

STUDIES

IN INTELLIGENCE | Vol. 68, No. 4 (December 2024)

Intelligence in Public Media

Special Edition



The Unvanquished: The Untold Story of Lincoln's Special Forces, the Manhunt for Mosby's Rangers, and the Shadow War That Forged America's Special Forces

By Patrick K. O'Donnell

(Atlantic Monthly Press, 2024), 410 pages, index.

Reviewed by David A. Welker

Author of 13 books focusing mostly on special forces, Patrick O'Donnell's latest volume turns to considering irregular forces of the American Civil War. A topic of considerable interest to intelligence officers who want to know just how far US intelligence has come in 150 years, a comprehensive, accurate, accessible single volume on this issue has long been wanted. Although its subtitle suggests this might be the volume, *The Unvanquished* falls short of these ambitious promises.

Organized into three parts, the book's first part recounts the running competition between the Union Jessie and Blazer Scouts and Mosby's Confederate Rangers that extended throughout much of the war in Northern Virginia. Offering many first-hand accounts, the author explores not only these units' formation and actions, but also how and why the Union played catch-up in creating irregular forces. The second major section considers the Confederate Secret Service's operations, chiefly those in the Shenandoah Valley, where its interests and mission most clearly overlapped with Mosby's irregular troops and their Federal counterparts. The closing section considers the rise of Union irregular forces toward the war's end, as Gen. Phillip Sheridan builds the shattered remains of earlier Union scout units into his

own irregular force during his late-war operations that secured the Shenandoah Valley before joining Grant's drive to finish off Lee's Army of Northern Virginia to end the war. This section interestingly extends to consider these irregular troops' post-war actions, particularly offering a rare look at the US response to France's 1866 political and military maneuvering in Mexico that threatened the wounded, recovering reunited nation.

There certainly are some bright spots to recommend the book. O'Donnell spends much of his work telling exciting, fast-paced stories of derring-do by Civil War scouts and rangers, who frequently risked life and limb to gather intelligence by penetrating deep behind enemy lines in disguise, risking execution as spies if discovered. The author has a dramatic flair for such storytelling, which perhaps derives from his own experiences accompanying today's US Special Forces into combat zones. Skillfully weaving together participants' own postwar writings, these passages have readers riding along with these courageous soldiers, and while telling only their own first-hand accounts, O'Donnell adds context that brings this material to vivid life. Pulling these disparate accounts into one volume and weaving them nicely within a comprehensible narrative is a genuine contribution.

The volume first stumbles, however, in frequently stretching to make Civil War scouts and rangers fit modern special forces concepts as "Lincoln's special forces." Despite some general overlapping actions—collecting intelligence, harassing enemies behind lines, etc.—today's US Special Forces' mission and role derives mostly from two 20th century world wars, which makes the frequent comparisons to concepts and applications unknown in the 1860s inaccurate and stilted. Another shortcoming is in trying to make too much of the contributions of these scouts and rangers. The truth is that unlike today, irregular forces in the Civil War were odd men out, playing a periodically useful role but one that the top generals on both sides didn't fully understand or appreciate, leaving irregular troops a "sideshow of the main show." Examples of this include claims that a Jessie Scout's "information gleaned while posing as a Confederate no doubt had a role in the Battle for Fort Donelson," accepting unquestioned Mosby's postwar claim to have launched the 1862 Battle of Cedar Mountain, asserting that General William Averell's 1863 "raid may well have contributed to breaking Longstreet's siege of Knoxville," and many more.

Similarly, the book spends considerable time on the plot to capture or kill President Lincoln, weaving throughout a distracting story of Confederate Secret Service operations that is but thinly connected to Mosby's Rangers or any other irregular units. The revealed point of this diversion is to show that Confederate President Davis and other Richmond officials were behind the plot but, like previous generations of those inclined to this view, in the end lack of documentation and data leads to unsupported accusations and nothing truly new. Such "gilding the lily"—making a good story, better—reflects the book's overall misplaced nature. Rather than being a scholarly work of history, *The Unvanquished* would work better as popular history, meant not to break new historical ground but rather to inform while entertaining.

Similarly, despite the subtitle's promises, the book notably and oddly omits any mention of the Union's Bureau of Military Information, its head Colonel George Sharpe, or the scouts operating under him, commanded by Captain John McEntee. Their exploits were no less daring than those of the units included and arguably had the greatest impact of any irregular troops on the war's course, so no study of Civil War irregular forces would be complete without them.

Lt. Gen. Philip Sheridan, whose experience with scouts later in the war developed his appreciation for the emerging value of irregular troops, wrote that the scouts "kept me constantly informed of the movements of the enemy and brought in prisoners from brigadier-generals down. The information gained through [them] was invaluable." Although the book that fully examines these irregular forces has yet to be written, *The Unvanquished* provides interested readers a lively, engaging way to learn of Civil War scouts and rangers' exciting personal stories. ■