CALIFORNIA'S ROLE IN THE CIVIL WAR

by

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INTRODUCTION

On April 12, 1861 Fort Sumter was fired upon and the Civil War had begun. But in far away California news of the incident was not immediately forthcoming. Carried partly by magnetic telegraph and partly by pony express the message arrived in San Francisco and was first announced on April 24 in a late edition of the San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin.[1] What meaning did this crucial event have for the people of California? What role would the state play in the war? With which section, if either, would she align her interests and provide material support? Months would pass and many battles would be fought before answers to these questions could be set forth with certainty and positive support implemented through state action.

Reasons for this uncertainty are well established. As early as January 1860 Governor John B. Weller, in his annual message to the State legislature, had remarked emphatically that California "will not go with the South or the North, but here upon the shores of the Pacific found a mighty republic which may in the end prove the greatest of all."[2] Sharing this view were California's United States Senator William M. Gwin and Oregon's Senator Joseph Lane. Both Senators favored a Pacific Republic extending along the Pacific Coast from Canada to Mexico.[3] And just before the election of Lincoln, Senator Latham, the man who had served one day as California's governor," had predicted that California, if the division came, would either go with the South or set up for herself."[4] Significantly, the newspaper press of California was still undecided what course the state ought to pursue as late as January 1861.[5]

It should be noted, too, that a high percentage of California's settlers in the decade 1850-1860 had come from southern slave holding states and that their sympathies were naturally with the South.[6]

Climaxing the uncertainty in California were the Presidential election results of 1860 which revealed the popular vote to be almost equally divided between the three leading contestants Lincoln, Douglas, and Breckenridge. Lincoln won but thirty-two percent of the popular votes of the state or eight percent less than his national average

had been. Moreover, he received only 711 more votes in California than Douglas.[7] Thus the popular vote indicated Lincoln was a minority candidate both in California and over the nation; it was logical, therefore, to expect effort would be expended by the opposing interests in California to make capital of this advantage. Besides, only seven of the fifty-three newspapers in California had supported Lincoln.[8]

In a pre-election speech Governor Weller made in San Jose in October, he again made his position clear. In that address the Governor declared that if Lincoln were elected the southern states would surely secede and that he would consider Californians "less than men if they did not."[9]

The Importance of California

Both Washington and Richmond had a clear understanding of California's importance in the national crisis and both seats of government realized the urgent necessity for courting her loyalty and support. The fascinating history of the state during the previous twelve years had provided convincing testimony: In 1848 she had become a part of the United States as a result of the Mexican War. The next year she was caught in the whirlwind of a mad gold rush. In 1850 she applied for statehood, became the center of the great Congressional debate that ended in the Compromise of that year, and was admitted to the Union as a free state. In the ensuing decade her population grew from 92,500 to 380,000, a phenominal increase of 243 percent.[10] Moreover, the state was rich in resources, agricultural products, wealth, precious metals, good harbors and manpower. These and many other strategic advantages would thus become available either to the North or to the South. And as Governor Downey said later, the commercial value of the Pacific empire which included California "renders its security as important as one-half of the Union."[11]

Confederate and Union Strategy

With the opening of hostilities it is not surprising that both the Union and the Confederacy would strike suddenly for the purpose of gaining control over California. Advantage at first belonged to the Confederacy. In July 1861 General Henry H. Sibley was authorized by Confederate authorities to go to Texas and organize a brigade of

troops for the conquest of New Mexico. The ultimate goal was California with its gold supply. Fortunately for the Union, Sibley's campaign in New Mexico was of short duration.[12] Even so, the Confederacy threatened again on August 1, 1861 when Lieutenant Colonel John R. Baylor made gains in New Mexico and actually was able to organize the Confederate Territory of Arizona.[13] The outlook for realizing the military objectives now appeared promising and especially, said Baylor, because California was on the eve of a revolution and had many southern men "who would cheerfully join us, if they could get to us."[14] But Baylor's efforts were also to prove unsuccessful and his forces were soon to evacuate the entire territory he had taken over.

