

Ralph Van Deman



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It is not for nothing that Ralph Van Deman is remembered as the “Father of American Military Intelligence.” To be named the father of anything, you must have a vision, and a willingness to take chances to achieve that goal. On the eve of America’s entry into World War I, Van Deman was a 51-year-old Army colonel who had spent most of his career learning about the potential enemies of the United States.

The scholar from Delaware, Ohio, received his commission as a second lieutenant of infantry in 1891 after first graduating from Harvard, attending law school, and enrolling in medical school at Ohio’s Miami University. He was allowed to finish up his medical education, which he did in 1893. After service with his regiment, he attended Fort Leavenworth’s U.S. Infantry and Cavalry School in early 1895. There he would encounter on the faculty a man who had already made a reputation for reforming Army professional education and a military thinker who paid much attention to the importance of intelligence. He was Arthur L. Wagner who became head of the War Department’s Military Information Division in 1896.

In June 1897 Van Deman followed Wagner to Washington to work for him. In the MID he compiled information on the military capabilities of Spain in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. With hostilities at an end, he went to Cuba and Puerto Rico in December 1898 to collect data for his maps. He was reassigned to the Philippines in April 1899 as an aide to Brig. Gen. Robert Patterson Hughes in the Vasayan District for two years before being promoted to captain and moving to the Manila-based Bureau of Insurgent Records, where he helped transform it into the Philippine Military Information Division. It involved him for the first time in counterintelligence work, for which he had not only an aptitude but a fascination that would last a lifetime.

Van Deman said the Insurgent Records section “contained very valuable information concerning insurgent activities.” He went on to describe the work of the other sections of the Philippine MID.

...The Division also contained a map section and was supplied with two very efficient Filipino draftsmen [and] several clerks detailed from the enlisted personnel of the Army. In addition it was provided with several undercover agents all of whom were Filipinos with the exception of one American. ...Information officers were also ordered appointed by each commander of a separate post in the Philippine Islands of which there were at that time some 450. These post information officers were required to submit a sketch map covering the territory around their post for a distance of at least ten miles with a report of the topography and the important natives living in their vicinity. These maps were retraced in the Manila office and blue printed and made available to the authorities, military and civilian, who desired them. ...During 1902...the Military Information Division of the Philippines was made a branch of the Military Information Division of the Adjutant General’s Office of the Army.¹

Serving in the Philippines under the Governor General, Maj. Gen. Arthur MacArthur, from 1901 to 1902, he ran a network of undercover agents that kept MacArthur informed of insurgent activities and managed to foil a plot to take over the capitol and assassinate the governor general.

When Van Deman returned to the U.S. in the fall of 1902, he became the aide to the Commanding General, Department of California, and then went to Fairbault, Minnesota, to command Company B, 22d Infantry. In 1904 he was one of the select group of nine officers that were chosen for the first class of the Army War College.

Another was the promising John J. Pershing. Upon graduation, he and Capt. Alexander Coxe, another officer with an intelligence background who would become Van Deman's right-hand man in 1917 and 1918, were sent on a secret mission to China to reconnoiter and map lines of communication around Peking. It was 1906 and Van Deman began forming his suspicions of Japanese intentions toward China. He returned to Washington in 1907 to take up duties as the Chief of the Mapping Section in the Second Division of the new general staff. He stayed in that job until he was reassigned to the Philippines in 1910. There he resumed his project to map Chinese rail lines, roads and rivers until Japanese protests to the Chinese government about his activities led to his expulsion.

Van Deman had reason to rejoice in 1903 when the U.S. Army reorganized its highest echelons, creating a General Staff modeled after the European armies. The Military Information Division was made one of the three functional elements of the new General Staff. For the first time in the U.S. Army, intelligence was recognized as a discipline on a par with operations and logistics, at least organizationally. But MI's time in the sun was to be short lived. In 1908 the Second Division [Military Information] was moved to new quarters at Washington Barracks [Fort Leslie J. McNair] and soon merged with the Third Division [Army War College] of the general staff. There it would gradually lose its distinct identity.

Back in the United States in 1912, he taught mapping in the 21st Infantry at Vancouver Barracks, Washington, then became an Inspector General with the Second Division, following them to Texas for maneuvers in 1914.

He began working at the War College Division in July 1915, now a major. He found that his special talents were not in much demand in the organization of the Army. Worse, there was a general apathy about intelligence-gathering. The intelligence function was treated like a poor relative, shunted aside and turned into a committee within the Army War College. Van Deman lamented this relegation of intelligence to an insignificant committee. "Everyone who is familiar with the workings of large committees can realize what happened. ...From the time of the consolidation, no military intelligence work was accomplished either in the United States or abroad except the reports of the military attaches continued to be received and filed in the War College files."² Van Deman wrote a memo about this state of affairs, but it fell on deaf ears. As part of his efforts to raise the consciousness of War Department leadership about the importance of intelligence, he wrote brief histories detailing the modest beginnings in 1885, its rise in 1903 and fall in subsequent years of a U.S. Army intelligence organization.

