

A conversation with historian James M. McPherson

How the US Civil War became “a remorseless revolutionary struggle”

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A recent conversation with historian James McPherson of Princeton University was prompted by two events: the appearance of Martin Scorsese’s *Gangs of New York*, which purports to deal with an episode of the Civil War, and the publication of Professor McPherson’s most recent work, *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam*, which studies one of the turning points in that same conflict.

The July 1863 draft riots play a significant role in Scorsese’s film, set in the teeming Five Points New York slum neighborhood. The filmmakers present the uprising by the largely Irish immigrant population against conscription, which resulted in dozens of deaths and massive damage over four days, as an act of legitimate social protest, albeit tainted by racism.

The immediate background to the draft riots was the passage of the conscription law of March 1863. Democratic Party officials in New York City, who favored compromise with the Confederacy, demagogically denounced the measure, arguing that white working men were being forced to fight in a cause that would only lead to their economic ruin, as former slaves would come North en masse and take the jobs of “white labor.”

This propaganda was directed particularly at the impoverished Irish-American population in New York, suffering from the most wretched conditions and often competing with free blacks for menial positions. The employment of blacks—former slaves, according to some reports—as strikebreakers did not improve matters.

The subject of Professor McPherson’s most recent work, the battle of Antietam—which occurred near Sharpsburg, Maryland in September 1862—remains, as the author notes, “the bloodiest single day in American history,” resulting in more than 6,000 Union and Confederate dead and 15,000 wounded. It marked a turning point in the Civil War in a number of ways.

The Union victory, although not a crushing one, ended a string of Southern triumphs and halted Robert E. Lee’s attempted incursion into the North. It revived Northern morale and helped Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans retain control of Congress in the autumn elections. Antietam also put paid to Confederate hopes of European recognition and intervention. McPherson argues that the victory, most significantly, freed Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation liberating the slaves, altering forever the course of the war and American and world history.

We began our discussion with the draft riots. I asked Professor McPherson about his attitude toward the episode. “The Democratic Party in New York has a great deal to answer for,” he suggested. “It had a major responsibility for what happened. Democratic newspapers poured forth an endless stream of propaganda, racist appeals, warnings about the consequences of ending slavery, and so on. They claimed that blacks

would flood the North, take white men’s jobs, their wives, sisters, etc. They ran cartoons entitled the ‘Miscegenation Ball,’ for example, showing Lincoln and other Republicans dancing with black women, and black men dancing with white women. Foul stuff. This went on for years. Horace Greeley [editor of the anti-slavery *New York Tribune*] was a particular target.”

I noted it was particularly telling that in *Gangs of New York* Greeley is one of the few identifiable public figures, portrayed as a wealthy hypocrite sending the poor off to die. In essence, Scorsese’s film plays on caricatures first advanced by the most reactionary political forces.

Countless recorded examples of the Democrats’ appeals to economic fears and insecurity exist. At a rally in October 1860, for example, James W. Gerard, a Democratic candidate for Congress, warned his listeners—including his “friends from Ireland”—that the Republicans were an abolition party: “Abraham Lincoln, if honest to his party, means to do his best that the free men of the North shall make free the laboring population of the South. (Cries of ‘Never,’ and cheers.)... I call upon all adopted citizens to stand up and vote against Abraham Lincoln, or you will have Negro labor dragging you from your free labor.” [Labor Competition and the New York Draft Riots, Albon P. Man Jr.]

“The *New York World* was the most respectable of the Democratic newspapers,” Professor McPherson continued. “The *Freeman’s Journal* was one of the most scurrilous. These people were War Democrats at best. Some of them out and out Copperheads [pro-Confederacy Northerners]. Most of them backed George McClellan [Union army commander until November 1862 and Democratic Party candidate in 1864]. They had New York’s Governor Horatio Seymour on their side. He was a pivotal figure between the War Democrats and the Peace Democrats, the Copperheads.

“Seymour rushed to New York during the draft riots, and started speaking to an angry crowd. ‘My friends,’ he began, and the Republicans never let him forget it. He was the Democratic Party candidate for president in 1868, losing to [Ulysses S.] Grant.