To achieve its Pacific Coast objectives Union strategy appeared clear and determined: California must be kept loyal and remain within the Union; United States Army Regulars stationed at far western outposts (Oregon, Washington, Nevada territories) must be relieved by Volunteers and reassigned to the main theaters of the war in the east; overland mail routes and supply lines to California were to be kept open and operating; any Confederate advance westward must be turned back; and all likely West Coast invasion attempts either by the enemy or an aggressive foreign power must be thwarted. How these objectives were realized by the Union presents the colorful and dramatic story of California's role in the Civil War.

Loyalty in California

Eventual success of the Union objectives was due in large measure to the preponderant efforts of loyal groups in California in face of the handicaps entailed by the work of disloyal elements in the state who were working for the Confederacy.

Loyalty to the Union expressed itself in many ways within this young state: In his message to the legislature in January 1861, immediately preceding the Fort Sumter incident, Governor John G. Downey had stated that "the people of California desire no change in our form of government" and that "they desire to remain in the Union."[15] With news of the outbreak of the war the San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin reported that "California has not seceded -- will not secede. Against any attempt to force her out

of the Union, we are willing and ready to lay down our lives. That is our position."[16] A few days later, on May 11, business was suspended in San Francisco in order that a loyal demonstration might be made.[17]

Among other developments both political parties professed utmost devotion to the Union and on May 17 the state legislature passed a resolution pledging support to the federal government.[18] In his address to the Assembly on January 6, 1862, Speaker George Barstow spoke of the national crisis and the need for California to assist the Union in putting down the rebellion. "We have got to save the Republic or perish with it" he said, and we want no Pacific Republic nor Southern Confederacy.[19] And for the following years, 1862, 1863, and 1864 the legislatures "vied with each other in the expression of the immovable determination of the people to sustain the Union at every hazard."[20] Indicative of this trend were numerous acts of the legislature in 1862: money appropriations for the war effort and coast defence, declaring secession flags and insignia a nuisance and to be destroyed by the sheriff, excluding secessionists and alien enemies from courts of justice, and requiring attorneys to take an oath to support the Constitution of the United States and the state of California.[21]

Once President Lincoln had signed an act on July 22, 1861 authorizing the use of volunteers to aid in enforcing federal laws and protecting government property, the first call for California troops was issued by Secretary of War Cameron for men to guard "the Overland Mail Route from Carson Valley to Salt Lake City and Fort Laramie."[22] On August 12, Governor Downey issued the order for the troops.[23] The response was immediate and by November California troops were occupying a vast extent of the country along the Pacific Coast from the Mexican to the Canadian borders.

Loyalty in California was also expressed in other ways. The state was rich in resources and precious metals and during the years 1861-1864 gold shipments from the port of San Francisco were approximately $185,000,000,[24] or an average of over $46 million per year each year of the war. After Congress imposed a direct tax upon all the states 1861, California was the first to collect and pay her proportion which amounted to nearly $250,000.[25] And once the United States Sanitary Commission, forerunner of the

American Red Cross, was organized and requested funds for its activities, extensive contributions were made by the citizens of California. Of the total funds raised by the Commission throughout the United States, the people of California contributed one-fourth, or one and one-quarter million dollars.[26]

Headquarters for the Department of the Pacific were located in San Francisco and the Commanders of the Department, with one exception, were constantly alert to the war needs and developments in California. In command at the outbreak of the war was Albert Sydney Johnston, a southern sympathizer, soon to resign and accept a commission in the Confederate army. In command at the Battle of Shiloh in western Tennessee on April 6-7, 1862, General Johnston lost his life -- a tremendous blow to southern military leadership.

Succeeding Johnston as Commander of the Department of the Pacific was Brigadier General Edwin V. Sumner. Aware of the growing strength of the secession element in Southern California, and in an effort to hold in check such opposition, one of his first acts was to withdraw the troops from Fort Mojave and place them in Los Angeles. There was more danger of disaffection there, according to the General, than at any other place in the state, and if there is to be difficulty "it will commence there."[27] Sumner also took action against the press for its unsympathetic and anti-Union sentiments. Striking swiftly and severely he excluded from the mails the following newspapers: Stockton Argus, Stockton Democrat, the San Jose Tribune, and the Tulare Post.[28]

