

PRESIDENT CLEVELAND AND THE PULLMAN STRIKE

An Expansion of Presidential Power

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In July, 1894, President Grover Cleveland ordered federal troops into service in the State of Illinois during a bitter labor-management dispute known as the Pullman Strike. The purpose of this paper is not to question the propriety or necessity of Cleveland's action, but rather to examine it in terms of its political implications. Did Cleveland's action constitute an unprecedented expansion of federal authority and the power of the presidency or was it merely an isolated act of no major political significance?

According to the Constitution of the United States the President is the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States¹ and shall take care that the laws be faithfully executed.^{1a} However the Constitution of the United States also provides that powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited to it by the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.² Hence the Constitution grants each state its own powers separate from that of the other branches that comprise the federal government. A conflict can develop when the President takes any action which a state may perceive as an improper infringement of that state's power. It was precisely this type of conflict which emerged as the central political issue when President Cleveland called out the federal troops during the Pullman Strike.

To better understand President Cleveland's action, a synopsis of the events relating to the Pullman Strike needs to be reviewed. During the depression winter of 1893/94, George Pullman decided to secure his high level of profit by making a series of wage

wage cuts for all employees of the Pullman Car Company. Many of those employees lived in the much-publicized "model town" of Pullman, outside the city of Chicago. Though wage levels were cut by a fourth, the cost of the company rents and utilities were not reduced by so much as a dime. Many workers' families discovered that after paying their rent, they had less than a dollar a day for food and clothing, and in May a delegation of workers begged for an interview with their employer and asked that either rents be reduced or wages be raised. George Pullman's answer was to fire three members of the workers' delegation. This inspired 80 percent of the workers to go out on strike, and Pullman then ordered all shops closed until the crazy radicals came to their senses.

The Pullman Strike generated national attention only when it ignited a sympathy strike by members of the American Railway Union (ARU). Some four thousand Pullman employees were members of the ARU, which had been founded a year earlier under the leadership of Eugene V. Debs. Debs, disgusted at the conservatism of the various railroad brotherhoods, had urged that there be a single union of all railroad workers, whatever their occupation or level of skill. By the spring of 1894 the ARU claimed 150,000 members in some 465 local unions. At the ARU convention in May, those of its members who were striking against the Pullman Company asked for the union's support. Debs first urged the strikers and the Pullman management to settle the strike by means of an impartial arbitration panel. When the suggestion was rebuffed by George Pullman, the ARU voted to boycott all Pullman cars, effective June 26: namely, to refuse to work on

any train that carried a Pullman car. The Pullman Strike now expanded into a general railroad strike that at its peak would affect rail traffic in twenty-seven states and territories. The General Managers Association (GMA), a consortium of the heads of twenty-four railroads that had terminals in Chicago, proclaimed the ARU to be an enemy of the public safety and resolved to destroy it. The railroad workers were equally determined to win their strike and increase their membership. By the early days of July, rail traffic to and from Chicago was at 10 percent of its usual volume, the federal mails were seriously obstructed, and the Chicago Tribune was denouncing Debs as an anarchist who had dictatorial ambitions. Attorney General Richard Olney obtained a sweeping court injunction, forbidding interference with rail traffic to and from Chicago; on July 3, 1894, President Cleveland ordered to Chicago a large number of federal troops³ with instructions to see that the federal injunction was observed. Incendiaries burned several of the buildings of the Chicago World's Fair; a pitched battle between soldiers and a mob of unemployed citizens, sympathetic to the railroad strikers, resulted in seven deaths; and Cleveland issued a presidential proclamation, promising punishment for all "unlawful assemblages." By July 10, Debs, with seventy other union members, had been indicted and arrested for violating the judicial injunction, and federal troops had secured safe passage of rail traffic through Chicago. Strikes and disorders in states west of the Mississippi were ended by means of other injunctions and the dispatch of other units of the United States Army. Grover Cleveland received the congratulations of James J. Hill,

the railroad builder, and the curses of agrarian politicians and John Peter Altgeld, the governor of Illinois.⁴

Listed below are headlines from the New York Times which paint a more graphic picture of the warfare and general pandemonium that broke out in Chicago and its vicinity during the early part of July, 1894. Included in these headlines are the reports of President Cleveland's efforts to restore order and the responses of the governor of Illinois and the mayor of Chicago to the President's intervention.