“The open Copperheads were people like Fernando Wood and his brother Benjamin Wood. They ran the Mozart Hall faction of the New York Democratic Party, as opposed to the Tammany Hall crowd. At the beginning of the Civil War, Fernando Wood, who had been mayor and was elected again in 1861, proposed that New York City secede from the Union. They were tied up with [Clement] Vallandigham, the Ohio Copperhead [who was arrested for his pro-Confederacy activities in 1863].”

The extent of pro-Southern sympathy within the New York City establishment is indeed remarkable. Commentators note that only five of the city’s seventeen daily newspapers were firmly behind the Lincoln

administration. The *New York Freeman's Journal*, edited by James McMaster and closely associated with the Catholic Church, played a particularly vile role. The newspaper crusaded against emancipation in the months leading up to the draft riots. McMaster editorialized that contrary to the Protestant abolitionists, "the Catholic Church has her own methods. She interferes not with any human arrangement not in itself a sin. Human slavery is not such a sin—least of all is it sinful where it exists in the person of a semi-savage race." [The Church and the New York Draft Riots of 1863, Albon P. Man Jr.]

Another newspaper, the *Metropolitan Record*, identified as the "Official Organ of the Most Rev. Archbishop of New York," denounced the Emancipation Proclamation, calling it a "vile and infamous" document, that would bring "massacre and rapine and outrage into the homes on Southern plantations, sprinkling their hearths with the blood of gentle women, helpless age, and innocent childhood.... Never was a blacker crime sought to be committed against nature, against humanity, against the holy precepts of Christianity."

On the second day of the riots, July 14, 1863, the *Metropolitan Record* continued to incite the Irish-American population, calling on them to resist conscription by organizing, under Governor Seymour's command, a state militia for the purpose: "There are, we should think, arms enough in this city to supply at least twenty thousand men."

Fernando Wood was a significant and unattractive figure in mid-nineteenth century New York City politics. A successful merchant and real estate investor, Wood first became mayor in 1854. After an administration marked by graft and crime, Wood was defeated in 1859 (he was later reelected). He vehemently opposed the Civil War and the Lincoln presidency. His brother, Benjamin Wood, was long-time editor of the *New York Daily News*, the highest-circulating daily newspaper in the US.

As McPherson notes, Fernando Wood appealed for the secession of New York in 1861. He did so in the following words: "With the aggrieved brethren of the slave states we have friendly relations and a common sympathy. We have not participated in the warfare upon their constitutional rights or their domestic institutions.... Much, no doubt, can be said in favor of the justice and policy of a separation.... As a free city, with but nominal duty on imports, her local government could be supported without taxation upon her people. Thus we could live free from taxes and have cheap goods nearly duty free. In this she would have the whole and united support of the Southern states, as well as all the other states to whose interests and rights under the Constitution she has always been true."

Although the Democrats in New York (and elsewhere) shaped their demagoguery to appeal to the poorest layers of the population, this was sheer opportunism and political cynicism. McMaster, the Woods and their ilk represented the interests of a section of the city's wealthiest layer, with considerable economic ties to the South.

"Which social layers in New York had an interest in economic and political conciliation with the slavocracy?" I asked Professor McPherson.

"There was a merchant elite in New York City," he replied, "with extensive and long-standing ties to the South. Many of them were engaged in trade in slave-produced commodities. They financed the plantation owners, insured them, bought their cotton, and so forth. The Democrats like Wood spoke for this elite. The draft riots were an alliance between the poorest and the elite. On the other hand, there were manufacturers in New York who supported Lincoln."

McPherson continued, "Of course the federal government made a tactical mistake. They started drawing names from a jar—the draft was at the time in the form of a lottery—on Saturday in Manhattan. All day Sunday the opponents of the war had the chance to work on the population, as people were getting liquored up. The riots began on Monday."

I noted that the particular ferocity of the four days of rioting revealed enormous social grievances. Moreover, many of the Irish immigrants no doubt had family members or friends who had starved to death during the Irish potato famines of the 1840s, or had heard accounts of the severe suffering. The loss of a job must have had to them a life-and-death significance.

