

# Ethan Allen Hitchcock



and the Mexican War Spy Company

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“To act absolutely according to virtue is nothing else in us than to act under the guidance of reason, to live and to preserve one’s being on the basis of seeking what is useful to oneself.” [Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV, proposition 24]

What makes the military career of Ethan Allen Hitchcock so remarkable, is not that he was the grandson of the revolutionary war hero, or that his life encompassed the War of 1812, the 1846 War with Mexico, and the Civil War. The reason his life bears examination is not because he was devoted to scholarship, an avid reader of philosophy, a correspondent with the leading minds of the 19th century, and a soldier known as the “Pen of the Army,” although these attributes certainly attract us to him. The fact that he was General Winfield Scott’s right-hand man during the Mexican War and a Civil War military advisor to President Abraham Lincoln serve to show the respect he earned for his professional astuteness, but do not alone make for him a place in history.

The chief reason we come to know Ethan Allen Hitchcock is that he is a moral man. He lived his life, not just as an aficionado of the abstract ethics of Spinoza, but as a principled man who was willing to speak out for what he believed. *Veritas* was the *nom de plume* he chose when writing to newspapers to defend his commander from the slanders of political opponents, and it serves him well as an epitaph.

Born in 1798 into a prominent Vermont family, he entered West Point in 1814 and graduated three years later. His early career alternated between garrison duty and West Point teaching assignments.

As an adjutant general on the staff of General Edmund Pendleton Gaines in the late 1830s, he saw service in the Seminole Wars. Hitchcock was opposed to the government policy toward the Seminoles and a critic of the actions of president Andrew Jackson. He wrote in his diary at the time: “The treaty of Paynes Landing [which called for the Seminoles to move out of Florida] was a fraud on the Indians: They never approved of it or signed it. They are right in defending their homes and we ought to let them alone.”<sup>1</sup> This would not be the only time, in a 47-year military career packed full of moral choices, when he would be required by duty to prosecute a war that he did not believe right.

Hitchcock had spent many years along the Texas border, beginning in 1836. He disagreed with the U.S. eagerness to annex the newly created republic of Texas, seeing it as the outgrowth of greed and expansionism. He foresaw it would lead to war, a war that he thought would be both wrong and unnecessary. It did lead to war and he would play a key part in it. Hitchcock was the commandant of the U.S. Army garrison at Corpus Christi, Texas, when the war broke out. In a diary entry for 20 September 1845 he talks about his feelings about a war with Mexico, which by now appeared unavoidable, and his opinion of General Zachary Taylor. “General Taylor came into my tent this morning and again, as frequently of late, he introduced the subject of moving upon the Rio Grande. I discovered this time more clearly than ever that the General is instigated by ambition—or so it appears to me. He seems quite to have lost all respect for Mexican rights and willing to be an instrument of Mr. Polk for pushing our boundary as far west as possible. When I told him that, if he suggested a movement (which he told me he intended), Mr. Polk would seize upon it and throw the responsibility on him, he at once said he would take it, and added that if the President instructed him to use his discretion, he would ask no orders, but would

go upon the Rio Grande as soon as he could get transportation. I think the General wants an additional brevet, and would strain a point to get it.”<sup>2</sup>

It was after long days of drilling volunteer troops at Corpus Christi that Hitchcock retired to his tent to read his books. Now he was reading newly arrived copies of Spinoza and Plato. According to Plato writing in *The Republic*, the four cardinal virtues are wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. With these characteristics Hitchcock had an acquaintance. When he was not reading, he was writing, corresponding with leading literary figures. When the war with Mexico came, it interrupted an exchange of letters between Hitchcock and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Hitchcock transferred to the staff of General Winfield Scott with whom he had been at odds in years past over some administrative disputes. But he found Scott’s welcome cordial and, as inspector general, became indispensable to the commander who needed Hitchcock’s vast administrative talents and organizational abilities. In addition to seeing to discipline, drill and logistics, he recognized the need for better intelligence in a country about which the American Army knew close to nothing.

