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REHEARSAL FOR
RECONSTRUCTION

The Port Royal Experiment

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With an Introduction by C. Vann Woodward

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race. On the other hand, the teachers and superintendents tried persuasion and attempted to arouse in the Negroes a sense of duty to their race and some notion of patriotism. Because this method was largely ineffectual, they were often disappointed in the apathetic attitude of their charges. "I wish sincerely," wrote William Allen, "that something would turn up to make these men more willing to fight for their freedom—their hungry spirit rises too easily. But forcing them into the ranks at the point of the bayonet is only driving them away." 46

That was the crux of the matter. From the time of Hunter's abortive draft of 1862 straight through the war, military authorities treated the islanders as suited their convenience, with utter disregard for the claims of humanity. Nor did they ever once allow drafting policy to be influenced by any understanding of the simplicity of a people who had hardly known a world existed beyond their islands until the Yankees started teaching them geography. The colored people did understand promises, however, and they understood that the Yankees were not keeping faith. General Saxton had assured them at the time he began recruiting on an authorized basis that no man would be taken against his will. 47

But as soon as the induction of freed slaves into the army became public policy Hunter resumed operations, and Saxton was powerless to impede his precipitate commander. With a customary lack of foresight, Hunter waited to begin forcible drafting in the spring of 1863 until the crops had put in their crops. Naturally, the Negroes did not fully exculpate the missionaries who rounded them up to explain the new developments. "Old Rachel" told William Gannett, "I tho't Mr. G. you were a gentleman and had feeling but now I see you have none." 48 The missionaries who were trying to teach the Negro fathers to assume family responsibilities were bound to see Robin's point.

When the people did not come voluntarily, squads of soldiers forcibly herded them into the camps. Surprise encroachments by day and sudden seizes in the night became regular occurrences. People were taken indiscriminately to Beaufort, without a chance to tell their families where they were, and sometimes kept for days, even when they held exemption certificates in their pockets. Much of this impressment was done by black soldiers already in the "contraband" regiments. They were not overly nice in their methods and shot at random, to the consternation of livestock and frequent injury to the people. Being for the most part illiterate, they distrusted and disregarded exemption papers, one man legally exempt was killed by a Negro press-gang that attempted to bring him in against his will. For these operations the white officers were of course fully responsible. The colored people did not take it like sheep. On one place the field women attacked the black soldiers with their hoes and were in turn fired upon. They shouted that the white men were afraid to fight and another wanted the Negroes to do their work. 49

46 Allen MS diary, February 24, 1864, typescript, p. 75.
48 Gannett MS diary, March 20, 1863, Gannett MSS; Tomlinson to McKim, March 16, 1863, McKim MSS.
50 Charles Nordhoff, The Freedmen of South Carolina (New York, 1863), p. 3; Towne MS diary, March 25, 30, April 14, 20, 26, May 18, September 21, 22, 1863; Gannett MS diary, April 14, March 23, 25, 1863; Pearson (ed.), Letters, pp. 183-189; Port Royal New South, June 13, 1863.
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The authorities seemed to regard the islands as an inexhaustible source of manpower. After three regiments of South Carolina “Volunteers” were raised, few fully eligible males remained on the plantations, but the drafts continued. In July, 1864, after much hesitation, Congress yielded at last to overwhelming pressure and authorized state governments to fill out their draft quotas in occupied areas of the South. Officials, armed with the power to offer bounties to the Negroes they could “persuade” to enlist, descended upon the islands like the plagues of Egypt, seized men at random, and as often as not pocketed the bounty money themselves. Laura Towne wrote that on the Frogmore plantation two men were shot, one killed outright and another mortally wounded. She wrote that Secretary Stanton, when he at last made a personal investigation, found that these procedures were “not uncommon, but that men were seized, their bounty appropriated and themselves sent to Morris Island without being allowed to return to tell their families where they were going.” A Treasury official completely unconnected with the missionary work wrote Governor Andrew, attempting to dissuade him from supporting state recruiting on the islands. He wrote that “The poor negroes are hunted like wild beasts. . . . There is a perfect panic throughout all these islands. Old men and invalids have taken to the bush through fear of the conscription. . . .” He could “conceive of no greater terror and distress on the coast of Africa after a slave hunt” than he had witnessed. “They have been pursued and fired at by cavalry.” He had heard of one “d—d black-hearted, black-coated sepulchral Chaplain turned negro broker” who had tried “to procure blood-hounds wherewith to hunt contrabands.”

A young Massachusetts officer in a white regiment blushed to think of “this traffic of New England towns in the bodies of wretched negroes, bidding against each other for these miserable beings who are deluded, and if some of the affidavits I have in

54 Pearson, Andreu, II, 143, note on p. 144.