

## **The Continued Violence of the New York City Draft Riots of 1863**

### **Introduction**

On July 13, 1863, New York City erupted in a spate of violence unequalled in the history of civil disorder in the United States to that point. Spanning five days, the New York City draft riots caused hundreds of deaths and millions of dollars of destruction in the city, undermining the already struggling Republican national government. The violence touched nearly everyone, from the impoverished immigrants who often participated in or observed the mayhem, to the innocent blacks victimized by the mobs, to the government officials and soldiers who had to watch powerlessly as the city slipped into a state of near-total chaos. Over the span of those five days, mobs hunted down and tortured blacks, looted and destroyed stores and homes and on several occasions attempted to take over armories and ammunition dumps in order to continue the violence.

New York City in 1863 was not the sprawling metropolis it is today. It was, nevertheless, the largest and most prosperous city in the Union. The census of 1860 reported that almost eight hundred thousand people lived in the city, mostly clustered in the south end of the island of Manhattan. Across the East River, Brooklyn was still considered a city of its own (rather than a borough as it is today) and the suburbs of Yorkville, Manhattanville and Harlem on the northern end of Manhattan were slowly being developed into what is today called uptown. Even at this time New York was approximately a grid, with avenues running north-south (starting with low numbers to the east and moving to higher numbers west) and streets running east-west (starting with low numbers in the south and moving higher as one traveled north). Central Park, spanning from Fifth Avenue to Eighth Avenue starting at Fifty-ninth Street, was in the center of the island, above the bustle of the developed part of the island that was considered “the city”.

The city was further drawn up along lines of race and class. The New York elite, who defined the opulence of the city, made their homes in lavish mansions to the north and west. Fifth Avenue became a center of wealth and decadence, lined with expensive restaurants and mansions. Where once they had thrived in the heart of the city to the south, they fled westward with the influx of the proverbial “poor, tired masses”. Broadway, an avenue running through the center of the city, became the dividing line between the

areas of the poor and the wealthy. South from Forty-second Street along Broadway and all the way to the East River, the city was lined with slums and shantytowns. In these homes lived immigrants and the native poor. The three largest segments of this population were Irish, German and black. Because of their abject poverty and social status, segregation of these groups was minimal. Although they had different characters and cultures, they were united by their situation.

There were several important areas in the slums of the city. One of these was the “Bloody” Sixth Ward. A filthy, low and marshy place to live (due to the filling of a lake the area was built on in the early part of the century), it was dominated by poor immigrant workers, mainly the Irish. A large population of free blacks also lived in the area, as with most of the poorer sections of the city. To the north lay the Bowery, a relatively respectable area, given that it was in the midst of the slums. Many of the poor German families lived in this area, clinging to some sense of dignity by working hard and abiding by the law. Southeast of the Sixth Ward was the Fourth Ward, an area similar to the Sixth save for its heavy commercial involvement in the waterfront. The Upper East Side of the city, home to many of its poor, stretched from Fifty-ninth Street south to midtown.

The geography and demographics of the city, however, do not adequately explain the scope of the rioting. Ostensibly the rioting began as a protest against conscription. The federal Conscription Act was passed the previous March, enabling the government to draft young males between the ages of 25 and 35 (and eventually married older males if necessary) into the military. In a country used to a purely volunteer military, such a law was anathema, but it was clearly a necessity in the bloody war effort against the Confederates. The law engendered a great deal of resentment, but the draft was successfully enforced as it made its way across the country, with the usual accompaniment of small riots and protests.

New York was a unique case in that the opposition to the draft was particularly strong in the city, especially in the tenements and slums of the East Side. The poor believed that the draft unfairly targeted them while allowing the rich to evade conscription via a 300-dollar fee. Although the government argued rather rationally that the fee actually helped the poor, most workers were angry that nearly a full year of wages was needed to escape what seemed to be, at times, certain death in the military. Furthermore, the government and Republican administration of the city in particular, through years of corruption and inefficiency, had lost the support of the people. Cook describes the justice system as such:

The administration of justice in New York was a public disgrace. Popular election and short terms of office made the judges and district attorneys mere creatures of powerful politicians. No criminal with the slightest political connections had to fear punishment. Scarcely one-third of the people arrested in New York were presented to a grand jury for indictment. When A. Oakey Hall was New York County District Attorney in 1857, it was said that from 1,500 to 2,000 indictments were being held in his office. If a case did come to trial, political influence could once again be brought to bear on the judge, or the jury could be easily suborned.<sup>i</sup>

The end result of such circumstances was a distrustful populace that was extremely hostile to the draft, to the point of violence.

