The Fight of the Century: The Regulation and Reform of Prizefighting in Progressive Era America

Margaret Frisbee

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THE FIGHT OF THE CENTURY: THE REGULATION AND REFORM OF PRIZEFIGHTING IN PROGRESSIVE ERA AMERICA

BY

MARGARET FRISBEE

B.A., History, Loyola Marymount University, 2001
M.A., California State University, Northridge, 2004

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

History

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 2010
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Abstract

This dissertation considers the symbolic, social, and political conflict between heavyweight prizefighters and progressive reformers from 1892 to 1910. That time frame encompasses the careers of champions “Gentleman” Jim Corbett, Bob Fitzsimmons, Jim Jeffries, and Jack Johnson. Their fights to win or defend the heavyweight title were planned for California, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Florida, and New York, among other places. By protesting them at every stop, reformers sought to prevent the permanent establishment of prizefighting as a legitimate business, even as the fame of these fighters elevated the sport to the highest level of popularity that it had enjoyed to that time. The fundamental battle of prizefight reform pitted local and state governments against each other in a contest over the regulatory control of American morality. In the process of resolving that question, states accrued more power for themselves and weakened the strength of civil authorities in villages, towns, and cities across the United States. Although reformers throughout the country categorized
prizefighting as a vice and damned it with fairly uniform rhetoric, cultural insecurities
and political anxieties specific to states or regions were the real motivations for enacting
or enforcing prizefight legislation. Cultural, political, and economic pressures planted on
state governors by people other than moral reformers proved to be much more powerful
instruments of change than the vocal minority’s genuine belief in progress.
Contents

Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 1
Chapter 1 The “Slogging” Craze in California ..................................................................................... 22
Chapter 2 The “Daring” Conservatives of the South ......................................................................... 59
Chapter 3 “The Right Way to Promote Something Is to Prohibit It” ............................................. 107
Chapter 4 The Ascendance of the Fightocracy in Nevada ................................................................. 152
Chapter 5 The Big Fix: Prizefighting in New York .......................................................................... 208
Chapter 6 Paradise Lost: The End of Prizefighting in California ...................................................... 255
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 290
Bibliography .......................................................................................................................................... 296
Introduction

Bob Fitzsimmons punched people for pay, and he had scheduled a defense of his middleweight championship title against Jim Hall in St. Paul, Minnesota, for July 22, 1891. Given that Tommy Ryan had defeated Danny Needham in a five-hour fight to the finish in Minneapolis just five months before, the 1890 Minnesota law prohibiting prizefighting should have posed no problem for Fitzsimmons. Newspaper publicity for the title fight emboldened reformers to threaten Gov. William Rush Merriam with impeachment if he did not prevent the fight; so, clearly feeling politically endangered, he ordered the county sheriff to enforce the law and blocked the bout. In a pattern repeated in several states over the next decade, the governors, the attorneys general, the militias, local law enforcement officers, and a clutch of anti-prizefight activists united their efforts to preserve their state’s national reputation, predicated through honor and virtue, from assault by immoral prizefighters. Not every attempt to purge this “vice” from their state or community was as successful as that of Governor Merriam, who privately supported such athletic pursuits, but a victory over prizefighters was a political badge of honor on the record of a progressive governor. For Fitzsimmons, the canceled event was simply a failed business venture.¹

This dissertation considers the symbolic, social, and political conflict between heavyweight prizefighters and progressive reformers from 1892 to 1910. That time frame encompasses the careers of champions “Gentleman” Jim Corbett, Bob Fitzsimmons, Jim Jeffries, and Jack Johnson. Their fights to win or defend the heavyweight title were planned for California, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Florida, and New York, among other places. By protesting them at every stop, reformers sought to prevent the permanent establishment of prizefighting as a legitimate business, even as the fame of these fighters elevated the sport to the highest level of popularity that it had enjoyed to that time. The fundamental battle of prizefight reform pitted local and state governments against each other in a contest over the regulatory control of American morality. In the process of resolving that question, states accrued more power for themselves and weakened the strength of civil authorities in villages, towns, and cities across the United States. Although reformers throughout the country categorized prizefighting as a vice and damned it with fairly uniform rhetoric, cultural insecurities and political anxieties specific to states or regions were the real motivations for enacting or enforcing prizefight legislation. Cultural, political, and economic pressures planted on state governors by people other than moral reformers proved to be much more powerful instruments of change than the vocal minority’s genuine belief in progress.

The crusade against prizefighting was but one scrap in the great fabric of Progressive reform that blanketed the United States from the 1880s to the 1920s. But this ornamental piece was one of the earliest triumphs of reformers, at least on paper, to incorporate the nation by normalizing a particular set of moral values. The prizefighters’ defenders and detractors engaged in a larger discourse about the conditions of and
conflicts between morality and democracy in turn-of-the-century America. Although the legislative bodies of many states and the national government had enacted laws regulating or prohibiting prizefighting, the zeal for enforcement was unevenly distributed across the United States. Local custom that allowed prizefighting was often at odds with state and national policy. The undeniable popularity of the sport—driven in large part by the press—the celebrity of the fighters, and the cleverness of their promoters and managers in selling them to an eager public overwhelmed the legal barriers erected by state governments. State governments began to seize control of the problem only when a scheduled heavyweight prizefight combined social and political conditions in a manner lethal to prizefighting. The exact combination of these elements was particular to the place.

The increasing popularity of pugilism paralleled the rise of reform movements in the late nineteenth century. The Progressive Era began roughly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the strong influence of women in reform crusades characterized the movement. These reformers wanted America to reflect or incorporate the values of the white middle class, which was striving to disassociate itself from the lower classes, including the immigrant working class, in the decades following the Civil War.

Moral crusaders reemerged in American public life with a new vitality in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The term progressivism broadly covers or describes the reform efforts of these people. Freighted with an ever-changing definition, progressivism is most easily identified with the groups and disparate movements that endeavored to reform politics and society in the United States from the 1890s onward. Maureen A. Flanagan offers useful and broad parameters for the people and the time
when she suggests that change certainly occurred during these years, regardless of
whether that change qualified as progressive. A shift in the way people exacted change in
their fellow man had definitely transpired from the Antebellum to the Progressive Era.
Americans had organized to reform their neighbors and brothers earlier in the nineteenth
century, but they sought to reshape the individual’s morality; in later efforts, they wanted
to create and impose a universal morality on society. In this study, progressives are both
social and political reformers, and policymaking began with traditional social impulses at
the community level but was ultimately driven by political anxiety that originated at the
state and national levels.²

The social-purity reformers were an important segment of the Progressive
movement. One of their most famously persistent crusades was the effort to prohibit the
sale and consumption of alcohol. Both boxing and gambling challenged the reformers’
ideal work ethic and code of proper gentlemanly conduct, but the actual performance of
pugilism became truly wicked only when its practitioners added money and severe injury,
or death, to the sport. By 1892, many states had outlawed all matches fought for a prize,
or at least they thought they had. Of course, promoters, trainers, boxers, and most of all

the fancy habitually eluded authorities by staging matches outside their reach on barges in the Hudson River or by decamping to sites more permissive, such as Louisiana. ³

One of the keystones of progressivism was the drive to remove institutional corruption from public life. Some critics of the fight game decried not the degrading and possibly deadly enterprise but that many fights were fixed. Contests with even the perception of predetermined outcomes distressed the sportsmen who accepted and supported prizefighting. Bare-chested men in short trunks hammering each other until one, sweaty and bloody, dropped to the ground did not alarm them. The specter of a cheat, however, triggered their sense of justice and fair play, which were moral concerns in their own right. Regulation, not prohibition, was the goal of prizefighting’s supporters. One of the aims of licensing prizefights was to eliminate the corruption that observers as prominent as Theodore Roosevelt believed would be the final undoing of the sport—not the naked brutality at the heart of so much anti-prizefighting rhetoric. In Nevada, supporters suggested that granting a license would allow the sport to flourish and prosper in a rarified air where “only men of national reputations as boxers can give exhibitions under the law.”⁴

Historical and cultural identities informed city, state, and regional relationships with prizefighting. National urban centers, such as New Orleans, New York, and San Francisco with large, stable complexes of trade and industry had more latitude to

⁴ Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, 26 January 1897, p. 3.
negotiate anti-prizefighting passions than did remote settlements such as El Paso, Texas. Large urban areas were the focus of social reformers, but in the case of prizefight reform, regulation rather than eradication tended to be the policy instituted by their civic leaders.

Fraud and fatalities in the ring also informed civic and state decisions about prizefighting. Several southern states took into consideration how the East framed or defined their identity by their plantation-slavery past and prohibited prizefighting to address and reverse a violent legacy. Nevada State, which rebelled against national moral integration, responded on the prizefight question to its impoverished treasury, not to progressive moral sentiment that emanated from the East. In the twentieth century, white anxiety about racial superiority affected another state’s stand on prizefighting. On the basis of this research, the success of public policy imposing prizefight reform on states or communities depended on cultural region, the economic condition of a place, and the degree to which reformers could pressure the state to intervene in public life.

The debate over the legality of prizefighting also involved a battle to determine whether the state or the city was the locus of legislative power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Local decisions about prizefighting tended to support the existence of the sport, either through legal negligence or decriminalization. The states often enacted or suddenly enforced prizefight prohibitions and committed even military resources to enforce the laws in noncompliant areas. As time progressed, the balance of power shifted from the city or locality to the state.5

In repeated cases, the laws around prizefighting were typically reactionary rather than preventative. A specific crisis involving a high-profile fight for the heavyweight
championship initiated either reform legislation or the enforcement of statutes previously passed but customarily ignored. The negative response of citizens and politicians outside a state sometimes inspired or steered policy against the fighters in a state where a big match was scheduled. In other situations, financial calamity inspired the acceptance and even celebration of the sport.

Overall, the regulation and prohibition of prizefighting were conservative policy changes. Conservative in this study refers to the maintenance of the status quo for the majority of Americans. These statutes did not dramatically change the way society organized itself or functioned, and thus the states readily enacted prizefight prohibitions in comparison to other progressive-related reforms. Laws were passed in no great burst of democratic activity; public opinion seemed to be genuinely divided on the matter in many places. The ten thousand or more fans who purchased tickets for a single event in the 1890s and early 1910s may not have defended prizefighting in a public forum, but their presence in a packed arena spoke to their cultural preference. The professional boxing industry was nascent in the nineteenth century, and the cohort, including the fighters promoters, trainers, and others, who depended on it as their sole source of income was relatively small when compared to those processing meats or mining coal. If officials were really worried about profligate gambling on spectator sports, they would have eliminated horse racing, which was widespread in the United States. Still, the passage of a prizefightings law in a state was a sensational occasion. Months of public debate often followed the moment when a governor signed a prizefighting law. Politicians celebrated

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their personal efforts for or against the sport. Ironically, the people who seemed to care the least were the fighters themselves.

In general, women who censured the sport focused on its brutality and immorality, while secular men were more interested in the corruption of the institutions of prizefighting and democracy. The Progressives targeted certain evils in society, some of which were nearly as old as the nation, and others of which were new problems created by immigration, industrialization, and the expansion of the nation. The citizens on both sides of the debate over prizefighting were mostly white men and women. No single national group comprised or organized the anti-prizefight contingent. Depending on the location and the fighters, the opponents of prizefighting were evangelical Protestants, members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, outraged politicians, agitated citizens angered by corruption, anxious racists, antigambling advocates, and famous historians. Prizefighting’s protectors were an amalgam of politicians, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, merchants, sportswriters, gamblers, and defenders of democracy. Members of this final group were worried less about the dangers or benefits of the sport than about the fate of American democracy. They feared that a vocal minority who campaigned against prizefighting was usurping the rights of the majority to spend their money and leisure time as they wished.

