



Lincoln's Informer: Charles A. Dana and the Inside Story of the Union War

by Carl J. Guarneri.

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The *New York Tribune* had become the most important American newspaper by the start of the Civil War. Under the editorship of Horace Greeley, its daily edition sold in New York and a weekly edition was mailed around the country. But Greeley had competition for running the *Tribune* from managing editor Charles Anderson Dana. While Greeley was often traveling around the country, Dana was overseeing a corps of reporters and setting the direction of the editorial opinion page that was so vital to the entire operation. Dana, educated (briefly) at Harvard, was a member of the Brook Farm transcendentalists community and a chronicler of the 1848 revolutions in Europe. His brilliant hiring and mentoring of political reporters on the war seemed always to put the *Tribune* a step ahead of its main rival, James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*, in deciphering what the Abraham Lincoln administration and the military would do next.¹

Greeley, too, was often at loggerheads with Dana, a strong abolitionist who spearheaded the *Tribune's* "Onward to Richmond" editorial campaign early in the war, urging President Lincoln and the Union Army to attack the Confederates and put a quick end to the conflict. Dana had injured the *Tribune's* reputation after the First Battle of Bull Run with an editorial demanding that Lincoln make major changes in his cabinet. His paper's weekly circulation dropped by twenty-six thousand readers. Dana cared less about covering battle results than about how politicians, especially Lincoln, interpreted the news and maintained public support for the Union war effort. Dana shrewdly evaded wartime censors by relying less on the telegraph than did the rival *New York Herald*. And, too, the *Tribune* had more accurate reporting of battles. For example, it scooped the *Herald* in telling the North that First Bull Run had devolved into a rout as Union soldiers scurried home to Washington.

Like many others, Dana was particularly frustrated in the first year of the war by the dilatory leadership of Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan. Greeley, initially content to let the hotheaded Southerners leave the Union (a position Dana abhorred), thought Dana's aggressiveness was out of line and that it was costing the newspaper both readers and advertisers. Accordingly, he sacked him in early 1862, with six months' severance pay. In fact, Greeley and Dana's successful efforts to get inside information was *boosting* circulation figures. Yet, suddenly, the man running the day-to-day operations of the nation's top newspaper was gone.

In *Lincoln's Informant*, historian Carl Guarneri (St. Mary's College of California) covers all of this territory well, but the book's real attraction is its account of what Dana did after his time at the *Tribune*. Instead of taking a job with another newspaper (there were several suitors), he went to work for the new Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, and therefore indirectly for Lincoln himself. Hence, his book's title. At first, Stanton gave Dana a minor role as an investigator with the War Department, where he dealt with petty crimes and frauds committed by quartermasters and contractors. Lincoln

1. Though Dana had not been a Lincoln man during the nominating convention of 1860, preferring Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, he and Greeley shared a disdain for William Seward.

was pleased with Dana's intelligence work utilizing skills he had honed as a veteran journalist. In spring 1863, Dana reported to Stanton and Lincoln about cotton trading by military officials along the Mississippi. This prompted the president to revoke trading privileges in occupied Confederate territory.

When word reached Washington that Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant might have a drinking problem, raising questions about his competence to take Vicksburg, Stanton made Dana a special commissioner and sent him to investigate in April 1863. Dana's approach was to go native as a participant-observer in Grant's camp. The general thought Dana was there to investigate the poor pay system that delivered money to soldiers far too slowly. The troops, for their part, resented having anybody from the national capital spying on them. One artillery chief wanted to toss Dana into the Mississippi. Grant, however, was savvy and ordered his men to give Dana any information he wanted. He also had Dana sleep in a tent next to his own. The former journalist soon came to befriend Grant, whom he found to be confident, modest, and honest. He did discover that Grant drank, especially when he grew bored during lulls in the action, but he reassured the president and war secretary that they could trust the general.

Lincoln was much relieved, since Grant, unlike McClellan, not only liked to take on the Confederates, but tended to win when he did. Dana eventually persuaded Lincoln to put Grant in charge of all Union forces in the West. The general grew to trust the former *Tribune* editor's view of the Vicksburg operation, and Dana provided Stanton and Lincoln with intelligence on it. While in Mississippi, he also met William T. Sherman, who quickly informed him that he despised the press. But Dana's lasting impression was of Grant's humility and accessibility. He reports about a night in spring 1863 when Grant slept in the grass of a plantation, using his saddle for a pillow. George Meade's victory over Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg and Grant's at Vicksburg gave the North much needed positive war news. Dana played a key role as intelligence officer in the latter, Guarneri notes, because Lincoln and Stanton "were often in the dark about the realities at the front" (154).