Even this latent hostility does not fully explain the riots. Why were they so violent? Why didn't the protesters simply stop after the first morning of rioting? By the first afternoon they had succeeded in embarrassing the military and police force and putting a stop to the draft, at least temporarily. It is interesting to note, however, that this only became official on Wednesday the 15<sup>th</sup> with a pronouncement from Provost-Marshal General Robert Nugent, the official in charge of the draft.<sup>ii</sup> This most likely has to do with bureaucratic inertia, since the draft was all but ruined after the vigorous assaults of the first day of violence. Some rioters went to businesses, asking them to close with the stated aim of making "...a big show to resist the draft."<sup>iii</sup> If this was truly the case, why was the city gripped in such chaos for five days? Clearly there was a complete failure by authorities to quell the riots early on, but an administrative breakdown does not adequately explain the animus of the people in this case.

Observers, both during the riots and long after, put forth many explanations for the sheer scope and brutality of the violence. One theory advanced heavily during the riots was that supporters of the South in the city planned them all along. The so-called "Copperhead plot" was said to be behind the riots, fueled in secrecy by money and information from the South. Others believed that the riots were led by groups of mobs and thieves plotting within the city for months beforehand. Some went so far as to blame the violence on criminals from other cities and states, who came to New York City in hopes of capitalizing on the hostility towards the draft. As we will show, these reasons have little foundation in truth.

The roots of this riot, its duration and its ferocity lie in the citizens of New York themselves. The plight of the poor in the city is well documented. The feeling that the draft was aimed squarely at them and their families caused a great deal of resentment that was channeled into violence and chaos during the riots.

Latent racial hostilities also played an important role, as the riots became a vehicle for the torture and murder of blacks throughout the city. The fact that many of these rioters were young Irish-Catholic males is also a very important factor, in that it exemplifies the combination of poverty and racial animosity that made the riots last so long.

### **The Copperhead Menace**

Paranoia about the South was rampant throughout the Union. Any popular uprising (and there were many) was cause for coming up with a new conspiracy theory about the South and their unseen agents in the Union. In New York, Southern support was strong, represented by the Peace Democrats, or “Copperheads.” Burnstein states that:

The Peace or Copperhead faction of the Democracy believed that the increased power and centralization of the Republican wartime government had brought hard times and political tyranny to the North; poor white men had paid for the war with their blood and toil, while blacks reaped the benefit of misguided Republican philanthropy; normalcy could be restored only by a negotiated settlement between the sections.<sup>iv</sup>

The Copperheads represented the segment of the population sympathetic with the rioters. The desire for peace with the South was very attractive for the poor, since it eliminated many of the negative actions that the government was taking in their eyes. They would no longer have to fear the draft, nor would they be implicitly supporting the freedom of blacks, who many believed would flood north to take their jobs when the war was over. Furthermore, support for the South was directly against the tenets of the reviled Republican institutions of the city, long held to be corrupt and ignorant of the plight of the poor.

Immediately after the riots began, the press blamed the Copperheads for the violence. In an editorial piece, the *New York Times* stated that:

It has long been declared by the rebel journals, and also by the European journals in the interest of the rebels, that the Conscription act could not be enforced, and that this would compel a discontinuance of the war. The anti-war journals here in the North, while they in

general have not ventured into to recommend violent resistance to the Conscription, have yet studied to excite against it every unreasoning passion and prejudice.<sup>v</sup>

The editorial in this case referred to an assertion by Southern leaders and spokesmen that Conscription would never succeed in the North. In a sense this argument had merit, since the country's military had been a purely volunteer force for decades. Furthermore, the Union could not support the war effort on the backs of its volunteers simply because there were not enough, and so it was forced to begin a draft in a population quite unused to the proposition. The point of this editorial was that the rebels, through the "anti-war journals here in the North," were inciting popular opinion against the draft, and that this, in some way was a cause of the rioting. Perhaps if the rioters stopped at closing the draft offices would this explanation be plausible, but the expansive nature of the violence was not accounted for by mere rabble rousing.

