

LINCOLN'S CIVIL WAR AGAINST NEW YORK by John Chodes

Between 1861 and 1865 there were two wars being fought simultaneously in the United States by Abraham Lincoln and his Republican administration. The first was to prevent the independence of the seceded Southern states. The second was a civil war in the North upon the six states controlled by the Democratic Party: New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin.

The Union army was called upon to crush out their guerrilla war, insurrectionary acts, and full-scale military defiance. This opposition was provoked by Lincoln's attempt to insure loyalty through terror: arbitrary arrests of civilians, martial law and military trials for civilians hundreds of miles outside the war zone, confiscation of property of suspected traitors and the closing of anti-Republican periodicals. Thirty-eight thousand Northerners were arrested and taken to unknown places of confinement, without benefit of habeas corpus or trial by jury.

Fernando Wood, the former mayor of New York City, summed up the reality of what provoked the North to rise. He said the United States was in the midst of two revolutions: One, at the South, with the sword, and the other at the North, by Executive and legislative usurpation ... Taking advantage of the popular enthusiasm in behalf of the Union, it has, under the pretext of furthering this holy object, gradually fastened the chains of slavery upon the people.

The Democratic Party was devoted to peace and reconciliation with the Confederacy. Its platform, like the South's, defended state sovereignty by thwarting the powerful centralized national government advocated by the Republicans.

Horatio Seymour, NY Governor

Horatio Seymour, New York's Democratic governor before and during the war, spoke about Southerners being heroic and loyal to the Union in the past, as a way to end the sectional conflict: Upon whom are we to wage war? Our own countrymen, whose ... courage has never been questioned in any contest in which we have been engaged. They battled by our side with equal vigor in the Revolutionary struggle, in the last war with Great Britain (War of 1812) and in the Mexican conflict. Virginia sent her sons, under the command of Washington, to the relief of beleaguered Boston. Alone, the South defeated the last and most desperate efforts of British power to divide our country, at the battle of New Orleans. Seymour tried to negotiate a peaceful settlement, but when that failed, he blamed the war fever on the Republican philosophy of meddling in areas outside their constitutional authority.

General William Tecumseh Sherman, in a speech to Congress, clarified the magnitude of the Northern war when he stated that the Union army had three million men in the field, and that half of them were fighting the war against the loyal states.

New York City: Biggest Battle of War

This turmoil erupted in July 1863 into a bloody battle between New York's citizens alongside the State militia, and the Federal government's regular forces. History books call this the Draft Riot, as if this was a spontaneous outburst against conscription. That term disguises the magnitude of this well-planned defiance against Lincoln's brutal policies against the North.

This riot was actually a brilliant military defense of the Empire State against the invasion of its sovereignty. It was the Battle of New York City, the longest engagement of the entire war and the only major urban battle. It surpassed Gettysburg in length of time, geographic scale, and approached it in casualty numbers. It more resembled the house-to-house fighting at Stalingrad or Berlin in the Second World War.

As a result of New York's insurgency, Lincoln inflicted a harsh occupation program on it, while the war raged in the South. This contradicts the myth that Abraham Lincoln was a moderate who opposed the radical Republican plan to impose a reconstruction of vendetta upon the defeated Confederacy. This myth presupposes that had Lincoln lived the seceded states would have returned to the Union painlessly. Yet Lincoln imposed a tyrannical military dictatorship over New York in the midst of the war, and it remained into peace-time. This paralleled the treatment for the post-war South; with Boss Tweed's carpetbag style regime and its incredible corruption and frenzied spending; changes and/or proposed changes in New York's constitution, like those alterations in the conquered states, designed to centralize power in the Republican Assembly. Long after the bloodshed ceased, there were still military trials for New York's civilians, coinciding with that kind of false justice in the South.

Vallandigham's Arrest Leads to Insurrection

Clement Vallandigham was a Congressman from Ohio and a nationally prominent Democrat. In May 1863 he made a speech attacking the Lincoln administration's conduct in the war. He was arrested, convicted by a military tribunal, although a civilian, and deported into the Confederacy.

Vallandigham provoked this extreme reaction by assailing Lincoln's autocratic powers: As inexorable in its character as that of the worst despotism of the Old World of ancient or modern times. When an attempt is made to deprive us of free speech and a free press, the hour shall then have come when it will be the duty of freemen to find some other efficient mode of redress.

Governor Seymour said this about Vallandigham's arrest: If this proceeding is approved by the government and sanctioned by the people, it is not merely a step toward despotism, it establishes military despotism.