While headquartered at Puebla, Hitchcock had occasion to send dispatches to other commands but the roads were hazardous, being patrolled either by Mexican forces or bandits. So he used as a courier one of the bandit leaders who both knew the roads well and could guarantee safe delivery through robber-infested territory. The man was Manuel Dominguez, who Hitchcock described as “a very curious and interesting man.” He was paroled from prison by General Worth on the condition that he work for the American Army and sent to Hitchcock. The lieutenant colonel said that he “tried him and found him faithful.” In fact, after being employed by the U.S. Army, Dominguez was offered a full, written pardon by no less a person than Santa Anna in his own hand, but the highwayman-turned-spy gave the papers to his handler in an undeniable act of loyalty to Colonel Hitchcock.

In his diary entry for the 26th of June, he described his recruitment of the spy company.

This morning I brought twelve from the city prison into the presence of my Dominguez and saw a most extraordinary meeting. Dominguez met some of his friends for the first time for years—men with whom he had doubtless been engaged in many an adventure, perhaps highway robbery. They embraced and swore eternal fidelity to each other and the United States. I remanded them to prison, saying that I would report their cases to the General and ask their release.<sup>3</sup>

The General gave permission for the release of what would become the nucleus of an almost 100-man spy company under Dominguez. The whole scheme was well received by Scott and his senior commanders and staff at a 29 June meeting. Hitchcock proposed that each of these original men be paid \$20 a month. He believed that by using these men, he would not only improve American intelligence, but he would deprive the enemy of recruiting their services. Dominguez was confident that he could “bring over the guerrillas to our side or seize their chiefs and bring them prisoners to our general.” The men of the original small band were first used as runners and spies “by means of them the General-in-Chief was accurately informed of all Mexican movements...clear into the city of Mexico, at a time when everybody passing in and out...underwent the most rigid examination. these spies usually entered the city as market people from Chalco, by the way of the canal, selling apples, onions, etc.”<sup>4</sup>

The services of the spy company were invaluable. They were known by the Mexicans as the *Poblanos*, since they operated out of Puebla. That they had damaging effect on the Mexican Army was

borne out by the fact that General Santa Anna offered them a “pardon for all past crimes” and offered them a “reward adequate to any service they may render the republic.” Colonel Hitchcock also was quick to recognize their value. After the war he wrote a brief summary of their exploits:

Besides a multitude of services rendered by this company as spies, couriers, etc., when it was impossible for an American to pass through the country, they have furnished escorts for trains to a limited extent, and on one occasion made a very important capture of Generals Torrejon and Gaona, with several other officers, and a number of men near Nopaluca, east of Puebla.<sup>5</sup>

The complete loyalty of the spy company was attested to by the fact that the highest ranking man in the American Army, accompanied by his personal staff, marched to the coast to disembark for the United States with no other escort than the Mexicans whom Hitchcock had enlisted.

The Spy Company was not the only source of intelligence upon which Hitchcock would rely in his role as General Scott’s G2. He paid a network of people, ranging from Mexican government officials to foreigners living in or near the capitol, who furnished him information. Records of General Scott’s headquarters show \$450 being disbursed directly to Hitchcock in April, \$645 in May, nothing in June and July, and \$2,500 for his spy company in August and September. In addition to this total of \$3,595 given to Hitchcock for intelligence operations, there were some 42 other payments made directly to informers, couriers, deserters, Mexican officers, and even a servant of Santa Anna. These payments ranged from \$10 for a small map of Mexico City to a \$10,000 bribe passed through an unnamed English agent to Santa Anna in an unsuccessful attempt to bribe him to seek peace negotiations. Expenditures for human intelligence operations in the central Mexico campaign totalled \$26,621.75.<sup>6</sup>

After the war the spy company commander was no longer safe in his own country. Hitchcock arranged for Dominguez and his family to move to New Orleans. Then he began the task of obtaining for him government protection. He appealed to the senator from Mississippi, Jefferson Davis, who had served notably in Mexico and was wounded there. Davis introduced a bill that would provide relief for Dominguez and his family, but it died in committee. Hitchcock wrote a second letter to Davis.<sup>7</sup> It too failed to elicit any action by Congress.

Two days after he wrote the letter, Hitchcock reported seeing Dominguez in New Orleans. Dominguez reported that he had been called to Washington by Secretary of War William Learned Marcy, a political opponent of Scott’s, who had asked him if he had any derogatory information on his former commander-in-chief. If he spoke freely, he would “be protected.” This political infighting Hitchcock labeled “Infamous!”

