

Bureaucracy in America: De Forest's Paperwork

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John W. De Forest is remembered, when he is remembered at all, as the first important novelist of the American Civil War (1861–65). When the war broke out, De Forest was already the author of a handful of novels and travel books. During his three years in the Union Army, while serving as a captain first in Louisiana and then in Virginia, he published a number of essays about his wartime experiences in the major northern magazines.¹ These essays came to the notice of a general, who detailed De Forest to his staff and charged him with publishing accounts of the battles in which the general's men had fought. In the final months of the war, this soldier-author became an administrator. He was discharged from active duty and transferred to the Reserve Veteran's Corps, and after the war had ended, he was assigned to work in the reserve corps' headquarters in Washington, where he was responsible for overseeing nine clerks in the personnel office. He was also charged with writing a report defending the corps against the generals, Ulysses S. Grant among them, who wanted it to disband. It was during this time that De Forest finished writing what would be his great Civil War novel, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867).

De Forest's career as an administrator then continued into Reconstruction (1865–77). In July 1866, he was transferred to the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, usually referred to as the Freedmen's Bureau. He served two months in the bureau's headquarters, also in Washington, where he was part of a committee that drafted regulations specifying the precise extent of bureau authority in the occupied states. He was then assigned to a local bureau office in Greenville, South Carolina, where he served from October 1866 to January 1868, overseeing all matters concerning the nearly eighty thousand people in his district. De Forest would publish six essays about southern

society in the aftermath of the war and an array of short stories on southern themes, as well as four essays about his own experiences working in the local bureau office.²

To recall that De Forest served as an administrator as well as a soldier is to recall that the Civil War and Reconstruction period entailed a remarkable expansion of government. The Civil War had been fought, after all, over the question of federal power, and the demands of fighting a vast war meant that the Confederacy no less than the Union saw government centralize over the war's four years. Nor did the end of the war reverse this process. The demands of overseeing and rebuilding the occupied southern states, as well as integrating the freed men and women into the new political order, meant that the federal government would continue to grow in size and take on new functions. For the first time the federal government assumed responsibility for aiding citizens in need, both by providing pensions to wounded soldiers and their families, and by providing food, clothing, housing, and medical care to the freed people. And new executive departments were established, among them the Departments of Justice and Agriculture, and the number of federal employees multiplied, from roughly 24,000 in 1860 to 126,000 at the turn of the century.³

This expansion of government drew new attention to bureaucracy. The major northern magazines, which voiced and set elite opinion, were filled with descriptions of bureaucracies, in particular those of the Union Army and the Freedmen's Bureau. Tracking these descriptions, I have recovered an evolving nineteenth-century discourse about bureaucracy. For the most part, this discourse was quite critical of both bureaucratic institutions and bureaucrats, but not entirely so in the United States of the 1860s. The Civil War and Reconstruction prompted at least some people in the north to see possibilities in bureaucracy as a mode of both allocating authority and of structuring organizations, but also, and more surprisingly, as a mode of literary representation. It was only in the 1870s, when the conservative backlash against Reconstruction gave rise to thoroughgoing attacks on the federal government more generally, that bureaucracy became what it remains in our political discourse today, a term of abuse.

In the evolving discourse about bureaucracy, De Forest played a key role. He not only worked within the two bureaucracies that were attracting so much attention, but he also wrote extensively about them in his letters, in his army and bureau essays, in some of his short stories and, most extensively, in *Miss Ravenel*. His letters and essays fit easily into the historical trajectory I've outlined: the wartime writings reveal the characteristically divided opinions of the 1860s, with De Forest accepting some aspects of army bureaucracy and rejecting others, while the Reconstruction-era essays attack the

bureaucracy of the Freedmen's Bureau with a ferocity that would characterize the 1870s. But while these nonfictional writings depict bureaucracy in ways typical of their time, De Forest's fictional writings do something quite different—and quite remarkable. They adopt the conventions of bureaucratic writing and turn those conventions to De Forest's own ends. Bureaucracy has so far been a neglected topic in De Forest's writings.⁴ In attending to it, I hope not only to bring into focus the broader nineteenth-century discourse about bureaucracy, but also to reveal new aspects of De Forest's fictional project, its literary as well as political commitments.

Bureaucracy and the Civil War

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the word "bureaucracy" appeared in political writings only rarely, and very often in italics that marked the concept as suspiciously French. This would change in the early 1850s with the publication of a new travel book by the Scotsman Samuel Laing, *Observations on the Social and Political State of the European People in 1848 and 1849* (1850). In Laing's account, bureaucracies had emerged on the continent to take over a function that the aristocracy could no longer perform, namely mediating between the sovereign and the people. The bureaucracy serves, then, as a new governing class, one that is just as tyrannical, in Laing's view, as the aristocracy it had succeeded. Laing's book was widely reviewed in Britain, and it was also the subject of a long essay in the *North American Review*, which made Laing's account of bureaucracy part of American political discourse as well.

In the course of discussing Laing's account of bureaucracy, other writers revised and expanded it, adding new sets of associations in the process. First, they insisted that bureaucrats can be found only on the continent (in Austria and France, in Prussia and Russia) and in China, but not in Britain, except in the colonial administration, and certainly not in the United States. These writers did not deny that the British and Americans had administrative officials, but they argued that the governments of both countries were too small and too decentralized for any governing class to form—and, in the United States, that the officials were rotated in and out of office too quickly, as well. Second, these writers associated bureaucrats with particular governmental purposes, such as regulation, investigation, and the commitments of a welfare state. Bureaucrats seek, as one writer put it, to "direct our life, to know what is best for us, to measure out our labour, to superintend our studies, to prescribe our opinions, to make itself answerable for us, to put us to bed, tuck us up, put on our nightcap, and administer our gruel."⁵ Hence the sense that bureaucracy was tyranny of a new kind: in the view of another observer, bureaucrats do

not "enslave" the people so much as reduce them to a "swathed and bandaged helplessness."⁶ But even as they involve themselves in all aspects of the people's lives, they exhibit a stunning indifference to the people. "They care nothing for the people among whom or upon whom they exercise their functions," concluded the *North American Review*, "and the people care nothing for them."⁷

Thus, the dominant nineteenth-century discourse about bureaucracy focused on bureaucrats as a class. It would reach its fullest expression in the writings of John Stuart Mill, who defines bureaucracy along recognizably Laingian lines as "government in the hands of the governors by profession."⁸ Believing that such government is necessarily more efficient than government in the hands of the people's representatives, Mill concludes *On Liberty* (1859) by arguing that the central problem for representative governments is finding a way to draw on the knowledge of bureaucrats without undermining the people's capacity for self-rule. This question would return in the later nineteenth-century campaigns, in both Britain and the United States, for civil service reform.