Thursday, July 5, 1894:⁵

- Bayonets Subdue Strikers
- Railroad Tracks in Chicago Now Guarded By Troops
- Riotous Mobs Charges By Soldiers
- Soldiers Harassed by Crowds

Friday, July 6, 1894:⁶

- Day of Riot and Disorder
- Railroad Property Destroyed by Chicago Strikers
- Cars Overturned, Then Set on Fire
- Gov. Altgeld Complains to the President for Sending Troops Into Illinois
- Mr. Cleveland Makes Answer

Saturday, July 7, 1894:⁷

- Strikers Apply The Torch
- Hundreds of Cars Burned In Chicago's Vicinity
- Pullman and Kensington Terrorized
- Mob of Rioters Fled at the First Approach of Illinois State Soldiers
- Two Of The Strikers Shot

Sunday, July 8, 1894:⁸

- Strikers Shot By Troops
- Soldiers Fire Into A Chicago Mob Of Rioters
- Twenty Five, One A Woman, Were Hurt
- Mob Fled At First Volley, Pursued by Soldiers With Fixed Bayonets
- Police Kill a Woman Spectator

Monday, July 9, 1894:⁹

Stern Warning to Strikers
Proclamation Issued By President Cleveland
Law and Order Must Be Restored
Council of War at Washington
A Busy Day for the President and His
Military Advisers
Shoot Them On The Spot
The Order of General Miles Carried Out
At Hammond
Strikers Met With A Deadly Volley
One Man Killed and Four Persons Wounded
by the Bullets
Unnecessary, Mr. Hopkins Says
Chicago's Mayor Does Not Approve of the
Proclamation

"I do not understand the necessity
for this action."

Tuesday, July 10, 1894:¹⁰

Second Proclamation Made
President Cleveland Gives a General Warning
Rioters In All States Must Disperse

Thursday, July 12, 1894:¹¹

Chicago Strike A Failure

Through two proclamations, issued on July 8 and July 9, 1894, respectively, President Cleveland first placed the city of Chicago under military protection and then extended the military's authority to include many of the western states. The President sent in the military

... With the purpose of enforcing the faithful execution of the laws of the United States and protecting its property and removing obstructions to the United States mails....¹²

The President decided that military forces were needed to enforce the law because

... By reason of unlawful obstructions, combinations and assemblages of persons it [had] become impracticable...to enforce by the ordinary course

of judicial process of laws of the United States within the state of Illinois and the city of Chicago...¹³

and

... at certain points and places within the states of North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Wyoming, Colorado and California, and the territories of Utah and New Mexico, and especially along the lines of such railroads traversing said states and territories as are military roads and post roads and are engaged in interstate commerce and in carrying the United States mails....¹⁴

President Cleveland's decision to send in military forces was firmly based on statute. By an act of July 2, 1890, Congress had provided that conspiracies in restraint of trade were illegal, and had instructed the Circuit Courts of the United States to prevent and restrain such conspiracies. Furthermore, the law left no doubt of the President's power in the premises, section 5298 of the Revised Statutes of the United States containing these words:

Whenever by reason of unlawful obstructions, combinations or assemblages of persons, or rebellion against the authority of the United States, it shall become impracticable in the judgement of the President to enforce by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings, the laws of the United States within any State or Territory, it shall be lawful for the President to call forth the militia of any or all of the States, and to employ such parts of the land or naval forces of the United States as he may deem necessary.¹⁵

The President of the United States had the statutory authority to impose martial law pursuant to legislation cited above, and President Cleveland decided to exercise that authority during the Pullman Strike.

In considering the political implications of President Cleveland's action, two points must be noted: (1) When President Cleveland acted, there was no legal procedure

in place for the peaceful resolution of labor-management disputes and (2) the issue of states' rights was raised by Governor Altgeld of Illinois who expressed vehement opposition to President Cleveland's action.

