DURING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, UNION GENERALS AND CIVILIAN LEADERS SENT MILLIONS OF TELEGRAMS TO COORDINATE AND DIRECT A SOCIETY AT WAR. PERHAPS TENS OF THOUSANDS OF UNION TELEGRAMS WERE SENT IN CIPHER DURING THE WAR TO PREVENT REBELS OR THEIR SYMPATHIZERS FROM UNDERSTANDING THE MESSAGES THEY MAY HAVE INTERCEPTED.

ANSON STAGER DEVELOPED THE FIRST TELEGRAPHIC CIPHER USED FOR MILITARY PURPOSES DURING THE CIVIL WAR. Shortly after the war began, Governor William Dennison of Ohio asked Stager to develop an encryption plan for communication with the governors of Indiana and Illinois. Major General George B. McClellan appointed Stager as superintendent of all telegraph lines in the Department of the Ohio and asked Stager to develop a field telegraph system to follow his army. The War Department adopted Stager’s cipher system, and in October 1861, Stager went to Washington to become an assistant quartermaster with the rank of captain. On November 25, he was appointed the head of the United States Military Telegraph with the rank of colonel. However, he did not resign as general manager of the Western Union Telegraph Company and soon returned to Cleveland to resume active direction of the company.

He delegated much of the responsibility in Washington to Major Thomas T. Eckert.2

Although Stager’s cipher was not terribly complex, it depended for success on absolute secrecy, and the operators were told not to reveal the code to any person, including commanding officers and even President Abraham Lincoln himself. A Civil War telegrapher described the system: “The principle of the cipher consisted in writing a message with an equal number of words in each line, then copying the words up and down the columns by various routes, throwing in an extra word at the end of each column, and substituting other words for important names and verbs.”3

The following example from April 1865 shows the cipher in action in a telegram from Abraham Lincoln in Washington to Major General Godfrey Weitzel in Richmond. Major General Weitzel had first entered Richmond on April 3 and immediately reestablished telegraphic communication between Richmond and Washington. “In that hour,” a military telegrapher later wrote, “the country was electrified by the intelligence that the Confederate capital, now re-possessed by the Federals, was telegraphically connected with the National head-quarters.”4

Abraham Lincoln to Godfrey Weitzel5
12 April 1865

Time _______
Office U.S. Military Telegraph, WAR DEPARTMENT,
Washington, D.C., April 12, 1865 .

Major General Weitzel
Richmond, Va.

I have seen your despatch to Col. Hardie about the matter of prayers. I do not remember hearing prayers spoken of while I was in Richmond; but I have no doubt you have acted in what appeared to you to be the spirit and temper manifested by me while there.

Is there any sign of the rebel Legislature coming together on the understanding of my letter to you? If there is any such sign, inform me what it is; if there is no such sign you may as close withdraw the offer.

A. Lincoln

[Endorsement]
9am
Tinker7
Abraham Lincoln to Godfrey Weitzel
12 April 1865

Key: Text in Lincoln’s original; Arbitraries substituted for specific words; Arbitraries substituted for punctuation; Null words with no meaning; Commencement words; Text added by telegraphers
The telegrapher wrote out Lincoln’s message on specially columned paper and used Cipher No. 1 to encode this message.

In the No. 1 Cipher, code words, or “arbitraries,” for the “President of the United States” included “Bologna” and “Bolivia.” Other arbitraries for President Lincoln in the No. 1 Cipher included “Ida,” “Ink,” “Irving,” “Ingress,” “Ingrate,” and “Ingot.” “Emma” meant 9:00 a.m., and “flood” meant “12” or “12th” for April 12. The telegrapher substituted key words with other arbitraries such as “Galway” for “Richmond,” “Walnut” for “Rebel,” and “yoke” for “signature.” He replaced punctuation with other arbitraries, such as “pekin” or “pedlar” for a comma, “Star” for an interrogation or question mark, and “unity,” “Zodiac,” and “zebra” for periods. After the signature, the final line was filled with a brief message to complete the grid of ten columns of eleven lines each.

