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By 1863, the United States was embroiled in a war between the states that killed more Americans than any other war. Six hundred thousand people died; another million were seriously injured.

As the Union ran short of manpower, Congress passed a Conscription Act. The draft law, however, was inherently unfair since it gave wealthy men a way to avoid service. As the country was falling apart, Washington politicians unwittingly set the stage for New York City to fall apart as well.

People everywhere were concerned that the Conscription Law was extremely unfair. It put the “whole sacrifice of life, limb, health, home” upon the “poor and laboring classes who have the least at stake in the preservation of the Union.” Men who could afford it would be able to buy their way out of service by paying \$300. Joseph Medill noted, in his 5 March 1863 letter to Horace White, that:

*There is no possible defense, justification or apology that can be made for this outrage.*

As Washington lawmakers decided what to do about recruiting more men to fight for the Union, opposition to the law poured in from around the Union. Various members of Congress (like Schuyler Colfax) expressed their opinions to the President. Knowing the Conscription Law would cause controversy and resistance, people gave President Lincoln ideas on how to make the law more palatable.

The President himself, needing men to fight the war, expressed his opinion that the law was necessary - and he would see to it that the “draft law” was “faithfully executed.”

In the summer of 1863, New York City erupted in protest.

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