

# Grenville Dodge

## Railroad Man and Spymaster

by Timothy Walch

Those who came to know Grenville Mellen Dodge saw him as a man with a “good deal of executive force, a man that, when he went into anything, went in with his whole soul.” It was this quality that came to the attention of Ulysses S. Grant. The two men established a partnership that lasted through the Civil War and for many years thereafter.

Dodge first came to public attention as a railroad man. Following his graduation from Norwich University in Vermont in 1850 with an engineering degree, he worked on a number of railroad projects, starting with the Illinois Central Railroad. Intelligent and ambitious, Dodge soon partnered with Peter Dey in planning the Mississippi and Missouri Rail Road from Davenport to Council Bluffs.

During the Civil War Dodge drew upon his railroad know-how. One of his primary assignments was to build and maintain the rails needed to supply the Union Army in the western theater of operations. Marshalling his considerable managerial and engineering skills, Dodge reopened numerous railroad lines, repaired bridges, added hundreds of miles of new track, and protected the lines from Confederate guerillas.

With only limited troops, Dodge built a defense on information and intelligence gathering. Military intelligence had been a staple of warfare since the times of the ancient Greeks, but he took these operations to new levels. Foremost, he recruited Southerners loyal to the Union to infiltrate Confederate lines. In fact,

he organized the 1st Tennessee Cavalry, the 1st Alabama Colored Infantry, and the 1st Alabama Cavalry as Unionist units to act as scouts and raiders. The intelligence gathered by these spies was vital in protecting Grant’s troops from rear-guard action.

The size and sophistication of Dodge’s network were unprecedented. For the Vicksburg campaign alone, Dodge had over a hundred agents who operated across the Confederacy as far east as Virginia and deep into Georgia and Alabama. Dodge gave his men code names and communicated with them by messengers using ciphers. He trained them to closely observe Confederate operations and carefully estimate troop levels and resources.

Dodge ran his operation from a war room where the walls were lined with maps. As the maps were updated, the incoming reports were destroyed. He quickly became known for his determination to control all intelligence information. Once, when ordered by a superior general to reveal the names of the agents, Dodge went directly to Grant, who countered the order.

In December 1864, Grant appointed Dodge to command the Department of Missouri with the assignment of quelling a restless Indian population on the Great Plains. Here again, Dodge’s ability to gather intelligence about his enemy gave him the upper hand. The Indians attributed supernatural powers to the general for his ability to anticipate their actions. To these Native Americans, Dodge was known as “Long Eyes.”

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In 1866 Dodge ran successfully for Congress, but he served only a single term. For the rest of his working life, he devoted himself to railroad ventures in the United States. He returned briefly to public service after the Spanish-American War when President William McKinley asked him to chair a commission on the performance of the War Department. Not surprisingly, the commission recommended a permanent intelligence division to support the army general staff. It can be said, therefore, that Grenville Mellen Dodge remained a spymaster, as well as a railroad man, to the end of his career.

—by Timothy Walch

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Archival materials on Grenville Mellen Dodge can be found in several repositories, including the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City and Des Moines as well as the Western History Collection of the Denver Public Library. The best biography of Dodge remains Stanley P. Hirshson, *Grenville M. Dodge: Soldier, Politician, Railroad Pioneer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967).