The question of federal regulation over morality appeared well before the epoch of the Progressive Era. Imposing the middle-class vision of America over unwilling or resistant regions, particularly over the western U.S. territories, sometimes required reformers to deploy the power of the federal government. The expanding power of the federal government during and following the Civil War may explain the assumption
made by the reformers and government officials that Washington, D.C., had the power to legislate or regulate social morality. One scholar has argued that increased federal authority attracted reformers who believed that convincing the U.S. Congress of a reform’s merit was far easier than convincing the legislators of the individual states. In the federal government, prizefighters faced a hulking opponent that had joined the legislative heavyweight class during and after the Civil War. The federal government tried to legislate against boxing once in 1870, but the bill, S. 590, never received the president’s signature. Congress directed this bill at both states and territories.

The reformers’ beliefs in what they should change about society and how they could accomplish it had evolved over time; the sport and business of boxing was different as well. The renewed thrust to end prizefighting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had more vigor than previous efforts but faced a thornier obstacle. As several scholars have noted, sports, prizefighting among them, had begun to show characteristics of a professional industry by the 1890s. The introduction of business savvy promoters and managers who made long-term personal and economic investments in prizefighting’s success made the business more difficult to dislodge than it had once been. Also, the number of nationally and internationally recognized fighters had increased in the 1890s, and as a labor force, they were uninterested in giving up their livelihoods. The reformers had to employ increasingly sophisticated tactics to halt the growth of an increasingly sophisticated business.

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One of the most significant elements in the reshaping of boxing’s identity was the national press, which helped the sport move out from the shadows in the late nineteenth century. Dedicated reporters from major newspapers wired daily reports on everything from what the first heavyweight heroes of the era ate for breakfast days before a fight to the precise location of every punch landed during a contest. The *National Police Gazette*, a paper that covered the popular sports of the day, like yachting, baseball, and horseracing, was integral to the popularization of fighters like John L. Sullivan, who became the first iconic pugilist in America. The circulation of a special edition detailing the Sullivan bout with Paddy Ryan was over 400,000 copies. Richard K. Fox, the publisher of the *Gazette*, designed championship belts and put up purse money for several bouts. Several scholars have noted the *Police Gazette* as a singular influence on establishing the popularity and palatability of boxing in America.\(^9\)

Well-known fighters evolved from common thugs into public figures who at least resembled an otherwise decorous gentleman like Jim Corbett. They appeared in the press in places other than the organ of the working-class, the *National Police Gazette*. Popular magazines such as *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly* published human-interest stories about Bob Fitzsimmons’s home life, casting him as an upstanding Victorian gentleman and erasing some of the class condemnation that plagued the fighters. By covering the

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sport and its practitioners, the national press acknowledged that boxing sold newspapers and magazines to respectable middle-class subscribers. 

In the bareknuckle era, roughly before 1890, class weighed heavily on the social acceptability of pugilism. Fighting for money was the entertainment of the working classes; sparring to demonstrate skill was the province of the refined man. Although prominent community members watched major contests that came to their communities, their presence at the bouts was sometimes scandalous. When Corbett beat the legendary John L. Sullivan in 1892 to win the heavyweight title, the first championship decided with five-ounce gloves, the spectators for that match in New Orleans were said to include city officials, at least one Catholic priest, and a few Protestant clergymen in civilian clothes. Gloved contests came into vogue with the introduction and application of the Marquis of Queensberry rules in the late 1880s and early 1890s, but the rules for audience conduct did not change. In fact, standards of behavior, no matter the spectator’s class or standing, sometimes went right out the window. The fancy—sporting characters—or fans, reveled in the combat, and freely shouted, stomped, and shook their fists in the presence of the modern gladiators. 

The space where a fight took place also played a role in the relative level of its attraction to different races, classes, and sexes. Outdoor venues drew in a wider array of society than the indoor events. The composition of the fight audiences, which represented

10 “Fitzsimmons the Fighter,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly, 15 June 1899, pp. 472, 475.
a variety of races, classes, and ages, as well as both sexes, demonstrates that prizefighting openly appealed to all kinds of people at the turn of the century. By the late nineteenth century, the once-taboo sport was now a certifiable social favorite. According to the logic of Christian reformers, the fans needed saving from exposure to savage brutality, and the more popular the sport became, the more strident the reformer’s crusade became.

The prominent prizefighters, who were proud of their skills and careers, challenged the reform strategies. Reformers did not target the champion fighters for personal reform, and their popularity was an obstacle to convincing people that prizefighting was morally wrong. Unlike the prostitutes and drunkards who evoked pity from their saviors and were sometimes characterized as innocents plucked from their families or foolish sots to blind to see their lot, the colossal fighting men of professional boxing were not ashen-faced urchins who needed nurturing. They were strong and healthy men, at least when they were training, and lived glamorous public lives. They were heroes to the working class and middle class alike, and their dedication to their profession was hardly simple and uniformed. Their training regimens were scientific, and they were sophisticated enough to know that their manly labor was worth large sums of money. The reform voices condemned prizefighting, but none wanted to send Fitzsimmons to finishing school.

The popularity of the fighters should have made enforcement require less legwork than efforts to upend social ills or crimes like illicit liquor distribution. The champion pugilists were public celebrities, who could not easily disguise themselves. Unlike countless cases of illegal rum that required troops of agents to track them during Prohibition, the movements of a handful of celebrity fighters were front-page news in the
papers. These men, sinners to reformers, walked in the open all the time, sometimes even posing as good men. Sketches, and later photographs, depicting the heavyweight champions in a positive light made mundane the presence of the heavyweight fighters to the majority in American society, adding another layer of challenge to reform.

The fact that prizefighting was a boldly advertised vice by the 1890s differentiated it from other notable societal evils, such as prostitution. Rarely would intense police work be required to discover when and where a bout would transpire. The promoters and fighters wanted to sell the sports or fancy tickets to the prizefights. Receipts from ticket sales were integral to the business operations of the sport. The date, time, and location of a prizefight were often known weeks, if not months, in advance. The dollar amounts of the prize purses were also common knowledge. That information alone would be enough for law enforcement to investigate the proposed bout. Some promoters were willing to place their men beyond the reaches of the law by pushing them out to sea on floating rings or shuffling them off to the hinterlands inside or outside the United States. These subterfuges might succeed, but at the cost of losing gate money and other valuable receipts. As a business, prizefighting only gathered momentum on the approach of the turn of the century, further complicating the battle against the sport at that time.

Academic scholars of boxing have treated this period of the sport lightly, particularly its history as a target of Progressive reform. The most respected work on boxing, Elliot Gorn’s *The Manly Art: Bareknuckle Fighting in America* (1986), covers the sport in America from the late eighteenth century to the late 1880s. He measures the growth of the sport in England and America, and he explores the meaning of class and
culture and the convergence of the two themes in the boxing ring. In his epilogue, he claims that the decade of the 1890s was a major transformative period for the sport.

Jeffery T. Sammons’s *Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in Society* (1988) has an expository chapter on the 1890s and introduces the question of the role of the region, specifically the West, in boxing, but his work focuses mainly on race and culture in twentieth century. Other appreciable scholarship discusses the bareknuckle era or the twentieth century, beginning with Jack Johnson’s victory over Jim Jeffries in 1910.

Biography is the other major source of history of boxing in this period.12

A brief primer on the turn-of-the-century world of prizefighting is necessary to understand fully the changes in both the sport and the people devoted to prohibiting it as time passed between Jim Corbett’s reign as heavyweight champion to Jack Johnson’s ascendance. The sport of two men hitting each other with bare fists or hands covered with some type of material is at least as old as Greek civilization. Boxing for a prize, often money, became popular and somewhat formalized in eighteenth-century England. In

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nineteenth-century America, pugilism was divided between men who studied the art and science of boxing and then exhibited their skill in nonlethal sparring matches and the fighters who participated in fights to the finish for financial reward. The class distinction made boxing a practice acceptable to the gentleman but prizefighting a despicable vice fit only for the workingman. In this project, the terms boxing, prizefighting, and pugilism are used interchangeably. Social context will differentiate the manly art from the reviled sport or business of prizefighting.

By the 1890s, prizefighting had developed into a profession with somewhat unofficial rules and regulations that were more loose guidelines than concrete procedures. The London Prize Ring Rules, which had governed bareknuckle contests, gave way to various types of gloved fighting rules. (John L. Sullivan was the last bareknuckle champion.) The best known of the new regulations were the Marquis of Queensberry Rules, but the Police Gazette Rules, American Fair-Play Rules, and Blanchard Fair Play Rules were other codes applied in America at the time. Other than the use of gloves, a few of the most important differences between the old system and the new rules were the institution of timed rounds, a ten-second rule for knocked-down men to recover, and the limit on wrestling. Previously, each time a man fell or even consciously took a knee, the round ended and the fallen man had thirty seconds to regain his feet and return to the center of the ring. In the past, opponents could throw each other to the ground. These new rules emphasized punching and knockout hits as tactics to score a victory. Referees often made their own revisions to the rules, and the fighters could agree to other modifications at the time of the contest. Amateur boxers also had their own provisions.

Weight classes for the fighters also added a sense of systematic and even scientific organization, but those divisions had existed in some form at least since the mid-nineteenth century. Major classes included bantamweight, featherweight, middleweight, welterweight, light heavyweight, and heavyweight. In practice, heavyweight was more an open division than a rigid class. Fitzsimmons certainly fought men who outweighed him by at least twenty pounds.

Heavyweight championships were a bugaboo that reformers consistently targeted for attack. The heavyweight division, the most important class in boxing, garnered the most attention at the time. Its literal and symbolic significance to the sport makes it a viable lens through which to inquire into the motivations for social and moral reform.

Setting up a big fight that starred the top boxers required the coordination of the fighters, their managers, fight promoters, and the venue. The manager of a contender often corresponded with the manager of the champion or other contenders to begin discussing the details of a contract for a bout. In some instances, a club matchmaker contacted the managers and fighters to plan a fight. The club typically promised a dollar amount for the prize purse. Boxers signed articles of agreement that stipulated the date, location, type of contest, and other information relevant to the bout. Fighters often provided their own money as a guarantee. Financial backers supplied the money if the fighter lacked the financial resources. Although it had no official governing body, prizefighting was a modern business with widely recognized operating procedures.

The boxers were only one group of people who intended to profit from prizefighting. Other signs that prizefighting was a profession in this period lay in the management and promotion of the fighters. William A. Brady, who managed Sullivan,
Corbett, and Jeffries, was primarily a promoter of theater in America, itself a highly complex and modern enterprise. He planned not only boxing careers for his clients but acting careers as well. The influence of Brady on Corbett and of show business manager Martin Julian on Fitzsimmons was integral to branding the boxers as something more than street thugs. As a promoter, Dan A. Stuart was a forerunner of Tex Rickard and the more recent star boxing promoters, Don King and Bob Arum. The moments of uncertainty, drama, and confusion that Stuart seemed both to create and to master gave the prizefights he promoted the air of modern public theater. The theatrical experiences of these promoters prepared them for the great fighters such as Fitzsimmons and Corbett, who supplied no shortage of histrionics for the public to consume and enjoy for a price.

