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PRESIDENT HAYES' "WITHDRAWAL" OF THE TROOPS— AN ENDURING MYTH

CLARENCE C. CLENDENEN *

One of the most persistent legends of American history is that President Rutherford B. Hayes, as one of his first official acts, withdrew the last remaining United States troops from the South, thereby ending the surviving Reconstruction state governments. This statement has been repeated by textbook writers and others until it is a routine remark in any history of the South from the end of the Civil War until the close of the century. Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr., for example, in his recent work, *A History of South Carolina, 1865-1960*, says, "On April 10, he [Hayes] ordered the Union troops out of South Carolina."¹ Other recent historians, without exception, repeat the same thing in substance, and in 1966, in a syndicated Question and Answer column published in many newspapers, the question was asked: "In what year were the last federal troops moved out of the South after the Civil War?" The answer, of course, was: "In 1877, during the administration of President Rutherford B. Hayes."²

The supposed withdrawal of troops from the South creates in the mind of the uncritical reader a mental picture of masses of blue-uniformed soldiers marching northward from the occupied South. And with this mental picture, too, is a closely related image of great numbers of United troops holding the South in subjection by the weight of their numbers—a weight that was lifted by President Hayes.

No one can deny that the United States Army was used, during the Reconstruction period, for purely political purposes—to support and maintain the so-called "carpet-bag" governments, and that many disagreeable incidents occurred, as that in which Colonel de Trobriand, in

* Colonel Clendenen is a retired army officer.

¹ Ernest McPherson Lander, Jr., *A History of South Carolina, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1960), p. 22.

² See Dexter Perkins and Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *The United States of America. A History—1865 to the Present* (New York, 1965), II, 64; John D. Hicks, *The American Nation. A History of the United States from 1865 to the Present*. (3d ed.; Cambridge, Mass., 1955), p. 108; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York, 1965), p. 724; Kenneth M. Stamp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York, 1966), p. 210; the Palo Alto (California) *Times*, April 27, 1966.

MUSTER ROLLS OF GRANVILLE AND COLLETON COUNTY REGIMENTS 239

¹² The figures recorded in the Council Journal, May 4, 1757, *ibid.*, p. 84, are as follows:

<i>Company</i>	<i>Officers</i>	<i>Sergeants and-Clerks</i>	<i>Private Men</i>	<i>Alarm Men</i>
1st	3	2	84	3
2nd	3		44	
3rd	2		111	5
			[Should be 110]	
4th	2		59	5
5th	2		60	6
6th	3	2	79	5
7th	2		69	2
Edisto Island	2		68	6
Wadmelaw Island	3		45	6
John's Island	3		50	
	—	—	—	—
TOTAL	25	4	669	38
			[Should be 668]	

full uniform, entered the Louisiana legislature and forcibly expelled all the legislators who were not acceptable to the group in power.³

It is worthwhile, however, to determine first the size and extent of the Federal forces that supposedly were removed from the South in 1877. The formidable armies of a million or more men that the North raised during the war were demobilized with almost startling rapidity at the end of the war. By 1867 the last of the war-time military organizations had been mustered out, and the men returned to their homes and civil occupations. In 1868 the Secretary of War reported to Congress that one lone volunteer officer remained on active duty. In fact, the army was so far reduced that it was necessary to muster a regiment of Kansas volunteers for an Indian war on the frontier.⁴ In 1869 the strength of the army, in round numbers, was 43,000, but this strength was reduced annually until in the exciting summer of the Hayes-Tilden election campaign it numbered only 28,571. This figure included everyone in the army, from General Sherman down to the newest recruit. It included several hundred Indian Scouts, chaplains, medical personnel, ordnance and quartermaster sergeants, and the cadets of the United States Military Academy. But even at this skeleton strength, the army had not yet reached the nadir. In that same summer, 1876, Congress passed an act that the total enlisted strength of the army should not exceed 25,000 enlisted men, and directed, in the same act, that "a sufficient force of calvary shall be employed in the defense of the Mexican and Indian frontier of Texas."⁵ The act provided, still further, that all cavalry companies must be maintained at a strength of one hundred men each.

