

Breaking Barriers: Women in U.S. Intelligence

From the founding of the Republic to the modern intelligence community, women have played vital—often overlooked—roles in shaping American national security. Women have made remarkable contributions to U.S. intelligence across four centuries, demonstrating courage and ingenuity.

Featured Historical Figures

- Agent 355 of the Revolutionary War's Culper Ring, whose intelligence helped protect General George Washington from betrayal.
- Harriet Tubman, who served as a Union intelligence asset during the Civil War and helped plan the Combahee River Raid.
- Virginia Hall, one of the most effective Allied spies of World War II, who worked with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).
- Valerie Plame, whose career in CIA counterproliferation—and subsequent public exposure—placed women intelligence officers at the center of national political debate.

Beyond Individual Heroes

The talk also examines institutional reform within the intelligence community, including:

- The early 1990s 'Petticoat Panel' study on gender disparities inside the CIA
- The advisory panel chaired by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright assessing equal opportunity in intelligence agencies
- The development of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives
- Current debates over DEI policies and their future direction in federal intelligence agencies

Why This Topic Matters

Women were often effective precisely because they were underestimated. Over time, they moved from informal networks and unofficial roles to positions of senior leadership, operational command, and analytic authority. Their story, told by a former CIA officer, illuminates broader questions about merit, diversity, institutional culture, and the evolution of American intelligence itself.