Several biographies, autobiographies, and eyewitness accounts inform this study. The basic facts in each sometimes conflict with each other, or seem to be outright fabrications rather than foggy or confused remembrances. In particular, period biographies that publishers churned out hastily to capitalize on a fighter’s upcoming championship defense are viewed with some skepticism, much as a celebrity tell-all appearing immediately in the wake of a star’s death might be seen today. Given these circumstances, the narratives chronicling the fighters’ ring battles or personal lives are sometimes presented from multiple viewpoints or with the understanding that some stories are apocryphal. At most points, the narrative follows the most consistent line of factual evidence. These fighters, promoters, and managers were front-page celebrities; their public legends are sometimes indistinguishable from their real lives. The ways in which they presented themselves and others promoted them were fact for most of the public and informed the public’s reaction to them.
Was the prohibition of the prizefighting business intended to save the sport of boxing or the people who watched it? The eradication of prizefighting was a peculiar type of reform in that it was the purification of both an unsavory activity and of the degraded people who participated in it. Prizefighting enfolded so many varieties of vice that reformers could set their sights on one or several to make their case for prohibition. A whole community of people—fighters, trainers, promoters, politicians, reporters, gamblers, and fans—would have to alter their behavior when prizefighting came to an end. To simplify their efforts, reformers had to stop the event rather than change the habits of the people to forward the progress of civilization. They needed the law, and they needed people to respect the law. Those were no easy tasks in any location at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States.\textsuperscript{13}

This dissertation relies on state-based case studies for evidence that the vagaries of local and state politics were far more influential on prizefight reform than any efforts made by citizens who appointed themselves the moral guardians of the nation. The sources for the analysis are newspapers and contemporary periodicals; documents created by or sent to local, state, and national governments; local, state, and national legal codes; and personal recollections including memoirs, autobiographies, and diaries. The connective tissue is a narrative of the heavyweight championship fights, often advertised as the “Fight of the Century,” from Jim Corbett vs. John L. Sullivan in 1892 to Jim Jeffries vs. Jack Johnson in 1910.

The first chapter chronicles the history of prizefighting in California from the early statehood period until 1896. California legislators had outlawed fighting without

\textsuperscript{13} Instances of individual reform did occur, although temperance was the major theme of Joseph Hess’s cautionary tale. \textit{The Autobiography of Joseph F. Hess: The Converted}
deadly weapons in its first legal code passed in 1850, yet San Francisco had evolved a booming prizefight industry by the approach of the twentieth century. The social and cultural reasons for the increased popularity of boxing in the second half of the nineteenth century are also outlined in the first chapter.

Chapter 2 surveys the reactions of the governors of Florida, Texas, and Arkansas to Jim Corbett’s plans to fight for the heavyweight title in their states from 1893 to 1895. The legacies of violence—the gold rush frontier in California and slavery in the South—infused the tone and manner by which heads of state publicly expressed their grievances against the sport.

Chapter 3 delves into the struggle for power between local authority in El Paso, Texas, and the political and legal authorities in Austin, the state capital. The proposed “Fight of the Century” between Bob Fitzsimmons and Peter Maher in 1896 was the point of conflict between community and state power. Ultimately, the Texas Rangers expressed and enforced the will of the state when El Pasoans were unwillingly to obey the law. The proximity of Mexico to El Paso also complicated Texas State’s claim on a regional moral authority. American reformers had to harangue or convince international officials as well as other Americans to recognize the immorality of prizefighting.

In chapter 4, Nevada State officials had to debate and measure the economic value of progressive morality to their state. “The Fight of the Century” for 1897 paired Jim Corbett with Bob Fitzsimmons in Carson City, Nevada. The state’s own desperate need for both inhabitants and industry led to a rejection of national moral authority in favor of state economic necessity. The benefits of progressive reform and its ironic turns were evident as legislators weighed the possible financial gain for the state with the loss of

*Prize-Fighter*, 2d ed. (Rochester, N.Y., 1888).
moral virtue that it would suffer for legalizing prizefighting. At the same moment, state congressmen also debated and denied the virtues of female suffrage.

Chapter 5 explores the stances taken by New York State officials on the sport of prizefighting from 1895 until 1900. New York politicians decided to regulate boxing rather than prohibit it during that period. That experiment brought to the surface the endemic corruption in both politics and prizefighting. Both moral reformers and political reformers targeted prizefighting for destruction. In the example of New York, the major impediments to reform were the corrupt politicians themselves. During the brief period of regulation, Bob Fitzsimmons battled Jim Jeffries for the heavyweight title.

Chapter 6 discusses the hardening of racial borders during the Progressive Era as a direct influence on California’s choice to enforce decades-old statutes prohibiting prizefighting. Black pugilist Jack Johnson’s fight with “The Great White Hope,” Jim Jeffries, in 1910 was the source of California’s conversion to and embrace of national moral standards.

The process of enacting and enforcing prizefight reform engaged several issues prevalent during the Progressive Era: Should the moral judgment of some Americans be trusted and embraced by the American majority? Who had the authority to decide that question and what were the responsibilities of officials at the local, state, and national levels in establishing, cultivating, and enforcing the morality of the United States? How did a white vision of moral progress incorporate other races whose physical superiority in some sports contests threatened racial hierarchies? No cultural region in the United States responded in the same way to these questions. That reality enabled the prizefight business
to continue its expansion, regardless of reform obstacles at the turn of the century in the United States.
Chapter One

The “Slogging” Craze in San Francisco

“The third prizefight in California came off yesterday afternoon and evidences our advancement in civilization and morals. . . . It had been supposed that this brutal sport would be confined to the Atlantic States, but we are satisfied that the march of civilization is onward and that even the shores of the Pacific cannot escape.”

This observation in the Pacific News concluded a brief article describing the bareknuckle boxing match between “McGee” and “Kelly” at “a beautiful spot on the shore of the Bay,” a few miles from Mission San Francisco. Kelly caught McGee under the eye in the third round, “scattering the claret” and winning the side bet for drawing first blood. The side bets for first blood and first knock down were for twenty-five dollars each. The prize purse totaled one thousand dollars.

The fighters clashed on October 16, 1850, just over a month after California became a state. Critics in California wasted no time censuring the sport of prizefighting and maligning the East for allowing its toxic decadence, represented by prizefighting, to spread. If settling the Pacific Coast was the fulfillment of American manifest destiny (as the quotation indicates) then the commentator also understood that the progress of white civilization was not always polite. Even the unappealing aspects of Euroamerican culture traveled across the continent in step with its admirable institutions. The crux of
California’s relationship with prizefighting in policy and practice over the following forty-five years was expressed in the quotation: While people condemned prizefighting, they were also resigned to its existence and even reported on it with poetic imagery that presaged the purple prose of early twentieth-century sports writing. In time, thoughtful observers would celebrate California’s exceptional contributions to the international sport of prizefighting.

By spurning state law that prohibited prizefighting, San Francisco authorities claimed local control over public morality. They also facilitated the growth of the small but significant business of professional prizefighting in California during the late nineteenth century. Although the powers assumed by the state steadily increased during the second half of the nineteenth century, the city still comfortably made its own ordinances that conflicted with state laws intended to prohibit prizefighting. The state made little effort to enforce the law there. Given that San Francisco’s wealth and power elevated it to the status of most important city on the West Coast in the nineteenth century, the choice of city authorities to ignore state law was unsurprising. Yet, state legislators continued to revise anti-prizefight statutes throughout the period. Events occurring at only the local level prompted an eventual but temporary suspension of heavyweight prizefights in San Francisco.²

In practice, control over prizefighting ultimately rested with local police, who determined what was and was not a prizefight by attending boxing matches. Although San Francisco police occasionally cracked down on the fighters, the appeal of boxing to

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¹ “Prizefight,” *Pacific News* (San Francisco), October 17, 1850, p. 2.
the dregs of society, the working class, the middle class, and even the most prominent
men in the city and state overcame any desire to enforce the letter of the law. Two
unrelated problems initiated a temporary lull in fighting. The first, brutality, which
troubled religious progressives, led to a stoppage of nearly all major match-ups in the city
during the mid-1890s and corresponded with the passage of a new anti-prizefighting
statute more stringent than what was already on the books. The second, possible fraud,
disenchanted prizefighting’s supporters and weakened their interest in the sport. Neither
issue was potent enough, however, to end completely prizefighting in California, despite
the fact that it had been illegal since 1850.3

Negative attitudes toward prizefighting were conspicuous in early meetings of the
California legislature. Lawmakers tried to block the growth of prizefighting in 1850 by
prohibiting it and making it a felony. In January 1850, legislative business on the matter
began with a discussion of the doorkeeper of the House, John Warrington, who was
absent without leave “to participate in, or witness a brutal prizefight.”4 Warrington lost
his post as doorkeeper, and a committee was formed to investigate who from the House
had attended a prizefight the previous day and how they had behaved at the match.

3 In the late nineteenth century, both state and local governments expanded their policy-
making powers. See Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order (New York: Hill and Wang,
1967), 44–55; and Ballard C. Campbell, The Growth of American Government:
Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present (Bloomington: Indiana University
Press, 1995). Monographs discussing the evangelical tradition of reform include Charles
Howard Hopkins, The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865–1915,
Yale Studies in Religious Education, vol. 14 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press,
1940); and Gaines M. Foster, Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of
of the urban contingent of purity reformers are described in David J. Pivar, The Purity
Crusade: Sexual Morality and Social Control, 1860–1900, Contributions in American

4 Journal of the Proceedings of the House of the Assembly of California, 1st sess. (San
Jose, Calif.: John Winchester, 1850), 634–35.

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Inappropriate personal conduct could increase the severity of the social crime of attending a prizefight. The legislature’s contempt for prizefighting was also evident in the law they created. They established a penalty for any person who fought without deadly weapons “upon previous concert and agreement” for money, a wager, or any reward, as well any person present at the fight and assisting in any way. Prizefighting was not mentioned by name, but fighting or “challenging to a fight” constituted disturbing the peace. The maximum punishment for disturbing the peace was two months in prison. The maximum punishment for fighting without deadly weapons was two years in prison. The specification “without deadly weapons” is curious, given that one of the problems with prizefighting cited by reformers was that men sometimes died from it.\(^5\)

Revisions to the legal code prohibiting prizefighting after 1850 attest to an ongoing problem with the sport and an enduring opposition to it. In 1872, the California’s first set of penal codes enacted section 412, which addressed prizefighting by name. The code encompassed fighters, promoters, trainers, referees, and physicians and promised the same maximum two-year sentence for violators as in the statutes.\(^6\) Spectators were not directly identified but the category “otherwise” in the list of possible offenders extended to them. When enforcing the code, officers of the law warned fans as well as fighters. The fans’ complicity in the illegal contests would be officially recognized in later years.

According to the legislative record, Californians were civilized. The laws undoubtedly banned prizefighting. The first lawmakers in California did not support

\(^5\) Statutes of the State of California, Passed at the First Session of the Legislature (San Jose: John Winchester, 1850), chap. 99, pp. 233, 243.

prizefighting in the law books, but, as their own records confirm, they occasionally went to the fights. California’s reputation for friendliness to the sport despite the official position against it only increased as time passed.

By the 1880s, the growth of clubs and the San Francisco Board of Supervisors’s decision to allow exhibitions in clubs, which were often fights to the finish with a prize purse, had turned San Francisco into pugilism’s “Garden of Eden.” The civilized men and women who migrated from the East were looking for their own Garden of Eden, but could not spoil the prizefighting paradise in California with their moral agendas. Some of new inhabitants from the eastern places, such as New York, had no desire to uproot the sport. The historical precedent for violent sport in California made fertile the territory for prizefighting’s growth as an industry.⁷

Prizefighting in California was as least as old as the state itself, and the European effort to civilize the region dates back the Spanish missions of the eighteenth century. The leisure activities that many nineteenth-century Americans found repugnant also had origins in the Spanish era. During the Mexican and California territorial periods, bullfighting and bear baiting were popular amusements that drew crowds to a ring to cheer violence. Horseracing, an important attraction to Spanish and later Mexican inhabitants, galloped into the American era and became extremely popular with wealthy citizens in California who had enjoyed the sport in the East. Society in Mexican California accepted blood sport, competition, and gambling. American San Francisco had

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been a gambling town since the days of the gold rush, and men of all classes and ethnicities participated in games of chance, whether they rolled dice or invested in confidence schemes. Two men slugging each other was enjoyable sport as well as an exciting opportunity for economic risk.  