After passing this rather extraordinary piece of legislation, Congress adjourned without making any appropriation for the pay of the army for that year. For a year enlisted men were unpaid; officers' pay vouchers were cashed, at a discount, by a syndicate of bankers, headed by J. P. Morgan. And because no increase in the size of the army was possible, the cavalry companies could be brought to the prescribed strength only by reducing the strength of the other arms. Infantry and artillery companies, under this dispensation, were reduced to ridiculous figures, often as low as nineteen or twenty men per company.

³ Alcée Fortier, *A History of Louisiana* (New York, 1904), IV, 168-188; Ella Lonn, *Reconstruction in Louisiana after 1868* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1932), pp. 504-506.

⁴ *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1868-69*, I, i, xi.

⁵ *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1876-77*, I, 24.

There was a very sound reason for the strength assigned to the cavalry—Indian troubles. But Texas was by no means the only frontier on which Indians raided, looted, burned, and killed. The disaster to Custer's column occurred in July 1876, and Custer's force was but one part of a large operation that was taking place to force the plains tribes to quit the war trail and make peace.⁶ Virtually all of the cavalry was on the Indian frontier, as well as most of the infantry and a large part of the artillery.⁷ This left only a small fraction of the army for the multitudinous duties in the rest of the country. At the end of the fiscal year 1876, of the approximately 28,000 men in the army, 3,230 were stationed in the entire area of the southern states, excluding Texas, which was a special case. Less than twelve percent of the total strength of the army was so located and it could be considered, even remotely, as available for Reconstruction duties.⁸

By 1876, the "military districts" into which the South had been divided at the height of the "carpet-bag" regime had long been abolished. For purely administrative purposes the United States was divided into three enormous military divisions—similar to, but vaster in extent, than the six army areas into which the country is now divided. Each military division, in turn, was subdivided into several departments, the extent and boundaries of which varied from year to year according to the situation at the moment. Thus, in 1876, the Department of the South, with headquarters at Atlanta, was included in the Military Division of the Atlantic, which embraced the entire Atlantic seaboard and most of the region of the Great Lakes. The states in the Department of the South were the two Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. The Department of the Gulf, covering Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas, was part of the Military Division of the Missouri, which also included the Department of Texas.⁹

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-36.

⁷ There were ten regiments of artillery on paper, but only one or two companies of each regiment were equipped and trained as artillery. The remainder functioned as infantry and was available for all infantry duties.

⁸ Texas is omitted from consideration here, for, with the exception of one company at San Antonio for service at department headquarters, the entire force was spread on the western and southern perimeters of the state, in twelve widely separated posts.

⁹ It should be noted that the military division and department commanders had no authority over the militia of the states. Hence, it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the Negro militia with which the Reconstruction regimes of several southern states sought to bolster themselves. The reader who is interested in this

Throughout the nineteenth century the peace-time Regular Army was an aggregation of companies. Regiments existed on paper, and were occasionally assembled, but companies were assigned to stations and duties without regard to the regiments to which they supposedly belonged. A task force (to use a modern expression) was an assemblage of whatever companies were available for a particular mission. It was not at all unusual for an expedition or the garrison of a post to be composed of companies of half a dozen different regiments. Thus, in 1876, the garrisons in the Department of the South consisted of thirty-seven companies of five regiments. Their total strength amounted to 1,586 officers and men. Most of the artillery units were stationed at the pre-war coast defenses, which the United States had reclaimed at the end of the war. The other troops were scattered in small detachments from Newport, Kentucky, to Key West, Florida, with the largest concentration, six companies, at the department headquarters, at Atlanta. In the Department of the Gulf the situation was similar. Thirty companies, totalling 1,257 officers and soldiers were dispersed in twenty-one stations, ranging from New Orleans to such obscure places as Pineville, Louisiana.¹⁰