Some editorials went so far as to say that the rioting, rather than being caused by ideas from the South, was in fact directly supported by a conspiracy of Copperheads within the city. An editorial in the *New York Tribune* writes: "We may just as well look these facts in the face. These riots are a "fire in the rear" on our country's defenders in the field. They are in purpose and essence a diversion in favor of Jeff. Davis and Lee."<sup>vi</sup> The implication was that the riots were somehow motivated by an effort to hamper the war effort of the Union. What better place to strike than its most prosperous (and some would say most divided) city? Although this editorial in particular is not specific, it seems likely that many authorities believed that Copperheads who supported the South planned the riots months in advance. Judging from the targets of the rioting, however, there seems to be little evidence for this assertion. Although mobs tried to take over armories and ammunition dumps, they were sparse and unorganized, failing at each attempt. A truly organized riot could easily have overtaken the police in these cases and caused mayhem throughout the city. The fact that the rioters were disorganized and often targeted civilians points towards an expression of anger and dissatisfaction rather than an organized plot.

Furthermore, it is very unlikely that the Copperheads had anything to do with the continuation of the violence beyond the first day. Even if they incited the rioting, the demographics of the mob changed as the violence developed. As described by Bernstein, a group that was on the first day composed primarily of honest workmen protesting the riots degraded into a series of mobs led by poor laborers.<sup>vii</sup> The timing of the rioting was also suspect in terms of Southern involvement. During the middle of the same week, the

Southern army was routed and subsequently narrowly escaped utter destruction by fleeing across the Potomac River.<sup>viii</sup> It seems unlikely that the South would devote the time and resources needed to seed such a violent riot and have it last for so long when resources and time were needed to fend off the advances of the Union. One could argue that the distraction could be used to divert troops from the front, which did occur, but the numbers needed to quell the riot were far too small to have a significant effect on the course of battle against the Confederates.

### **The Reign of the Rabble**

Another popular explanation for the continued violence placed the blame squarely on opportunistic miscreants. In an editorial piece after the first day of rioting, the *Times* noted, “It was probably, in point of character, the lowest and most ruffianly mob which ever disgraced our City. We have never witnessed a more disgusting or more humiliating sight than was offered in every street that these gangs of outlaws tramped through...”<sup>ix</sup> This piece was only an opinionated characterization of the rioters. It did, however, point out that the kind of violence undertaken by the rioters was uncharacteristic for the city. A logical conclusion to draw from this was that those who continued the rioting after the assaults on the draft offices and the peaceable closing of businesses were the criminal element, those people who saw the riots as an occasion to reap profit. There were obviously many “toughs” out in the riots, but the anger and rage with which the acts were committed indicates a more deep-seeded reason for the violence. Also, the fact that many of the rioters were “mere boys”<sup>x</sup> indicates the absence of a criminal element in these early stages.

As the riots progressed, so did the reports that criminals were fueling the violence. These criminals were no longer home grown, but were thought to come from places as far away as Baltimore. A section in the *Times* labeled “Reinforcements for the Mob” reported that:

The scoundrels and roughs - the Blood Tubs and Plug Uglies of Baltimore, and the Scuvikli Rangers and other rowdies of Philadelphia – are reported to have come to the city in large numbers to make common cause with the Dead Rabbits, Mackerel-villers, and other

leading spirits of the riot in their carnage and plunder. The scoundrels cannot afford to miss this golden opportunity of indulging their brutal natures and at the same time serving their colleagues the Copperheads and dear sympathizers.<sup>xi</sup>

Although news did travel fast enough in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was difficult to believe that criminals from as far away as Philadelphia and Baltimore were able to sneak into the city in order to fuel the riots. In fact, rioters had stopped many of the trains, so this seems even more implausible.<sup>xii</sup> Also, the targets of the violence again come into play here to disprove this assertion. Why would thieves and scoundrels, looking to capitalize on the riots, attack poor blacks and loot their homes? Towards the end of the week, the violence was primarily directed at poor blacks and government officials and institutions. Although there was considerable plunder of the homes and business of the wealthy, these were not the main targets of the mobs. It seems likely that criminals sneaking into the city would seek to rouse as little suspicion as possible, going about their business silently in order to maximize their gains. Even the explanation that the criminals were sent by the Confederates, which is implied by this passage, seems unlikely since it was doubtful that the Confederates had a better working relationship with their criminals than the Union did! Most likely these explanations were the work of editorial writers seeking any reason for the senseless violence that gripped the city during the week.

