

*Secretary Taft
on the Brownsville Affair*

The subject of most immediate interest discussed in the annual report of the Secretary of War, made public last week, was the discharge of a battalion of the Twenty-fifth Infantry. Secretary Taft describes the conditions precedent to the disorder at Brownsville, reports the evidence which incontrovertibly connected the soldiers with the shooting and the murder, and the results of the investigation by Inspector-General Garlington, which convinced General Garlington, the Department officials, the Secretary of War, and the President that the men of the battalion were united in a conspiracy of silence to protect the criminals. Mr. Taft then, with admirable clearness and logic and with judicial temper, states the reasons which not only justified the dismissal of the battalion, but made it necessary. This statement is substantially as follows: From nine to twenty men from a battalion of 170 men formed a preconcerted plan to revenge themselves upon the people of a town for the insults which they felt had been heaped upon them. They left their barracks about midnight and fired into the houses of the town for the purpose of killing those against whom they had a grievance. They did kill one man, wound another, and seriously injure the chief of police. There can be no doubt, therefore, that this squad of men were guilty of murder in the first degree; the purpose of one was the purpose of all. Within a few minutes after the crime was committed, the men returned to their places in the ranks (a call to arms having been sounded), and must have been among the last men to take their places, for the firing continued after the formations had begun. The absence of the rifles from the racks could not have escaped the attention of the sergeants who had the keys; yet all the sergeants swear that the rifles were in the racks, untouched. It is impossible that many of the battalion who did not take part

as active members of the conspiracy were not made aware, by one circumstance or another, of the identity of the persons who committed the offense. Instead of giving to their officers or the inspectors the benefit of anything which they knew tending to lead to a conviction of the guilty men, there was a conspiracy of silence on the part of many who must have had some knowledge of importance. The murderers were taken back into the battalion and protected entirely from punishment. Here Secretary Taft pertinently asks:

Is the Government helpless? Must it continue in its service a battalion many of the members of which show their willingness to condone a crime of a capital character committed by from ten to twenty of its members, and put on a front of silence and ignorance which enables the criminals to escape just punishment? These enlisted men took the oath of allegiance to the Government, and were to be used under the law to maintain its supremacy. Can the Government properly, therefore, keep in its employ for the purpose of maintaining law and order any longer a body of men, from five to ten per cent. of whom can plan and commit murder, and rely upon the silence of a number of their companions to escape detection?

Mr. Taft calls attention to the fact that "when a man enlists in the army he knows that, for the very purpose of protecting itself, the Government reserves to itself the absolute right of discharge, not as a punishment, but for the public safety or interest." He thus corrects the supposition that the discharge is a punishment either of the innocent or the guilty. He says further:

The discharge "without honor" is merely the ending of a contract and separation from the service under a right reserved in the statute for the protection of the Government, which may work a hardship to the private discharged, but which, in the public interest, must sometimes be arbitrarily exercised.

In conclusion, he considers the possibility of the re-enlistment of some of the men, now discharged, in the event that evidence is adduced tending to exculpate them entirely both from participation in the crime and assistance in the conspiracy of silence to prevent the detection of the offenders. He dismisses as unworthy of consideration the idea that the policy in ordering this discharge has been in any way affected by the race question. Secretary Taft's statement of

the reasons governing the action of the Administration seems to The Outlook to be founded on sound principles of justice and public policy. Resolutions have been passed by the United States Senate calling upon the President for all the facts and documents in the case for its consideration.



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