Hitchcock’s loyal testimony after the war in defense of his commander, who was being pilloried by other political opponents, were a credit to his sense of justice. Under cross examination by Gideon Pillow, he testified why he had sent accounts of the war to a New York professor. “I stated that I thought it a duty to the army, to our country and to history that those of us who knew the truth should tell it and put down the vile falsehoods which have been spread before the public. I claimed that I had violated no regulation; that I felt perfectly free to use my knowledge of the campaign..., and that I expected to continue to use it as occasion might require.”<sup>8</sup>

Brevetted colonel for his service at Cerro Gordo and Vera Cruz, Hitchcock toured Europe for two years, then became Commanding General of the Department of the Pacific, having been brevetted Brigadier General. His close association to Winfield Scott would hurt his

career when Jefferson Davis became Secretary of War in 1854 and purged the Army of all Scott supporters. [Scott had been a Whig presidential candidate in 1852, running against Franklin Pierce, Davis' boss.] Hitchcock was relieved of duty in 1854 and the 41-year veteran submitted his resignation in 1855.

Called back to duty at the outset of the Civil War, he was given a volunteer commission of major general and even offered command of the Army of the Potomac by Lincoln in March 1862 after George B. McClellan's failures. He turned down this coveted opportunity because he felt that his advanced age and failing health ill-equipped him to perform such a demanding duty. Instead he became a trusted advisor to the president and to the Secretary of War Edwin McMasters Stanton. In the final years of the war, Lincoln appointed him to oversee the exchange of prisoners.

In the spring of 1866, while walking the streets of Washington, he was felled by a runaway horse. The injuries he suffered, combined with his age, resulted in his being mustered out of the Army on 1 October 1867. In 1870 he died of natural causes.

His biographer, William Teague, summed up the man when he wrote:

A bookish man who delighted in the study and writing of history, philosophy, and theology, he was both a moralist and a humanitarian. Hitchcock's attempts to improve the lot of the Indians, his opposition to the jingoists whose foreign politics eventually led to war with Mexico, and his efforts in behalf of prisoners of war attest to his great concern for others and to his sense of intellectual independence and moral duty.<sup>9</sup>

He might have added that his efforts on behalf of Manuel Dominguez, a loyal subordinate, would stand as an example of the meaning of the word "honor" for generations of U.S. Army intelligence officers to come.

#### Notes

1. Croffut, W.A., ed., *Fifty Years in Camp and Field: Diary of Major General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, U.S.A.*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1909.

2. Croffut, p. 201-2.

3. Croffut., pp. 264-5.

4. Croffut, p. 337.

5. Croffut, pp. 340-1.

6. U.S. Senate, *Lieutenant General Scott*, Senate Executive Document 34, 34th Congress, 3rd Session, 1854, pp. 21-4.

7. It is quoted here in its entirety from Croffut, pp. 341-4:

New Orleans, Jan. 9, 1849

DEAR SIR: I write to ask your attention to the situation of Manuel Dominguez, the chief of the Mexican spies employed under the orders of General Scott in Mexico, for whose 'relief' you introduced into the Senate last session some resolution which was not acted upon.

On reaching this city a few days since Dominguez came to see me, and on examination I found himself and family, nine persons, living without furniture in a single third-story room in the outskirts of the city and perfectly helpless, so far as I can judge from appearances.

When Dominguez was taken into our service at Puebla, he was living decently in a comfortable house. He was soon afterwards offered high rewards if he would enter the Mexican service, but he never faltered for one moment in his fidelity to us. The value of his services can hardly be estimated by those who were not engaged in the war (you will understand them fully) and were of a kind likely to

be disregarded when the immediate need for them was past. Indeed, the full extent of his services has never been known except to some two or three persons in the army.

Dominguez was sent to me at Puebla by General Worth with a note stating that he had borne a dispatch for him safely and might be of service to General Scott. I employed him, and by the orders of the General sent him with dispatches for the commanders on the route to Vera Cruz, and he faithfully returned with answers. I then confidentially took into service five of his men, to whom twelve others were afterwards added. The Spy Company, so called, was not formed until a number of weeks later.