Another view of bureaucracy emerged, however, in response to war. The Crimean War (1853–56) made the British recognize that they did, in fact, have a bureaucracy by drawing public attention to the military and governmental administrations. More importantly, however, the obvious failures of those administrations prompted observers to think of bureaucracies in a new way. For the problem posed by the Crimean War was not the tyranny of bureaucrats as a class, but rather the inefficiency of certain bureaucratic institutions. To attack this inefficiency, some writers borrowed existing tropes used to satirize the law, such as the red tape that bound legal documents and the pigeonholes in which they were filed, while Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) brought two new tropes into common currency, the Circumlocution Office and How Not to Do It. In these tropes, we see an attempt to describe, if only to condemn, the characteristic workings of bureaucratic institutions and they therefore mark the first efforts to grasp what Max Weber would later describe more neutrally as the techniques of rational administration.⁹ Here, then, we can find the origins of an emergent discourse about bureaucracy that would become dominant in the twentieth century. The crisis of the Crimean War prompted calls for administrative reform, and the debates over these reforms revealed considerable divisions among British elites in how to think about bureaucrats and bureaucratic institutions: had England always had a bureaucracy, or was the bureaucracy new? were bureaucrats aristocratic or democratic? and, most urgently, was it possible to make bureaucratic institutions more efficient without further reinforcing the power of bureaucrats as a class? Various positions were taken in these debates, but they all shared

one presupposition: that bureaucracy, whether bureaucratic institutions or bureaucrats as a class, was a force to be contained and controlled.

The Civil War also altered American views of bureaucracy, but in more varied and surprising ways, as contemporary writings about the army reveal. Red tape and circumlocution appear in these writings as well, but two other tropes are even more central. The first is the army regulation, which figures the specialized knowledge that regular soldiers already had and volunteer soldiers needed to acquire. When volunteers joined the army, they presumed that they needed little training, and volunteer officers, in particular, took it for granted that their earlier experiences leading civilians had more than prepared them for leading soldiers. The regulations they were required to learn, like the drills they were obligated to perform, seemed, to many, to symbolize the uselessness of specialized training. In this respect, De Forest was typical of other volunteers: in his early letters, he complains about the army regulations, which he dismisses as mere "military manners" and "soldierly etiquette."¹⁰ But once in battle, volunteers recognized the value of the regular soldiers' specialized knowledge—and the value of the regulations through which this knowledge was preserved and transmitted. One of the war's most common narratives, then, followed a volunteer soldier as he learned to appreciate the regular army and its regulation ways. The volunteer colonel and man of letters Thomas Higginson wryly commented on this narrative, noting that volunteers entered the army believing that the "'Army Regulations' were a mass of old-time rubbish, which they would gladly reedit, under contract, with immense improvements, in a month or two" and left it having discovered that "the same book was a mine of wisdom, as yet but half explored!"¹¹ And Higginson's observation is confirmed by the historian Wayne Hseih, who has found diaries and letters recording the volunteers' growing realization that they must learn to follow regulations, must commit themselves to the drill, before they can learn how to lead and to fight.¹² De Forest was typical in this respect as well. After six months in the army, he was entirely persuaded that all volunteer regiments should be put under the command of regular officers, even when those officers came in the form of a very young lieutenant colonel from West Point, with a "boyish face" and handkerchief in hand, "blushing . . . like a bashful girl at her first party" and yet thoroughly "familiar with the articles of war" (*Volunteer* 44). The volunteers' growing respect for the regular army is significant because it is at odds with the general nineteenth-century resistance to a permanent governing class. The regular army had been limited in size for the same reason that the federal government has been, out of a republican conviction that ordinary citizens should come forward to govern or to fight when needed by their country: the

volunteers' recognition of the regular army's value may have helped prepare them to accept government bureaucrats.

The other crucial trope was paperwork, which figured the army's techniques of rational administration and thereby pointed toward the question of how bureaucracies actually work. The Civil War drew attention, as the Crimean War had done, to the institutional aspects of the army, in particular its infrastructure. The regular army retained an administrative and supply apparatus in peacetime so that the army could expand rapidly for war, but this apparatus had to grow and further centralize in order to transport and supply more than a million soldiers across a territory that extended from Maryland to Texas. Even so, the apparatus was still not sufficient. A voluntary association, the Sanitary Commission, formed to supply the army hospitals, organize the army camps, and tend to the wounded soldiers. Some observers viewed the administering of the army and the supplying of the soldiers as impeding the army's true function: fighting battles. And nowhere was the impediment more clear than in the paperwork this apparatus required.