As the only officer in the War College Division who had any background in intelligence, Van Deman had several opportunities to mingle with the intelligence officers of foreign armies. Their strides in intelligence work, along with his own experiences, convinced him that the U.S. Army must have a coordinated intelligence apparatus if it were to avoid calamitous defeats in the near future. By now it was obvious that the United States could not avoid becoming involved in the war in Europe. But Van Deman was seemingly alone in his conviction. When he briefed General Hugh Scott about his plans, he was told that our allies would provide all the intelligence we would need about our German adversaries. The Army Chief of Staff gave the colonel strict orders not to take the matter any further. Scott did not share his vision.

Van Deman explained, "The...Chief of Staff was a fine officer.... However, he apparently knew nothing whatever about the vital importance of an intelligence service or how impossible it was to carry on a war without the necessary information concerning the enemy organization and efficient service for the discovery and elimination of spies and saboteurs within our own country and armed forces.

Unfortunately, this could also be said concerning many of the higher officers of the Army at that time.... [I] felt responsible that a suitable organization for intelligence work be created and put to work at the earliest possible moment. ...[I] decided to employ other means to accomplish the objective if possible.”³

Chance intervened. A unique opportunity presented itself when Van Deman was assigned as escort officer for a visiting authoress with connections in the War Department. She was familiar with British intelligence efforts and was surprised that her country did not have a similar level of sophistication. She promised Van Deman that she would bring it up when she next met with the Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker.

Not only did he choose to seize that opportunity, but made his own efforts to gain the ears of those who could help him accomplish his goals. He knew that the Secretary of War and D.C. police chief breakfasted daily at a certain club and he contrived to have the chief, a colleague, mention the lack of a security organization to the secretary.

In this way Van Deman was able to get an audience with the Secretary of War to present his case. He convinced the upper echelons of the War Department to accept his design of an intelligence department which would assure a quantum improvement of both intelligence and counterintelligence for U.S. forces in World War I, and provide a foundation for future development.

Missing in the Van Deman memoir account of this incident is the pivotal role played by Colonel Claude Dansey, his friend and ally in the British Security Service who interceded at high levels of his own government which in turn put the idea for a military intelligence organization in the head of Colonel Edward M. House, a member of an American liaison mission to Britain and one of President Wilson’s influential advisors.⁴

As the result of Van Deman’s unceasing advocacy, a Military Intelligence Section, War College Division, War Department General Staff, came into being on 3 May 1917 with Van Deman at its head. He credited his longtime friend and colleague Alexander Coxe, the first officer detailed to the new organization, with much of the work accomplished by the Military Intelligence Section. By war’s end, the Military Intelligence Division had grown to 282 officers and 1,159 civilians, most of them specialists called from civilian life.

His efforts to build and then operate the first national intelligence service was prodigious. First he had to outline just what form the organization would follow and what its functions would be. His familiarity with British Army intelligence gave him models. The organization and functions of Van Deman’s MI Division testify to his farsightedness and influence on the intelligence missions and doctrine of modern times. He divided his work into positive and negative (counterintelligence) intelligence. He assumed responsibility for administration (MI-1), information (MI-2), military attaches (MI-5), translation (MI-6), maps and photographs (MI-7), codes and ciphers (MI-8), and combat intelligence instruction (MI-9). Under the category of negative intelligence, Van Deman’s office oversaw the Army Section (counterespionage) (MI-3), foreign influence (counterespionage within the civilian community) (MI-4), news (censorship) (MI-10), travel (passport and port control) (MI-11), and fraud (MI-13).

Fortunately, he had the foresight to include emergency intelligence appropriations in the budget submitted to Congress for the previous fiscal year so that money would be available on start up. Before he was authorized to establish the MID, he had begun collecting intelligence through his liaison with the intelligence collecting bureaus of the State Department, Department of Justice and other agencies within the government. To man the organization, he relied

mainly upon experienced civilians who he had the authority to commission in the National Army. One of those civilians was Herbert O. Yardley, a code clerk with the State Department who Van Deman made a first lieutenant and put in charge of codes and ciphers, his MI-8 section.

It immediately became apparent that the MID had to focus on two fronts, the home front and operations in Europe. In the United States there was the real danger of sabotage and subversion by enemy agents or German sympathizers. Without the manpower to field such a large counterintelligence force as would be needed to cover the nation, he relied on private patriotic groups which he organized into an umbrella organization called the American Protective League. He provided security in government offices, defense plants, seaports, and other sensitive installations. He put together a field organization of MID in eight cities which employed mobilized civilian policemen to perform such duties as security investigations. The only German spy apprehended by Van Deman's MID agents on American soil during the war was Pablo Waberski, picked up in Nogales, Arizona, after he crossed into the U.S.

His MID would collect information from military attaches and allied governments and disseminate it immediately to the War Department staff and the American Expeditionary Force in France. In addition to funneling whatever operational intelligence he could get to the AEF G2, Colonel Dennis Nolan, he supported the American Expeditionary Force by recruiting 50 sergeants who could speak French and who had police training. The resultant force was known as the Corps of Intelligence Police, a forerunner of the Counter Intelligence Corps.