As early as 1886 President Cleveland had recognized the need for a system to facilitate the peaceful resolution of labor-management conflicts. On April 22, 1886, Cleveland sent a message to Congress informing that the

... relations between labor and capital are far from satisfactory....[and recommended voluntary arbitration]...to prevent the disturbances which so often arise from disputes between employers and the employed, and which at times seriously threaten the business interests of the country....¹⁶

Apparently at the time President Cleveland's message was ignored. On July 10 and 11, 1894, over eight years later and after President Cleveland had already imposed martial law in Chicago and in many other sections of the nation, the same issues raised by President Cleveland in his message of April 22, 1886, were debated in the United States Senate. The use of military force and the concept of arbitration as a means of resolving labor-management differences was discussed. Several Senators participated in the debate. William Peffer, a Populist Senator from Kansas, demanded an end to the use of the military to quell every disturbance, particularly involving disputes between employers and employees. Senator Peffer stated:

It is time that this military idea, the idea of quelling every little disturbance by force, should cease and that brings me to the vital point in this whole controversy. What are you going to do when disputes arise between employers and employees? Keep your hands off, Mr. President. That is my advice.¹⁷

Senator Peffer went on to say that the use of military force provokes more conflict:

But the instant that you begin to call out the military arm in order to protect one side and send the other one to prison, just that soon you arouse a spirit of animosity which cannot be quelled by force.¹⁸

Cushman Davis, a Republican Senator from Minnesota, expressed an entirely different point of view, fully supporting the President's action. Senator Davis stated:

The authority of the United States cannot be denied.... The military power, the last resort in a free government, has necessarily been called into action.¹⁹

Nonetheless, Senator Davis also recognized the need for legislation to address inequities in the relationship between labor and management:

No one denies that there are before the American people to be settled in a lawful and constitutional manner through their legislative functions vast questions of adjustments between the rights of labor and capital.²⁰

William Stewart, a Republican Senator from Nevada, warned that using military force against labor threatens the stability of the nation. Senator Stewart stated:

In making war upon labor, which the present laws require, we shall be putting free institutions to a test more severe than the civil war, more severe than anything which has preceded.²¹

Jacob Gallinger, a Republican Senator from New Hampshire, asked that the Senate go on record approving the principle of voluntary arbitration and proposed an amendment to a Senate resolution endorsing President Cleveland's action.

The proposed amendment stated:

While thus endorsing the action of the Chief Executive, the Senate approves the principle of voluntary arbitration as a potent means of settling disputes between employers and their employes.²²

Joseph Hawley, a Republican Senator from Connecticut, objected to the amendment, asserting that arbitration was on the statute book already and that there was no necessity to say anything more than that the Senate approved the action of the President. Orville Platt, the other Republican Senator from Connecticut, also objected to the amendment on the grounds that views about arbitration could be discussed later.²³ John Daniel, a Democratic Senator from Virginia, also questioned whether there was a need for legislation to promote the settlement of labor-management disputes through arbitration, stating that

... by an act approved October 1, 1888,... the Congress of the United States and the President gave their sanction and approbation to the principle of arbitration and provided machinery for a peaceful settlement of such controversies as we now have to deal with....²⁴

However, Joseph Carey, a Republican Senator from Wyoming, said that the act cited by Senator Daniel was of no value. According to Senator Carey, the law to which Senator Daniel had referred

... [had] been inoperative and [had] been ineffective: it [had] never been called into operation, and it was passed, as many things [were] passed by Congress, to please somebody or other, but it [had] no effect whatever. It cannot be enforced, and never has been enforced.²⁵

The issue of states' rights was also raised during the debate. On July 11, 1894, Senator Daniel, asserted that the responsibility for maintaining law and order superceded

the rights of local government. Senator Daniel stated:

I am a States rights Democrat who would not like to see the muniments of local self-government overridden. But I am also a national Democrat, who would not like to see the muniments of national authority and national safety destroyed.²⁶