This case is made particularly vehemently in *Red-Tape and Pigeon-Hole Generals* (1864), an attack of the Army of the Potomac by an anonymous officer serving within it. The attack focuses on a bureaucracy-mad general, who berates the author for trivial inconsistencies between the many copies of a document he has prepared and who consults the "French authorities" on bureaucracy to see if these errors invalidate the document.¹³ In response to this, the author muses that the army would be better if the general were allowed to devote himself exclusively to filing papers, for to put such a man in charge of actual soldiering is to ensure that battles will never be fought: "T's must be crossed when we ought to be crossing the Potomac; i's dotted when we ought to be dotting Virginia fields with our tents."¹⁴ Nor was this anonymous author alone. The northern magazines were filled with bitter references to the red tape that kept soldiers from marching and to the regulations that kept them from receiving the medical care they needed. De Forest shares this contempt for the army's paperwork, which only grows as the war goes on. While still training, he praises the patience of his general, who was willing to instruct a volunteer officer in the paperwork required by the army's property returns, but soon he is bitterly complaining about the War Department clerks who expect an officer to complete his returns while "on the march or in the midst of battle" (*Volunteer* 151). It is clear that De Forest sees the paperwork and the battle as opposed, and he more generally fails to see the value of the army's administrative and supply apparatus. He speaks dismissively of the army's quartermasters and cooks, lumping them in with ordinary shirkers as part of the "hundreds of men who never fight" (173), without seeing the connections between

the work that cooks and quartermasters do and his own sufferings when inadequately fed or supplied.

But alongside these criticisms we can find other accounts which seek to explain to civilian readers and to volunteers alike that the army's administrative and supply apparatus is precisely what makes it possible for soldiers to fight. The *Continental Monthly*, for instance, devoted two essays to explaining the various bureaus of the army, emphasizing that the most brilliant general cannot dream up a battle plan without consulting his adjutant to learn how many of his men are able to fight, the ordnance and commissary officers to make sure the men can be properly armed and fed, and the quartermaster to make sure they can be transported to the battlefield.¹⁵ A handful of observers went even further in their analysis, attempting to defend not only the ends that the administrative and supply apparatus was trying to achieve, but also the specifically bureaucratic means used to achieve them. Here, for instance, is one officer from the Sanitary Commission, offering an analysis of the army's bureaucracy which looks forward to that of Weber in its attention to accountability and limited responsibility: "Discipline is the soul of an army; strict accountableness and limited responsibility are essential in the administration of military affairs. Routine makes the skeleton, and red-tape applies the ligaments of the system."¹⁶ In these ways, the expansion of the army's apparatus taught people to recognize and, in some cases, to appreciate the bureaucratic systems that structure large organizations.

Thus the Civil War-era debates over bureaucracy, in which De Forest took fairly conservative positions. Although he learned to admire the regular soldiers, he never learned to appreciate the army's administrative and supply apparatus, much less the paperwork that made it function. His published Civil War essays make no reference to this apparatus at all, preferring to treat war as if it were solely a matter of fighting. But in *Miss Ravenel*, bureaucracy becomes central to the novel's depiction of war, and De Forest shows a new respect for its paperwork.

De Forest's Conversion to Bureaucracy

In 1868, De Forest issued a literary manifesto entitled "The Great American Novel," which begins by announcing that such an American novel has yet to be written. It then runs through the list of American novelists, from James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Oliver Wendell Holmes, to show how each has fallen short. Some, in De Forest's view, have focused too exclusively on a single region or class of characters, thereby failing to represent the nation as a whole, while others

have tended toward comedy or romance and so fail to offer the "truthful outlining of character" and "natural speaking" that would soon be called realism.¹⁷ The manifesto names the aspirations, both the political aspiration to national representativeness and the aesthetic aspiration toward realism, that had inspired *Miss Ravenel*, published just a few months before.

Miss Ravenel's commitment to realism takes two forms, the first of which is borrowed from Cervantes. Again and again, De Forest draws attention to the differences between his own novel and the conventional narratives it rewrites. The narrator, for instance, makes much of the fact that the novel's heroine is not beautiful but merely very charming, and he delights in undoing other conventions of the courtship plot. In much the same way, heroic narratives are also rewritten. The novel's hero, a young captain, has fallen under the sway of a glamorous older colonel and volunteered for the army. Once the war begins, however, he realizes that battle is not glorious but instead terrifying and bewildering, and he realizes that battles are only a small part of war, which is mostly made up of tedious waiting and arduous marching. These Cervantes-like rewritings are interspersed, however, with realism of another kind. In the novel's battle scenes the Thackerayan narrator recedes, to be replaced by a narration focalized on the captain's own impressions. The result is a realism not merely pictorial, for the sights of limbs shot off and eyes hanging out are paired with the incessant sound and smoke of artillery explosions and an almost maddening thirst. *Miss Ravenel* is equally committed to representing the nation as a whole. It offers an almost ethnographic account of social life in New England and New Orleans, touching on Virginia and New York society as well; in the process, region becomes the novel's fundamental ground of characterization. At the same time the novel attempts, as much postbellum literature would do, not only to represent the nation but also to recreate national feeling in the aftermath of civil war. Borrowing the conventional plot of the sectional romance, the novel shows how the heroine, a fiery Louisiana belle, finally learns to love the hero, the young captain, a morally-upright New England man.

De Forest's manifesto set the terms for the novel's reception. Critics in De Forest's day praised the novel for the realism of its characterizations and its battle scenes, and twentieth-century critics continued to praise the battle scenes as well. More recently, critics have focused on De Forest's politics, by which they mean his efforts toward national reconciliation, with Nina Silber arguing that *Miss Ravenel* established the pattern that subsequent sectional romances would follow and Martin Buinicki and Gregory Jackson showing that De Forest's conception of reconciliation was more complicated than it

might at first seem.¹⁸ But if De Forest was engaged with questions of nationhood, he was also engaged with questions of government, as we can see from his persistent interest in bureaucracy. Attending to bureaucracy sheds new light on De Forest's views about the postbellum political situation—and also reveals unnoticed features of his realism.