In the 1870's the most critical military zone in the United States was in the northern plains. By far the greatest part of the United States Army was deployed in the Military Division of the Missouri. As contrasted with the number of troops and troop units in the two southern departments (excluding Texas), in the Department of the Platte there were *eighty-two* companies, of which thirty-five were in the field in an active campaign against the Indians, eighteen were in reserve at Camp Robinson, Nebraska, and others were guarding the transcontinental railroad line. At the same time, farther north, in the Department of Dakota, there were *ninety-two* companies, comprising some forty-five hundred men, of whom over two thousand were in the field under Brigadier General A. H. Terry. (The ill-fated Custer command was part of this force.)¹¹

The situation on the northern plains was so critical that in the summer of 1876, in spite of the excitement of the approaching election, and the fear that violence would erupt in the South, troops were withdrawn and transferred to the Department of Dakota. Two companies

important feature of the "military occupation" of the South is referred to Otis A. Singletary, *Negro Militia and Reconstruction* (Austin, Texas, 1957).

¹⁰ *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1876-77*, I, 46-47, 50-53, 61-62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

of the 2d Artillery, about one hundred men, were taken from the Department of the South, and three companies of the 7th Cavalry (the only cavalry in the South at that time) were taken from the Department of the Gulf. They arrived at Fort Lincoln, Dakota Territory, in time to march with Custer to their death at the Little Big Horn.¹²

It is usually tacitly assumed that the small forces of United States troops that were scattered over the former Confederate states were there almost exclusively for political duties. Actually, their principal, and most onerous and disagreeable duty was to assist revenue officers. This is shown by numerous reports. For a typical example, in September 1874, Company F, 2d Artillery (forty-seven officers and men) was moved to Marion, North Carolina, at the request of the secretary of the treasury. Several revenue officers had been killed in that region, and others had been threatened. The Treasury Department urged that troops be stationed permanently at Marion, but Major General Irwin McDowell remarked in his report: "It may become necessary to comply . . . but I hope not."¹³

At the time of the 1876 election there were only three states, Florida, South Carolina and Louisiana, in which the Reconstruction regime still survived. In Florida the Reconstructionists lost control as a direct result of the election, leaving South Carolina and Louisiana as the only states in which the regime was supported by Federal force. In Louisiana, Brigadier General C. C. Augur, the Department commander, reported that on election day his troops were scattered at no less than sixty-two places, with positive orders from him that they were not to interfere in any way; they were there solely to prevent disorder. Election day passed quietly, and Augur reported that he had received a large number of letters from citizens testifying to the soldiers' good conduct and courtesy.¹⁴

The election results in Louisiana were disputed, and shortly after the election Augur received orders from President Grant to furnish military protection, if necessary, for the Louisiana returning board. Because the post-election excitement centered in New Orleans, and both the business community and local officials feared rioting and disorder, Augur at once began to concentrate his widely scattered forces. Four small companies, totalling about a hundred and fifty officers and men,

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 116.

¹³ *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1874-75*, I, 99-100.

¹⁴ *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1877*, I, 99-100. Note that this is not the same report as the one previously cited for 1876-77.

were left to guard government property at several places; all the remaining troops were moved to Jackson Barracks, just outside the city. The forces thus assembled consisted of twenty-five companies, numbering less than a thousand officers and men.¹⁵

The tense situation in Louisiana grew out of the gubernatorial election. At some time during the contest, Augur received orders to post a guard at the St. Louis Hotel, which was the temporary state capitol. The guard effectively protected the Republican state government and governor-elect. The opposition, meanwhile, denied the validity of the election of the Republican candidate and formed a state government at St. Patrick's Hall. With two state governments fully organized, each claiming the other to be illegal, the situation was tense. But, outside of guarding the Republican capitol, Augur's troops maintained a strict neutrality, and there the matter rested until after Hayes' inauguration.