The arrival of the gold rush miners coincided with some of the first reports of prizefighting in California. Notes on prizefights appeared regularly, and with some detail, in newspapers during the early statehood period. The *Alta California* reported in February 1850 that Woolley Kearney knocked out the Sydney Slasher on Goat Island (Yerba Buena) in a challenge that went twenty-five rounds in thirty minutes. When the *Pacific News* reported on the “march of civilization” and the McGee and Kelly prizefight, the tone was critical yet the reader learned the location, the names of the combatants, their attire, the amount of the purse, the terms of the side bet, the number of spectators, the length of the fight in rounds and minutes, and the result. The reporter devoted far more lines to the fight than to his moralizing editorial. The *California Police Gazette*, a weekly criminal news and sporting magazine similar to the *National Police Gazette*, began delivering the ring reports and gossip in 1859. Mark Twain mocked the breathless

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9 *Alta California* (San Francisco), February 18, 1850, p. 2.
reporting and popularity of prizefighting in California when he penned a piece on a political battle in 1863.\textsuperscript{10}

The East glimpsed boxing in the West in the 1860s through pieces by Bret Harte, who composed columns for the \textit{Christian Register} in Boston. Harte treated \textit{Register} readers, many of them presumably Christian, to the shenanigans of their western brethren. A group of Californians, including “many solid, respectable, and church-going citizens,” participated in a ruse to see Tommy Chandler fight Doony Harris at Crystal Springs in San Mateo County, about twenty miles from San Francisco. Tickets to the event had “Picnic” printed on them to avoid defying the law. The sheriff of San Mateo County was not deceived by the charade. Even if he had been, the newly constructed arena with seating for three thousand spectators was cause for suspicion. The sheriff prevented the fight without major incident, and Harte noted that while the Californians were crazed for the battle, they did not want to physically harm the sheriff. The citizens willingly defended the law when confronted with its representative, but were otherwise apt to disobey when it suited them.\textsuperscript{11}

Harte’s tale highlights that fact that pulling off a fight where it was illegal required the careful orchestration of the fighters and fans. The day before Chandler-Harris, location unknown, the \textit{Alta California} discussed the fight and predicted, “Several people will be looking at ranch properties in Marin county” the following day, and the paper noted the several fishing boats chartered by “private parties” for the next day.

Helpfully, a list of boats leaving for Marin County was also provided. The tip, pointing north rather than south to San Mateo County, might have been planned misdirection or the result of rampant rumor. Chandler and Harris actually completed their match in Contra Costa County, and Chandler won what the papers called the middleweight championship of America. The Associated Press reporter found his way to the fight ground; the county sheriff did not. Authorities complicated the execution of prizefights but both fighters and fans were determined, regardless of obstacles and the time and distance necessary to circumvent them, to consummate the agreement to fight.¹²

Even when cornered by incontrovertible evidence of their wrongdoing, pugilists and spectators often wriggled out of trouble. In 1884, a jury acquitted two men charged with engaging in a prizefight. At the trial, John Howard claimed that he fell during what he defined as a sparring match, although posters advertised that his contest with Hugh Cottle was for $250 a side. Howard, it seemed, was just tired from demonstrating the proper methods for throwing a punch and defending against one, and Cottle gave him a push.¹³ The jury created no fear of the anti-prizefighting law for the fighters, and its acquittal suggests that the sport was not objectionable to all citizens. Two years later, fighters and fans caught in the act in an Oakland theater rolled out of windows fifteen feet above ground to escape a fine. “Lawyers, actors, doctors, merchants, pugilists, and toughs” were among the escapees from the “Buffalo” Costello and Tom Cleary fight for the middleweight championship of the Pacific Coast.¹⁴

¹² *Alta California* (San Francisco), April 13, 1867, p. 1; and *San Francisco Call*, April 14, 1867.
¹⁴ “The Prize Fight,” *Alta California* (San Francisco), July 28, 1886, p. 2.
Law enforcement’s habit of turning a blind eye to prizefights or letting crowds disperse in a friendly manner, without arrest, indicates that prizefights ranked low on their list of crimes to prevent or were not worth the effort to stop. The thousands of people who congregated to cheer the pugs knew that what they were doing was against the law; otherwise, they would have no need for fight sites distant from the city, deceptions to dupe county sheriffs, and escape routes out windows. The customs surrounding prizefights in California might have continued into the twentieth century, but changes in American culture in the 1870s contributed to more instances of prizefighting and eventually, to a serious effort to suppress them.

A movement espousing a new kind of physical culture developed in the post–Civil War era that indirectly influenced the legality of boxing matches in San Francisco and elsewhere. The new ideal male was not the rugged outdoorsman of the Davy Crockett mold but the clean and civilized muscle man, eventually represented by men such as Theodore Roosevelt. The body was a visible marker of manhood in the late nineteenth century, and boxing required nurturing masculine muscle and exercising precise control over them. The physical result of boxing training was aesthetically pleasing and tied directly to the reassertion of male culture at the approach of the twentieth century. Sparring demonstrations were fashionable among the upper class as a prescription for the “overwomnenized” and “overcivilized” parts of Victorian society, and many professional fighters earned income as trainers to men who wished to pursue the manly art of amateur boxing. However, training one’s body with the specific purpose of pummeling another man, perhaps to death, voided the benefits of the physical
development of the body. Broken jaws, jabs below the belt, and the general bloodiness that marred the sculpted muscle had no part in the aesthetic ideal.\(^\text{15}\)

The worship of the body also had a religious element. Muscular Christianity was an offshoot of the trend that celebrated the vigorous yet civilized male. Englishman Thomas Hughes, who was a boxing coach and a member of the Christian Socialist movement in England, promoted physical fitness as an avenue to manliness that could bolster the increasingly effeminate Anglican Church. American Protestants adopted the philosophy and integrated it into their culture. The religious aspect was an additional impetus for Protestant approval of physical improvement through boxing. By conditioning the body and teaching boys and men about fair play and cooperation, the health of the spirit also improved. The gymnasiums of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) promoted this new interest in physical development, heeding the call of leaders to carve a strong bodily instrument to contain the spirit and advance the cause of Christ. Amateur athletics gained many new devotees as a consequence of the push to develop manly Christians. Nothing, however, was sacred. On May 10, 1878, Harry Maynard fought Barney Farley for a monetary prize in the basement of the San Francisco YMCA in front of members of the Stock Board, Board of Supervisors, and other city officials “interested in the development of muscular morality.”\(^\text{16}\)


The YMCA and other clubs that had more secular aspirations for athletic training were instrumental in San Francisco’s conflict with the state over prizefighting in the 1880s. Organized athletic and social clubs that offered its members facilities to pursue sport sprang up all over the city and outlying areas, Oakland included, beginning in the 1860s. As the city matured, three different types of cultural spaces for boxing emerged.

The Barbary Coast, the section of San Francisco near the waterfront at Broadway and Pacific, was first an ethnic ghetto populated by Chileans and other South Americans who ventured north with pick ax and wash pan in hand in the late 1840s and 1850s. Convicts and other reprobates arrived in the enclave from the penal colonies of Australia during the same period. In time, Sydney-Town, as it was known, was rechristened the Barbary Coast, reflecting the conditions a sailor might find in North African ports. Jim Corbett recalled that in his first years as a boxer, he frequented a firehouse and a blacksmith shop for fistic competition, and the gangs that organized matches at those places scoured the Barbary Coast to find opponents for him. The Barbary Coast underworld represented the very place and people that moral reformers associated with prizefighting.  

Somewhat less worrisome were the legitimate establishments that transacted socially acceptable business as well as catering to the fancy. Harry Maynard’s saloon, frequented by ring professionals, had a boxing ring in the back. Patrons passed around a


17 Herbert Asbury, The Barbary Coast: An Informal History of the San Francisco Underworld (New York: Capricorn Books, 1933), 49–50; and James J. Corbett, The Roar
hat to collect prize money, and then volunteers fought for the purse. Rather than fights to the finish, these affairs usually lasted only four rounds. Patsy Hogan, who once fought John L. Sullivan, had a saloon that attracted a similar crowd. Saloons and other businesses that held boxing matches in addition to conducting their trade drew few big-name fighters but kept alive informal prizefighting as entertainment. They also violated the law without pretense.18

Clubs promoting athletic fitness, such as the YMCA, became part of the urban landscape in the second half of the nineteenth century and stood on firmer legal ground than the facilities that kept ropes and poles ready for evening amusements. Amateur athletes trained and learned skills for the intrinsic health rewards, and sparring demonstrated their commitment to improving their minds and bodies. Other, somewhat less pure, organizations also assisted the physical improvement of young men, but also capitalized on the public enthusiasm for the sport by training fighters and staging prizefights that featured their boxers. They were officially licensed clubs with instructors and athletic equipment, but they also filled their galleries with sporting men and women eager to see one trained fighter knock another flat.

Professional teaching elevated the student of boxing above the thuggish street scraper and contributed to regularizing, to some extent, fighting styles. At many clubs, a pupil received boxing lessons from a club instructor, or professor. The Acme Club of Oakland, of which California ring chronicler Dewitt C. Van Court was a founding member, the Manhattan Club of San Francisco, and Alec Greggains’s San Francisco Athletic Club were a few of the boxing clubs founded on the West Coast in the 1880s.

The Pacific, West Oakland, Golden Gate, Sequoia, Reliance, Golden West, National, and California clubs were also active boxing venues. Greggains was a middleweight of some renown who also worked as a promoter. His “club” was a storefront that doubled as a battleground for fighters on Friday nights. A “curtained gallery” near the ring created privacy for women who paid the price of admission. Even establishments low on the social order protected the integrity of women, regardless of the fact that a woman at such an event renounced any notion of social status. The San Francisco Athletic Club’s facilities, mission, and members contrasted with those of socially superior clubs, but each supported the illegal enterprise.\(^1^9\)

The Olympic Club in San Francisco was the most famous of these spots for society men to enjoy sport. Founded in 1860, the club predated the New York Athletic Club by six years. Notable members later included Mark Twain, William Randolph Hearst, Adolph B. Spreckels, and Charles Crocker. Among the sports pursued by club members were tennis, track, wrestling, gymnastics, fencing, and football, and the amateur athletes competed against representatives of other clubs. The Olympic sportsmen gave demonstrations of boxing and their gymnastic abilities on the same programs with violin recitals and opera performances, demonstrating that their art was compatible with high culture. When Jim Corbett first began training there, the club hosted no professional fights. In 1886, George M. Robinson, who fought under the banner of the Olympic Club, faced John L. Sullivan on the latter’s tour of the West. At Mechanics’ Pavilion, Robinson


\(^{19}\) Rufe Hepburn to Jack Kitchen, March 1, 1943, folder 5, box 1, Personal Correspondences, Albert E. Conlon Collection, San Francisco Historical Society, California [hereafter AECC, SFHS]; List of Clubs, folder 20, box 2, Personal Correspondences, AECC, SFHS; and Van Court, *Making of Champions*, 37, 38.
hit the canvas repeatedly, winning him only jeers and accusations of cowardliness. The Olympic Club expelled him, his unmanly display reflecting poorly on the club.\(^2\)

The clubs were not strictly for amateurs or cultured observers of the manly arts. Clearly, some clubs welcomed anyone, regardless of sex, with the money for a ticket to see a fight. Others, like the California Athletic Club, were professional operations with dedicated clubhouses, exercise apparatus, and a membership list of people who had far more in their pocketbooks than just the price of admission. The best fighters of the day trained, exhibited, or fought for purses at the big clubs, while local toughs continued to mix it up in the less reputable establishments. By hosting events that featured men like Corbett in their own facilities or at public spaces like Mechanics’ Pavilion, clubs created among the boxers a tiered system that distinguished the professional pugilists from the Friday-night thugs. The desire to see and bet on boxing united the members from each type of club.