In *Miss Ravenel* bureaucracy is central to the novel's structure. The young captain's induction into the army is depicted as an extended encounter with bureaucracy. The induction begins on board a ship carrying him and his company south. He is called before the colonel, whose laconic heroism had inspired him to volunteer, but now a new side of the colonel appears. The colonel asks to see the captain's property returns, which come wrapped in "the famous, the historical, the proverbial red tape," and he then calls all the other new officers before him and delivers a long speech celebrating, of all things, army regulations:

Gentlemen, the United States Army Regulations are as important to you as the United States Army Tactics. Ignorance of one will get you into trouble as surely as ignorance of the other. . . . You ought to take a pride, gentlemen, in learning the whole of our profession.¹⁹

The celebration is interspersed with comic anecdotes. In one, the colonel returns victorious from his first battle against the Indians and is chastised for not being able to account for three ball-screws he had lost; in another, he describes a fellow officer's dealings with the War Department over trivial sums and unending paperwork. The colonel permits his officers to laugh at these anecdotes, but this does not stop him from ending his speech with a paean to bureaucracy: "Red-Tape means order, accuracy, honesty, solvency" (103).

Just as the captain's entry into the army was marked by his paperwork, so too is his exit. After three years of war, he returns home, gaunt and feverish, his only baggage the large wooden box containing the company papers. Shocked by his appearance, the Ravens urge him to get medical care immediately, but he insists that he must first complete his mustering-out roll, which records "the name of every officer and man that ever belonged to the company—where, when, and by whom enlisted—where, when, and by whom mustered in—when and by whom last paid—what bounty paid and what bounty due—balance of clothing account—stoppages of all sorts—facts and dates of every promotion and reductions, discharge, death and desertion—number and date of every important order" (*Ravenel* 434). Horrified by his feverish obsession with his paperwork but unable to persuade him to abandon it, the Ravens watch as he doses himself with opium in order to get the paperwork done. In his drugged and delirious state, the captain keeps recurring to his earlier attempts to complete his property returns and update

his lists of wounded men while marching and fighting through the Shenandoah Valley. When he is finally done with the mustering-out roll, the Ravenels help him in the only way they can, by making the requisite four copies.

It is difficult to interpret this pair of scenes. On the one hand, they seem to be satirizing bureaucracy. The anecdotes the colonel tells and his culminating praise of "Red-Tape" could make him the cousin of the bureaucracy-mad officer in *Red Tape and Pigeon Hole Generals*, while the paperwork required of the captain at the end seems grotesque, even cruel. But on the other hand, the bureaucracy is something that the colonel and the captain themselves embrace. And in this novel given to ironizing all perspectives, the two touchstones of proper judgment are the colonel's opinions about army matters and the captain's opinions about everything once his initial innocence is dispelled: if the captain is wrong about bureaucracy, it's finally the only thing he's wrong about. Moreover, the novel's plot confirms the characters' judgment: the colonel's tragic fall is not complete until his betrayal of his wife through adultery is paired with his betrayal of his army through fraudulent property returns. In these ways, the novel presents bureaucracy as something admirable, but describes it in a way that makes it impossible for readers to admire, thereby creating a disjunction between the novel's view of bureaucracy and our own. Something similar is at work in the novel's first battle scene. One of the soldiers in the captain's command is shot and another requests permission to carry him to a field hospital, but the captain refuses because he knows that doing so would be contrary to regulations, which the narrator then goes on to quote at length: "Soldiers must not be permitted to leave the ranks . . ." (*Ravenel* 254). For a civilian reader, this passage can only be ridiculous: in the midst of the battlefield, regulations seem entirely out of place. But for a soldier like De Forest, who has learned that regulations encode precisely the knowledge that is needed in battle, the captain's recalling of the regulations is the most natural thing in the world. This seeming formal oddity thus underscores, once again, the difference between soldier and civilian.

And this difference is precisely the point. For De Forest insists on a strict separation between the world of soldiers and the world of civilians, and the novel's plot rigorously polices the line: whenever the two worlds come into contact, as when officers are deputed to govern the conquered territories or when politicians meddle in army promotions, both are compromised. And this separation is further marked by the army's bureaucracy. It is no coincidence that the novel's most extended treatments of bureaucracy come when the captain is entering the army and when he is leaving it: De Forest uses army bureaucracy, which soldiers appreciate and civilians fail to understand, precisely to set the boundary between the two.

De Forest insists on the separation between soldiers and civilians for two reasons. The first is political. *Miss Ravenel* is set at a moment of transition between two political orders: an antebellum world dominated by gentlemen, and a postbellum world dominated by what De Forest calls "the plain people." De Forest's allegiances are with the gentlemen, as his biography would suggest and his characterizations confirm. The novel's main characters may represent an array of regions, but they all come from a single class: the captain is the product of old New England and Yale; the colonel, of old Virginia and West Point; the heroine comes from the highest circles of New Orleans society, and her father, from the highest circles of Charleston; and even the colonel's comically drunken adjutant is the product of Columbia and old New York. Everywhere surrounding the main characters, but only rarely brought into focus, are the plain people. They are celebrated in the abstract, as when the captain apostrophizes, "Oh, these noblemen of nature, our American common soldiers!" (*Ravenel* 323), but they are depicted as individual characters only rarely—and then, almost always satirized. The narrator reminds himself, from time to time, that Abraham Lincoln had been a plain person as well, but no such figure appears within the novel, and only one plain person of even ordinary dignity.

When the war breaks out, the gentlemen presume that its conduct will be in their hands. Indeed, the experienced colonel recruits the inexperienced captain precisely because he believes that any "college man" (*Ravenel* 31) or "gentleman" (74) can be made a good officer within three months. And the governor, though himself a plain person, is happy to give the gentlemanly captain a company of his own. But the captain finds that his company is hard to fill because his fellow gentlemen are reluctant to volunteer and the plain people prefer to join companies run by men like themselves. This is the sign that, as the narrator says, the plain people are determined to "lead the fighting as well as to do it" (79). De Forest sees the justice of their determination, but he nonetheless resists it, unable to imagine a more democratic government as leading to anything but corruption and incompetence. In this context, the army becomes compelling as a model of a political order neither aristocratic nor democratic, but rather what we now call a meritocracy. In the army, as the captain describes it, "all . . . distinctions are rubbed out; it is who can fight best, march best, command best; each one stands on the base of his individual manhood" (329). That this vision of advancement would motivate the civil service reformers of the postbellum period is another sign that the regular army would prepare Americans for governmental bureaucracy.

