THE SIGNAL & THE NOISE:
Gettysburg and the Power of Information

The Men Who Helped Win the Civil War
George H. Sharpe

Appointed intelligence chief of the Army of the Potomac on February 11, 1863, Colonel Sharpe made decisive contributions to the Union victory in the American Civil War.

- Born in upstate New York in 1828, Sharpe graduated from Rutgers College in 1847
- He studied law at Yale and became a noted attorney in New York City during the 1850s
- Sharpe also had some brief diplomatic experience, before joining the Union army in 1861 as a captain in a New York regiment
Gen. Hooker Reorganizes Army of Potomac

“I have heard, in such way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship.”

--Abraham Lincoln to Joseph Hooker, January 26, 1863

The Union’s troubled main fighting force went through two commanders before Fighting Joe Hooker took over in early 1863 and immediately began instituting reforms, including for better intelligence gathering.
“The BMI was a rare example of a business-like staff section created solely for the collection and dissemination of intelligence.”

--US Army, Military Intelligence Hall of Fame induction, 2013
PART 1: FINDING INFORMATION
What’s the right way to gather information?

Allan Pinkerton and Abraham Lincoln, October 1862
Pioneering the All-Source Method

Nine Types of BMI Sources

• Espionage
• Scouting
• Interrogation

• Cavalry reconnaissance
• Balloons
• Signal Corps observation
• Flag-signal intercepts
• Southern newspapers
• Telegraphed reports

--Edwin Fishel

Contrabands Crossing Rappahannock, August 19, 1862
Seeing Slaves, Hearing People

Detail images from Timothy O’Sullivan’s August 1862 photograph near Fredericksburg, Virginia
“Forever Free”: New Allies & Fresh Recruits

Two sides of the type of emancipation announcement which Union officers often shared with liberated slaves after 1863

Harriet Tubman (1823–1913) nurse, spy and scout
PART 2: ANALYZING INFORMATION

How can you distinguish signal from noise?

Dickinson College president Herman Johnson dismissing reports of Confederate threats to Pennsylvania in 1861 and 1862

Emergency broadside, June 16, 1863
Babcock and the Order-of-Battle Charts

Estimations of Army of Northern Virginia troop strength prepared by John Babcock, April 28, 1863
“...an order from General Lee was very lately read to the troops announcing a campaign of long marches & hard fighting in a part of the country where they would have no railroad transportation.”

--Col. George H. Sharpe reporting to Gen. Joseph Hooker, May 27, 1863
Mapping Gettysburg, late at night, Day One

Captain William H. Paine’s map of Gettysburg, July 2, 1863
PART 3: PRESENTING INFORMATION

How can you turn knowledge into action?

General Meade’s Council of War, July 2, 1863
Longstreet’s Assault on Day Two

“Repulse of Longstreet’s Assault” by James Walker (1876)

1,360 prisoners
Meade’s Headquarters

Lydia Leister’s farmhouse (then and now), used as Gen. Meade’s headquarters during the Battle of Gettysburg

“Prisoners have been taken today, and last evening, from every brigade in Lee’s Army excepting the four brigades of Pickett’s Division…Pickett’s division has come up and is now in bivouac, and will be ready to go into action fresh tomorrow morning.”

--Col. George H. Sharpe to Gen. George Meade, July 2, 1863
Legacy of George H. Sharpe

- Sharpe and his BMI unit proved indispensable to Gen. Ulysses Grant during the 1864-65 campaigns against Lee in Virginia.

- After the Civil War, Sharpe helped pursue Lincoln assassination conspirator John Surratt and served as the U.S. marshal in New York who helped convict the notorious Boss Tweed of corruption.

- Sharpe then continued his career in New York law and politics before his death in 1900.