Then John Mullaly, a prominent Democrat in New York, gave this call to arms: While we have such a governor as Horatio Seymour... there is not a man that needs to be afraid of being carried off as Vallandigham has been ... There was one State out of which Vallandigham could not have been taken, except over the bodies of thousands of armed citizens.

Conscription: The Final Straw

Unconstitutional arrests, attacks on freedom of speech, confiscation, etc., put the citizens of New York on a collision course with Lincoln but the spark that provoked war between the State and Federal government was the assault on state sovereignty. This was manifested by the radical transition from permitting each state to administer the bringing of men into the military system within its jurisdiction, to the nationalizing of conscription. In March 1863, with the war going badly, voluntary enlistments dropped dramatically. Congress enacted a Conscription Bill to coerce men into the armed forces. The reaction to this was immediate. Governor Seymour believed that this would prove unfortunate as a policy. He asked Lincoln not to put the draft into effect until its legality could be determined. I do not dwell upon what I believe would be the consequence of a violent, harsh policy before the constitutionality of the act is tested. You can scan the immediate future as well as I.

The Democratic Party passed a resolution concerning the Conscription Bill: It is subversive to the rights of State governments and designed to make them dependencies and provinces, to be ruled by military satraps, under a great, consolidating, usurping, central despotism.

Then Abraham Lincoln's bureaucrats sent New York its draft quota. Horatio Seymour wrote several furious letters to the President. If the comparison is made between cities of different states, the disproportion of men demanded from New York and Brooklyn (both Democratic cities) is still more startling. While in these cities 26% of the population is enrolled, in Boston (a Republican city) only 12.5% or less than half the ratio, are liable to be drafted.

Lincoln backed down. The quotas were more equitably distributed, but the conflict had reached the point of no return. J.A. McMasters, editor of the Freeman's Journal, said that the time for deliberation had gone, and the time for action had come by fighting, not by street fighting, not by disorganized opposition. They should organize by tens and hundreds, by companies and regiments, and they should send to their governor for commissions as soon as their regiments are formed.

New York vs. Federal Invasion

On Saturday morning, 11 July 1863, the actual drawing of draftee names began. At 5 a.m. it was already hot and overcast. A long column of citizen-soldiers moved from the Lower East Side, across Broadway, to 9th Avenue, armed with iron bars, bludgeons and bats. Armed women were among them. Small groups split off and smashed into hardware stores to get hand guns and rifles. Another column poured down Lexington Avenue to the Bulls Head Hotel on 43rd Street. The office of the American Telegraph Company. From here messages could be sent to Washington, warning of the uprising. The office was destroyed.

Another formation swarmed over the Harlem and New Haven Railroad tracks. The American Telegraphs transmission lines were alongside. They were cut. Communications with the outside world and the police precincts went dead, delaying aid.

Simultaneously the citizen-militia entered the railroad yards and depots, stopping all service. They moved against the major police stations, isolating them. Police headquarters on Mulberry Street was placed under siege. The 23rd Precinct station house on East 88th Street was burned. The 16th Precinct on East 22nd Street, wrecked. The 5th Precinct at Baxter Street, surrounded. Much further uptown, the Harlem River Bridge was burned to stall Federal reinforcements.

It was soon obvious to Republicans that this was not a riot but a well-planned military operation. Navy Secretary Gideon Welles wrote in his diary: There is, I think, indubitable evidence of concert in these riotous movements, beyond the accidental and impulsive outbreak of a mob or mobs. Lee's march into Pennsylvania, the appearance of several rebel steamers off the coast, the mission of A. H. Stephens (the Confederate Vice President) to Washington, seem to be part of one movement, have one origin, are all concerted schemes between the rebel leaders and Northern sympathizer friends.

The New York Tribune, Republican newspaper, reported that no person who carefully watched the movements of this mob, who noticed their careful attention to the words of certain tacitly acknowledged leaders, who observed the unquestionably preconceived regularity with which they proceeded from one part of their infernal program to the next ... can presume to doubt that these men were acting under leaders who had carefully elaborated their plans.

Sunday, 6 a.m. Another large body of New Yorkers-massed along Second Avenue. One section moved against the Union Steam Works, a weapons factory for the Federal army, on 22nd Street. Thousands of rifles were in that building. A second attack was aimed at 21st Street; the New York State armory. More small arms and artillery were stored there. The police held the armory. Ten thousand New Yorkers charged them. The police retreated. To block reinforcements to the armory, the 18th Precinct on 22nd Street was also assaulted; its officers routed.

Further downtown, New York's militia headed for the City Hall area and the offices of the Tribune. Simon Gay, the managing editor, saw the approaching force and said: This is not a riot, but a revolution. The New Yorkers wrecked the Tribune's facility but the police counter-attacked, drove them out, and the newspaper printed its next edition. Fifty thousand New Yorkers were now in the streets.

