232.
[75] Van Lew, 35.
[76] Markle, 183, 184.
[77] William B. Feis, "Neutralizing the Valley: The Role of Military Intelligence in the Defeat of Jubal Early's Army of the Valley, 1864, 1865," Civil War History 39, no. 3, Sept. 1993: 205, 206.
[78] Fishel, 553.
[79] Van Lew, 110, 111.

waitress in the home of President Davis, thereby allowing her access to first-hand information.[80]

Once Elizabeth had information to send, she used her servants to get the messages out of Richmond, using the excuse of an out-of-town vegetable garden. "Not many people would poke into the soles of muddy brogans worn by an old colored man on a horse." And who would guess that in a basket of eggs there was one hollow egg with a coded message inside it?[81]

Because Elizabeth visited Union prisoners, along with the fact that she did not keep herself properly groomed, she was believed to not be "in total control of her right senses" and became known as "Crazy Bet."[82] So, she went along with her neighbors' suspicions. When she went out in public, she "mumbled and hummed to herself, head bent to one side, holding imaginary conversations." She let her hair become disheveled and wore old, ragged clothes.[83] Surely, someone so crazy was no threat.

Early in 1864 Elizabeth sent a message to General Benjamin Butler—whom she communicated with often—telling him that defenses in Richmond were susceptible to attack.[84] She

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[80] Markle, 183.
[81] Kane, 237.
[82] Markle, 181.
[83] Kane, 239.
[84] Feis, 205.

hoped that he would send a raiding party to free Union prisoners in Richmond who were having to live in horrible conditions and dying rapidly. Butler consulted with Secretary of War Stanton, and a plan was approved to send 3,500 cavalrymen under General Judson Kilpatrick and General Ulric Dahlgren. But the raid went badly, and Dahlgren was killed. Papers were supposedly found on his body, showing that he planned to burn Richmond and kill President Davis. In retaliation for this outrage his body was dug up from its shallow grave and taken into Richmond, where angry Southerners threw rocks at the coffin.[85] Elizabeth, in her journal, says "the heart of every loyal person was stirred to its depths by the outrages committed upon his inanimate body."[86] Finally, the body was buried secretly in Oakwood Cemetery, just outside of town.

Elizabeth, along with some other loyalists, resolved to find and remove the body. Thanks to two men who had seen the secret burial, they dug up the body, sneaked it through Confederate lines, and reburied him on a farm owned by one of the men involved.[87] Regarding the papers found on Dahlgren, Elizabeth questions in her journal their validity.

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[85] Van Lew, 14, 15.
[86] Van Lew, 69.
[87] Van Lew, 15, 16. It was only after Dahlgren's father requested the body returned to him that the Confederacy learned it had been stolen.

She says they were never publicly exhibited and a search for the papers failed.[88] She concludes that the papers were a fabrication of the Confederate government to enrage the Southern people.[89]

During heavy fighting in the first half of 1864 in Virginia, Elizabeth managed to get out quite a lot of information to General Grant and some to General Butler. She began to send Grant copies of the *Richmond Dispatch* wrapped around a rose, along with other information she had gathered. She also sent Butler a note in November of that year telling him that "torpedoes" (land mines) were being laid on the roads into Richmond and in front of the defenses.[90]

On February 4, 1865, Elizabeth sent a message that munitions had been sent south. The Union already knew that the Southern army was adding armaments to its southbound shipments, and, added to the message from Elizabeth, concluded that Richmond was being prepared for evacuation. This information is thought to have come from sources she

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After the war, Elizabeth revealed the burial place to the Dahlgren family so it could be removed and sent north.

[88] In regards to the search, she does not explain how she knows about this, only saying it was carried out by "those who had access to the different bureaus of the war office." It can only be assumed that the search was carried out by contacts she had made who were loyalists and who gave her other information during the war.

[89] Van Lew, 72, 73.