In South Carolina the situation was similar, but there seemed to be even greater danger of violence than in Louisiana. A bitterly contested gubernatorial election, combined with a disputed national election, aroused violent passions. During the autumn of 1876, before the election, there had been race riots in several places in the state, which were quelled by the arrival of Federal troops.¹⁶

In the ensuing election, as in Louisiana, both sides claimed victory. President Grant ordered Brigadier General T. H. Ruger, the Department commander, to "sustain Governor Chamberlain in his authority against domestic violence." Accordingly, Ruger moved a company to the state house at Columbia. The War Department ordered additional troops to South Carolina, although Ruger protested, saying that he had ample forces to handle any situation likely to arise.¹⁷ As in Louisiana, each party ignored the claims of the other and proceeded to organize its own state government. But at first Ruger's troops, unlike Augur's in Louisiana, did not maintain a strict neutrality. Officers of the guard at the capitol refused to permit opposition legislators to enter the building. Within a few days, however, Ruger reconsidered and ordered that the troops were not to take sides; they were present only to preserve order and protect the officially recognized state government from violence.

¹⁵ The companies averaged two officers and thirty-four soldiers each.

¹⁶ Francis Butler Simkins and Robert Hilliard Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1932), pp. 504-506. It is interesting to note that a company was dispatched from Charleston to Cainho, where a race riot occurred, *with orders to protect the white people.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

The opposition legislators who had been barred from the capitol, meanwhile, had organized themselves into a legislature at Carolina Hall. General Wade Hampton was formally inaugurated as governor of the state, and two fully organized state governments stood side by side. As soon as Ruger's change of orders became known, the Carolina Hall legislature crowded into the capitol, where the recognized legislature was in session. The situation was potentially explosive, but fortunately the members of both legislatures seemed to regard it as humorous, rather than deadly, treating each other with the utmost courtesy and consideration. Although purely conjectural, it is not impossible that the presence of Ruger's guard company helped keep tempers below the boiling point. At any rate, peace was maintained.

The new president had to make a decision quickly as to which government was to be recognized in each of the two states. To arrive at a decision, he invited the two South Carolina claimants to the governorship to Washington for a conference. At the same time he sent a commission to Louisiana to investigate and report upon the situation. At the close of a cabinet meeting on March 31, 1877, during which the South Carolina matter was discussed thoroughly, the president announced that as soon as the two rival governors-elect reached Columbia, he would order the troops from the capitol. On April 3, he sent a formal letter to the secretary of war: "You are directed . . . to see that proper orders are issued for the removal of . . . troops from the State House to their previous place of encampment."¹⁸ On April 10, 1877, the guard company marched out of the capitol building and returned to its home station. Reconstruction in South Carolina was ended.¹⁹ On April 20, the president issued an order almost identical in its terms with the one just quoted to remove the troops from the St. Louis Hotel, in New Orleans; very soon the blue-clad soldiers packed their equipment and marched to Jackson Barracks, where they were permanently assigned.

The Reconstruction era was over, and as for the legendary removal of troops from the South as a direct result—it simply did not occur. The troops returned to their barracks and thereafter were not used to bolster any state or local government. About this time there was, nevertheless, a considerable movement of troops from the South, but

¹⁸ Charles Richard Williams, *The Life of Rutherford B. Hayes, Nineteenth President of the United States* (Boston and New York, 1914), II, 52-53.

¹⁹ It is uncertain just where this guard company came from. Station lists for 1877 show a detachment (*not* a company) of the 18th Infantry permanently stationed at Columbia. It seems likely that the guard company came from Charleston Barracks.

for reasons that had nothing at all to do with the administration's policy toward the former Confederate states. In January 1877 a company of the 2d Infantry was transferred from the Department to the South to Jeffersonville, Indiana, to guard the immense stores of government property in the quartermaster depot there. Some recruiting parties were ordered to return to their northern home stations, and five artillery companies temporarily stationed in the South returned north—but these movements took place *before* the inauguration.²⁰

Far to the north, in Montana, Wyoming, and Dakota, and in the states of Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado, bands of Indians were harrying the frontier. Within a few days after the new president assumed office, and before he ordered the removal of the troops from the two state houses, the 3d Infantry was ordered from the Department of the Gulf to Dakota; the 16th Infantry was transferred from the South to the Department of the Missouri.²¹ It is impossible to say that these regiments were now regarded as surplus in the South because of the changing political situation, or because of the desperate need of every man and rifle possible on the plains. From the various factors involved, the latter seems probable.