Ultimately, on July 11, 1894, the United States Senate passed a resolution endorsing President Cleveland's action.²⁷ On July 16, 1894, the United States House of Representatives joined the Senate in endorsing the President's action.²⁸ However, the issue of states' rights was raised during the debate that ensued in the House. Richard Bland, a representative from Missouri, expressed his strong belief in the principle of local state government and protested against actions of the federal government which undermine the authority of the states.²⁹ Thomas Catchings, a Representative from Mississippi, responded by saying that due observance should be given to those limitations in the Constitution which define the rights of the states on the one hand and of the federal government on the other. But Mr. Catchings then went on to say that

... it must not be forgotten that it is written in the Constitution that it and the laws made in pursuance thereof constitute the supreme law of the land; and when it comes to executing the Federal authority, let it always be remembered that the shadow of the national flag obscures and obliterates all State lines. There is not a nook or corner or crevice in all this broad land of ours where the power of the Federal Government may not lawfully go when the proper occasion arises.³⁰

In addition to the debates in Congress in Congress, sparked by President Cleveland's action, another debate also occurred between President Cleveland and Governor John Altgeld of Illinois. The main issue in the Cleveland-

Altgeld debate was states' rights. President Cleveland was not the first President to call out federal troops to suppress violence during a railroad strike; President Hayes had done so in 1877. But President Cleveland was the first to do so on his own initiative and not on the application of a state governor,³¹ who, in the State of Illinois in July, 1894, was John Altgeld. Not only did Governor Altgeld not apply to President Cleveland for federal troops, the Governor asserted that the federal troops were not needed and that the State of Illinois could handle the situation.

ON JULY 5, 1894, ALTGELD TELEGRAPHED TO THE PRESIDENT:

I am advised that you have ordered Federal troops to go into service in the State of Illinois. Surely the facts have not been correctly presented to you in this case, or you would not have taken this step, for it is entirely unnecessary, and, as it seems to me, unjustifiable.... [T]he State of Illinois is...able to take care of itself.... Local officials have been able to handle the situation.³²

Altgeld further asserted that President Cleveland's action was^{AN} unconstitutional violation of the principle of local self-government:

... to ignore [local self-government] is to do violence to the Constitution.³³

President Cleveland, on the other hand, felt that his decision to send in federal troops was completely lawful and proper. *ON JULY 5, 1894, CLEVELAND TELEGRAPHED TO ALTGELD THAT*

Federal troops were sent to Chicago in strict accordance with the Constitution and the laws of the United States, upon the demand of the Postoffice Department that obstruction of the mails should be removed, and upon the representations of the judicial officers of the United States that the process of the Federal courts could not be executed through the ordinary means, and upon competent proof that conspiracies existed against commerce between the States. To meet these conditions, which are clearly within the province of Federal authority, the presence of Federal troops in the city of Chicago was deemed not

only proper, but necessary, and there [had] been no intention of thereby interfering with the plain duty of the local authorities to preserve the peace of the city.³⁴

Governor Altgeld's position was not unanimously supported by other state governors or local officials. Although the governor of Texas sent a telegram to President Cleveland notifying the President not to use U.S. troops in Texas unless requested by state authority,³⁵ the governors of the states of Alabama and Vermont wrote letters to the President fully endorsing his action.³⁶ In addition, other state and local officials wrote to the the President expressing their support for his action. The President received correspondence from the Deputy Secretary of State for the State of Maine,³⁷ the mayor of the City of Brockton,³⁸ and the mayor of the City of Gallipolis, Ohio.³⁹

There was also a substantial outpouring of correspondence from private citizens and organizations expressing their support and gratitude for the President's action.⁴⁰ Probably the most grandiose expression of support came from C.H.J. Taylor who wrote to the President's private secretary the following:

Dear Sir:- I cannot desist. I must write you this note. Great is our President. He is today the greatest man in the world. He not only by his acts, in the last two or three days, tells the entire world that law and order in the United States are supreme but he gives the laboring man to understand that all of his just and reasonable demands shall be granted. Great is our President. Democrats are having trouble to get in their telegrams of approval for the reason that the Republicans have the wires busy doing the same thing. Last Tuesday the Negro Democrats in seventeen States passed resolutions endorsing him

Always your Servant & friend,
[s] C.H.J. Taylor⁴¹

In the aftermath of the strike, on July 26, 1894, President Cleveland announced a commission to investigate the causes of the strike. The commission was directed

visit the State of Illinois and the city of Chicago and such other places in the United States as may appear proper...make careful inquiry into the causes of any pending dispute or existing controversy, and hear all persons interested therein.⁴²