Rather than being motivated by criminal intent, much of the looting and theft of the riots occurred while locals were settling old scores. In one example, John Weschusen had his store ransacked and looted by local boys. A newspaper account states that “[He] kept and keeps now, a grocery-store on the North-east corner of Division and Essex streets. It appears that he had made himself obnoxious to that class of men and boys who usually congregate about corner groceries; as a consequence, his store was sacked.”<sup>xiii</sup> In this case, and many others, the violence was used as a pretext to settle old grudges by means of destruction. Any thievery in these cases was not instigated by criminal gangs, but rather by angry locals who wished to get even and perhaps make some level of profit. The riots appealed to the baser instincts of usually good people but did not seem to attract a cadre of hardened criminals into the city.

The most reasonable explanation for the crimes blamed on “thieves” and “rogues” was, of course, a group mentality. As in many cases, when people saw their peers acting in a certain manner, they tended to follow suit. As Theodore Arnold, a looter, testified, “I took said property because every one else took it.”<sup>xiv</sup> This was as simple and honest an answer as could be expected. Much of the theft and looting was caused

by a group mentality, where one errant thug would go in to loot and others would follow, if only to be a part of the violence. In this way, we can see that the violence continued for so long because it was easy for these people to loot and steal, for they faced few consequences against a battered police force. Opportunism and going with the crowd were prime motivators in this case.

### **The Plight of the Poor**

A significant issue of contention for the poor was the 300-dollar exemption from the draft provided by the Conscription Act. A letter written to *The New York Times* highlighted the arguments of the rioters very clearly.

You will, no doubt, be hard on the rioters tomorrow morning but that 300-dollar law has made us nobodies. Vagabonds and cast-outs of society, for whom nobody cares when we must go to war and be shot down. We are the poor rabble, and the rich rabble is our enemy by this law. Therefore, we will give our enemy battle right here, and ask no quarter. Although we got hard fists, and are dirty without, we have soft hearts and have clean consciences within, and that's the reason we love our wives and children more than the rich, because we got not much besides them, and we will not go and leave them at home for to starve. Until that draft law is repealed, I for one am willing to knock down more such ram-hole politicians as KENNEDY. Why don't they let the nigger kill the slave-driving race and take possession of the South as it belongs to them.<sup>xv</sup>

The argument here was that the 300-dollar exemption allowed the rich to bypass the draft, and forced poor workers to join the military. These young workers were often the only source of income for their families. The loss of this income was disastrous for the women and children that the income supported. There was also a latent hostility towards the government and the affluent, here represented by "KENNEDY", the Police Superintendent John A. Kennedy. The poor and downtrodden of the city wanted vengeance for being marginalized by the rich and powerful, and so they plundered the city. This was clearly a significant problem in New York during this period, but the generally corrupt local governments did not adequately address it.

The effects of poverty were plainly visible in many of the targets of the rioting. One of the most visible targets was the home of Mayor George Opdyke.

Early in the morning, the rioters had assembled en masse on Fifth-avenue, in front of the residence of Mayor OPDYKE, and commenced a violent assault upon his house, and succeeded in forcing the front door and in breaking the costly plate glass in the second and third story windows. One of the lamps on the front stoop was entirely demolished. The riot here was conducted mainly by boys between the ages of eighteen and twenty years.<sup>xvi</sup>

There could be no better place to strike at both the government and the affluent than the home of the Mayor, who was presumably a figurehead for both. The fact that they destroyed “costly” windows indicates that the rioters sought to eliminate the external signs of wealth in order to bring the Mayor some sense of their poverty. Although the rioters were stopped in this case, the article noted that they had a “...sincere intention...to gut and burn the building.” Such actions were taken against the rich throughout the city, and showed that the poor were committing these acts to show those in power that they were also able to have some effect on the city and their lives. In this way we can view the riots as a grand gesture by the poor to gain some attention for their plight. An interesting note here was the age of the rioters in this case. They were too young to be drafted, which shows that this attack was not against the draft, but instead a display of rage against the wealthy and powerful of the city.

