

Overreached on All Sides: The Freedmen's Bureau Administrators in Texas, 1865-1868

William L. Richter



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At the end of the Civil War, the U.S. government recognized some responsibility for the former slaves that its battles and proclamations had freed. It established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands to foster adjustment to the new economic conditions. Though the bureau initially attempted to transcend the racist beliefs of the nation, it wound up--according to this challenging analysis--embodying them in its very soul.

William L. Richter finds that the Freedmen's Bureau failed in its idealistic program, radical for its time, because of the unimaginative bureaucratic administration of white officers, who hesitated to pursue the program with the same commitment that the federal govt had devoted to the prosecution of the war. In addition, the jealousy caused by the involvement of officers with regular and volunteer commissions and the competition for relatively few postwar positions created confusion and acrimony throughout the Freedmen's Bureau and the army as a whole.

By 1868 violence drove most of the bureau's officials out of the rural areas where blacks needed legal protection, and except for notable areas of the original military occupation along the southeast Gulf Coast, the bureau did little. Blacks began to stop coming in to seek aid because the subassistant commissioners, ensnared in a web of bureaucratic regulations that headquarters saw as more important than deeds in the field, became more and more impotent.

As a continuation of the work the author began in *The Army in Texas during Reconstruction, 1865-1870*, this book examines the military occupation of Texas and how the policies of the quasi-military bureau affected the state after the Civil War. Whereas other studies of the bureau have looked primarily at its effectiveness in guaranteeing blacks' civil, economic, and personal rights during this critical era, Richter focuses on the white administrators who made up the bureau's field agencies and headquarters staff and who ultimately helped entrench the system of sharecropping and peonage they had been intended to prevent.

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