He put into place a national level intelligence organization that could support both domestic and tactical intelligence requirements in a matter of months.

Van Deman went to France in 1918 to work for Nolan. When Van Deman was reassigned to France, he was replaced by a reserve officer, Brig. Gen. Marlborough Churchill, who would describe Van Deman's work in organizing the section. He wrote in 1918, "in spite of his modest description of the work here, ...he has performed miracles in building up an intelligence service which is as good as anything which I saw in England or in France. As time goes on and American imagination and originality begins to get in its work, I am sure that we shall have a better intelligence service than anybody else. ...I am willing to do everything that is humanly possible to 'carry on' in his absence, but it is impossible for an amateur, no matter how well intentioned, to equal the work of a professional like Van Deman."⁵

Marc Powe, military intelligence officer and historian, summed up those formative years for Army intelligence:

For today's Military Intelligence Branch, this period was crucial. If it was born in the early days of the Republic, it only reached maturity in World War I. If Van Deman was not the father of the branch, he certainly was its godfather. The establishment of intelligence officers as equal members on all staffs, the recognition of a need for professional intelligence men, the birth of the Counter Intelligence Police and MI-8 and the outstanding performance of duty by the MI men ensured their reputation. Thereafter, the Army always provided for an intelligence effort (even though it was often less than completely effective). The creation of the MI Branch, delayed for 40 years, was the inevitable fruit of the work done by Van Deman, Churchill and Nolan.⁶

After overseeing security at the Paris Peace Commission, he returned to Washington in August 1919 to briefly serve as Deputy chief of the Military Intelligence Division. Then in March 1920 he was back on duty in the infantry and off for another tour to the Philip-

piners to command the 31st Infantry. His time overseas would include three months of detached service with the British Army in India. Back in the U.S. he began a series of tours with the National Guard. He worked in the Washington headquarters of the Militia Bureau, then served as an instructor with the 159th Infantry Brigade in Berkeley, California. As a brigadier general in 1927 he commanded the 6th Infantry Brigade at Fort Rosecrans in San Diego, California. Promoted to major general in May 1929, he commanded the 3d Infantry Division at Fort Lewis, Washington, in May 1929. He retired in September 1929 with 38 years of service.

In California he used the contacts he had established in World War I in the American Protective League to privately compile files on suspected subversives and foreign agents. In World War II he acted as a consultant on intelligence matters for the Assistant Chief of Staff, G2, War Department, for which he received a Legion of Merit. On 22 January 1952, at the age of 87, he died in his home in San Diego.⁷

Van Deman never stopped voicing his belief in the value of a military intelligence corps within the U.S. Army. In the final paragraph of his memoirs dated 8 April 1949, he made one last plea which he felt it was his duty to call "to the attention of all of the intelligence officers." He said that "After being closely associated with Military Intelligence matters over a period of some fifty-five years," he believed "that the Army will never have a really efficient intelligence service until it is made into what is known as a *career* service. In other words, until the officers who have proved themselves to be competent and efficient intelligence officers are allowed and encouraged to make military intelligence their army career. This should...only apply to the higher ranking intelligence officers, since the efficiency of all intelligence officers must be based on the thoroughness of their training in the military service and this requires years of both study and actual experience."⁸

He is recognized as the "Father of American Military Intelligence" for his largely single-handed role in forging a Military Intelligence Division on the eve of World War I. Like all human endeavor, it was a close thing. In bypassing his superior, General Scott, to bring his case to the top, he had to make a difficult decision. In going over the head of the Chief of Staff, he was violating the cherished principle of the chain of command, risking censure and the end of his career. Was his vision worth this chance? Van Deman thought the importance of intelligence far outweighed any personal considerations. He took the chance and succeeded. Had he failed, many more Americans would have died in France, and he would have sunken quickly in the mire of obscurity. Fortunately for the U.S. Army, the forcefulness of an idea, the value of which was inescapable, carried the day.

Notes

1. Van Deman Memoirs, typescript of a memorandum prepared by Maj. Gen. Van Deman in 1949 on file in the U.S. Army Intelligence Center and Fort Huachuca library, p. 9-10, 15.
2. Van Deman Memoirs, pp. 25-6.
3. Van Deman Memoirs, p. 34.
4. O'Toole, G. J. A., *Honorable Treachery: A History of U.S. Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA*, Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1991, p. 254.
5. Letter from M. Churchill to Colonel Dennis El Nolan, 4 June 1918, included in Van Deman memoirs.

6. Powe, Marc B., "American Military Intelligence Comes of Age: A Sketch of a Man and His Times," *Military Review*, December 1975, p. 28.

7. For most of the biographical information, I have relied upon: Powe, Marc B., "American Military Intelligence Comes of Age: A Sketch of a Man and His Times," *Military Review*, December 1975.

8. Van Deman Memoirs.