



Nature's Army: When Soldiers Fought for Yosemite by Harvey Meyerson.

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Review by Rolf Diamant, University of Vermont (rolf.diamant@gmail.com).

In *Nature's Army*, Harvey Meyerson (Library of Congress Congressional Research Service) describes a little understood period in the early evolution of America's national park system when the US Army was called upon to administer and protect the parks before the 1916 establishment of a civilian park management agency, the National Park Service.

After Yellowstone National Park was established (1872), a beleaguered Department of Interior was charged with overseeing and protecting the new national parks from all manner of depredation. Lacking the needed administrative ability and funding for this job, a desperate Interior Secretary eventually turned to the War Department for assistance. When the US Cavalry took over the management of Yellowstone (1886), the military campaigns against Native Americans were winding down and the War Department was amenable to assuming new responsibilities to help justify its continued presence in the West. As the only government institution sufficiently organized and trained for such a task, the army was able to bridge this critical gap between legislative ambition and executive branch capability.

As Meyerson points out, the multipurpose pre-twentieth century US military, known as the "Old Army," was used to carrying out various domestic functions. These included road and bridge construction, surveying and map making, natural science-linked exploration, and other "nation-building" activities. After the Civil War, the army became an "armed bureaucracy," as army officers were seconded to "administer Indian reservations, staff the Freedmen's Bureau, [and] police new national parks."¹

Military administration of Yellowstone was followed in the 1890s by similar deployments to Sierran national parks: Sequoia, General Grant (Kings Canyon), and Yosemite. For almost thirty years, soldiers worked to introduce "a rudimentary degree of government authority and [give] the park shape and form as an independent entity." Gradually, they made "the national park concept a working reality" (170). The breath of their duties was daunting:

Exploration, mapmaking, surveying, trail-blazing, public administration, site investigations, record searches, law enforcement without enforcement authority; in a mountainous wilderness frequented mainly by free-spirited sheepherders, cattlemen, miners, and hunters unaccustomed to taking orders from anyone; on behalf of an idea that few on the scene understood and a government that few on the scene respected. (95)

Many of these early park guardians were Civil War veterans and eventually included African American cavalrymen, who became known as Buffalo Soldiers. In 1903, Col. Charles Young, a West Point graduate whose parents had been enslaved, became superintendent of Sequoia National Park.²

1. Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2017) 115-16.

2. National Park Service, US Department of Interior, "Buffalo Soldiers Study" (2019)—available online.

Meyerson concentrates on a handful of calvary officers, mostly West Pointers, who were seasonally assigned to run the nascent Sierran parks. Whether they might have preferred other military theaters is unknown; in any case, they tackled difficult administrative assignments with diligence, acumen, and a deep personal commitment. It is debatable whether these men, as Meyerson believes, were ecological warriors and proto-environmentalists, or just honest, capable soldiers. Several showed remarkable foresight. First Lieutenant Daniel Kingman, chief engineer of Yellowstone's early road system, noted in an 1887 annual report to Congress "if the Park ever becomes truly popular and national, it will be when the people ... will find what they seek—rest, recreation, and health." A national park, he stressed, should be "a source of pleasure to all who visit it, and a source of wealth to no one." If exploited and overdeveloped, particularly by railroad corporations, Kingman presciently warned, Yellowstone "will cease to belong to the whole people and will be unworthy of the care and protection of the National Government."³

The performance of these individual officers won praise from leading contemporary conservationists like Robert Underwood Johnson and John Muir. Harvard's Charles Sprague Sargent recommended that the army assume management of the newly established forest reserves as well as the national parks, recognizing the need for a special corps of military administrators "schooled in public service in a system that taught civic virtue as well as professional skill and rewarded character as much as competence" (200).

Though Meyerson's national park narrative is well grounded and carefully documented, his admiring account of the Old Army's overall record has several troubling omissions. His discussion of the early impact of West Point Military Academy is a case in point. Founded as a national school for science and engineering, West Point was "less for war-related pursuits than for the design and construction of a new nation" (19). The author is particularly impressed by the Academy's role in the early nineteenth century instilling a strong sense of national cohesion and loyalty as cadets "studied the Constitution and committed themselves in solemn ceremonies to serve united under its national banner." He quotes the army's chief of engineers, writing in 1846, that each West Point cadet was taught "he belongs no longer to a section or party, but, in his life and all his faculties, to his country" (23). If this ethic of national patriotism and constitutional fidelity was in fact so deeply ingrained, why did so many many West Point graduates and cadets quit the army in 1861 to take arms against the United States? (The government responded by revising army regulations, decreeing that any officer "shall be registered as a deserter and punished as such" if they submit a resignation not accepted by proper authority.⁴)

Also problematic is Meyerson's characterization of the Old Army's complicated interactions with Native Americans. He credits the cavalymen he profiles for their unconventional sensitivity to the plight of Native Americans and contempt for the aggressive encroachment by white settlers and the suppression of Indigenous culture and economy by domineering missionaries and social reformers. The army fought Native Americans reluctantly, he contends, when forced to under civilian orders. Afterward, the army strove to fend off incursions by "greedy whites" on federally designated Indian reservations. "Although the shooting wars between soldiers and Indians grabbed the headlines and dominate popular memory today, they constitute only a small part of the army's role in Indian-white relations" (206). However, despite the author's desire that the Old Army be remembered for its more benevolent legacy, the fact remains that the army was instru-

3. Annual Report of Captain Clinton B. Sears, Corps of Engineers, for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1887 (Washington: GPO, 1887) 3139.

4. Frederick C. Brightly, *An Analytical Digest of the Laws of the United States: 1857-1869* (Philadelphia, 1869) 46.

mental in facilitating westward expansion, conducting serial campaigns that subjugated and displaced Native American tribes across the continent.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Meyerson has written an essential reference for those seeking to better understand how America's national park system survived its early gestation. *Nature's Army* clarifies the Old Army's vital role in developing park infrastructure, protecting vulnerable resources, and creating a recognized administrative presence until the political will emerged in the early twentieth century to establish a civilian service of professional park managers. Meyerson makes a case that the Army's intervention helped forestall a takeover of the early understaffed and underresourced national parks by Gifford Pinchot's ascendent US Forest Service during Pres. Theodore Roosevelt's administration. It should be noted that national park friend and powerful chairman of the House Public Lands Committee, the indefatigable John Lacey, also had a hand in keeping Pinchot at bay.

Meyerson shows that the Old Army's impact was more than transitional. When the National Park Service was established, provision was made to appoint a handful of willing soldiers who had previously patrolled Yellowstone as the new agency's first park rangers. Certain elements of Old Army culture are still evident in today's National Park Service (about the same size as the late nineteenth-century frontier army). These include a strong esprit de corps, a stress on unit cohesion, and distinctive dress uniforms reminiscent of their cavalry predecessors. But the most meaningful imprint of the Old Army on all who steward the parks is an abiding ethic of national civic duty—a legacy we can all be thankful for.