"Yes," said McPherson, "and they transferred their bitterness and anger to the powers that be in New York, and the blacks. No doubt as well, they were under no illusions about the contempt with which they were regarded by the Protestant elite. That had a long history. Many factors combined. The argument that it was a 'rich man's fight, but a poor man's war' made a powerful impression on these people, mostly from rural areas of Ireland. One should also mention, on the other hand, the role of the 150,000 Irish who fought in the Union Army, particularly in the Irish Brigade, which fought quite heroically."

He went on to explain some of the peculiarities of Civil War conscription. "You could buy your way out of the draft for \$300. Or hire a substitute. This was an age-old tradition, which doesn't make it any more equitable. The theory was that if you could afford \$300, you were economically important on the home front. This was a class idea. At the time of World War I they looked back on the Civil War experience, and commutation was not tried again. You had the Selective Service Act of 1917.

"An analysis of the figures indicates that the Union Army was pretty representative of all the social classes in American society. There were those who bought their way out, but that was an exception. However, the slogan of a 'poor man's fight' was lent credibility by this draft legislation, with its commutation clause.

"What happened in New York, after the draft riots, was that the Democratic Party pushed through legislation paying the commutation of any draftee who didn't want to serve. Ninety-eight percent of those drafted in New York didn't go. Tax revenues went to pay for the commutation. They didn't have to come up with their own money.

"Draft insurance existed at the time. For the payment of a premium, in the event you were drafted, the insurance company would buy your way out of it. Remember, conscription was not really universal. It was organized by congressional district. Each district had a quota to fill within 50 days. They offered bounties to men to enlist.

"There were four drafts from July 1863 till the end of the war. Half of the districts fulfilled their quotas without a draft of any kind. Lincoln made four calls for men from July 1863, the last one in January 1865. He called for a total of something like 1,000,000 men. Draftees only accounted for 74,000 out of that 1,000,000. There were another 150,000 substitutes. A combination of bounties and patriotic appeals did most of the work.

"In both the North and the South the essential purpose of the draft was to encourage volunteering. And it is well known that the best soldiers were those who rushed to volunteer in 1861-62—those who volunteered first and stuck it out.

"You could make some money out of the system. The federal government offered a \$400 bounty. Various levels of government—state, local—offered bounties. Also private organizations. Someone in Rochester, New York, for example, could get the federal, state, local and private bounties. Which meant, of course, that poorer districts would have difficulty fulfilling their quotas, because men would sign up in Rochester. A smart guy could pyramid these bounties. Such men were looked down on in the army. And some took the bounties and then deserted. There were executions. It's an unsavory business, and some historians blow it up out of proportion."

And some filmmakers, one might add.

Did Lincoln comment on the draft riots, I wondered? McPherson made the point that Lincoln had other matters on his mind, including the

military situation in the aftermath of the battle of Gettysburg, as well as elections in Ohio and Pennsylvania. His attitude is not known.

A contention of *Gangs of New York* and its admirers is that modern America was born “in the streets,” in ethnic rivalries, squalor and mindless violence. Weren’t Americans in the 1850s, on the contrary, quite susceptible to progressive ideas and impulses?

McPherson responded, “Well, you only have to consider the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858. [Held between Democrat Stephen Douglas and Republican Lincoln, candidates for the US Senate in Illinois. Douglas won the election.] People traveled miles and waited for hours to hear the debates, on critical political issues. The population was aware of the issues, there was great political interest and intensity. Big ideas were advanced, and policies arose from these big ideas.

“The American Civil War was a highly ideological war. Real issues were at stake, about which the population, including those who fought as soldiers, had formed definite ideas. The issues at stake would have a permanent impact on the country.

“Think about the number of soldiers killed. Two percent of the population died in the war. Today that would mean 5.5 million deaths. What permitted Northern and Confederate soldiers to sustain the levels of casualties? They weren’t forced to fight in this war, after all. This was a democratic society.

“They had to believe in something to sustain this level of death and destruction, this level of suffering. There was virtually no one at the time who did not have a family member, relative or friend who died in the war or was injured. Big ideas and issues were involved.”