Acts of theft also demonstrated the animus of the mob. Rather than looting poor local businesses, the rioters often set out to rob stores frequented by the wealthy. One group of rioters attacked the famous Brooks Brothers clothing store: “The large clothing store of BROOKS BROTHERS...was also visited by the insurgents. A great amount of plunder was secured by the mob in the shape of clothing, boots and shoes...”<sup>xvii</sup> Brooks Brothers was (and still is) a very visible symbol of affluence in New York City. Many of the wealthy bought their clothes exclusively from that store. By looting the stores of the wealthy, the rioters demonstrated that they had a great deal of power, and that they could use that power to profit if they so wished. These acts were less to gain profit and more to show the rich and powerful that the invisible masses of poor who lived in “their” city did exist, and could cause a great deal of damage if provoked. The wealthy did, after all, move away from the east side of the city as the poor flowed in.<sup>xviii</sup> They tried to avoid dealing with poverty by making it invisible to them, but the riots were a way for the poor again to assert their presence and demand some level of consideration in the business of the city.

## Mob Demographics

There was a significant demographic shift in the rioters after the first day. As Bernstein describes it, “Monday’s rioters were by no means all Irish and Catholic. Some were German speaking, and some were native born and Protestant.”<sup>xxix</sup> As the week progressed, the mobs were “...more predictably Irish and Catholic, and they were more likely to be members of trades restricted to the sons of Erin.”<sup>xxx</sup> As early as Tuesday, other segments of the population, especially Germans, had come together to protect their neighborhoods against the mobs.<sup>xxxi</sup> The protests on the first day cut across racial lines. The initial protestors were united by their belief that the draft was wrong, and should be stopped. The mobs of the first afternoon and beyond were of a more violent and less idealistic sort, and no longer showed a great diversity of ethnic background. This demographic shift was very much related to the continued and increased violence as the riots progressed. Irish-Catholics were often poorer workers in hard labor professions such as dock work. Germans were often more well off, and tended to live within the bounds of the law. Although they had as much reason as anyone to protest the draft, they saw little reason to commit violent acts against the people of the city to do so.

Almost immediately after the riots, the Irish-Catholics were put in the news spotlight. According to the *Times* it was “...a fact, patent to everyone who has seen anything of the mob, that it is composed almost exclusively of Irishmen and boys.”<sup>xxxii</sup> The Archbishop of New York even filed a plea in the newspapers for Catholics to stop participating in the riots.<sup>xxxiii</sup> No mention is made, however, of why these more violent mobs are composed of the Irish. Many explanations seem plausible. The Irish tended to work as unskilled labor, and dominated several professions, such as dock work and quarry work.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Unskilled laborers were paid very little in these days, and struggled to make a living. Arguments against the draft, and in turn against the wealthy and the government, would resonate strongly with this group of workers. The Irish made up approximately one quarter of the city’s population and “...virtually all of them were squeezed into the East Side slums.”<sup>xxxv</sup> These conditions, coupled with the provocation of the draft, released the tensions that these people were faced with in an outburst of violence. The violence was an outburst from people who had little hope and even less help from the people of the city. Although the Irish did have a history of violence (both in Ireland and in the areas to which they immigrated), they were also among the

most marginalized people of the city. The Irish constituted the majority of the poor, and so they were the ones most heavily involved in the rioting.

Irish newspapers in the city tended towards denial of a strong Irish presence among the rioters.

According to the *Irish-American*:

The abolition papers, without a single exception, continue their assaults on the Irish-born population of New York, attributing to them, with all the exaggeration that prejudice and malignity can impart to the slander, the worst excesses committed during the late riots in the city. ... The lying assertion that the watchword of the rioters was “Democratic Catholic”...Anecdotes are related about the benevolent capitalists who called around them their *Irish* workingmen, and rich merchants who warned their *Irish* servants of the loss that would inevitably befall themselves if the mob should assail the factories and residence of these millionaire traders and the moral is carefully drawn, that these establishments were not touched, leaving it to be concluded...that said Irish working people were either a constituent part of the mob and were only prevented from destroying the property of their employers by the fear of losing the miserable pittance with which their labor is required.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The implication of this piece was that the mobs were not predominantly Irish, and that such information was merely a fallacy invented by the popular abolitionist newspapers (*Greeley’s Tribune* was mentioned in particular). From the records of those arrested for rioting and accused of violence during the riots, the Irish were a significant portion of the mobs.<sup>xxvii</sup> Admittedly, the characterization of the Irish as the only people in the mobs is extreme, but they did play a significant role. Several parts of this passage also bear mentioning as indicative of the resentment towards the wealthy and powerful that motivated that violence after the first morning. The descriptions of “benevolent capitalists” (clearly sarcastic) and the “servants” of “rich merchants” indicate a great deal of resentment towards the wealthy. It is important to keep in mind that this was published a full week after the riots ended, and yet the tone of bitterness was still present in the piece. Although the piece was probably meant to mock the Abolitionist newspapers, it was obvious that the Irish poor held a great deal of resentment towards the elite of the city. It was this resentment that was clearly displayed in the rioting.

## The Negro Menace

Perhaps the most horrific aspect of the rioting was the terrorizing of blacks. Throughout the city blacks were hunted down and killed. They were often tortured and hanged, left for dead until they were cut down, at which point further assaults and mutilations were perpetrated upon their lifeless bodies. In the case of Abraham Franklin, after hanging him and seeing his body cut down by police, the mob "...again suspended the now probably lifeless body of Franklin, cutting out pieces of flesh and otherwise mutilating it."<sup>xxxviii</sup> Savage acts like this occurred throughout the riots, often committed by parties composed of men, "...none of them more than twenty-two or three years of age..."<sup>xxxix</sup> The rage of the rioters was clearly focused on blacks, but the sheer brutality of these acts was still shocking. Latent racial tensions clearly manifested themselves in these riots. Blacks and whites lived side-by-side in the slums as neighbors and often worked together as well.<sup>xxx</sup> Why then were they the targets of these attacks?

One point of contention was Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The proclamation set all slaves in the South free. Although it was merely a political maneuver and did little to provide for equality between blacks and whites, many poor whites foresaw a massive influx of freed blacks to the North after the war. This movement, they assumed, would mean cheap black labor for many businesses, costing them their livelihood. Therefore, they had little sympathy with, and much hostility for, all freed blacks. Interestingly, the opposite of this assumption became true; blacks had an even harder time finding work than whites, since many employers were reluctant to hire them due to social stigmas.

The announcement of the draft outraged poor whites. Much of this outrage is evident in passage XIV. The whites that took part in the riots did not feel that they should be fighting and dying in a war to save people they believed to be inferior. Furthermore, to have to abandon their families in such a cause was seen as an affront, and only compounded their sense of being marginalized. They did not, as one would expect, feel any camaraderie with their black neighbors. These blacks signified their poverty and station in life, which magnified their resentment. In a way, the blacks of New York City were an easy scapegoat for more deep seeded problems in the city's society. Thus, latent racial tensions that had built up because of the overwhelming poverty of the city's residents exploded into the continued violence of the riots.

Another interesting reason for the assault on blacks is evident in the Conscription Act itself. One of the provisions of the act is that "...able-bodied male *citizens*..." (emphasis added) of the Union were the only people who could be drafted.<sup>xxxix</sup> Since blacks were not citizens, they were not subject to the draft. This was probably very inflammatory for the poor whites. After all, why should they be drafted if the very people the war was fought for were not? This argument overlooked the fact that many blacks volunteered to fight in the war in spite of not being drafted. It did, however, highlight the racial conditions that made the riots possible. The government looked upon blacks as secondary members of society. It is no wonder that the poor whites felt justified in hunting them down like animals during the riots. The attitude of the government only perpetuated the feelings and prejudices of the poor.

Many of the attacks against blacks were tinged with a sexual element. Many brothels catering to black men were attacked, as well as mixed race households.<sup>xxxix</sup> A "colored orphanage" was attacked as well.<sup>xxxix</sup> This mixture of attacks against blacks with some level of sexuality seems on some level an effort to "cleanse" the streets of black influence. By striking at women who consorted with blacks the rioters were eliminating the root of what they perceived to be moral wrongs. By attacking black children, they were eliminating the next generation of blacks, effectively "cleansing" the city for the future. They were also, in some sense, eliminating the power that blacks were soon to obtain with the end of the war. Not wanting to compete with yet another strong group for work, especially one that they saw as inferior, the rioters took their power back by killing helpless blacks throughout the riots.