Some of the combatants still seemed unsavory to more refined followers of the sport, but while boxing for a prize might have been an ugly display, the skills that many fighters exhibited were the foundation of American manhood in the late nineteenth century. Fitness and overall health, as exemplified by Muscular Christianity, were watchwords that also had currency in the secular world. Irishman John Boyle O’Reilly, a

journalist and poet in America, published a tract on the value of boxing and other sport. Arguments for physical manhood, which could be enhanced through boxing, lent credibility to the prizefighter. O’Reilly, however, drew the line at fighting for money. The cash prize created a class border between those who watched fighting for money and those who simply appreciated manly skill. That border was quite porous when a heavyweight championship was on the line, and the city’s elite filed into their box seats at ringside to see the best men on the West Coast—and the sometimes the English-speaking world—fight in San Francisco.21

The history of champions in California is a distinguished one. John “Old Smoke” Morrissey, a native of Ireland, claimed the heavyweight title of America at Mare Island near San Francisco in 1852. John C. Heenan, a native New Yorker, was one of California’s first heroes of the ring. The “Benicia Boy,” named after the California city that he called home, came west as part of the gold rush but, like many miners who stayed in the state, profited from something other than the diggings. His status as a tough pugilist quickly elevated him to the top ranks of the small, informal world of American prizefighting. In 1858, he fought Morrissey, whom he had known in New York, for the heavyweight championship. He lost the fight in Canada but took the title when Morrissey retired the next year. Although his most important fights did not transpire in the state, he gave California a reputation for the sport and enthused its inhabitants.22

California launched the American careers of five of the most important fighters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. James J. Corbett, also known as “Gentleman Jim,” was born in the city and was the most famous fighter of the 1890s.

21 Bederman, Manliness and Civilization, 8; and John Boyle O’Reilly, Athletics and the Manly Sport (Boston: Pilot Publishing, 1890), xvi, xvii.
Peter Jackson and Robert Fitzsimmons arrived in San Francisco in 1888 and 1890, respectively, and immediately began making their marks as professional boxers in the United States. Tom Sharkey left the U.S. Navy and entered the ring professionally in the city, and Jim Jeffries, although not from California, was often identified with the state and later helped to build the standing of boxing in Los Angeles. At the turn of the century, the great heavyweights made California the state of champions. The permissive attitudes of local policeman and municipal government and the stable of strong competitors living in or coming to California were essential to the successes of prizefighting in the state and the nation.

Jim Corbett, one of the first California stars, was a mere bank clerk who began training at the Olympic Club around 1885. Corbett, the fourth of ten children born to Irish immigrants Patrick and Catherine, almost chose baseball over boxing. As a young scrapper, Corbett trumped schoolyard challengers, and he took up fistic training with friends as he matured. He was soon invited into the folds of the Olympic Club. Corbett remembered club representatives noticing his play at second base, and although an injury to his hand ended his career on the baseball diamond, he was still valuable as a boxer. Another story has John W. MacKay, an officer of the Olympic Club and Corbett’s boss at the Nevada Bank of San Francisco, introducing the clerk to the club. Yet another version describes the Olympic’s instructor giving Corbett lessons at a livery stable and later inviting him to join when his great talent became apparent. Regardless, Corbett quit the bank to become the boxing instructor at the Olympic Club, having learned that a smart appearance and athletic skill brought social rewards in San Francisco. He was one of the pioneers of scientific boxing, which relied on defense and strategy more than brute

22 Van Court, The Making of Champions, 6.
strength to vanquish an opponent. Although America’s first celebrity heavyweight champion, John L. Sullivan, and his supporters mocked Corbett and his habits of neat dress and style with the moniker, Gentleman Jim, the son of Irish immigrants crossed societal boundaries and appealed to men and women above the working class.  

One of Corbett’s primary rivals was a much different kind of man. Highly renowned in Australia, Bob Fitzsimmons had arrived in San Francisco from the island continent in May 1890 to make his impression on the American fight scene. The son of a blacksmith and sometimes policeman, Fitzsimmons was born in Cornwall, England, but later immigrated with his family to Timaru, New Zealand. A smith himself, one of his many nicknames was “The Fighting Blacksmith.” Fitz married his second wife, Rose, who was the sister of his manager, Martin Julian. He scored his first major victory in America in a middleweight championship fight with the “Non Pareil” Jack Dempsey in January 1891. Described as a “freak of the ring,” “ungainly in the last degree, resembling more than any other man . . . the animal that has made Australia famous,” he was yet “a cheery, kindly soul despite his looks.”

Although he initially tipped the scales at about 155 pounds, Fitz soon eyed challenges with the bigger men.

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23 Corbett, Roar of the Crowd, 4, 8, 10; Fields, James J. Corbett, 14; and Adam J. Pollack, In the Ring with James J. Corbett (Iowa City, Iowa: Win by KO, 2007), 12.
One of the sturdiest of the big men was “Sailor” Tom Sharkey. Originally from Dundalk, Ireland, he had a solid reputation as a fighter before he joined the professional ranks. The Sailor, who ran away to sea at the age of ten, honed his skills while stationed at Honolulu aboard the USS Philadelphia, and he called himself champion in the American navy. Richard K. Fox, the genius behind the National Police Gazette’s success, marketed boxing training manuals starring the most famous boxers of the day. The theme of Sharkey’s edition was “Navy Drill.” The sailor joined the profession with great ceremony from the service, but with no respect from the civilian handicappers at the Colma Athletic Club in San Mateo. The Philadelphia’s corporal soon won admiration, if not for his skill, then for his toughness, quick feet, and strong hands.26

Peter Jackson, a black man born on St. Croix island in the West Indies, moved to Australia when he was twelve. After a short career as sailor, he started on his path toward becoming a professional boxer. He was already the heavyweight champion of Australia when he came to America with the encouragement of San Francisco sportswriter Bill Naughton in 1888. The “Black Prince” took the position of professor of boxing at the California Athletic Club. He later sailed for England and won the heavyweight championship of England from Frank Slavin, but Charlie Mitchell, a white man, was typically accepted as the champion of England instead. “Praised by all who knew him as a gentleman,” Jackson won approval from white observers, and white fighters well knew his skill, for the most famous among them rarely consented to face him in the ring.27

27 Naughton, Kings of the Queensberry Realm, 157–58; and David K. Wiggins, “Peter Jackson and The Elusive Heavyweight Championship: A Black Athlete’s Struggle
The problems Corbett and Jackson encountered when they faced each other attest to the sentiments against prizefighting and to the intensity of American racism at the time. In 1891, Jackson and Corbett proved their mettle against each other at the California Athletic Club. Corbett had faced another local fighter, Joe Choynski, on several occasions to improve his reputation, but Jackson had international renown. Corbett’s father protested his son fighting professionally “for a purse,” and against his engagement with a “negro.” Jack Corbett claimed that Jackson’s race was in fact not a problem, but he did not blame John L. Sullivan for “drawing the color line.” Early in his career, Jim Corbett willingly jumped in the ring with a black man who had the skills to beat him, but was reluctant once he achieved fame.28

Corbett established himself as a fighter of merit on the night of May 21, 1891. The crowd at the California Club cheered their fighter, Jackson, against Corbett, the Olympic’s man. After sixty-one rounds, both fatigued fighters nursed pains in their arms and shoulders, and referee Hiram Cook declared the result no contest. They had been fighting for four hours, and the hands of the clock had rounded one in the morning. Both men had pleased their backers, although the dissection of the fight lasted for months and Corbett maintained that he had won the match. In his autobiography, Corbett credited his opponent and generously noted that Jackson’s injured leg, the result of a buggy accident the month before, inhibited his movements. He also praised Jackson’s quickness and

28 “It Shall Not Be,” San Francisco Morning Call, January 2, 1891, p. 2.
skill. Corbett could afford grace; Jackson had lost an opportunity to strengthen his status as a contender.²⁹

During Corbett’s career, which started in the mid-1880s, boxing surged in popularity, and the mechanisms of a business organization emerged in the sport. Large prize purses, professional trainers, and club matchmakers who sought out remarkable talents were a few signs of the growing prizefight business. California’s geographic proximity to Australia and New Zealand meant that the West drew on a talent pool different from that of the New York fight scene, which was dominated by Irish and Englishmen as well as Americans. They all came together during a revolutionary period in American prize ring history.

Van Court, a pugilist and professor of the ring, recognized that a new era of prizefighting began when boxing became a business with promoters and managers around the late 1880s. That observation applied to the institutional structure of prizefighting, which as Van Court suggests, was becoming more rigid and defined than it had been, but also to San Francisco’s legal attitude toward the sport. The clubs, whether their reason for existence was for the pleasure of the elite or the working class, were the salvation of prizefighting at the start of the 1890s. Through a local legal provision, regulation rather than suppression became the official position on boxing in San Francisco. In fall 1889, the San Francisco City Council proposed requiring licenses for athletic clubs that held fights. The fees amounted to a tax on the state-prohibited practice of prizefighting. Unable or unwilling to control this facet of city culture, the council could at least raise public revenues from it. Only those clubs that could afford the one-

²⁹ Pollack, In The Ring with Jim Corbett, 159–87; Naughton, Kings of the Queensberry Realm, 96–97; Corbett, Roar of the Crowd, 126, 132, 145; and Wiggins, “Peter Jackson
hundred-dollar fee could hope for legal protection when they sponsored boxing contests.\(^{30}\)

Consternation about prizefighting in the state flared in June 1890 over Gov. Robert Waterman’s fear that the sport’s popularity jeopardized his state’s reputation, and, by extension, his own. A worse problem was that his authority and that of the state lawmakers was apparently less than the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, which issued the fight licenses. Waterman pressured the city to end the “disgrace” and, at the local level, San Francisco Police Chief Patrick Crowley announced his intent to end club fights. In the month of June, the police made two arrests for the misdemeanor of holding a prizefight, and one charge was dismissed. Nonetheless, the civil attack truly threatened clubs and their sport culture. The California Athletic Club suspended matches, and the Occidental Club released some of its employees in anticipation of the end of boxing exhibitions. Many clubs had nothing other than boxing to interest their “members.” They would cease to exist without regular bouts. In fall 1890, a jury of the California Superior Court acquitted Sidney Huntington and Charles Rochette of the charge of fighting at the California Athletic Club. The police then had proof that the courts were unlikely to support their efforts against prizefighting, and the sport only became more exciting than it already was for many Californians.\(^{31}\)


\(^{31}\) “Prize-Fighting and the State Law,” *Sacramento Record-Union*, June 17, 1890, p. 2; San Francisco Board of Supervisors, *San Francisco Municipal Reports for the Fiscal Year 1889–90, Ending June 30, 1890* (San Francisco: W. M. Hinton, 1890), 233; San Francisco Board of Supervisors, *San Francisco Municipal Reports for the Fiscal Year 1890–91, Ending June 30, 1891* (San Francisco: W. M. Hinton, 1891), 227; “A Break-Away,” *San Francisco Morning Call*, June 24, 1890, p. 2; and “Field of Sport,” *San Francisco Morning Call*, November 19, 1890, p. 8.
Obviously, the City Council was aware that these bouts occurred with some frequency, even if they were officially called sparring exhibitions, and they believed that the better course of action was to profit from them rather than to prevent them. In 1890, the police chief’s report listed two arrests for giving a sparring exhibition without a license. The failure of the case against Huntington and Rochette proved that the council, courts, and local opinion, as reflected by the jury members, were more potent than state law, at least in San Francisco. Actual demonstrations of sparring techniques were so customary that establishments like opera houses and theaters let the fighters on stage to practice and demonstrate their skill. In some manner, whether through newspapers, saloons, clubs, or popular-culture spaces, all segments of society were exposed to the sport of boxing. Not everyone reacted positively to the new ordinariness of gloved warfare but no one seemed to worry that local custom violated state law.32

Accepting the state’s authority in local matters was in some ways a new practice for San Franciscans, who had a tradition of extra-legal public action, often as vigilantes. At midcentury, they had empowered themselves to punish criminal behavior rather than waiting for or expecting elected officials to rescue them. Californians wishing to seek their own justice had recent precedent for their actions. Miners resolved problems in their private judicial system, and sometimes executed their sentences, such as when vigilantes hunted Joaquin Murrieta. In San Francisco, an extra-legal group had rampaged through a Chilean community with impunity and another stopped short of lynching a pair of accused murderers. The San Francisco Committee of Vigilance, both the 1851 and more powerful 1856 iterations, instituted their own death penalties for certain felonies and

corporal punishment for other crimes. The Committee of Vigilance of 1856 captured several men accused of election fraud by means of violent coercion and ballot stuffing. Among them were prizefighters James “Yankee” Sullivan and Woolley Kearney. They worked for politicians such as former Tammany Hall enforcer David C. Broderick, who later became a U.S. senator from California. Sullivan committed suicide while in the committee’s custody. Reform was as violent as boxing was in the 1850s.33