We then turned to the bloody battle of Antietam, the subject of Professor McPherson’s new book. In the preface to the work, the author takes note of three definitions of freedom “that struggled for dominance from 1861 to 1865.”

The Confederacy claimed allegiance to a peculiar notion of “freedom,” based on state sovereignty and the right to own slaves, a kind of “Don’t Tread on Me” outlook, which they claimed to trace to the American Revolution. Second, there was Lincoln’s conception, at the beginning of the war, that an independent Confederacy would destroy the nation established by the Revolution, but that compromise with slavery was possible. And there was the most radical notion, shared by the slaves themselves, as well as the abolitionists and radical Republicans, which advocated emancipation and universal equality. According to McPherson, the course of the Civil War, looked on from this point of view, witnessed the growth and eventual dominance of the more radical and democratic conception of freedom.

Much of *Crossroads of Freedom* is taken up with a discussion of the vicissitudes of war in the first half of 1862. A series of Union triumphs began in February of that year “that seemed to portend the imminent end of the Confederacy.” However, the successes of Confederate generals “Stonewall” Jackson in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley and Robert E. Lee in the Seven Days Battles near the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia in the spring and summer of 1862 seriously damaged Northern morale and confidence. According to McPherson’s book, General George McClellan, whose hesitant military style flowed from his equivocal political stance—he was in favor of compromise with the slavocracy—“went to pieces. He was defeated, even if his army was not.”

Meanwhile, the Southern victories “reopened the question of foreign recognition of the Confederacy. Many in Britain and France regarded these battles as confirmation of their belief that the North could never subdue the South. Many of the gentry and aristocracy in Britain tended to sympathize with the Confederacy, while the working class identified with the Union as the champion of free-labor democracy.” The *Times* of London declared it was time to end a war that had become “a scandal to humanity.” McPherson notes dryly, “The ‘humanity’ they seemed most concerned about were textile manufacturers and their employees.”

The most critical and *cruciating* aspect of concerns the buildup to the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, and, more generally, the transformation of the Civil War from a struggle to defend the political status quo into a revolutionary war against slavery. McPherson considers the last six months of 1862 to be a crucial period in this regard. It was becoming increasingly clear by this point that both for political and military reasons a war conducted along conciliatory lines, in the hope that the South would return to the Union fold with the various pre-war institutions—including slavery—intact, was a hopeless effort.

The *New York Times*, which reflected the views of moderate Republicans, including sometimes Lincoln himself, expressed the new mood in an editorial July 27, 1862: “The country is weary of trifling. We have been afraid of wounding rebel feelings, afraid of injuring rebel property, afraid of ... freeing rebel slaves. Some of our Generals have fought the rebels—if fighting it can be called—with their kid gloves on [an obvious reference to McClellan].”

McPherson writes: “In his annual message to Congress the previous December, Lincoln had expressed a hope that war would not ‘degenerate into a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle.’ But since then the war had become remorseless, and Lincoln was about to embrace the revolution.”

From his home in London on August 7, 1862, Karl Marx wrote a letter to Frederick Engels which perspicaciously summed up the situation:

“From the outset, the Northerners have been dominated by the representatives of the border slave states, who were also responsible for pushing McClellan, that old partisan of [former vice president and Southern Democratic candidate for president in 1860 John C.] Breckinridge, to the top. The South, on the other hand, acted as a single whole right from the very start. The North itself turned slavery into a pro- instead of an anti-Southern military force. The South leaves productive labour to the slaves and could thus take the field undisturbed with its fighting force intact. It had a unified military leadership; the North did not.... In my view, all this is going to take another turn. The North will, at last, wage the war in earnest, have recourse to revolutionary methods and overthrow the supremacy of the border slave statesmen.... The long and the short of it is, I think, that wars of this kind ought to be conducted along revolutionary lines, and the Yankees have so far been trying to conduct it along constitutional ones.”