Another source of loyal Union strength came from California's war governors: John G. Downey, Leland Stanford, and Frederick F. Low. Downey, the first of the three governors, was a native of Ireland having been born there in 1827.[29] Once in America, and after a brief stay in Virginia, he came to California in 1849 where he arrived with only ten dollars in his pocket. Elected to the office of Lieutenant Governor, Downey became Governor on January 3, 1860 with the resignation of Governor Latham who had served for only one day, and who was to be appointed immediately to the United States Senate. But on at least three different issues, two of which arose within the period of his administration, Downey's loyalty was questioned. First, on August 28, 1861, a letter to the Secretary of War, signed by sixty-five businessmen of San Francisco, asserted that

every appointment made by the Governor in the past three months "unmistakably indicates his entire sympathy and cooperation with those plotting to sever California from her allegiance to the Union."[30] On another occasion the Governor wrote a letter to Dr. Scott, the San Francisco minister who had been forced to resign from his church because of his sympathetic prayers for President Jefferson Davis. Reverend Scott made plans to leave the United States and on the day he was to leave Downey's letter arrived expressing regret that he [Scott] was leaving and that he hoped the minister would return "to ornament the pulpit" with his "distinguished abilities and Christian virtues. . . ."[31] On still another occasion, this time following his governorship, Downey wrote a letter that aroused considerable comment and criticism. In the letter, written in 1863 to his party group in the May meeting in San Francisco, Downey indicated he had never favored waging an aggressive war upon any section of the Confederacy, nor did he believe the Union could be preserved by a coercive policy.[32] Even with the aroused opposition, Downey served for two years as Governor and upon leaving office received praise for his loyalty to the Union.

Elected in 1861, Leland Stanford followed Downey as Governor of California. As reported by the Sacramento Union on September 6, Stanford received thousands of votes, "not because he was a Republican, but because he was a Union man."[33] Shortly thereafterwards, with the overland telegraph having been completed, Governor-elect Stanford wired President Lincoln that California, like her sister states, "holds civil liberty and union above all price."[34] This thought was reaffirmed in his inaugural address when he emphasized that California was loyal to the Union and that her citizens had declared their devotion to national unity and to the supremacy of the National Government.[35] A year later, in his annual message, Stanford called attention to two matters of timely importance: Had the militia of the country been stronger at the outbreak of the present war the President would surely have been able to crush the rebellion in its infancy. It was Stanford's feeling, too, that the California soldiers should be given the vote for their rights at home should follow them to camp.[36]

As Governor of California, Stanford gave full support to the Union. Upon completing his term of office he was not a candidate to succeed himself.

On December 10, 1863, Frederick F. Low was inaugurated as Governor. His opponent, significantly, had been former Governor Downey. But the vote had been convincing: 64,323 for Low and 44,492 for Downey. Of particular interest also were the results of the soldiers' vote with Low receiving 4,159 to Downey's 140.[37]

Governor Low had come to California from New York in 1849. At first he was in business at Marysville, then from 1861 to 1863 he served in the United States House of Representatives. At the end of his term of office in the House, Low returned to California and was commissioned Collector of the port of San Francisco. This post he resigned in September 1863 in order to assume the duties of Governor in December three months later.[38]

In his inaugural address Governor Low commended his fellow-citizens for their decision "to stand firmly by the national cause."[39] Four times by ballot has our position on this question been announced, said the Governor, and each time the popular will has stressed the need for the rebels to submit to the Nation's rightful authority.[40] Such sentiment was to characterize Governor Low's four years as governor even though a large secession element was present in the state. And in 1867 he was able to say that as governor he had been able to meet promptly every demand made of him by the general government.[41]

For sheer devotion and effort expended to advance the Union cause on the West Coast two men, Edwin D. Baker[42] and Thomas Starr King,[43] had no peers. Moreover, each man has been acclaimed by his biographer as having been responsible for keeping California safe for the Union. Baker, a close friend and supporter of Lincoln, a lawyer of considerable reputation in California, and later a United States Senator from Oregon, was famous for his powerful oratory in California and Oregon proclaiming support for the United States. Resigning from the United States Senate at the outbreak of the war he accepted a commission as a Union Colonel. In an opening battle of the Civil War, at Ball's Bluff on October 21, 1861, he was killed in action.[44]