By means of those first engaged under the direction of Dominguez I was enabled to keep the General accurately informed of the state of things on the main road from Vera Cruz to the City of Mexico, and fully advised of everything in the vicinity of Puebla. This was one of the means by which General Scott protected himself from false rumors, continually reaching him, of movements of the enemy. Reports were constantly coming in of threatened attacks upon Puebla, and of large forces passing from the City of Mexico to cut the line of communication with Vera Cruz. Many of these reports were disposed of very easily by the General himself without looking to the spies for information, though in other cases this information was often of highest value, and ought to be weighed by its estimate at the time.

After the number of the spies was increased and the Mexicans suspected we had such persons in our employment some of them were detected and executed; but, notwithstanding this, Dominguez found others and continued to obtain information which could be had in no other way. It became necessary to be very guarded. In some cases they were sent to the City of Mexico itself even, without any paper whatever, and would report on their return, simply what they had seen and heard. In other cases, to make them known as our friends and protect them from enemies, they were provided with a small piece of tissue paper, very small indeed, on which was written a date, with the words "Trust the bearer," with my signature; this they would hide in the seam of some part of their dress, or between the soles of their shoes; they would hide it in a lock of their matter hair or put it within a bullet button on their dress, or they would enclose it within the folds of a cigar, etc., etc. With this bit of paper they would go from one post to another and bring back verbal messages from our commanders with other valuable information. It was in this way that the General communicated with his reinforcements while coming up from Vera Cruz. As these services were secret, so, for that very reason, they have never been properly appreciated except by a very few persons. To understand them one must imagine the American army entirely isolated within the enemy's country at Puebla when it was impossible for any of our own men, except in large parties, to go with safety beyond the limits of the city; and then consider that through these spies chiefly the army reposed in perfect quiet and security from false reports so harassing to a body of men subject to be ordered under arms at all times, night and day, only to be dismissed after one, two, or three hours full of disgust at being needlessly disturbed.

During the whole of the campaign to the City of Mexico General Scott never on one single occasion caused the troops to be turned out on a false alarm. To this healthy repose the spies under Dominguez contributed, not as the only means indeed, but yet they were indispensably important agents. The subordinate persons employed by Dominguez were but little known and are not now particularly exposed. They have gone to the Rio Grande frontier and will readily be dispersed and lost sight of; but not so with the leader of that band, Dominguez. He is a known and a marked man, and cannot live in his own country. On this account something seems due to him, not to be

determined so much by "his honor" as by what may become "our own honor," and perhaps sound policy. After the City of Mexico was occupied by the American army and road had become tolerably quiet, the Spy Company made several expeditions to Vera Cruz and back again to Mexico [City] without ever losing a single dispatch committed to them.

Besides other evidences of fidelity I ought to mention that while our army was before the capital Santa Anna, over his own signature, sent a full pardon to Dominguez, countersigned by the Secretary of State, and bearing the great seal of the republic, if he would abandon our service; with a promise of reward if he would "seduce our soldiers to desert, drive off our mules, or destroy our magazines." The moment Dominguez received the paper (which I have now in my possession) he rode up to me upon a fine charger, halted, dismounted, saluted, and handed me the paper with a scornful smile that needed no interpretation. He had given me a similar paper at Puebla, sent to him by the government of the state of Puebla while at the town of Atlixco. Indeed, his fidelity was proved in every possible way, insomuch that when I left Mexico, we had no other escort to Vera Cruz but the Spy Company under Dominguez.

Under all these circumstances I hope you will see the propriety of asking of Congress some proper allowance to be paid monthly or quarterly for the support of Manuel Dominguez, exiled on account of his services to the United States. It may be supposed that if Dominguez had any claim upon the generosity of the government it would have been stated by General Scott himself; but it should be recollected that General Scott left Mexico before peace was declared, while General Butler, his successor in command, had no personal knowledge of the services of Dominguez.

Although it is many years since I have had the pleasure of seeing you, I hope I am not altogether forgotten, and must beg you will permit me to number myself among your friends as I am

Very truly yours,  
E.A. HITCHCOCK,

Bvt. Col. U.S.A

8. Croffut, p. 324.

9. Spiller, Roger, ed., *Dictionary of American Military Biography*, 3 vols., Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1984. Article by William Teague on Ethan Allen Hitchcock, pp. 475-78.