After preparing the message in grid form, the telegrapher prepared the message for transmission by rewriting it according to the route dictated by the selected format. The first words, “Whats next news,” formed a “commencement” code that indicated to the receiving telegrapher the number of columns and lines, as well as the route through the resulting matrix. The handwritten instructions at the beginning of the No. 1 Cipher explain that “After having written the message in columns commence by writing any one of the ‘Blind words’ after this, two of the Line Indicators taken from the same page as the route used will be used, the numbers set opposite to them being added together will indicate the no of lines & it is these two words that indicate the no of column & route.” Apparently, the telegraphers added “Whats” as a blind word for a ten-column message after the initial publication of the No. 1 Cipher. The Line Indicator “next” meant 2 lines, and the Line Indicator “news” meant 9 lines; added together, these words indicated an 11-line message.

The telegrapher reordered the message by reading down column 6, down column 10, up column 1, down column 8, up column 2, down column 4, up column 7, down column 3, up column 5, and down column 9. This encryption process also added “null” words at the end of each column to disguise the message further. The null words at the end of each column are underlined—“mean,” “your,” “never,” etc. Doing so produced the following enciphered message that could be sent by telegraph without detection.
Abraham Lincoln to Godfrey Weitzel
12 April 1865

U.S. MILITARY TELEGRAPH.

By Telegraph from War Dept

To J. H. Emerick

Apr 12 1865

Whats next news I the prayers I to while coming star what you you mean dispatch zebra I you spirit there understanding any if the piloted your offer there such of any and have was I to Emma never seen of of no toby

Zodiac on there is with what remains yoke as sign my sign temper acted in to paradise flood over weitzel abe remember pekin that my walnut to form such why not say may it if together there you have spoken matter have senses shelter bardie not galway in manifested torch letter in no bologne plenty dont sign me you legislature (2) me appeared but bearing out unity in your prayers while doubt the is the is pedlar draw you down

T. T. Eckert

Key: Text in Lincoln’s original; Arbitraries substituted for specific words; Arbitraries substituted for punctuation; Null words with no meaning; Commencement words; Text added by telegraphers

This telegram was the penultimate message sent by Abraham Lincoln via telegraph, appropriately in cipher, as so many had been over the previous four years. The last telegram Lincoln sent was another on the same day, also to General Weitzel in Richmond and also in cipher.

By Daniel W. Stowell

Director/Editor

Notes:

1 Anson Stager (1825-1885) was a printer’s apprentice while still a teenager and had learned telegraphy by the time he was 20. He became a telegraph operator in 1846 and managed the Pittsburgh office of a telegraph company by 1847. By 1856, he was the general superintendent of the Western Union Telegraph Company, with headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., American National Biography, 24 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20:526-27.


4 Plum, Military Telegraph during the Civil War, 2:320-22.

Godfrey Weitzel (1835-1884) was born in Germany or in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he grew up and was educated. Weitzel graduated second in his class at the United States Military Academy in 1855 and later returned as a professor of engineering. In 1861, he was transferred to Washington, DC, to construct defenses. He served on the staffs of
Major Generals George B. McClellan and Benjamin F. Butler, and was promoted to Brigadier General in August 1862. He commanded a division under Major General Nathaniel P. Banks in Louisiana. Reassigned to the East, he commanded a corps of United States Colored Troops. Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant placed Weitzel in command of all Union troops north of the Appomattox River in the final operations of the war, and Weitzel’s forces took possession of Richmond on April 3, and Weitzel made his headquarters in Jefferson Davis’s home. Garraty and Carnes, American National Biography, 22:917-18; Whitelaw Reid, Ohio in the War: Her Statesmen, Generals, and Soldiers, 2 vols. (Columbus, OH: Eclectic Publishing, 1893), 1:789-95; Ohio History Central, s.v. “Godfrey Weitzel.”

Abraham Lincoln to Godfrey Weitzel, 12 April 1865, RG 107, Entry 34: Records of the Secretary of War, 1789-1889, Telegrams Sent and Received by the War Department Central Telegraph Office, 1861-1882, Vault, National Archives, Washington, DC.

Abraham Lincoln to Godfrey Weitzel, 12 April 1865, RG 107, Entry 36: Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, Records of the Secretary of War, Record Series Originating During The Period 1789-1889, Telegrams Sent by the Field Offices of the Military Telegraph and Collected by the Office of the Secretary of War, 1860-1870, National Archives, Washington, DC.


John H. Emerick (1843-1902) entered the military telegraph service in 1861 at the age of seventeen, and he became the youngest cipher clerk in the United States Army. By the Spring of 1865, Emerick was the chief telegraph operator with the Army of the James and was at that army’s headquarters in Richmond until the telegraph corps was disbanded. Brooklyn Eagle (NY), 12 May 1902; Plum, Military Telegraph during the Civil War, 2:345.

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