Thomas Starr King, the outstanding Unitarian minister who came to San Francisco from Boston in 1860, combined his ministerial responsibilities with a dedicated effort not

only to gain support for the Union but to raise funds urgently needed by the United States Sanitary Commission. Like Baker, Reverend King did not live to see the end of the war, but because of the high esteem and reverence held for him the California legislature named him as one of two great men from California whose memory would be perpetuated in the Statuary Hall in Congress.[45]

There is little doubt but that such varied and evident display of loyalty influenced J. F. Chellis, President of the California Senate, to remark in the closing session of the legislature in 1863, that "the loyal people of the East no longer doubt the loyalty of California."[46]

That California remained loyal to the Union was indeed a deep disappointment to the Confederacy and especially to President Davis. According to James G. Blaine who wrote of the situation many years after the war, Davis had expressed such feeling when he dared hope that the Pacific Coast would at least be disloyal to the Union even though it did not actually join the South.[47]

Disloyalty in California

Throughout the war there were numerous disloyal elements in California which continued active support for the Confederacy. Not only did these elements assume a variety of shapes and forms but they expressed their pro-Southern support and anti-Union views in different ways. According to General Sumner a majority of the people in California were unionists though a strong secessionist minority existed in Southern California that would seek to draw the state into the secession movement.[48] Even in the state legislature the secession element was represented. In January 1862, there were seven secessionists in the Senate of forty members, and ten in the Assembly of eighty members.[49] Fear even existed that secession elements within the state would establish a military force "for the purpose of making war upon the United States" and in April 1863 General Wright believed such an organization was forming at Napa.[50] As already set forth restrictive action had to be taken to curb the actions of certain disloyal newspapers within the state.

More colorful cases perhaps were the overt acts of disloyalty by certain prominent men. Reverend William A. Scott,[51] of the Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, incurred the wrath of his Church superiors and congrègation by offering prayers for both President Davis and Lincoln. The Church governing body proclaimed at once that it was the duty of ministers of the gospel to warn the people of the awful crime of rebellion, and to stand by their government and give it their full support. Popular demonstrations were directed against the minister, the Church itself was ordered closed by the City of San Francisco, and Reverend Scott was actually forced to resign.

There was Judge James H. Hardy,[52] of the 16th Judicial District, who was impeached in 1862 by the Assembly of California on a total of twenty-two impeachment articles and later convicted by the Senate acting as a Court of Impeachment. Conviction was voted because the Judge had uttered "treasonable and seditious language of and concerning the Government of the United States." Among the specific acts for which he was convicted were the following: shouting "huzzas" for Jefferson Davis; referring to the American Flag as "an old woman's rag" that "ought to be torn down;" admitting that he was a rebel and shouting that he did not "care a damn who knows it." And in a barroom, toasting the perpetuation of a Southern Confederacy and the sovereignty of Davis.

Late in the year 1863 another California Judge, Lansford W. Hastings,[53] advanced a fantastic proposal directly to President Davis for the overthrow of Federal forces in Arizona and repossession of that area for the Confederacy. Hastings planned to raise volunteers in California and disguise them as mine workers for Arizona mines. The men were to rendezvous at the juncture of the Gila and Colorado Rivers. They would then reduce Fort Yuma, capture all Federal troops and military posts in Arizona, and thus hold the area permanently for the Confederacy. The plan was too weird for any serious consideration by the southern military strategists yet it served as a constant reminder of the efforts being expended by the disloyal element in California to give assistance to the Confederacy.

The California Volunteers

Though the ultimate work of the California Volunteer Organization was extremely varied in both objective and place, its original military purpose was to protect from hostile Indians the overland mail route between California and the Eastern states by way of Salt Lake City.[54] And to organize and command this force with the rank of Colonel the assignment was given to Major James H. Carleton, First U.S. Cavalry. The first regiments were formed at Oakland and by October 1861 were ready for active field service. But instead of being sent to guard the overland mail route as originally intended the troops were ordered to Southern California because of the activities there of the secession elements.[55]

