Foreword

THE PASSAGE of the first Reconstruction Act on March 2, 1867, marked the climax of a long and bitter struggle between the executive and legislative branches of the federal government over the right to determine and to implement the policies by means of which the Southern states were to be reconstructed. Prior to that date, the program had been almost exclusive property of the executive department. Presidents Lincoln and Johnson followed a course which was essentially dedicated to the immediate and relatively painless restoration of these states to their erstwhile position in the Union.

In the two years following the Civil War during which the presidents dominated the Reconstruction process, congressional opposition steadily grew; this opposition eventually solidified and in March, 1867, through a series of laws known collectively as the Reconstruction acts, over-all direction was abruptly taken out of the hands of the President and assumed by Congress. The ensuing program contained the seeds of social revolution for the South. It is not surprising, therefore, that the years after 1867 were marked by serious dislocations and aberrations, the ugliest of which was an angry wave of racial violence.

A not inconsiderable amount of this violence was directly connected with the Negro militia movement. In most Southern states these troops originated as a defensive force; they were the protective arm of the newly created Radical state administrations. Since a powerful element among Southern whites remained implacable in their opposition to these governments, the need for protection was a very real one indeed.

In so far as its purpose was the perpetuation of Radical

state governments, the militia experiment can be fairly adjudged a failure. Such failures, however, are frequently as instructive to the historian as those more fortunate movements which are rewarded with success, for they, too, are inextricably woven into the historical fabric of the period. Yet, even if this were not true, the story of the Negro militia movement, intricate in design and colorful in execution, would still be worth telling, particularly in our own day, when thoughtful persons have reason to fear a resurgence of racial violence in the South.

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OTIS A. SINGLETARY

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