Following a fruitless meeting with border state congressmen on July 12, Lincoln apparently made up his mind—McPherson writes—“to go ahead with a proclamation of emancipation, grounded in his war powers as commander in chief to seize enemy property (in this case, slaves) being used to wage war against the United States.” At a cabinet meeting a little more than a week later Lincoln announced his decision. With one exception, the cabinet members “expressed varying degrees of support.” Secretary of State William H. Seward, however, counseled Lincoln to wait “until you can give it [the Emancipation Proclamation] to the country supported by military success.”

McPherson writes: “The wisdom of this suggestion ‘struck me with very great force,’ Lincoln said later. So he put the proclamation away to wait for a military victory.” It would prove to be a long wait, but, according to McPherson’s analysis, success at Antietam in September—after two months of dismal Union setbacks—provided that occasion.

In our conversation I raised with Professor McPherson his reference to the Union forces “taking off the kid gloves” in the summer of 1862. He remarked, “Soldiers and others in the North were becoming critical of the idea that you could treat traitors in the South in this conciliatory manner. You couldn’t take a fence-rail from a slave-owner, a chicken if you were hungry, much less free his slaves. How could you fight these traitors without taking their property? Northern soldiers would welcome slaves

into their army, but the high command was continuing to prosecute this 'kid-glove' war.

“Taking off the kid gloves meant treating these forces as they deserved to be treated. This kind of criticism reached a crescendo in the summer of 1862. They had passed the Second Confiscation Act [which freed the slaves of persons engaged in assisting the Confederacy and ordered the freeing of all slaves taking refuge behind Union lines], the Emancipation Proclamation was forthcoming. Tougher policies were instituted. McClellan was gotten rid of.”

I mentioned the dramatic change in attitude on the “Negro question” to which his book refers. Not only were there moral and political objections to slavery, but it was now clear to wide layers in the North that freeing the slaves was a practical measure necessary to ensure the defeat of the Confederacy. “Yes,” McPherson pointed out, “there was a growing understanding that the only way to deal with these people, to break the back of the slavocracy, was to seize their property, the slaves themselves.”

He continued: “There are ironies in the situation. McClellan’s lack of success meant the end of the society he wanted to preserve. His strategy, and that of those who supported him, was to take Richmond, in which case the South would surely sue for peace. Slavery would continue, but the South would have been chastised, would have been taught a lesson.

“Lee’s success, on the other hand, also brought about his eventual downfall. His offensive-defensive strategy—the idea that the North would inevitably win in a long conflict and that the best chance for victory lay in striking a blow which would force the North to recognize the Confederacy as an independent state—led him to march into Maryland, and there he met defeat. Antietam is the final step in that stage of the war.

“After this, it became clear that the world was not going to be the same. Antietam made possible the Emancipation Proclamation, it forestalled European intervention, it prevented the Democrats from winning control of the House of Representatives. After a series of Confederate victories, Antietam reversed the process. From the mid-summer of 1862 till the end of the year is a decisive period.”

I suggested that the “remorseless, revolutionary” character the Civil War was about to assume raised a number of issues. In the first years of the war Lincoln and others in the North took pains to paint the South as rebellious and the Union cause as the defense of the status quo—and there was some reality to this. At a certain stage, both for political and military reasons, the war transformed itself into something different.

What we were discussing, it seemed to me, was the process by which the utter irreconcilability of slavery and industrial capitalism, and, therefore, the need to prosecute a ruthless struggle, became manifest and entered into the consciousness of wide layers of the population in the North. From that point of view, there was an internal connection between the battle of Antietam and the draft riots.

The latter event was one of the political complications arising from the new stage of the war and its new demands, particularly when they were placed upon impoverished layers of the population, in a society torn by class division and social inequality. (The inability of Greeley and the Republicans to make a convincing social appeal to the immigrant workers in New York revealed the limitations of the bourgeois-democratic Civil War.)

McPherson replied, “The draft riots were a counterrevolutionary backlash against the turn the war had taken. They were underlain, or the thinking of those who encouraged them was underlain by the idea that the war ought not to change the antebellum status quo. The Emancipation Proclamation, to these forces, was one of the manifestations of unconstitutional measures designed to destroy the South and destroy the Democratic Party.”



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