During its investigation, the President's commission asked certain witnesses for their thoughts on the concept of arbitration as a way of settling labor-management disputes. George Pullman, the president of the Pullman Company, saw no need to submit anything to arbitration because

... a man should have the right to manage his own property.⁴³

And while Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, expressed his belief in voluntary arbitration, he expressed reservations concerning compulsory arbitration on the grounds that it would be an exercise in futility and that no labor organization could give up the power to strike. Gompers testified:

I think that compulsory arbitration would be futile.... I want to say this, if permitted, that an organization of labor that would resolve never to strike would be simply placing itself in the hands of the employer for him to do all the striking in the shape of reduction of wages.⁴⁴

Eugene Debs, the president of the American Railway Union, expressed outright opposition to the concept of compulsory arbitration. Debs testified:

I am opposed to the principle or the theory, rather, of compulsory arbitration.⁴⁵

Gompers was asked for his suggestions of methods which could be adopted by the state or federal government to prevent strikes and boycotts. Gompers testified that under the present economic system there would always be strikes:

So long as the present industrial and commercial system will last, so long will strikes continue. They may be diminished in number or intensity of feeling and bitterness, but, I repeat, so long as the present industrial and commercial system will last, so long will we have industrial disputes and disturbances. *6

From the testimony of Pullman, Debs and Gompers, two points become apparent: (1) the owner of the Pullman Company did not want to relinquish any authority to operate his business in any manner he so desired and (2) the labor unions did not want to give up the power to strike. Both sides would have rejected compulsory arbitration and only one side, labor, would have possibly accepted voluntary arbitration, but only so long as their power to strike was not effected. Under these conditions the possibility of labor and management settling their differences through peaceful means would have been remote. In addition, if Samuel Gompers was right, then arbitration would have been useless anyway as a means of resolving, without violence, the labor-management problems which led to the Pullman Strike.

The Pullman Strike was expensive, in terms of lives lost, lost earnings and expenses incurred. During the strike the number shot and fatally wounded was 12. The railroads lost in property destroyed, hire of United States Deputy Marshals, and incidental expenses, at least \$685,308. The loss of earnings to these roads was estimated at \$4,672,916. As

estimated also, the 3,100 employees at Pullman lost \$350,000 in wages, and the 100,000 employees upon the twenty-four railroads centering in Chicago paid at least \$1,389,143 for their part in the strike.⁴⁷

In addition, during the strike, the number arrested by the police was 515, and the number arrested under United States statutes and against whom indictments were found was 71. The arrests made by the police were for murder, arson, burglary, assault, intimidation, riot, and lesser crimes. The cases passed upon by the United States Grand Jury were for obstruction of the mail, conspiracy in restraint of trade, and conspiracy to injure, oppress, threaten, or intimidate.⁴⁸

On July 10, 1894, Eugene Debs and his associates were arrested for violating the court injunction, and their arrest ended the strike.⁴⁹ On December 14, 1894, the Illinois Circuit Court sentenced Debs to six months imprisonment, and his associates to three months each, "for contempt of court." An appeal was taken to the Supreme Court, Debs and his associates applying for a writ of habeas corpus on the ground that the facts found by the Circuit Court did not constitute disobedience to the writs of injunction served upon them. The case was argued on March 25 and 26, 1895, and on May 27 a decision was handed down, sustaining the verdict of the Circuit Court and completely vindicating the legality of President Cleveland's course. The decision declared:

The United States may remove everyting put upon highways, natural or artificial, to obstruct the passage of interstate commerce, or the carrying of the mails.... It is equally within its competency to appeal to the civil courts for an inquiry and determination as to the existence and character of any of them, and if such are found to exist or threaten to occur, to invoke the powers of those courts to remove or restrain them, the jurisdiction of the courts to interfere in such matters by injunction being recognized from ancient times and by indubitable authority....

The complaint filed in this case clearly shows an existing obstruction of the artificial highways for the passage of interstate commerce and the transmission of the mails, not only temporarily exisiting, but threatening to continue, and under it the Circuit Court had power to issue its process of injunction.