When the reform wave of the late nineteenth century struck California, community organizations were still taking responsibility for local problems. The Progressive Era in San Francisco began in earnest in the 1890s, and the religious element that was so essential to reform efforts early in the nineteenth century was evident in the new crusade. In California, the Irish Catholics, who were not often the primary group identified with the reform impulse, led the charge. Corbett’s ascension to the heavyweight throne later troubled Irish Catholic church leaders in San Francisco. Evangelical Protestants were also in the reform fray, and they joined with Catholics to clean up the Barbary Coast in 1897.34

San Franciscans listened to calls for reform but all were not yet eager to add their voices to the choir. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which was

beginning to make inroads across the nation with its temperance crusade, brought its white-ribbon campaign to San Francisco in the 1890s. After a presentation at the Westside Christian Church in 1896, most of the parishioners were unwilling to sign their names to join the union. Although the WCTU primarily focused on temperance, its reform projects extended over a wide variety of causes, including the battle against prizefighting. If its members were having difficulties winning support for their main goal in San Francisco, their secondary aims, boxing among them, were not bound to be popular either.35

Alcohol reform may not have gained an easy foothold, but the 1890s was still an era of significant change in the way white Californians saw their world. Edward Alsworth Ross, one of the founders of modern sociology, introduced ideas about social control while at Stanford University. In any such policy, the state had to be the mechanism to control immigrants, ethnic peoples, and the working class. The church-based reformers were also turning their attention to the state as an agency for bringing about change. In San Francisco, the Methodists belonged in this category.36

Although San Franciscans showed signs of moving into the Progressive Era of reform, the sense that their society needed cleansing was insufficient to motivate widespread action. The city leaders had recently decided to regulate prizefighting rather

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than to prevent it. The state prepared to strengthen its anti-prizefight law as San Francisco became more liberal with its policy. The success of California’s champions, particularly Jim Corbett, intensified the discussions about prizefighting in the state. Larger social anxieties informed several opinions that favored suppression but only the death of a fighter could temporarily halt of the trend of local regulation in California.

Jim Corbett’s victory over John L. Sullivan to win the heavyweight title in 1892 reignited the debate over prizefighting in San Francisco. Corbett’s triumph in New Orleans on September 7, 1892, was a momentous day for a hometown boy, but it spotlighted Californians’ obsession with the sport. Representatives from several corners of San Francisco society responded to a query in the Morning Call about prizefighting. Clara F. Feltz, an attorney, represented the female perspective, and she focused on men’s bodies and comportment. She feared for the “puny, weak, narrow-chested unfortunate creatures in the shape of men” whom she met in the street. She saw physical evidence of a crisis of masculinity. As for the demoralizing effect on manly character, she reasoned that the same sport that had created the “bully” John L. Sullivan had also provided the “gentlemen” Corbett, who knocked out the bully. From her position, she called for more Corbetts than John Ls, making a distinction between “civilized” boxers and indecorous brawlers. She beseeched mothers to rear muscular men worth a woman’s admiration and to raise physically capable women to adore them. On the other side of the debate, Hubert Howe Bancroft professed: “All fighting and wars are brutal. . . . Intellectual supremacy is the measure of civilization.” Breeding brutes only retarded the advance of Man. Both

views assumed that societies could improve humankind. An unnamed politician answered that he would not offer an opinion until after the upcoming election. Sport, it seemed, was as treacherous a subject as any other for an office-seeker. If the politician could not afford to declare a view, then prizefighting was indeed a contentious public issue.^{38}

The state legislators already in office moved to stiffen laws that prohibited prizefighting in January 1893. Their cause received an unfortunate blessing. On February 25, 1893, a death in the featherweight division ended fights to the finish in California for the short term. Dal Hawkins knocked out Bill “Swede” Miller (William Hanson) in the fifteenth round at the Pacific Athletic Club in San Francisco. Miller died of his injuries the next morning. Policeman William M. Ross was present at the fight but saw nothing that inclined him to stop it. At least two medical doctors also attended as spectators, but they could do nothing for the fallen man. The jury at the coroner’s inquest delivered the charge of manslaughter. On March 10, Judge C. T. Conlan dismissed all charges against Hawkins, but Miller’s death did occasion a revision of the state prizefighting law.^{39} On March 9, 1893, the state legislature made prizefighting a felony, effective immediately.

The final language of the law defined prizefighting as fighting “with or without gloves, whereby bruising or maiming or other serious bodily injury, may result to the

^{37} Columns discussing Corbett’s victory and the reaction in the city covered three-fourths of the Morning Call’s front page the next day. San Francisco Morning Call, September 7, 1892, p. 1.
^{38} “Would the Suppression of Prize-Fights Be Beneficial?” San Francisco Morning Call, October 23, 1892, p. 8.
^{39} “Only Pushed Him,” San Francisco Morning Call, March 1, 1893, p. 8; “It’s A Weak Case,” San Francisco Morning Call, March 3, 1893, p. 7; and San Francisco Examiner, March 10, 1893.
participants.” Brutality, not the monetary reward for it, was the focus of this amendment.

The law and Miller’s death wiped out notable ring battles for several years. Albert E. Conlon, a San Francisco police officer and historian of boxing in the city, charted the decline of important fights in San Francisco from 1893 to 1896. He counted nine fights of merit in 1893, the last being Hawkins-Miller; no worthy contests in 1894; and six in 1895. He had thirty-three on his list for 1892. Conlon blamed the Miller tragedy for the abrupt drop in finish fights, and according to his catalog, the important fights stopped before the state congress passed the bill. Newspaper reports of fights broken up by police during 1894 show that vigilance was the order of the day after Miller’s death. The License and Order Committee of the Board of Supervisors may have been reluctant to issue licenses after the calamity but the threat of a felony and an alert police force may have prolonged the fistic drought. Amateur rules—limited rounds, referee’s decision—prevailed in 1895. By 1896, prizefighting had resumed but with the number of rounds stipulated before anyone stepped into the ring. Knockouts were still common, but fights to the finish were no longer in vogue. That development was the product of civilized progress.

Even with the state statute in effect, local decisions regarding boxing were still normal procedure. In San Mateo County, permits were granted for glove contests that purported to display “skill and training.” The regulation also codified acceptable

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40 The Statutes of California and Amendments to the Codes, Passed at the Thirtieth Session of the Legislature, 1893 (Sacramento: State Printer’s Office, 1893), chap. 88, 101
standards for physical manliness. County ordinance 121 emphasized that the “strength or endurance” of the persons engaged in the contest should not be part of the demonstration. Manliness evinced by any sort of brutality, or ability to withstand violence, was not allowed. Presumably, a spectator could not mistake an exhibition of muscle control and physique for a prizefight.\(^{42}\)

Although the state officially condemned prizefighting by making it a felony, municipal and county law undermined the statute’s strength. Just as they had done at midcentury, the pugilists simply crossed county lines when San Francisco authorities blocked their plans. In Alameda County, Croll’s Gardens and Hotel was a favorite spot for champions to train. When San Mateo County granted licenses for sparring exhibitions, the crowds came to Colma. “Sunny” Jim Cofforth, California boxing promoter and racetrack builder, later turned the village of Colma into a boxing mecca. The county sheriff did prevent several fights, and citizens petitioned the county supervisors to stop every announced fight. Notably, these concerned citizens approached their local civic leaders, rather than the state authorities, to address their grievances.\(^{43}\)

The unofficial local option might have continued to be the standard practice. The state was proactive on legislation but passive on enforcement. Cities and counties made their own financially beneficial regulations, which ostensibly divided the positive pursuit of sparring from the destructive sport of prizefighting. The death of Bill Miller, who was at best a regional fighter, was shocking and led to changes that protected fighters for a short time. When nationally recognized figures of the sport were involved in separate

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\(^{42}\) “San Mateo Crusade,” *San Francisco Call*, November 30, 1895, p. 3.

\(^{43}\) Ibid.
incidents that injured the integrity of the sport, Californians had to distance themselves not from tragedy but scandal.

Two major fights in 1896 shook the reputation of boxing in California. One illustrated the problems present in the way the sport governed itself, and the other was evidence for the selective policing against it. The first featured Jim Corbett and Tom Sharkey in a four-round match. The second was a riotous affair between Sharkey and Bob Fitzsimmons that damaged the national character of prizefighting and cooled attitudes toward the sport in California.

With the sponsorship of the National Athletic Club, Jim Corbett met Tom Sharkey for a match on June 24, 1896, at Mechanics’ Pavilion in San Francisco. Corbett agreed to the four-round contest to help him prepare for an upcoming fight with Fitzsimmons. With his scientific style on display in the first two rounds, Corbett appeared to have the best of Sharkey, but below peak physical condition, he began to drag as the fight progressed. Sharkey’s tactics relied as much on wrestling as boxing, and he could withstand a punch form the hardest hitters, a group to which Corbett did not belong. Sharkey twice wrestled Corbett to the canvas. By the final round, the boxing had deteriorated to grappling—some observers said that Corbett was hanging on to Sharkey to keep from falling—and the police stepped in to stop the fight. Several newspapers reported that the police appeared with just seconds to go at the behest of Corbett or his seconds to prevent an embarrassing defeat for the champion. The fighters and the referee were not the only men with control over the outcome of a boxing match. The police, by interfering in a contest, could manipulate the result. Ultimately, the referee’s decision was a draw, but Corbett still lost professional creditability. The press promoted Sharkey
from “sailor” to “commodore.” A more certain sign of Sharkey’s elevated status were the offers for theatrical engagements that came across the wires following the bout.44

Although Corbett-Sharkey was not a fight to the finish, the fans accorded it high regard. A lawyer involved in the case contesting the estate of James G. Fair, a mining millionaire and U.S. senator from Nevada, asked the that court might be delayed for a few days, given that he needed to speak more with his client and that “a counter attraction” on the night of the twenty-fourth probably held the opposing lawyers’ interests as much as his own. Fighting had not lost any of its popularity among the educated classes. In December 1896, lawyers figured prominently in the aftermath of the most important prizefight in California up to that time. Just two years after the major bouts resumed in San Francisco, a catastrophe involving Fitz, Sharkey, and Wyatt Earp made complete the farce of California’s prohibition of prizefighting.45

By the mid-1890s, prizefights had evolved into a major social event in San Francisco. Mechanics’ Pavilion was the venue for the fight between Sharkey and Fitzsimmons on December 2, 1896, and the structure rocked with over 10,000 spectators, including the police, gamblers, judges, toughs, doctors, lawyers, Chinese, and some fifty women all packed onto wooden benches and rousing for the fight. No one feared breaking the state law (the names of well-known citizens and sporting men attending major matches were often casually listed in newspaper reports). In the better seats sat Charles Crocker of the Southern Pacific Railroad, Supreme Court Justice McFarland, and District Attorney W. S. Barnes. Olympic club football star Pete Smith had four women

all to himself. No one skulked with embarrassment. The National Athletic Club sponsored the event, and the prize purse, for the “ten-round sparring contest.” The local Civic Federation appointed men to persuade Chief Crowley to stop the fight. Crowley had previously declared that he wanted to rid the city of prizefighting, but he too was in the crowd on December 2. When the result of the fight became a litigious debate, the reputations of all the people at the event were tainted by the controversy.