Hardly had the volunteer units reached Southern California when it became apparent that California and all of the Pacific Coast were attractions to the Confederacy. As indicated earlier the advance of the Confederacy toward accomplishing these ends had reached as far as New Mexico and Arizona with Lieutenant Colonel John R. Baylor, having already organized the Confederate Territory of Arizona.[56] Learning of the Confederate occupation of New Mexico, General George Wright, now commander of the Department of the Pacific, suggested to the War Department that the California troops could serve the Union better if they were sent to Arizona to aid in driving out the rebels.[57] If the venture were successful an invasion of the Pacific Coast from this quarter by the Confederates would be unlikely. General Wright's request was approved by General McClellan[58] and Colonel Carleton proceeded immediately to organize and fit out the expedition. Of special interest were some of the items enumerated in the first supply requisition Carleton issued: Ten thousand mule shoes for 1200 mules; 4,400 horse shoes for 550 cavalry horses; 1,500 woolen overalls and 2,000 pairs of shoes.[59]

The resultant military unit became known as the California Column. Composed as it was of 2000 officers and men it was to become the state's most colorful volunteer military body. The history of its experiences and hardships and its struggles and uncertainties reads like modern fiction. Starting from Los Angeles on April 13, 1862, enroute to the Rio Grande, the Column actually marched a distance of nearly 1,000 miles in less than four months and were still full of fight upon arrival at the Rio Grande.

From Los Angeles the troops first stopped at Camp Wright, a sub-depot near the Yuma desert. From Camp Wright to Fort Yuma, a distance of about 180 miles, the troops crossed a continuous desert, without vegetation and little water, entered Mexico at a point near Calexico, and continued on to Fort Yuma. From Fort Yuma the Column proceeded to Pima Villages, Arizona, thence to Tucson, and then eastward to the Rio Grande and El Paso. The first troops of the California Column reached the Rio Grande on July 4, 1862.[60]

To march 2,000 men and a like number of horses and mules from Los Angeles to El Paso would be no easy task even today, but in 1862 the difficulties were almost unsurmountable. The only road open was the Butterfield mail route, abandoned in 1861, and supplies were available at only two points between Fort Yuma and the Rio Grande, Pima Villages and Tucson.[61]

Harassing the troops as they crossed the country were many severe problems: weather, mountains, lack of water, hunger, fatigue, alkali dust, maintenance of military equipment, and unfriendly Indians. Absence of pasturage along the way did not allow the live stock to forage. The men marched on foot; often the mud and water complicated travel. Cattle were driven along with the marching column in order that fresh beef would be on the soldier's menu at all times.

Knowing Tucson had been occupied, Carleton expected considerable resistance there yet was able to report on May 25 that his forces under Colonel West had taken possession of the city five days earlier without firing a shot.[62] The secessionists there had apparently fled. Immediately, Carleton set up a Federal "Territory of Arizona" under martial law with himself as military governor.[63]

Almost simultaneously with the continued advance of the California Column the walls of Confederate planning crumbled in Arizona and adjacent areas, and though forced to withdraw, the Confederate authorities continued to entertain the hope of returning and recovering their losses. Such hopes, however, were never realized and California remained safe for the Union. Without this effort on the part of the California troops

the Confederates might have gained the Pacific Coast. Had this occurred the South would have had a route to the coast and access to foreign trade, the Union blockade would have been rendered ineffective, and she would have had possession and use of the vast supply of California's gold.

Apart from the work of the famous California Column in the Southwest, other California Volunteers performed invaluable service elsewhere. And wherever the California men were stationed, the Indian menace was present. Throughout American history the Indian problem has been a continuous and troublesome one. The situation was no different during the four years of the Civil War. In the Western Territories and in California the problem was especially acute. Attacks by the red men were frequent and vicious as they proceeded to carry on their war against the white man. Policy dictated the need for strong action by both state and national authorities. Governor Stanford, in his annual message to the legislature in 1863, spoke of the frequent occurrence of Indian disturbances, depredations, and murders through an extensive portion of the state.[64] Again it should be recalled that the California Volunteer organization came into being originally for the purpose of guarding the overland mail route from Indian uprisings.[65]

While on duty in New Mexico and Arizona the California military organization was subject to perpetual harassment from hostile Indians. Farther to the north, in Nevada and Utah, Colonel Edward Connor who was in charge of the California Volunteers there, reported the Indians were threatening the overland mail route, had stolen horses, and were expected to attack the mail stations.[66] In early 1862 General Wright had been forced to send two companies from Santa Barbara to the Humboldt District in northern California because of the Indian difficulties in that region.[67] In this area the Indian problem was to prove to be a most severe and persistent one. And over two years later, in May 1864, Wright reported the Indian war was still being prosecuted there vigorously and successfully.[68]