De Forest was not alone in conceiving of the army as a meritocracy: many wartime writings praised it for permitting worthy enlisted men to rise through the ranks. But this is not how the meritocracy works in *Miss Ravenel*. Rather than providing a structure in

which the plain people can rise, it re-authorizes the gentlemen already in power. A plain person could be distinguished for "fighting best, marching best, commanding best," but none ever is, while the colonel is thrice celebrated by his men because, in their distinctively American idiom, he "knows his own business" (*Ravenel* 100), because he "'knew his biz'" (172), and finally because "he knew his business so well." (214). Moreover, the captain does turn out to be an exemplary officer, just what the colonel had hoped of a gentleman. In this way, the new meritocratic model of governance that De Forest proposes turns out to be nothing but a screen for a residual attachment to something like aristocracy.

The separation between army and civilian life has a literary significance as well: it shapes the novel's depiction of war. *Miss Ravenel* is explicitly concerned with how the war should be depicted. The novel reproduces patriotic poems, sentimental songs, and newspaper editorials, disparaging them all for failing to capture the war's reality. Moreover, it shows the young captain gradually learning to depict the war more accurately. His early letters about the war are marred by grandiloquent rhetoric—the regiment is "noble," the colonel, a "hero," and the general, a "genius" (*Ravenel* 192)—while the more experienced colonel writes off-handedly of a "smart little fight" and "whipp[ing] the enemy handsomely" (191). But later, when the captain has more experience of war, his letters, which are drawn from the ones De Forest had sent to his wife, adopt the same realism that would typify the novel's battle scenes. Within the novel, this form of realism is held up as superior to other modes of representation, but the novel can imagine something even better. *Miss Ravenel*, after all, is not the kind of thing that the soldiers themselves would read. When the captain returns home from war, he no longer reads the newspaper accounts of the war, filled with what the narrator calls "picturesque particulars" (440) and we might call realist detail. Instead, he reads only the official reports of the battles, written and read by those within the army. These are not very striking narratives; indeed, they are hardly narratives at all. But they do not need to be. The facts are enough for those who know how to read them: a simple list of "the positions, the dispositions, the leaders, [and] the general results" is enough for an experienced soldier to "infer the minutiae" (440). And it is in this context that we can best understand the final paperwork that the captain must do. To civilians, the list of topics that the mustering-out roll must complete—the enlistments, the promotions, the desertions, the deaths, the clothing, the orders, the supplies—is only so much trivial paperwork. But to a soldier who knows the army, to a veteran like the captain, these figures add up to the whole story of the war.

Twenty years after *Miss Ravenel* was published, De Forest reflected on all that the novel had achieved and failed to achieve: "I tried, and I told all I dared, and perhaps all I could," he confesses, before going on to allude to the experiences he had failed to

convey.²⁰ De Forest's emphasis on "'telling" and "daring" reminds us that nineteenth-century realism was intended as a communicative act, seeking not only to represent the world, but also to create imagined relations among author, subjects, and readers. But if this is what the novel's battle scenes only partly manage to do, it is not at all what the novel's paperwork attempts. For paperwork, as De Forest conceives of it, is the mode of representation that makes sense only among those who have been brought together by the experience of war, not merely its depiction. And bureaucracy more generally, as De Forest uses it in *Miss Ravenel*, draws the line between soldiers and civilians, between the army and the postbellum political world.

Bureaucracy and Reconstruction

When the war ended, the army soon shrank to a mere constabulary force, but new federal bureaucracies emerged. The first and most visible of these was the Freedmen's Bureau, which was the subject not only of bitter debate in Congress, but also of considerable attention in the northern magazines. Much of this attention focused on its status as a bureaucratic institution. There were some descriptions of the elaborate hierarchy of bureau officials and some account of the many regulations that governed the bureau's actions, but particular attention was paid to its paperwork. Paperwork became the bureau's defining trope, so much so, indeed, that the bureau's commissioner would describe the moment of assuming control of the bureau as a transfer of papers: he recalls that the Secretary of War approached him, holding a "large, oblong, bushel basket heaped with letters and documents" in his hands and saying with a smile, "Here, general, *here's your Bureau!*"²¹ Some of these papers were property receipts of the kind that army bureaucracy required to track the flow of goods, but most attempted to gather and disseminate information about the people and conditions in the occupied southern states. This was an unprecedented thing for the federal government to do. Prior to the war, the federal government gathered little information, such as only what was needed to justify Indian removal and westward expansion. The historian Oz Frankel has argued that the 1860s efforts to gather information about the freed people were initiated by elites who wanted to remake US social policy along more continental lines.²²

What is striking about the 1860s descriptions of bureau paperwork is how positive they are. Contemporary observers approved of the bureau's project of gathering information, and the northern magazines summarized many of the bureau's reports: the *Nation* and *Harper's Weekly* even established regular columns for this. Bureaucratic reports were no longer confined to the bureaucracy but instead circulated information

more widely. In addition to summarizing the bureau's reports, these magazines also adopted some of the conventions of bureau paperwork, in particular those that sought to ensure comprehensiveness and objectivity. We can see this most clearly in the writings of the many northern reporters who went south in the aftermath of the war. For the most part, these reporters follow the familiar conventions of nineteenth-century travel writing, going from one place to another, recording their chance observations and conversations along the way, seeking to paint a complete picture from a subjective perspective and many brief glimpses. But when they visit the local bureau office, as they do whenever they enter a new town, their writing falls under the influence of paperwork. Some adopt its conventions by reproducing the actual forms, as when one reproduces a report on violent outrages. "Complaint is made," the catalogue begins, with the passive voice removing the agent's subjectivity from the record.²³ The catalogue then goes on to offer a comprehensive account of all the acts of violence committed against the freed people in the first two weeks of September 1865 in Davidson, North Carolina. Other reporters acknowledge the superiority of paperwork by using the bureau agent to focalize a perspective more comprehensive and objective than any other, including the reporters' own. In these travel books, the perspectives of most persons are captured in all their subjectivity, with direct quotations that preserve peculiarities of dialect and a few sentences of vivid character sketch. But the bureau agents go undescribed and their speeches are recorded indirectly, with the repeated phrase "the agent reports that" anchoring descriptions of unchallenged authority. In this way, many writers of the late 1860s found in bureaucratic reports a model for depictions more comprehensive and objective than anything to be found in nineteenth-century realism.