## **Conclusion**

The New York City draft riots of 1863 were among the most horrific civil disturbances of the civil war era. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their ferocity and level of violence is unmatched. There were many factors that led to the terrible violence of the riots. There was a clear failure on the part of authorities to stop the rioting at an early stage, when it could possibly have been put down without lost lives. A complete lack of leadership by many of the city authorizes (some bordering on the incompetent) only added to the damage of the riots. In spite of this, no one expected the severity of the violence that rocked the city over

that week. None could have predicted the total destruction of dozens of buildings, the looting of homes and businesses, or the slaughter of blacks that took place during the rioting.

In a sense, the draft riots were the first indication of the birth of the modern city. Immigrants from all over the world were flooding into New York each day, and had to live alongside each other, among the blacks and white Protestants who were here before them. Predictable racial tensions arose, but were compounded by the station of the immigrants. A great class divide was developing in New York City. The disparity between the wealthy, with their million-dollar estates on 5<sup>th</sup> avenue, and the poor, in their slums on the East side was evident to anyone who cared to notice. The government, however, took few steps to assuage this disparity and lay dormant in its usual corruption. The riots were a signal to those in power that times were changing, and that the issues of race and class needed to be addressed. No longer was the country a homogenous land filled with small white Protestant settlements. Now large, cramped cities would dominate the landscape, and people of all races and social standings would have to live with each other in these cities in order for the country to prosper and go forward.

Although draft riots clearly highlighted important issues for the future, these issues were not at all immediately addressed. Many charitable donations helped the blacks of the city slowly recover from the rioting.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Although many in the press came to recognize the plight of the poor and the tensions building between the different races of the city, none of the major newspapers proposed solutions to these problems. Prejudice was clearly a large problem in these days, and those who were poor or black had little say in policy. For a time after the riots, William “Boss” Tweed and the Tammany Democracy dominated New York’s political scene. Although corrupt, Tweed’s government did a great deal to bring funds to the poor. At the same time, Tweed set up an entirely white supremacist regime that dealt with the “problem” of blacks through suppression and intimidation.<sup>xxxv</sup> The problems exposed by the draft riots would take decades to solve, and many of them have yet to be solved to this day.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Cook, pp. 35.
- <sup>ii</sup> *The New York Times*, July 16, 1863.
- <sup>iii</sup> Case of Thomas Fitzsimmons, Grand Jury Dismissals, August 1863, CCB. Cited in Bernstein p.20.
- <sup>iv</sup> Bernstein, p. 11.
- <sup>v</sup> *The New York Times*, July 14, 1863.
- <sup>vi</sup> *The New York Daily Tribune*, July 15, 1863.
- <sup>vii</sup> Bernstein, p. 23.
- <sup>viii</sup> *The New York Daily Tribune*, July 16, 1863.
- <sup>ix</sup> *The New York Times*, July 14, 1863.
- <sup>x</sup> *The New York Times*, July 14, 1863.
- <sup>xi</sup> *The New York Times*, July 16, 1863.
- <sup>xii</sup> McCague, p. 62 and *The New York Times*, July 14, 1863.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *The New York Evening Post*, August 5, 1863.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Case of Theodore Arnold, Indictments, August 1863, CCB. Cited in Cook.p. 199.
- <sup>xv</sup> *The New York Times*, July 15, 1863.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *The New York Times*, July 15, 1863.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *The New York Times*, July 15, 1863.
- <sup>xviii</sup> McCague, pp. 13-27.
- <sup>xix</sup> Bernstein, p. 23.
- <sup>xx</sup> Bernstein, p. 23.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *The New York Times*, July 14, 1863.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *The New York Times*, July 16, 1863.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Bernstein, p. 294.
- <sup>xxv</sup> McCague, p. 23.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *The Irish-American*, July 25, 1863.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Cook, pp. 256 – 268.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> *Report*, p. 14.
- <sup>xxix</sup> *Report*, p. 21.
- <sup>xxx</sup> McCague, pp. 20-27.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *The New York Times*, July 11, 1863.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Cook, pp. 134-6.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> *The New York Times*, July 14, 1863
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> *Report*, p. 31.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Bernstein, p. 196.

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