Each time there was a call to duty for volunteers the response from California

men was immediate and far in excess of the numbers who could be accepted. In one instance they not only volunteered to aid the State of Massachusetts to meet its assigned quota, but 500 of them enlisted and served under the colors of Massachusetts. A similar number was supplied by California for the Territory of Washington in the Far Northwest.[69]

An interesting sidelight characterized the history of one unit in the California Volunteer organization: In 1862 General Wright requested and received permission to raise four companies of native cavalry. The request had been made because of the "extraordinary horsemanship" native Californians had displayed and because it was believed such a battalion would "render excellent service in Arizona."[70] A General Don Andreas Pico was commissioned Major of the Battalion but he felt forced to decline the commission because of "sickness and his inability to ride on horseback."[71] This regiment was stationed in various parts of California and though its records are not very complete one characteristic does stand out -- it had an unusually large number of desertions.[72] Actually, thirty-seven percent of its 450 men deserted.

Before the war's end, California had accounted for a total of almost 16,000 volunteers who saw service in the Union military organization.[73] But none was sent to the main battle fronts east of the Mississippi River. Rather, the volunteers saw duty in the Western Territories, the Pacific Far West and the Southwest.

Fatalities for California troops were not high in comparison with the total Union and Confederate casualties. One source revealed Union losses to have been twenty percent;[74] another source placed Confederate losses at thirty-three percent.[75] For the California troops, though deaths from arrow wounds were far greater than from bullets, and sixty percent of the arrow wounds proved fatal,[76] the percentage of fatalities was less than three and one-half percent.[77]

In his biennial message to the legislature in December 1865, Governor Low expertly summarized the war efforts of the California Volunteers and their contributions to the Union cause. The Governor spoke as follows:[78]

> It gives me great pleasure to inform you that the conduct of the volunteers of this State has won the highest honor for themselves, and called forth encomiums from all the officers who commanded them, from the highest to the lowest. Scattered, as they have been, along the outposts of civilization; quelling Indian disturbances within our own borders, and in the adjoining States and Territories; affording protection to the overland mail and telegraph, and acting as an army of observation on the Mexican frontier, their duties have been arduous, while their opportunities for winning distinction have been small.

With the war ending in April 1865, it is of interest, as a final note, that the last of the California Volunteers were mustered out of the service on September 30, 1866.[79]

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61. Report of Surgeon McNulty OR, I, 50, pt. 1, op. cit., p. 138.

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63. Carleton's Proclamation, June 8, 1862, OR, op. cit., pp. 96-7. Orton, op. cit., pp. 55-6.

64. Governor Stanford's Annual Message, January 7, 1863, Journal of the Senate, Fourteenth Session, 1863, p. 33.

65. Supra.

66. Connor to Drum, December 2, 1862, Orton, op. cit., p. 509.

67. Wright to Lippitt, April 7, 1862, Orton, op. cit., p. 419.

68. Wright to Adjutant-General, May 9, 1864, Orton, op. cit., p. 721, OR, I, 50, pt. 2 p. 841.

69. Orton, op. cit., p. 5.

70. Orton, op. cit., p. 304.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid, p. 305

73. Ibid. p. 5.

74. George W. Admas, Doctors in Blue. (New York: Henry Schuman, Inc., 1952), p. 3.

75. H. H. Cunningham. Doctors in Gray. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), pp. 3-6.

76. Aurora Hunt. The Army of the Pacific. (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1951), pp. 362-63.

77. Orton, op. cit., pp. 871-83. (See "Deceased Officers and Enlisted Men". A tally revealed that seven officers and four hundred and ninety-four enlisted men exclusive of the casualties of those in the Massachusett's quota, died in the service of the United States.)

78. Governor Low's Biennial Message, December 4, 1865, Journal of the Senate, Sixteenth Session, 1866, p. 49.

79. Orton, op. cit., p. 8, (See Company M, First California Cavalry Volunteers).