In the summer of 1877 the critical situation on the frontier was further complicated by a new war that suddenly blazed in the far northwest. The Nez Percé tribe, living in Idaho and eastern Oregon and Washington, broke into rebellion against moving to a reservation to which they had been assigned. A few malcontents started fighting in June, and soon the entire tribe joined them. The Indians were led by a man who was a natural military genius, Chief Joseph, and it was quickly apparent that the troops in the Department of the Columbia were totally inadequate for the task that had so suddenly fallen upon them. The department commander, Major General O. O. Howard, a Civil War hero who had lost an arm in battle, stripped his department of every man, horse, and weapon that could be found; he recalled troops that the War Department, not anticipating the outbreak, had ordered to the war on the plains. General Irwin McDowell, who now commanded the Department of the Pacific, denuded the posts and stations in California and even drew troops from Arizona, where the Apaches were on the warpath, but still there were not enough troops to overcome Chief Joseph and the Nez Percés.

²⁰ *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1877, I, 106.*

²¹ Not to be confused with the Military Division of the Missouri, which covered almost all the territory between the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains.

Under Chief Joseph's masterly leadership, the Indians made a fighting retreat across Idaho into Montana, where they apparently hoped to join the plains Indians in the war against the whites. As the Indians moved eastward, Howard's increasingly long supply line absorbed more and more men. Together with normal attrition and from losses in combat in some of the most savage fighting in the long history of the Indian wars, Howard's command was shrinking. More and more soldiers were needed.²² Hence, in the early summer of 1877, the 2d Infantry entrained at Atlanta for the long journey across the continent to the Department of the Columbia. About the same time the 16th Infantry was ordered from the Department of the Gulf to the Department of the Missouri.

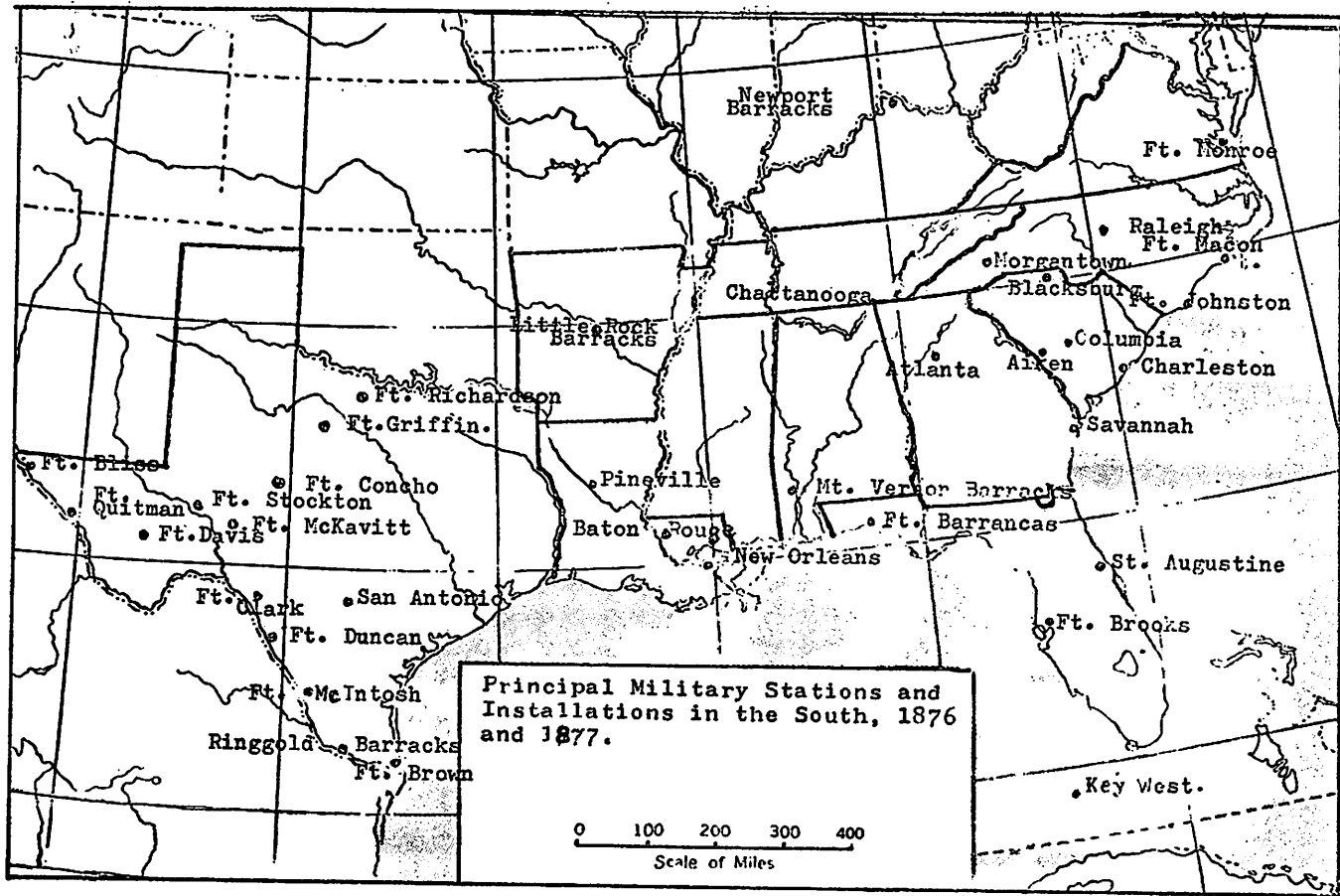
But the movement of troops northward from the South was not yet finished. The rapidly increasing industrialization of the Ohio River valley and contiguous regions brought about the nation's first serious labor troubles. The summer of 1877 saw violent railroad strikes and long continued rioting. In July, with disorder spreading, and with freight movements almost completely stopped, the governors of six states, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, appealed to the president for military assistance.