[90] Van Lew, 17.

claimed she had in the War Department.[91] Just before the Union entered the burning city of Richmond, there is a report of Elizabeth rummaging through the debris of the Confederate Capitol looking for bits of documents that the Union could use.[92]

During the war, Elizabeth had depleted most of her funds running her spy operation and helping Union soldiers. By the end of the war she had very little money left and was hated by most of her Richmond neighbors for going against the Southern Cause.[93] When Ulysses Grant was elected President, he appointed her postmaster of Richmond. She held the position throughout his two terms. Before Grant left office he wrote on her behalf to the new President-elect Hayes, saying that she was appointed "from a knowledge of entire loyalty during the Rebellion and her service to the Cause."[94] Hayes did not take the recommendation though. Another testament to her value to the Union came from General Sharpe, Grant's intelligence officer. He said,

> For a long, long time she represented all that was left of the power of the U.S. government in Richmond...The greater portion of our intelligence in 1864-65 in its collection and in good measure in its transmission we owed to the intelligence and devotion of Elizabeth Van Lew.[95]

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[91] Fishel, 554.
[92] Markle, 185.
[93] Kane, 231.
[94] Markle, 185.
[95] Markle, 180.

He even proposed to General Cyrus Ballou Comstock, Grant's aide-de-camp, that Congress be asked to allocate $15,000 to the Van Lew family in thanks for their service.[96]

Elizabeth Van Lew died on September 25, 1900, so hated that no one attended her funeral except relatives of Union soldiers she had helped. Some of these grateful people who were from Boston[97] had a gravestone placed on her burial site. The plaque that was placed on the stone read:

> She risked everything that is dear to man—friends, fortune, comfort, health, life itself, all for one absorbing desire of her heart—that slavery might be abolished and the Union preserved.[98]

IV.

All three women had strong convictions about which side was right during the war. And all three attempted to be of service to their side. While there is debate on the extent of their contribution, there is no doubt about each woman's dedication. It is difficult to know from their personal accounts what is true and what is exaggeration, but the accounts give a good idea of how each woman viewed the war and the service they felt they were doing.

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[96] Van Lew, 107.
[97] During the war Elizabeth befriended Colonel Paul Revere, the great-grandson of the Revolutionary War hero, who was being held in Harwood prison. She brought him food and books, and he wrote about her kindness to his family. He was later exchanged, but was killed in the Battle of Gettysburg. His family was involved in purchasing her gravestone in gratitude for her kindness to him. Van Lew, 9, 22.
[98] Van Lew, 3.

Rose Greenhow was in an advantageous position in Washington to gather much information for her beloved South, but she compromised her usefulness through her open partisanship. Even in prison she managed to gather and communicate information, but once she was sent away from Washington she lost her ability to be of service as a spy. One can only speculate how much more she could have done to help the South if she had been a more discreet spy.

Belle Boyd used her charms with the soldiers to gather information and escape imprisonment, but she also sought adventure and fame, rendering herself less useful a spy than others more discreet. She truly loved the South and wanted it to be victorious, but she was only a young girl at the time and did not have the experience or knowledge to realize her full potential.

Elizabeth Van Lew took advantage of her Richmond neighbors' suspicions about her sanity and was never arrested. She used her own money and time to help Union soldiers in prison, but much information about her activities is unknown because she destroyed her correspondence. Even her journal, for a time buried, only survived in part. When Elizabeth, on her deathbed in 1900, asked to see her journal, she was crestfallen, exclaiming,

"Oh, that is not half."[99] But the evidence that does exist shows she did a lot in her service to the Union, and likely wished she had been able to do more.

The experience of women spies during the war differed in many ways from their male counterparts. Spying was more dangerous for men since the authorities were more reluctant to hang or even imprison women spies, as evidenced by the numerous times Belle Boyd was captured only to be released soon after. Also women had to do most of their spying in cities and towns where troops were stationed or where they had access to government information. Men did more actual infiltration of army units, finding positions such as soldiers, couriers, and government clerks. One male spy for the Union, Timothy Webster, was placed by Pinkerton among Baltimore secessionists and became a courier between Richmond and Baltimore. In this capacity, he was able to freely move around Richmond and among Confederate troops on the field, gathering much information about munitions and troop strength and placement.[100] But women could more easily talk with enemy soldiers without raising suspicions. Many of them used their femininity to loosen the tongues of infatuated young soldiers. Especially at the beginning of the war, women were not thought to be much of a threat,

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[99] Van Lew, 22.

facilitating their work. But even though in some ways women seemed to have had an easier time spying than men, there was still danger, because no one knew if the authorities would decide to start hanging women spies along with the men, and many women did spend time in prison for their spying. Both Rose Greenhow and Belle Boyd relied primarily on their feminine charm to gain information, while Elizabeth Van Lew used more covert methods.