In the same magazines that were excerpting bureau reports and interviewing bureau agents, De Forest's own Reconstruction essays appeared. Six of these essays describe the various classes of southern society, and four describe the day-to-day workings of the local bureau offices. These essays take a much more critical view of bureaucracy than either *Miss Ravenel* or the wartime writings had done, and the reason for this is not far to seek: De Forest was deeply at odds with the bureau's mission. Charged with assisting and superintending the freed people and the unionists who had been displaced by war, the agents of the Freedmen's Bureau were empowered to intervene when the local justice system was not working fairly and also to provide aid to those in need. This marked a radical shift from state to federal government, and a radical expansion of governmental power more generally. In the late 1860s, northern elites were generally supportive of this transformation, but De Forest was not. He insists in his essays that the purpose of

Reconstruction is to return power to the states as quickly as possible, and he thinks of himself as an "instrument of Reconstruction" when he refuses to intervene on a freed person's behalf.²⁴ He invariably deferred to the local authorities, claiming that it was impossible to determine the limits of the bureau's power even though he had spent two months in Washington helping to draft the regulations that set those limits.²⁵ In much the same way, De Forest insists that aid demoralizes those in need by rendering them unable or unwilling to work, and that the demoralization is all the greater when the aid comes from the government because then it seems like a right, not a charity. For this reason, De Forest balks at requesting rations to distribute in his district even though he recognizes that the people are hungry because the harvest was poor. And when, as the hunger gets worse, the bureau sends him the rations he has not requested, he devises an elaborate system of his own to make sure that none are given to the undeserving.

Fundamentally opposed to the bureau's mission, De Forest vigorously attacks its bureaucracy. This would become a common strategy in antigovernmental writings, but De Forest gives it an unusual twist: he protests against the bureau's bureaucracy by creating a persona who exemplifies all the indolence and self-interest of bureaucrats as a class. By all external accounts, De Forest was a hardworking agent, but his persona is flagrantly, almost sublimely, lazy—and still complaining about all he must do. This persona continually remarks on how busy he is, but the essays suggest that he actually does very little work: he arrives at his office at eight in the morning and stops work every day punctually at two in the afternoon. In between, he typically handles no more than five petitioners a day, mostly by peremptorily dismissing them. He is expected to travel through his district, investigating conditions in the outlying areas, but he refuses to do so, he says, because it would be too tiring; later, when he learns that such trips will soon be required, he resigns his commission. All of this is quite far from the young captain eager to learn the whole of his profession. On the contrary, when the persona learns that a former Confederate soldier had impersonated him in his absence and dealt with some freedmen's complaints, he blandly concludes that a "sham Bureau officer" can do the job as well as a real one, so long as he is properly instructed in the bureaucrat's "how not to do it" (*Reconstruction* 26).

De Forest is particularly opposed to the bureau's paperwork. He objects to the property returns that *Miss Ravenel's* colonel had celebrated, seeing them as one of the techniques of bureaucratic administration that make his job more difficult. When he finally distributes rations to the hungry, for instance, he is required to receipt every bushel of corn, as well as every sack in which the corn was carried. But De Forest is even more skeptical

of the reports he is required to file. As a bureau agent, De Forest was obligated to prepare monthly reports on labor contracts made, outrages committed, rations distributed, the numbers of freedmen and women, and the attendance in the freedmen's schools, along with special reports on the numbers of the disabled, the indigent, and the orphaned, as well as the amount and variety of the region's crops. In these requirements, we see the new governmental aspiration to gather information about all its southern citizens, but De Forest's account of paperwork emphasizes that the information gathered is not as comprehensive as it might seem. He reveals that he was unable to gather the information required for the special reports; instead, he consulted with some leading citizens and made his best estimates, the only alternative being to go "a-harvesting in the depths of my subjective" (*Reconstruction* 41). And if the content of these reports is questionable, their form can be obscuring. De Forest reproduces some of the reports on the destitute that his assistants had produced, recording every spelling mistake and unintelligible notation: "Susan Chertain, wid," we see, "thinks She must Suffer without help," "Tilda Burgess, do," is "and Verry hard Run to git bred," while "J. C. Fortner, male," is "him Self not able to Work much and his wife Sickly and now in want" and "Salley Turner wd" is "Rather Ediot & nearly naked nothin to Eat" (81). While many of De Forest's contemporaries were embracing the bureau's paperwork as a more comprehensive and objective mode of writing, De Forest was exposing its possible mediations and limits.