The troubled regions contained almost no United States troops. In Pennsylvania, for instance, where the greatest violence occurred, there was not a single garrison. In the other states the United States forces consisted only of recruiting parties and small detachments guarding government property. Troops to quell the disorders had to come from elsewhere. In spite of the seriousness of the frontier situation, troops en route for the Indian country were detained at Chicago; frontier posts in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Indian Territory (Oklahoma) were stripped of troops, leaving settlers and traders at the mercy of prowling bands of Indians.²³

The only reserves in the United States were the small garrisons of the seacoast fortifications and the handful of troops remaining in the

²² To illustrate the heavy attrition upon Howard's scanty forces, in one of the first fights of the war, a detachment of the 1st Cavalry, numbering less than one hundred officers and men, lost an officer and thirty-two men killed within a few minutes time. The number of wounded was not recorded.

²³ Gen. George Crook, in command of the Department of the Platte, later reported: "During the riots of July, ultimo, nearly all the troops along the line of the railroad . . . were necessarily drawn away to Chicago . . . and unfortunately, at this juncture, the depredations of *Lame Deer's* band . . . were most frequent, and appeals for troops were coming from all sides, when there were none to give." *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1877*, I, 85.



South. Thus, in July 1877, there was a steady movement, for several days, of small bodies of troops from the South into the Ohio valley. For example, Company M, 2d Artillery, three officers and twenty-nine enlisted men, left Fort Johnson, North Carolina, on July 21, for Pittsburg, where it remained until the end of August. Company F, 3d Infantry, also three officers and twenty-nine soldiers, departed from Holly Springs, Mississippi, on July 25; the end of the labor troubles found it at Scranton, Pennsylvania. Further examples would be redundant. The entire United States east of the Rockies (except for Texas) was denuded of soldiers for weeks, but in all cases, as soon as the troubles were over, they returned to their home stations.

It is not known who first made the statement that President Hayes ended the Reconstruction period by removing the troops from the South, but it has been repeated so long and so often that it seems to be a durable item of our national mythology. President Hayes' order to remove the troops from the capitols at Columbia and New Orleans did not cause the removal of a single soldier from the South. Such actual removal of troops from the South as occurred was brought about, not by the new policies of the incoming administration, but by railroad strikes, the depredations of Sitting Bull and Lane Deer, and the genius of Chief Joseph.