Guarneri traces Dana's intelligence work through the end of the war, when he restarted his journalism career as editor of the *Chicago Republican* in 1865. His forte was providing timely, accurate information—the new model of journalism that the war helped form. The *Republican* surged past Wilbur F. Storey's *Chicago Times* to the second spot in the city's circulation wars behind the *Tribune*. As Guarneri notes, Dana came to support Grant for president as Andrew Johnson faded from public favor. He also co-authored Grant's campaign biography.

Eventually, Dana returned to New York as editor of the *Sun*, where he favored exposés and sensationalist pieces. He fell out with Grant for refusing to appoint him as New York customs collector, a federal post. The *Sun* then crusaded against government corruption, including the Crédit Mobilier scandal. Though Grant claimed he was the target of unparalleled press criticism, Lincoln experienced far worse. The *New York Times* began to call the *Sun* editor "Charles Assassin Dana" for his withering commentary on the Grant administration (395). Dana also was seen as a traitor for siding with the Democrats in the postwar years; but this was no different from Greeley, who challenged Grant in the 1872 presidential election as a Democrat. Toward the end of Dana's life, he granted a series of interviews to Ida Tarbell about his Civil War experiences. *McClure's* magazine published these as Dana's memoirs with mentioning Tarbell's authorship.

Carl Guarneri's new book clarifies the close ties between journalism and political and military power, bridging the gap between the partisan journalism of the antebellum era and the new journalism of the century's closing decades. This exemplary biography of a remarkable Civil War-era journalist should be carefully pondered by all serious students of nineteenth-century journalism.

Guarneri's Dana is a shaper of events as much as a recorder and reporter. The ambition of *Lincoln's Informer: Charles A. Dana and the Inside Story of the Union War* is to measure Dana's influence on the powerful people to whom he gravitated throughout his life. The book succeeds by first establishing the adamant nature of Dana's political convictions that formed in his early adult life. Study of Transcendentalism at Harvard University led Dana to the utopian community of Brook Farm in Massachusetts, where the communal emphasis on just living and social reform sharpened Dana's convictions. *Library Journal*, "Lincoln's Informer is a genuine contribution to both Civil War studies and the history of nineteenth-century journalism. In the story of Charles A. Dana, *Lincoln's Informer* reclaims exciting and underreported aspects of American political, literary, and military history."-- Harold Holzer, winner of the Gilder-Lehrman Lincoln Prize

"This highly readable, thoroughly researched account of Charles A. Dana's role in the Civil War era is a welcome addition to the literature, for it sheds new light not only on Dana but also on such important players as Lincoln's Informer at long last sets the record straight, giving Charles A. Dana his due in a story that rivals the best historical fiction. Dana didn't just record history, Carl J. Guarneri notes: he made it. Starting out as managing editor of Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, he led the newspaper's charge against proslavery forces in Congress and the Kansas territory. When his criticism of the Union's prosecution of the war became too much for Greeley, Dana was drafted by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to be a special agent—and it was in this capacity that he truly made his mark. *Lincoln's Informer: Charles A. Dana and the Inside Story of the Union War*. Carl J. Guarneri. 4.2 out of 5 stars 9. — Douglas Waller's fast-paced and deeply-researched narrative of Union intelligence operations in the Eastern theater of the Civil War cuts through the myths and fabrications that grew up around "Lincoln's spies" and presents a professional, readable appraisal that emphasizes the positive contributions that Colonel George Sharpe and Richmond Unionist Elizabeth Van Lew made to ultimate Northern victory. This book is vital reading for anyone interested in the Civil War or in the origins of modern spycraft."—James M. McPherson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Battle Cry of Freedom*

Dana's reporting and Guarneri's lively narrative provide fresh impressions of Lincoln, Stanton, Grant, and other Union war leaders. *Lincoln's Informer* shows us the unlikely role of a little-known confidant and informant in the Lincoln administration's military and political successes. A remarkable inside look at history unfolding, this book draws the first complete picture of a fascinating character writing his chapter in the story of the Civil War. eISBN: 978-0-7006-2847-6. Subjects: History, American Studies, Political Science, Language & Literature.