Newly skeptical of paperwork as a mode of representation, De Forest is less willing than he had been in *Miss Ravenel* to imagine it as a possible model for his own writing. In a handful of Reconstruction-era short stories, he does adopt the forms of paperwork, but always for purely comic effect. In "Lieutenant Barker's Ghost" (1869), for instance, a bureau agent sees what seems to be the ghost of a Confederate officer: he recalls himself to his senses by imagining how shocked his superiors would be if he were to include the ghost in the next Report of Outrages. And in "Mr. Pullet's Mistake" (1867), an army colonel has his revenge on the man who has sent a love letter to the colonel's wife: he returns the letter to the man's own wife, duly summarized and receipted according to all bureaucratic forms, and "respectfully referred to Mrs. Joseph Pullet, who will please attend immediately to the morals and intellects of her husband."²⁶

But these adoptions of bureaucratic conventions are rare. For while the northern reporters traveling through the southern states make their travel writings more like bureau reports, De Forest wants to make his reports more like conventional fiction. We can see this most clearly if we track a single convention, the outrage, or instance of interracial violence, as it migrates from genre to genre. First, there is the official report

of outrages, which De Forest prepares monthly for the bureau and satirizes in an essay, also entitled "A Report of Outrages" (1868), for *Harper's Monthly Magazine*. De Forest begins by observing that only seven such outrages were committed during his tenure as a bureau agent: seven outrages, divided by fifteen months of service, further divided by two different forms, each prepared in triplicate, leaves, as De Forest dryly notes, "very nearly one-thirteenth of an outrage." De Forest then selects one of these outrages to be translated into a second form: the anecdote. The first anecdote he recounts in this essay focuses on a freedman who shoots at a gang of white men attempting to break into his cabin. He injures one of them: afraid of being lynched, he comes to the bureau in search of federal protection. De Forest insists, however, that the freedman turn himself over to the local courts because he wants to demonstrate that the local courts can be trusted and that the federal occupation can therefore soon come to an end. And indeed, justice is done in this one case. This anecdote is then followed by three others, which do not refer to racial violence at all. Instead, they refer to more timeless figures, the gangs of "bushwhackers" or "bandits," who instill fear, but also awe, in their neighbors.

It is these bushwhackers, rather than the freedmen or any other more familiar figure of Reconstruction, who return in a third genre: the short story. "Fate Ferguston" (1867), the most accomplished of De Forest's bureau stories, is framed by a bureaucratic encounter. A family of yeoman farmers appears in a bureau agent's office to report the lynching of their son and demand that justice be done; the agent investigates the matter and, at the end of the story, reports his findings to his superiors. In doing so, he reveals a keen understanding of bureaucratic procedure. Having learned that the son belonged to a gang of unionists turned bushwhackers and having decided that the lynching was a form of rough justice, he submits these findings to the bureau with a request for "special instructions." When this request is met with silence, he knows his judgment has been tacitly approved and the case "committed to pigeon-hole oblivion."²⁷ Within this savvily bureaucratic frame, however, De Forest presents his findings not as a bureau report, but rather as a conventional narrative.

The shift from official report to anecdotal essay to short story has formal consequences: a single story, or even a series of anecdotes, makes no claim to comprehensiveness. De Forest ends up recording only one of the nine outrages he was required to report, the case of the freedman shooting at the bushwhackers, and this one case signifies in two interrelated ways. Taken on its own, it implies that violence in Reconstruction-era South Carolina is sporadic, even infrequent; read synecdochically, as standing in for all other acts of violence, it implies that whatever violence occurs is treated justly by the local

courts. In this way, the abandonment of bureaucratic forms for conventional narrative has significant political consequences. Moreover, the particular narrative that De Forest has chosen to tell has political consequences as well. This narrative belongs to a genre that had no name in the 1860s but clearly stands as a precursor to the western, a genre that emerged at the turn of the century. Here, as in the western, there is something larger than life about three men who live off their terrified neighbors, sleeping wherever they want and seizing whatever they need, shooting any man who is not deferential enough, and shooting some men just for fun. Such men seem timeless, disconnected from any specific historical context. And so while De Forest learns, for instance, that Fate Ferguston had been a unionist during the war, brutally persecuted by his Confederate neighbors, he insists that this did not motivate Ferguston's later actions: the war, he says, merely gave "a color of justice" to what had always been outlawry.²⁸ In this way, the narrative of the outlaw draws attention away from the lingering divisions of the postwar period. It similarly draws attention away from the persistent oppression of the freed men and women. We can see this most clearly in one of the bushwhacker anecdotes from "A Report on Outrages," in which De Forest describes the colorful adventures of Texas Brown and his gang. As it happens, these adventures begin when a local planter hires the gang to murder one of his two former slaves who now refuse to work for him, preferring to find another employer. One of the freedmen is killed while the other escapes, but this is merely the introduction to the story De Forest really wants to tell, which is about the "wonderful horsemanship and marksmanship" of the outlaws and other "reckless feats" (19). In these ways, the dangers faced by unionists and freed people are obscured—and so, too, is the true nature of the ongoing resistance to federal power, which was shared by many former Confederates, not merely a handful of colorful outlaws.

De Forest's bureau writings were at odds with many of the many Reconstruction writings appearing in the northern magazines of the late 1860s. For while many northern elites supported the bureau's project of federal occupation and federal aid and while many northern writers saw in the bureau reports a more objective and comprehensive account of the newly-reconstituted nation, De Forest rejected the bureau and the bureau writings together. But a view that put him on the conservative side of northern opinion in the late 1860s would be mainstream by the mid-1870s, when elite northern opinion had turned decisively against Reconstruction. And once the bureau had been abolished and Reconstruction came to an end, the many pro-bureau and pro-bureaucracy writings of the period would be forgotten, and the critical views of skeptics like De Forest would prevail. As a consequence, it is hard for us to imagine that there was ever time when Americans would celebrate government bureaucracy and admire its paperwork.

The Literature of Reconstruction

Nearly fifty years ago, the historian John Hope Franklin concluded his study of Reconstruction by observing that the period has long been misunderstood because it has been so grossly misrepresented in "fictional [and] near-fictional accounts."²⁹ De Forest played a crucial role in helping those misrepresentations take hold. In January 1868, he quit his position at the Freedmen's Bureau, returned to civilian life, and sought to support himself through his writing. Fairly soon after that, he stopped publishing works about the south, except for works about Reconstruction. Among these are two novels about life in Washington during the Grant administration, *Honest John Vane* (1874) and *Playing the Mischief* (1875), as well as short stories such as "The Colored Member" (1872), "The Inspired Lobbyist" (1872), and "An Independent Ku-Klux" (1872). In the short stories, the carpetbaggers are scheming, the unionists are craven, the freedmen are ludicrously unqualified to hold office, and the Ku Klux Klan is nothing more than a broad joke (albeit one that ends with a dead freedman). The novels focus on the corruption of Washington, implicitly blaming it on the Reconstruction-era state governments. Here, the federal government is a place where offices are bought and sold, bribes are exchanged on the floor of Congress, and elaborate scams defraud the government in the name of transcontinental railroads and freedmen's colleges. The short stories were published in major magazines, the novels were published by major presses, and their prominence reveals the extent to which elite opinion had turned against Reconstruction in the 1870s.

