“Northern Rebels Help Southern Ones” (Anna Dickinson, July 1863)

In the summer of 1863, President Lincoln issued a call for troops under the first federal draft law, which had been passed by Congress in March. Included in the draft pool were all men between the ages of 20 and 45, and those inducted had to serve three years. However, the law favored the rich because any man who could afford a $300 “commutation fee” or could hire a substitute was exempt. In northern cities, Irish immigrants particularly objected to the law. They competed with blacks for low-paying jobs and resented fighting for their rivals’ freedom. On July 12, 1863, the names of the first draftees in New York City appeared in the newspapers beside the lists of soldiers killed at Gettysburg. On July 13, a three-day riot began that focused its violence on blacks.

On the morning of Monday, the thirteenth of July [1863], began this outbreak, unparalleled in atrocities by anything in American history and equaled only by the horrors of the worst days of the French Revolution. Gangs of men and boys, composed of railroad employees, workers in machine shops, and a vast crowd of those who lived by preying upon others...began to gather on the corners and in streets and alleys where they lived...

A body of these, five or six hundred strong, gathered about one of the enrolling offices in the upper part of the city, where the draft was quietly proceeding, and opened the assault upon it by a shower of clubs, bricks, and paving stones torn from the streets, following it up by a furious rush into the office. Lists, records, books, and the drafting wheel, every article of furniture or work in the room was rent in pieces, and strewn about the floor of flung into the streets...

And then, finding every portable article destroyed – their thirst for ruin growing by the little drink it had – and believing, or rather hoping, that the officers had taken refuge in the upper rooms, set fire to the house, and stood watching the slow and steady lift of flames, filling the air with demoniac shrieks and yells, while they waited for the prey to escape from some door or window, from the merciless fire to their merciless hands...

With difficulty and pain the inoffensive tenants escaped from the rapidly spreading fire, which, having devoured the house originally lighted, swept across the neighboring buildings till the whole block stood a mass of burning flames...

Before night fell it was no longer a vast crowd collected in a single section, but great numbers of gatherings, scattered over the whole length and breadth of the city, some of them engaged in actual work of demolition and ruin, others, with clubs and weapons in their hands, prowling round apparently with no definite atrocity to perpetrate, but ready for any iniquity that might offer, and, by way of pastime, chasing every stray police officer or solitary soldier or inoffensive Negro who crossed the line of their vision. These three objects – the badge of a defender of the law, the uniform of the Union army, the skin of a helpless and outraged race – acted upon these madmen as water acts upon a rabid dog...

The next morning’s sun rose on a city which was ruled by a reign of terror. Had the police possessed the heads of Hydra...they would have been powerless against the multitude of oppressors...It was absurd and futile to characterize this new reign of terror as anything but an effort on the part of Northern rebels to help Southern ones...
“Rich Man’s War, Poor Man’s Fight” (Private Sam Watkins, April 1862)

In April 1862. The Confederate Congress passed the first national draft in American history—precisely a year before Union conscription by almost a year. Private Sam Watkins, a soldier in the First Tennessee Regiment, recalled the impact of the draft on Confederate morale in a memoir written after the war.

They [the histories] tell of great achievements of great men, who wear the laurels of victory, have grand presents given them, high positions in civil life...But in the following pages I propose to tell of the fellows who did the shooting and killing, the fortifying and ditching, the sweeping of the streets, the drilling, the standing guard, picket and vedette, and who drew (or were to draw) eleven dollars per month and rations...

A law was made by the Confederate States Congress about this time allowing every person who owned twenty Negroes to go home. It gave us the blues; we wanted twenty Negroes. Negro property suddenly became very valuable, and there was raised the howl of “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight.” The glory of the war, the glory of the South, the glory and the pride of our volunteers had no charms for the conscript...

Soldiers had enrolled for twelve months only and had faithfully complied with their volunteer obligations; the terms for which they had enrolled had expired, and they naturally looked upon it that they had a right to go home. They wanted to see their families; in fact, wanted to go home anyhow. War had become a reality; they were tired of it. A law had been passed by the Confederate States Congress called the conscript act. A soldier had no right to volunteer...He was conscripted.

There last hope had set. They hated war. To their minds the South was a great tyrant, and the Confederacy a fraud. They were deserting by thousands. They had no love or respect for General Bragg. When men were to be shot or whipped, the whole army was marched to the horrid scene to see a poor trembling wretch tied to a post and a platoon of twelve men drawn up in line to put him to death, and the hushed command of “ready, aim, fire!” would make the soldier, or conscript, I should say, loathe the very name of Southern Confederacy.