Gotham At War: New York City, 1860-1865

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Gotham At War is an entertaining and readable account of the biggest and most powerful city in the Union during the Civil War. The citizens of New York City were certainly not unanimous in their opinions of the Civil War, but they played a major role nonetheless. Edward K. Spann, professor emeritus of history at Indiana State University, discusses that role, from sending forces to defend Washington D.C. against capture by Confederates to the Union victory in 1865.

New York City was right in the center of the secession crisis of the 1860s because it depended heavily on the trade with the South, namely King Cotton. But as time passed, Spann points out on page 11, "... New Yorkers were beginning to recognize that cotton was not their king, that they were not as dependent on the South's trade as they had thought. New York's financial power remained intact, to be strengthened by large imports of California gold." The strong financial support the Union received from New York City, once the war actually started, may well have saved the national government from financial ruin.

Gotham was a center for manpower, military supplies, and of course shipbuilding. New York was one of the first cities to provide military protection to Washington D.C. early in 1861, and also sent men to fight in the Battle of Bull Run. It continued to supply troops throughout the war, with some city officials going to extreme lengths to prevent the enforcement of the draft, but Spann points out that the metropolis probably did the most good not on land but on the sea.
With the instigation of the blockade of Southern ports, New York City's shipbuilding capabilities took on a whole new role. Not only did shipyards such as the Brooklyn Navy Yard prosper, but also with the advent of the ironclad vessel, other merchants in the City got in on the action. Spann points out on page 42 that "In many ways Gotham helped make the Union the world's greatest naval power." Shipbuilding was only one aspect of Gotham's profit making during the bloodiest conflict the United States had ever seen.

New York City prospered from the war. On page 54, Spann writes, "Hay, horses, cattle, rifles, cannons, bread, and uniforms--the metropolis drew on its vast reservoir of skills and facilities to meet virtually every military need. It was also to make a notable if flawed contribution to the preparation and deployment of the most essential ingredient of all for war, the soldier himself."

The draft riots of 1863 were an important part of New York City's history during this period. Up until this point the City had provided many soldiers for the war effort, but with the passage of the National (Conscription) Act of March 1863 things began to heat up. The factors that led to the riots were numerous, but Gotham's reaction to them was even more important. A system of substitutes was set up, funded by the City, and was used for the duration of the war.

As Spann points out on page 199, "The Civil War was too great, too cataclysmic an event for them to fully understand in their lifetimes." The Civil War impacted all New Yorkers but did little really to alter the social order. Emancipation was certainly not received with much enthusiasm in the City, especially by the poor Irish immigrants who would now be fighting with the freedmen for employment. As a whole Gotham prospered during the Civil War, which is to say those with means prospered while those without remained without.

Spann does an excellent job of breaking down a complex city into easy to follow sections. By making race, politics, ethnicity, and wealth separate issues a complex situation becomes much easier to comprehend. Also by including the endnotes at the end of the chapter as opposed to the end of the book, the reader is able to follow up on particular issues of interest with ease. This book is a must for anyone interested in the politics of the Civil War and the uniqueness of New York City itself.
Connie Langum is the historian at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield in Republic, Missouri and is the Midwest Coordinator for the American Battlefield Protection Program.