Diversionsary Attacks in Outlying Towns

To divide police and Union army strength away from the main battle area in New York City, other attacks were staged in Brooklyn, Staten Island, and The Bronx. On Staten Island there was an assault on the military drill room of the Tompkins Lyceum in Stapleton. A detachment of 200 took 30 rifles. A second drill room near Stapleton Landing was sacked and weapons taken. Then a railroad car barn of the Staten Island Railroad was burned at the Vanderbilt Landing Depot. This was to slow Federal and police reinforcements.

Two companies of New York's 5th Regiment were diverted from lower Manhattan to Staten Island, along with two Federal companies and 300 policemen. At Clifton, as they disembarked, one company was sniped at by citizens concealed in the surrounding woods. They fired back. The citizens charged, took the soldier's weapons, crushed one's head, disembowelled a second, bayoneted others.

In Brooklyn, military activity pinned down a considerable portion of the police force when they were desperately needed in New York City. The Metropolitan Police District (which encompassed both cities) had about 2,000 men. At least half remained in Brooklyn as long as a threat existed there. One such attack was on two huge floating grain elevators in the bay off Atlantic Basin. The elevators had been loading grain as food for the Union armies. They were set on fire at night. The flames were visible to all of Brooklyn. This gigantic blaze drew firemen and police away from the major battle zone. A huge crowd gathered. It seemed they were just fascinated by the fire but they attacked the pier where the elevators were docked like zouaves charging an enemy's breastworks. Firemen, police and security guards only survived by escaping on small boats in the river.

The Brooklyn Navy Yard was a logical target. Four howitzers were placed at one gate, four cannons along the Flushing Avenue wall, and more artillery covered the main entrance. Soldiers and sailors were withdrawn from other locations to reinforce this critical base. It was not assaulted.

In the Bronx, at Morrisania and the West Farms sections, citizen-militia burned the enrollment offices. At Westchester Square they demolished the telegraph offices and at William Bridge and Melrose, ripped up the rails on the New Haven and Harlem railroad.

Police and Troops Counter-Attack

The initial clash between New Yorkers and the Union army occurred on the first day. Fifty Invalid Corps troops met the New Yorkers on Third Avenue. The Invalid soldiers had been wounded in earlier battles and were unfit for front line service. At first they fired blanks at the New Yorkers. This did not stop them. They switched to live rounds. Six New Yorkers fell, but the rest surged forward, killing several soldiers and taking their weapons. Because of the cuts in communications, it took thirteen hours for two companies of regular US infantry, stationed in the harbor, to arrive in the city. Mayor Opdyke sent an urgent telegram to Secretary of War Stanton, asking that all New York regiments return to the city from Gettysburg where they had just been fighting. At the Steamworks weapons factory, 150 New York State militia-men who were still loyal to the Federal government, confronted the citizens. It seemed the loyalists would not fire on their own people but they did; grape-shot from artillery. Six rounds. The street was littered with dead and dying. The police supported the loyal militia by attacking the Steamworks from a different direction. They charged forward but were trapped in a hail of bullets and bricks from snipers on rooftops. The police poured into these buildings. They rushed to the roofs. In hand-to-hand fighting, both sides were hurled to the streets below. The citizen-militia retreated from the Steamworks, regrouped, attacked again. The loyalists and police gave ground. The citizens took the factory and it became their headquarters. Later, the police with loyalist reinforcements, once again rushed forward, gained a foothold on the first floor and in room-to-room, floor-to-floor combat, slowly took back the Steamworks.

There were many shipyards along the East and Hudson rivers, most of them engaged in the building of military vessels for the Navy. The New Yorkers attacked Webb and Allen, one of the biggest, where the Dunderberg, an iron-clad ram, was near completion. The 7th New York Regiment defended the facility. Their concentrated fire drove the citizen-militia back. Simultaneously a column of citizens attempted to seize the ferry terminal on Fulton Street to deny this landing site to Union reinforcements. It was already defended by Federal troops. Here the citizens were also beaten off.

Police headquarters at Mulberry Street was still under siege. Thomas Acton, head of the Metropolitan board of Police Commissioners, ordered all police reserves to relieve the blockade, along with a company of Zouaves.