All three women, though with varying degrees of success, had the courage to brave danger in defense of what they believed to be right. They could not defend their side by becoming soldiers, so they found another avenue to show their patriotic fervor. Whatever else can be said of these three women, each gave her heart and soul for the cause she believed in.

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[100] Fishel, 89, 90.

Bibliographical Essay

Abundant sources exist for researching this topic. Rose Greenhow and Belle Boyd both wrote autobiographies I could use for a primary source, and Elizabeth Van Lew had a journal she kept during the war. As well, there were quite a few books with secondary information about the exploits of the women and differing interpretations of their contributions.

Rose Greenhow's autobiography, *My Imprisonment and the First Year of Abolition Rule at Washington*, was not as useful as I had hoped. As the title suggests, the book is largely about the conditions in Washington during the war and her imprisonment, first in her home and then at Old Capitol. Her spying efforts are mentioned almost in passing, not giving much in-depth information about it. I was able to use some information from the book, but not about her actual spying.

The main book I used for Rose Greenhow was *Rebel Rose* by Ishbel Ross. It was written by a twentieth century author, but did have a lot of primary source excerpts. It gave a very detailed picture of her life, much more than I could incorporate into a paper of this size.

The books *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War* by Donald Markle, *Spies of the Confederacy* by John Bakeless, *Secret Missions of the Civil War* by Philip Van Doren Stern, and *Spies for the Blue and Gray* by Harnett Kane are about espionage during the Civil War in general and many different spies, but gave a good overview of the women I was researching and made good secondary sources.

Belle Boyd's autobiography *In Camp and Prison* was useful in getting a sense of Belle herself and how she viewed things, but it tended to be quite dramatic at times, so I was not sure how reliable it was. She loved adventure and publicity, so it is very possible that she exaggerated her exploits. But it was a good primary source.

For Elizabeth Van Lew I used a book containing the remains of her journal, *A Yankee Spy in Richmond*. Before her actual journal pages is an introduction by the editor giving his own account of her life and explaining how her journal is not complete. Parts of it were destroyed from being buried for a time, and other pages were covered in ink blots, which made deciphering it practically impossible. Over seven hundred pages are believed to have been in the original, but only about four hundred remain. But again, this was a useful primary source, giving me a look into her

personal thoughts and feelings on the war and her spying for the North.

I did not find many useful periodical articles that I could use. And there is only one I cite in this paper. William Feis's "Neutralizing the Valley" in *Civil War History* (1993) was useful because it placed Elizabeth Van Lew's work as a spy in Richmond in the bigger context of military intelligence and its importance to the war effort.

I also made use of the *New York Times* regarding Rose Greenhow. Several times she was discussed briefly from when she was first arrested to when she was sent back south. The *Official Records* was useful as a primary source regarding correspondence from North and South, such as a letter asking what to do with Belle Boyd after she had been captured and a report of some information Rose Greenhow managed to get out even though she was a prisoner in her home at the time.

The last important source that I made use of was *The Secret War for the Union* by Edwin Fishel. This source was the most recent of the ones I used (1996) and took some major deviations in opinion from the older sources. My other sources all pretty much agreed that Rose Greenhow's information during First Manassas was very timely and useful. Fishel questions this though, suggesting that the Confederacy already knew the information Rose sent.

Regarding Belle Boyd, most of the sources seemed to agree that her fame was not due to incredible success as a spy, but Fishel went farther, questioning more closely some of the details of her exploits. So this book served a very useful purpose, not only giving me the most recent view on the subject, but also giving me conflicting information from what I had already found and making me question more myself.

I am sure many other useful sources exist. I was grateful to the three women for all writing either an autobiography or a journal of their experiences that I could use in getting to know them. When I started researching I knew very little about any of them, especially Elizabeth Van Lew. But now I feel that I know quite a bit about them and am interested in researching further for my own benefit.