Such an injunction having been issued and served upon the defendants, the Circuit Court had authority to inquire whether its orders had been disobeyed, and when they found that they had been disobeyed, to proceed under Rev. Stat. §725, and to enter the order of punishment complained of.⁵⁰

In conclusion, by his prompt and determined course, President Cleveland made it clear, not only that the law must be obeyed, but that the nation is paramount and state lines only geographical expressions when the welfare of the country is at stake. President Cleveland prized the decision of the court because, to quote his own words, it established

in an absolutely authoritative manner, and for all time, the power of the national government to protect itself in the exercise of its functions.⁵¹

FOOTNOTES

1. Article II, Section 2, Subsection 1
- 1a. Article II, Section 3
2. Amendment X
3. Nevins, Allan, Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage (New York: Dodd, Mead), 1933, p.621
4. Welch, Richard E., Jr., The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland (University Press of Kansas), 1988, pp.141-143
5. New York Times, page 1
6. Ibid., page 1
7. Ibid., page 1
8. Ibid., page 1
9. Ibid., page 1
10. Ibid., page 1
11. Ibid., page 1
12. Grover Cleveland Papers (Washington, Library of Congress), 1958, Documents No. 26481 and 26482
13. Ibid., Documents No. 26481 and 26482
14. Ibid., Document No. 26480
15. McElroy, Robert, Grover Cleveland: The Man and the Statesman (Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York and London), 1923, p.147
16. United States Congress, Congressional Report (Washington, Government Printing Office), 53rd Congress, Second Session, July 11, 1894, pp.7282-7283
17. Ibid., July 10, 1894, p.7236
18. Ibid., July 10, 1894, p.7236
19. Ibid., July 10, 1894, p.7239
20. Ibid., July 10, 1894, p.7237
21. Ibid., July 10, 1894, p.7241
22. Ibid., July 11, 1894, p.7283
23. Ibid., July 11, 1894, p.7283
24. Ibid., July 11, 1894, p.7281
25. Ibid., July 11, 1894, p.7281
26. Ibid., July 10, 1894, p.7241
27. Ibid., July 11, 1894, p.7284
28. Ibid., July 16, 1894, p.7546
29. Ibid., July 16, 1894, p.7545
30. Ibid., July 16, 1894, p.7545
32. Nevins, Allan, editor, Letters of Grover Cleveland (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1933, pp.357-358
31. Welch, Richard E., Jr., The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland (University Press of Kansas), 1988, p.145
33. Ibid., p.360
34. Ibid., p.360
35. Grover Cleveland Papers (Washington, Library of Congress), 1958, Document No. 26558 - telegram from J.S. Hogg, Governor, via Austin, Texas, July 11-94
36. Ibid., Documents No. 26639 and 26633, respectively - both dated July 13, 1894
37. Ibid., Document No. 26501 - letter dated July 9, 1894
38. Ibid., Document No. 26536 - resolution dated July 10, 1894

39. Ibid., Document No. 26571 - letter dated July 12, 1894
40. Ibid.. Numerous letters of congratulation and support are to be found in the Grover Cleveland Papers
41. Ibid., Document No. 26668 - letter dated July 13, 1894
42. McElroy, Robert, Grover Cleveland: The Man and the Statesman (Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York and London), 1923, p.170
43. United States Strike Commission Report, Sen. Exec. Doc. 7, 53rd Congress, Third Session, p.556. On December 10, 1894, President Cleveland transmitted the full report to Congress-- see page 152, Congressional Record, 53rd Congress, Third Session.
44. Ibid., p.204
45. Ibid., p.176
46. Ibid., p.195
47. McElroy, Robert, Grover Cleveland: The Man and the Statesman (Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York and London), 1923, p.170
48. Ibid., p.170
49. Welch, Richard E., Jr., The Presidencies of Grover Cleveland (University Press of Kansas), 1988, p.142
50. McElroy, Robert, Grover Cleveland: The Man and the Statesman (Harper and Brothers Publishers, New York and London), 1923, pp.171-172
51. Ibid., p.172

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