Then the howitzer battery was ready. But a mob could learn. On the order to fire, the mob flung themselves flat on the pavement or scattered into doorways on both sides of the street. In the interval between rounds of cannister screaming harmlessly down First Avenue, an answering rattle of musketry began to grow from windows and rooftops; these sharpshooters concentrated their fire on the officers. The troops were trapped, and because they did not have the training to fight their way out or clear the buildings, they died. The mob routed the Zouaves. The mob captured the artillery and turned it on the troops. Then, two companies of police struck the citizen-army in the rear, at 4th Street and Broadway. In more hand-to-hand fighting, they surged back-and-forth. The New

Yorkers were routed, retreating up Broadway, which looked like a battlefield, thickly strewn with prostrate forms.

Invading US Army Counter-Attacks

On the third day, the 47th New York Regiment reached the battle from Gettysburg. Edwin Stanton informed Mayor Opdyke that another five regiments are under orders to return to New York. Then Stanton telegraphed that eleven New York regiments have been relieved and will be forwarded to New York as fast as transportation can be furnished. Stanton had chosen New Yorkers to kill New Yorkers.

At noon of the third day, after having been driven back from Webb and Allen, the citizen-militia retreated until they reached barricades of cobblestones along 9th Avenue. There the police and the Union army combined to dislodge them. Connecticut troops poured on a withering fire which allowed the police to overwhelm the defenders.

Governor Seymour came into the city and found that he not only had to deal with his efforts to force the Union army to withdraw but also with the Republican leaders. They were intent on inciting the New Yorkers to greater lawlessness. This would force General Wool, who commanded the Department of the East, to declare martial law. That would end Democratic Party rule and civil law and government in New York. It would be replaced by military justice administered through the Republican administration. Martial Law would depose Horatio Seymour and require a military governor to control all future elections. When General Wool refused to declare martial law, the Tribune called him an imbecile. Wool was immediately replaced by General Dix who was more compliant but the battle ended before he could initiate such an extreme measure.

As the tide turned and the Federal forces pushed the citizen-militia back, Governor Seymour, with a cavalry escort, entered City Hall Park. It was filled with infantry. Seymour spoke to the New Yorkers, asking them to stop fighting. He realized that the battle was lost and to continue meant needless slaughter and permanent Federal control of the state: My friends, I come...from a kind regard for the ... welfare of those, who under the influence of excitement and supposed wrong, were in danger of not only inflicting serious blows to the good order of society, but to their own interests ... I beg of you to listen to me as your friend and friend of your families. Seymour told the citizens that he had sent his personal adjutant-general to Washington to stop the draft. The New Yorkers threw down their weapons and dissipated into the wreckage of the city.

After four days the battle was over. Union troops remained in control of the city. More soldiers were brought in, as part of a continuing army of occupation. Secretary of War Stanton sent this telegram to General Dix: We are sending you 10,000 infantry and 3 batteries of artillery. These are picked troops, including the regulars. If you need cavalry, we can, perhaps, send you 500. This tremendous battle did not make Lincoln more willing to compromise on conscription. He announced that the draft would continue immediately, under General Dix, who provoked another confrontation with Horatio Seymour. Dix telegraphed the governor that since the enrollment will probably be

resumed in this city, at an early date, I am desirous of knowing whether the military power of this State may be relied upon to enforce the execution of the law, in case of forcible resistance to it ... [so that] I need not ask the War Department to put at my disposal for the purpose, troops in the service of the United States.

Seymour wrote back that he had appealed to Lincoln not to resume conscription until the constitutionality could be tested. Lincoln refused to postpone it. August 14th was the day the draft resumed. Dix requested more Federal troops. Seymour again refused to comply, warning that enforcement would excite popular resistance and clarifying that New York State authorities would not carry out this national law. Conscription proceeded under the bayonets of this large Union army presence.

Conclusion

It has never been known how many perished in those awful days. According to the lowest estimate, some 1,200 of the rioters must have been killed and five to six times that number wounded; but they hid their losses as far as possible and disposed of their dead in silence and darkness. This means that the citizen-militia suffered about 8,400 casualties. And, as a standard rule, an attacking army takes three times as many killed and wounded as the defenders. Then, the Union army and police had losses of 25,200. The combined total of 33,600 is higher than the greater slaughter at Antietam and close to those at Gettysburg.

This battle radically altered the political climate of New York, its constitution was shredded, and the long-term consequences continue to be felt into the 21st century, since Abraham Lincoln viewed New York as another Confederate state that had to be taught a lesson through reconstruction. To achieve this, its elections had to be manipulated through terror, as was voting in the occupied Southern states.

So, New York was invaded a second time by land, with a huge amphibious assault waiting on the New Jersey waterfront, to be launched in case more force was necessary. This was in 1864, during the Presidential election. With the polls controlled by the army, a Republican victory was assured. Horatio Seymour was deposed and Lincoln re-elected. But, all that, dear reader, is the subject of another story on another day.