The case for Reconstruction would still be made in the handful of historical novels about the subject published in the years immediately following its end. Albion W. Tourgée's *The Fools Errand* (1879) was the first and most famous of these, and the ones that followed were quite similar. These novels sought to reverse the stereotypes that authors like De Forest were circulating, insisting that the northern emigrants were noble, the southern unionists stalwart, and the freed people hard-working and wise. They also sought to defend the federal government, showing it to have taken up the valuable work of aiding those whose lives had been upended by war and were now rebuilding the shattered infrastructure of the south. In seeking to capture the government and its workings, many of these authors drew, as many writers of the 1860s had done, on the conventions of bureaucratic writing. Politically radical and formally inventive, these novels were nonetheless relegated to minor and regional presses. And they would be forgotten in the flood of reactionary anti-Reconstruction novels that appeared in the 1890s and early 1900s and the equally reactionary films that would follow, such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone With the Wind* (1936).

If we think of the Civil War and Reconstruction primarily in terms of nationhood, in terms of the divisions between south and north, black and white, then De Forest's writings tell a familiar story of a Union and a Confederacy reconciling at the expense of African Americans. And this is certainly one aspect of De Forest's politics. But if we think of the Civil War and Reconstruction in terms of government, particularly in terms of bureaucracy, a more surprising story emerges. We see De Forest grappling, during the Civil War, to abandon his republican skepticism about the regular army and to understand the army's bureaucracy—and while he did not go as far in celebrating bureaucracy as many of his contemporaries, he could nonetheless recognize that bureaucratic paperwork might be a mode of representation more truthful even than realism. And having recognized the power of the bureaucratic report to offer a newly comprehensive and objective account of the new nation, we can see De Forest systematically undermining that power in a protest against the kind of nation that Reconstruction was briefly trying to achieve. In this way, attention to De Forest helps us to recover the troubling history of why regulations and red tape, bureaucracy and paperwork, are now terms of abuse.

Notes

1. In the 1880s, De Forest combined these essays with excerpts from his wartime letters to his wife and prepared them for publication in a single volume. The volume would not be issued, however, until 1946 when they appeared under the title, *A Volunteer's Adventures*. I will refer to this volume when I quote from De Forest's wartime writings.
2. De Forest later prepared these for publication in a volume as well, but these did not appear until 1948 under the title *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction*.
3. Leonard Dupee White, *The Republican Era, 1869–1901: A Study in Administrative History* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 2; Carl Abbott, *Political Terrain: Washington, D.C., from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1999), 101.
4. The one exception is William J. McGill's "The Novelist as Bureaucrat: The Structure of De Forest's *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction*" in *Critical Essays on John William De Forest*, ed. James W. Gargano (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 173–81. But this essay is quite limited in its formal analysis and uses the topic of bureaucracy merely as an occasion to discuss De Forest's views of Reconstruction more generally.
5. Richard Simpson, "Bureaucracy," *Rambler*, February 1859, 114.
6. W. R. Greg, "Le Siecle," *Edinburgh Review*, October 1850, 523.
7. "Laing's Observations on Europe in 1848–9," *North American Review*, October 1850, 500.
8. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1862), 126; John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859; repr., Forgotten Books, 2010), 140.
9. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), 339.
10. John W. De Forest, *A Volunteer's Adventures: A Union Captain's Record of the Civil War*, ed. James H. Croushore (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1890), 4; 23. Page numbers hereafter cited parenthetically.
11. T. W. Higginson, "Regular and Volunteer Officers," *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1864, 350.
12. Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh, *West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2009), 136–37.
13. William H. Armstrong, *Red-Tape and Pigeon-Hole Generals: As Seen from the Ranks During a Campaign in the Army of the Potomac. By a Citizen-Soldier*. (New York: Carleton, 1864), 59.
14. *Ibid.*, 64.
15. C. W. Tolles, "An Army: Its Organization and Movements: Part I," *Continental Monthly*, June 1864, 715.
16. "The Sanitary Commission," *North American Review*, January 1864, 189.
17. John W. De Forest, "The Great American Novel," *Nation*, January 9, 1868, 28.
18. Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1993); Martin T. Buinicki, "John W. De Forest's 'Miss Ravenel's Conversion' and the Limits of Sentimental Citizenship," *American Literary Realism* 39, no. 1 (Fall 2006); Gregory S. Jackson, "'A Dowry of Suffering': Consent, Contract, and Political Coverture in John W. De Forest's Reconstruction Romance," *American Literary History* 15, no. 2 (2003).
19. John W. De Forest, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2000.), 101. Page numbers hereafter cited parenthetically.
20. William Dean Howells, "Editor's Study," *Harper's Monthly*, May 1887, 987.
21. O. O. Howard, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard, Major-General, United States Army* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1908), 208.
22. Oz Frankel, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2006), 75; 207.
23. John Richard Dennett, *The South as It Is: 1865–1866* (New York: Viking Press, 1866), 125–26.
24. John W. De Forest, *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1890), 29. Page numbers hereafter cited parenthetically.
25. James F. Light, *John William De Forest* (New York: Twayne, 1965) 76.
26. John W. De Forest, "Mr. Pullet's Mistake," *Harper's Monthly*, August 1867, 365.
27. John W. De Forest, "Fate Ferguston," *Galaxy*, January 1, 1867, 100.
28. *Ibid.*, 91.
29. John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (1961; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994) 189.