Prizefighting had killed more than one man in recent years, but so had the fight’s referee, Wyatt Earp. From the moment that ring announcer Billy Jordan called his name as the fight’s official, Earp was cast in a notorious role. Chosen by the club management, including J. J. Groom, after the two sides failed to reach a compromise on the identity of the referee, Earp carried into the ring a few rounds of experience as a bareknuckle referee, a gambler’s knowledge of the sport, and a gun. Fitzsimmons’s men eyed him suspiciously, having heard that the former lawman might be in on a fix. Martin Julian, Fitz’s Australian manager, knew little about Earp, but was quickly given a run-down of his reputation. Earp’s vengeful pursuit and killing of Curley Bill Brocius and other violent deeds shadowed his reputation as a lawman and later stung him when whispers of a fix began circulating. When Earp climbed in the ring, police captain Charles W. Wittman noticed the bulge of the Navy Colt and promptly disarmed the referee. The first

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45 “Now Mrs. Craven Has Been Sworn,” San Francisco Call, June 24, 1896, p. 16.
illegal act of the evening was Earp’s, and he was later fined fifty dollars for carrying a concealed weapon. It was an ominous beginning to the night.\textsuperscript{48}

Wyatt Earp had long been known as a gambler, but in San Francisco in the 1890s, his derby and diamond-stick-pin persona fit into civilized society. San Franciscans knew him from the racetrack at Ingleside, where he tried to make a living by picking the fastest horse. Although it was not entirely disreputable, the gambling profession was an unstable pursuit and lacked the prestige of marshal or even the control of running a faro bank, as he had done several times in his career. After the fight, caricatures depicting him as a wily pistolero abused his character and reintroduced his frontier legend. He was a “bad man from Arizona” and a “yellow dog” who needed to bring a gun into the ring with him for protection. The fans had no fear of his character as a man killer; by the end of the fight they were ready to do away with him themselves.\textsuperscript{49}

The bout held promise as a fight for the ages, but its legacy was as a monument to all scandals of boxing’s modern era. Fitzsimmons was the harder hitter. Sharkey’s advantage was his endurance. Several local papers reported the fight, some with an agenda to show that the fight was fixed and that Fitz was the victim. Other papers were partisans for Sharkey. Wasting no time in the first round, Sharkey landed several punches but the more experienced Fitzsimmons snared the confident sailor. Fitz drew him in and sent him down twice before the first round ended. The fighting was fierce in the


succeeding rounds, and the crowd called for fouls on both men. The eighth round was the key to the event.\(^5^0\)

Fitz controlled the pace in the eighth, landing uppercuts and finding Sharkey’s chin on several occasions. A right hook to the jaw stunned the navy champion. A hard left to Sharkey’s gut was the final blow. But how low was it? Sharkey went down, tried to rise, and fell again. The sailor writhed on the canvas, groaning as the seconds ticked off. Some observers thought that they saw Fitz bring his left knee up into Sharkey’s groin. The fight ended when Earp counted Sharkey out, then promptly awarded him the victory. The shocked Fitzsimmons had been casually leaning on his corner, waiting for Earp to declare him the winner. Sharkey’s men hustled him off to his dressing room, where a doctor of dubious reputation, Dr. Benjamin B. Lee, rather than the club doctors, headed by Dr. Daniel D. Lustig, examined him. Earp quickly escaped from the building.\(^5^1\)

Female spectators had witnessed what might have been the shocking defilement of male genitalia but seemed no worse for the experience. Rose Fitzsimmons and J. J. Groom’s wife peered out from somewhere in the building. Rose, who described herself as “conversant with the rules of boxing,” said that she saw no foul. Not only was Fitz a good boxer in her view, but also “one of the best husbands on earth.” Mrs. Groom had less to say than Mrs. Fitzsimmons but did volunteer that Sharkey appeared to have fouled several times throughout the match. As the club owner’s wife, she probably had at least some familiarity with the rules of the sport, and, if not, she at least recognized that her

\(^{50}\) Descriptions of the fight compiled from several different sources can be found in Pollack, *In the Ring with Bob Fitzsimmons*, 273–86; and DeMattos, *The Earp Decision*, 30–46.

\(^{51}\) “Fitzsimmons Was Robbed,” *San Francisco Call*, December 3, 1896, p. 2; and Pollack, *In the Ring with Bob Fitzsimmons*, 305.
seatmate had strong views on the matter. The opinions of the women, however, were of no interest to the legal experts who hashed out witness accounts of the hit.\textsuperscript{52}

The law was sometimes the enemy of the prizefighters, but they readily sought its protection when it might benefit them. After the fight, Fitzsimmons immediately filed suit against Sharkey and the National Athletic Club. Payment on the prize check stopped and the courtroom circus began. Although Earp was not named in the complaint, his complicity in a fixed fight was implied, and his integrity was an essential issue in the trial.\textsuperscript{53}

The result of the fight and the ensuing trial was a feast for the city’s newsmen. Days of testimony from spectators, trainers, doctors, fighters, and the referee filled the front pages of all the major papers and were ammunition in a war between the Hearst-owned San Francisco Examiner and the San Francisco Call. Earp testified that he stood by his decision and regretted that he had failed to stop the fight earlier when he saw Fitzsimmons foul. The Call reporters and artists vilified Earp while the Examiner men defended him. The reformers were right: prizefighting could tarnish a man but Earp was neither fighter nor spectator. They all went on with their lives just as they were. Fitz and his backers had lost, but Earp was destroyed as a public figure. He continued the sporting life, but kept a much lower profile.\textsuperscript{54}

The trial and its result symbolized the absurd relationship between state and local law and the overall balance of power between state and local authority. The foundation of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52]“Mrs. Fitzsimmons Is Indignant,” San Francisco Call, December 3, 1896, p. 2.
\item[54]Tefertiller, Wyatt Earp, 294–95, 304.
\end{footnotes}
the suit was a disputed decision in a boxing match in which the victor won a prize purse. Prizefighting was illegal in California, despite the permits for gloved contests passed out by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Yet testimony went on for days. Only when Sharkey’s legal team realized that the facts of the case seemed to substantiate Fitzsimmons’s accusation did the issue of legality become important. Sharkey’s counsel moved to have Fitz’s complaint dismissed on the basis that the court could not rule in the matter of an illegal act. Judge Austin A. Sanderson dissolved the injunction. Local law could not invalidate state law, although it had been doing so for years.55

The fury in the press was about what Earp had decided, not what Fitzsimmons and Sharkey had engaged in. Police Commissioner Moses Gunst called the decision “an outrageous steal,” although he should have declared no view on the banned activity.56 Judge Sanderson had to acknowledge the overlooked fact that prizefighting was illegal. All the testimony for and against Earp left no doubt that the forbidden event had transpired. By participating in the case, even the police and the courts seemed to legitimize prizefighting in California in spite of the law.

Public sentiment changed course after the fight. People were indignant about Fitz’s foul, and City Supervisor William H. Dimond felt that the board was unlikely to grant more boxing permits for some time. He cited public opinion for the new direction that the board would likely take. Even in these circumstances, the existing state law received no attention. The decision to discontinue the fights was made at the local level. The public was of course fickle, and their love for the sport and gambling on it was

55 Pollack, In the Ring with Bob Fitzsimmons, 325, 326.
greater than their fear of a fighter’s death or fraud. Corbett, Fitzsimmons, and the others returned to their boxing glory in California after just a few years.\(^{57}\)

San Francisco was the hub of scientific boxing training and professional prizefighting on the West Coast. Corbett took his first licks in the schoolyard of St. Ignatius College in the city and later scuffled with men from the seedy Barbary Coast. Seasoned fighters arrived on steamships from Australia and New Zealand to make their U.S. debuts at San Francisco’s famous Olympic Athletic Club and in the barn-like Mechanics’ Pavilion. The rise of amateur club athletics popularized boxing. Corbett, one of the greatest fighters of the day, received schooling in the manly art at the Olympic. The amateur pretense faded as club members sought matches with local professionals like Joe Choynski. Although reformers tried to tie prizefighting to the lower classes, the city leaders who were often behind regulation and prohibition drives were the same ones who cheered the great prizefighters battling in the rings of San Francisco.

From the early statehood period until 1896, boxing’s popularity in California grew steadily. Although prizefighting was illegal in the state, civil authorities rarely obstructed the popular heavyweight contests. San Francisco attracted pugilists, promoters, and fans to its clubs, cavernous public halls, and open-air spaces. By the 1880s, the sport began to subdivide. Prizefighters ducking the law, and the fans who stooped with them, fought in barns, on barges, and wherever else they could find privacy. For more refined men, a club, where they could train with a professional boxing instructor, was the proper environment to practice the pugilistic skill. When the sport evolved into a profitable business for promoters in the 1890s, California lured fighters from within its own borders and from across the oceans. The lively fight scene hid the

\(^{57}\) “No More Fight Permits,” *San Francisco Call*, December 6, 1895, p. 10.
fact that prizefighting was illegal. San Francisco incubated prizefighting’s tender years in California until it developed into a nuisance. Even when the reform impulse washed over the city and the disastrous Earp decision turned fans against the sport, the state continued to shelter prizefighting by neglecting to enforce the prohibition against it. Municipal leaders still ignored the provisions created by the state. Yet, they were cautious. When the heavyweight “Fight of the Century” (the 1897 installment) needed a state to host it, only Nevada was willing.

The sequence of events that isolated the heavyweights in 1897 began in 1892 with Corbett’s victory over Sullivan and Fitzsimmons’s challenge to fight him. Fitzsimmons vowed that he was ready to fight Corbett “should he, by some unforeseen chain of— for him—fortunate circumstances, defeat the world’s champion, John L. Sullivan.”58 Corbett did beat Sullivan. For Californians, his victory was a point of pride but also an outstanding marker of the state’s bewildering and constantly changing relationship with prizefighting. Fitzsimmons chased Corbett east, south, north, and west to get a title fight—the two strong men fussing at each other in the press and in person at every stop. As their efforts to fight each other for the heavyweight championship demonstrate, the motivations of other states and regions for prizefight reform were also wrapped in political power and cultural traditions.

58 “Fitz Dodges and Counters,” Chicago Tribune, April 21, 1892, p. 1.
Chapter 2
The “Daring” Conservatives of the South

After winning the glittering Police Gazette belt from John L. Sullivan in 1892, Jim Corbett parlayed his familiar face and popular persona into a stage career. As the star of Gentleman Jack, a melodrama about a young, handsome, and educated boxer who wins the heavyweight championship, Corbett earned money without risking his title, or serious injury. He followed the precedent set by Sullivan for boxers to grace the stage as headlining actors. Guided by his manager, theater showman William A. Brady, Corbett hoped to eclipse Sullivan’s success.¹ Several companies of players, who included a sparring partner for the climatic fifth act, toured Gentleman Jack intermittently from 1892 through 1895. The itinerary took them all over the United States, as well as to London and Paris, among other cosmopolitan cities. Despite the glamour of show business, the unscripted drama that staged Corbett’s ring battles was far more riveting than what one reviewer of Gentleman Jack described as something that “ought to be

During the same period that theater audiences cheered the light-hearted romance of Corbett’s character, gentleman boxer Jack Royden, the ranks of state government uniformly damned the genuine prizefighters, generating turmoil, intrigue, and a cunning conqueror named Dan A. Stuart.

The dawn of prizefighting’s gloved era, with Corbett as its standard bearer, coincided with a surge in state-enforced prohibitions against the sport. Although some state legislatures had written anti-prizefighting laws in the mid-nineteenth century, a fresh reform impulse targeting the fighters initiated a new series of restrictive legislation. Corbett stood like a lightning rod in the activist storm. His avocation was not necessarily more dangerous than it had been before the adoption of the Marquis of Queensberry rules but the mounting forces demanding reform across society and surging press coverage and aggressive promotion of prizefighting increased the sport’s notoriety. In quick succession, eastern, southern, and Midwestern states and federal territories enacted or enforced statutes outlawing prizefighting, or, as a minimum, bullied the pugilists without certain legal foundation. In essence, consecutive legal maneuvers in the eastern half of the United States funneled the heavyweight champion and contenders to venues in the West as the decade progressed.

