

The Ghost of Horace Greeley

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HORACE GREELEY, the founder and editor of the 19th century *New York Tribune*, made a career of championing New York's down-trodden. Cutting a distinctive figure with his trademark white duster and rakishly long white hair, Greeley appeared both rugged and erudite. From the moment he founded the *Tribune* in 1841, he made sure to call special attention to the plight of New York's underclass, most of whom were impoverished Irish immigrants.

While Greeley never stopped advocating for his city's worst-off citizens, some of his opinions made him increasingly unpopular with New York's burgeoning Irish population. As an early proponent of abolition, Greeley and the *Tribune* became ardent supporters of President Lincoln. When the administration announced a military draft in early 1863, Greeley endorsed it--in spite of the draft's provision that any man who gave the government \$300 would effectively buy his way out of military service.

The draft, and especially its \$300 exemption clause, outraged New York's poor who were already in large part against the war. Having been previously convinced by Copperheads that freed slaves would eventually take their jobs, the Irish rebelled at the conscription law and prepared to visit their fury upon the war's supporters in general and Greeley and the *New York Tribune*, in particular.

BEGINNING ON Monday, July 13, 1863 and continuing for five days, the island of Manhattan saw the greatest civic unrest in American history. Barnet Schecter captured the episode well in his superb book, *The Devil's Own Work*: Egged on by Copperhead agitators, tens of thousands of New

York's downtrodden rioted and took over the city.

At the time, Manhattan was virtually defenseless; the Union Army, which included virtually the entirety of New York's militia, had been engaged in both the Battle of Gettysburg and the siege of Vicksburg. New York's small police force was numerically inadequate to do battle with a mob that outnumbered it by a margin of 100 to 1.

The mob raged at Greeley and his fellow pro-war members of the press with particular fury. It was no small irony that the people that Greeley had championed for decades were now marching through New York singing, "We'll hang old Greeley to a sour apple tree."

THERE WAS NO DOUBTING that the rioters meant what they sang. Conservative estimates of the riots' damage stand in the neighborhood of 500 dead.

With the authorities unable to protect them, Greeley's minions at the *Tribune* took it upon themselves to arm and garrison their building. James Gilmore, a member of the editorial staff, declared that "a blow aimed at the Tribune was aimed equally at free speech." While a mob of thousands surrounded the building declaring that they would soon attack, 150 members of the *Tribune* staff risked their lives to continue publishing the paper.

Just as it didn't back down physically, the Tribune refused to back down in its rhetoric. In its Wednesday edition the Tribune ran an editorial that announced it was armed and prepared to slaughter any attackers.

Although the more conservative *New York Times* wasn't as much of a target of the mob's wrath as the *Tribune*, it, too, turned itself into a garrison and refused to be cowed by the rioters; the *Times* editorialized during the week of mayhem that it would follow its conscience "without regard to the menaces of the mob."

New York's abolitionist newspapers performed heroically during the draft riots. In spite of grave physical danger, the papers and their staffs showed that freedom of the press was more than an airy abstraction. None of the papers made any attempt to appease the murderous mob.

WHAT WOULD Greeley's ghost make of the fourth estate's recent collapse in the Danish cartoon incident? The once lion-hearted *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Boston Globe* have refused to run

the cartoons which sparked global riots out of a concern for some of their readers' sensitivities. But this argument can hardly be taken seriously. After all, the *New York Times* last week opted to run, apropos of nothing, a photo of the infamous "artwork" that depicted the Virgin Mary smeared in elephant dung.

At least Boston's alternative weekly, the *Boston Phoenix*, perhaps alone amongst media outlets, has had the internal fortitude to offer a forthright explanation for its refusal to run the cartoons. Explained the *Phoenix* in an editorial titled, "World of Pain:"

[We won't publish the cartoons] out of fear of retaliation from the international brotherhood of radical and bloodthirsty Islamists who seek to impose their will on those who do not believe as they do. This is, frankly, our primary reason for not publishing any of the images in question. Simply stated, we are being terrorized, and as deeply as we believe in the principles of free speech and a free press, we could not in good conscience place the men and women who work at the Phoenix and its related companies in physical jeopardy. As we feel forced, literally, to bend to maniacal pressure, this may be the darkest moment in our 40-year publishing history.

AND YET THE SPIRIT OF HORACE GREELEY nevertheless lives on. In the *Daily Illini*, the newspaper of record for the University of Illinois, managing editor Acton Gorton published the cartoons so his readers could fully understand the surrounding controversy. Gorton explained his actions in a note:

If anything, journalists all over this country should be letting the public decide for themselves what to think of these cartoons. As an editor of a college newspaper, I cannot claim to be a champion for free speech and at the same time restrict it from running its course. My gut has been turning for days questioning how to address this issue. It is only proper that you, the public, are allowed to think for yourselves.

Gorton's words have already earned the ire of his fellow members of the *Daily Illini* editorial board. Proving that they have learned from the contemporary *New York Times*, Gorton's peers ran an editorial on Monday lamenting the fact that Gorton didn't "fully understand the complexity of this situation" and apologizing to the Muslim community. "We value freedom of the press, speech and expression," they declared. They then added, "But we acknowledge that in certain instances . . . , there are issues that must be considered," leaving up in the air just how much they

"value freedom of the press."

One wonders who will go further in the world of professional journalism, Gorton or his timid peers. It's safe to guess who Horace Greeley would have favored.

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