In the South, public confidence in government authority was weak enough that municipalities established their own legal codes to regulate or prohibit prizefighting, but reformers who had no other recourse against the fighters still sought assistance from those same state governments. Boxing promoters and athletic clubs challenged the conviction of state authorities and federal officials, forcing them to push back vigorously

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against the sport. By testing the regulatory boundaries of state power, the prizefight contingent compelled their expansion.

Corbett’s initial success as an actor proved that the American general public supported the prizefighter as a public man, whether or not they approved of his brutal craft. The boxing-themed play that starred “Pompadour Jim” collected generally supportive reviews for its novelty and popularity rather than weathering constant reproach for its glaring deficiencies in performance and plot. Patrons flocked to see Gentleman Jack at every stop, and they thought that the champion at least looked gentlemanly in his stage costumes. Audiences experienced boxing in a controlled stage environment; they saw the famous fighter without suffering public disgrace for watching an actual bout. Playwright Charles T. Vincent had predetermined the fight’s outcome, and the hero always won. The stage mitigated the violence of boxing.³

The people in the seats were not the only ones concerned with virtue when Jim Corbett strode out from the wings into the spotlight. Corbett wanted something from the stage that he could not buy with any of his fight purses: class and respectability. He explicitly planned to use his acting career as a vehicle to reach that goal: “All I want is a chance. I am catering to a better class of people than the average pugilist does. In other words, I am trying to be a gentleman and a pugilist at the same time. I think that I ought to have a show.” The public stage offered Corbett a platform in which to fuse creatively a new male honor status. Fighters who were tempted to cross class lines threatened the reformers’ mission to create uniform standards of class behavior.⁴

⁴ “Gotham by ‘Phone. Corbett is Trying to Do What’s Right,” Philadelphia Inquirer, November 18, 1892, p. 2.
Corbett understood the tension between his profession and the higher echelons of society that he aspired to enter. His statement about exploiting acting to achieve a better social status indicates that he believed in class fluidity and his own potential for upward mobility. By the end of the nineteenth century, popular professional sport was a sort of alternate route to social improvement, although many fighters still struggled after their careers ended.\(^5\) Corbett’s eagerness to join the ranks of respectable society inspired him to separate himself from his boxing peers, such as the clownish Fitzsimmons, without renouncing the profession that bolstered his notoriety. With any luck, audiences would conflate the character Gentleman Jack Royden with the real Gentleman Jim Corbett. He anticipated that his fame for gentility and acting skill would eventually overshadow his reputation for dodges and jabs.

With no intention to abandon boxing for a full-time stage career, Corbett faced the task of enhancing his and his sport’s status. He could not ascend the social hierarchy while anchored to a profession deemed unworthy for all but the lowest ranks of society. Biographer Armond Fields and ring historian Nat Fleischer both concluded that Corbett’s efforts were integral to making both boxing and popular theater socially acceptable entertainments for a wide range of audiences. The fact that Corbett so rarely defended his heavyweight title, due in part to a negative perception of boxing among statesmen and reformers, suggests that his immediate positive impact on the sport was less certain than his long-term influence.\(^6\)


His choice of theater as an avenue to respectability might, from historical distance, seem slightly odd. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the establishment of a new cultural hierarchy occurred in tandem with the firming up of social strata in the United States. Americans were still defining their sense of culture, particularly what constituted popular culture, before the turn of the century. The border between art and amusement eventually distinguished high culture from popular culture. Although its avant garde realism was notable, Gentleman Jack clearly belonged in the second category. Still, stage acting was a legal endeavor, and therefore stood higher on the cultural ladder than landing jaw-cracking punches for money in a boxing ring. His audiences at the Grand Opera House in New York and some of the other venues he played were better than the working-class crowd to which he supposedly appealed most as a boxer.⁷

Corbett was not only a big draw on stage but also in motion pictures. In 1894, he went to Thomas Edison’s studio in West Orange, New Jersey, to appear before an amazing new machine, the motion picture camera. Edison had already experimented with filming a boxing match, and now he wanted to shoot a star. In the Black Maria, the name workers gave to the dark and cramped studio, the camera captured Corbett and Peter Courtney trading punches for six rounds. Film promoters advertised the result as a “genuine” knockout, but Corbett later revealed that he had agreed to finish the match in six rounds. The first successful fight film had a scripted outcome. When New Jersey authorities looked into the possible illegal prizefight, Edison explained before a grand

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jury that he had paid Corbett and Courtney to box for the camera, which was not the same as a prizefight. The court dismissed the charges, and Corbett became one of the first celebrities of a new media. But did it earn him the respect that he desired?8

The star’s own behavior compromised his mission and jeopardized his legacy. Being a famous person helped ignite his acting career but it also subjected him to the scrutiny of the media, which fed on fame and scandal. The married Corbett, who, in his own words, was trying to “act just a little better than the rest of his profession,” reportedly chased Hattie Clark, “a tall blond” with a voice “as soft as the coo of a dove.” She claimed that he was the one in pursuit, and she published Corbett’s intimate letters that exposed his passion.9 The story made front-page news, replacing headlines that boasted of his great pugilistic skill with tawdry banners maligning his character. His wife Olive, whom he married in 1886, initially stayed with him, although she was well aware of his appeal and attraction to other women.10

In 1895, Gentleman Jim sweated through the divorce suit that Olive eventually brought against him. This time, the subject of his desire was as enamored of him as he was of her. The soon-to-be Mrs. Corbett, Vera Stanwood (Jessie Taylor), toured with Gentleman Jack, although according to the testimony of witness Marie King, she was not known for her acting. She was, however, devoted to her man, telling Corbett that she once stabbed a female friend who censured Vera’s ardor for him. Vera wrote to Jim, a man she had never met, to relate the incident to him, and he responded with a ticket to his

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9 “Gotham by ‘Phone. Corbett is Trying to Do What’s Right,” Philadelphia Inquirer, November 18, 1892, p. 2.
10 Fields, James, J. Corbett, 33; and “Gay Gentleman Jim,” San Francisco Call, July 16, 1895, pp. 1–2;
show. Several weeks later, the champion defamed himself again, spitting in Bob Fitzsimmons’s face, when tweaking his nose failed to anger the Cornishman. Corbett’s unflattering personal behavior, including his much-publicized divorce, provoked the fickle news media to turn against him in mid-1895.  

Public opinion judged the result of Corbett’s experiment to become a gentleman-pugilist, and to some observers, he had flopped. The problem lay not only in his goal, but also in his execution. Stiff acting, regardless of how many shows he sold out, marked him for ridicule from theater critics, and his personal indiscretions won only recriminations from the public. His failure to defend his title was the ultimate betrayal of the sports who loved him and promoted his fame. A columnist for the Chicago Tribune questioned the whole notion that Corbett wanted to be a “half-breed”—part gentleman, part “bruiser”—on the grounds that half-breeds of any stripe were the “worst sort.” Even worse was that ducking his challengers had made Corbett a “poser.” Climbing into the ring to exchange blows with his top challenger was essential to saving his boxing career, which would in turn keep theatergoers purchasing tickets.

Corbett may have scaled a few rungs on the social ladder but the status of prizefighting among state governors gained nothing from his foray into acting. Beginning in 1893, at least three major opponents, Charlie Mitchell, Peter Jackson, and Bob Fitzsimmons, tried to make a match with the champion. Only one of them succeeded in stepping through ropes to meet Corbett in a championship fight. On some occasions, Corbett’s reluctance delayed events. More often, state government intervened to keep

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Corbett and his challengers apart. The fame that gave him the chance to be an actor also made him a highly recognizable violator of the law and public decency. Despite his stage stardom, Corbett and his pugilistic calling became increasingly unpopular with state and national officials during his reign as champion.

In the southern United States, new or newly enforced prohibitions against prizefighting correlated directly with Corbett’s attempted title defenses. Prizefighting was semi-legal, if not by law, then by deed, across a swath of the South, but southern states would reverse their posture as the 1890s progressed. Creating or enacting a prohibition was often a quick process, but entailed civic disputes over the interpretation of law, confrontations between state and local authority, and the usual finger pointing between the fighters, who never doubted their profession regardless of how many times police arrested them. If anything, the law was an annoyance that they faithfully expected their promoters and managers to circumvent. When southern states confronted Corbett and the vice he represented, they lost some battles but eventually won the war against the most famous heavyweight fighters. By taking on the sporting men, they also tried to reconcile their brutal heritage with their refined culture.13

Like other parts of the nation, the South organized campaigns to reform its society in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The region’s reputation for reform, however,

was less pristine than some other places, such as New England. A long-standing renown
for backwardness, later complicated by slavery and the Civil War, generated a negative
perception of the South outside the region. During the Progressive Era, part of the
South’s continuing problems with its national image stemmed from the decidedly racial
aspects of progressive improvements. For example, instituting poll taxes and literacy tests
solved election fraud, but also effectively disenfranchised black voters. Although this
case and others like it essentially established Jim Crow laws in the South, additional
avenues of reform, such as the crusade against alcohol, created continuity with other
regions in the United States that pursued the same types of change. The southern
governors’ battle against prizefighting signaled that they disapproved of brutality among
white people, while they did less to discourage the “rough justice” of lynching that served
an important social and ritual purpose to white society.¹⁴

Due to its historical significance to the sport, Louisiana’s turn against
prizefighting struck a damaging blow in behalf of reform. Louisiana was the national
capital of boxing in the United States in the early 1890s. New York City and San
Francisco had their claims to prominence, but New Orleans staged the marquee title
matches in many weight classes. The famous Olympic Club and the Crescent Club hosted
major events, including the bout in which Corbett beat Sullivan in 1892, and the 1891

¹⁴ Fred C. Hobson, “The Savage South: An Inquiry into the Origins, Endurance, and
Presumed Demise of an Image,” in The New South, vol. 2 of Myth and Southern History,
ed. Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, 2d ed. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press,
1989), 137–38. Monographs focusing on lynching in the South and other regions include
W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930
(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and Michael J. Pfeifer, Rough Justice:
Lynching in American Society, 1874–1947 (Champaign: University of Illinois Press,
2004).
contest that featured Fitzsimmons wresting the middleweight crown from the “Non Pareil” Jack Dempsey. A legal loophole enabled these fights. The law permitted sparring exhibitions and the club charters promised only “exhibitions,” which the bloody fights to the finish, such as Corbett’s twenty-one round knock out of Sullivan, were certainly not.15

Promoters negotiated the thin margin between legal glove contests sponsored by athletic clubs such as the Olympic, and prizefights, which were illegal in any setting. Louisiana state law addressed prizefighting in 1882, making it a jailable offense. The law prohibited “combat with fists.” The Marquis of Queensbury rules, which began to earn favor in the 1880s, prescribed the use of gloves. Technically, the gloved fighters struck with leather, not flesh-and-bone fists. New Orleans allowed the contests as long as the city received a small slice of the revenues through issuing permits for glove contests. After Sullivan bested Jake Kilrain in New Orleans in 1889, the city and state moved to update the 1882 statute. Gov. Francis T. Nicholls and some New Orleans citizens aimed for a tougher act but the resulting laws were fairly lenient. In 1890, New Orleans and Louisiana permitted glove contests only in charted clubs. Although the state enacted an official law against prizefighting and New Orleans adopted a similar ordinance, the code and the authorities tolerated “glove contests.” The Crescent City remained a hotbed for pugilists looking to climb the ranks of their weight classes.16

A few state officials shared the goal of abolishing prizefighting but obstructionist citizens wilted their intensity. Gov. Murphy Foster and Atty. Gen. Milton Cunningham pursued the closure of the Olympic Club in 1893, and Chief Justice Francis Nicholls, who moved to the bench after completing his term as governor in 1892, had called out the

militia to prevent a fight. Unfortunately for them, the testimony of expert witnesses, including several prominent citizens, convinced the court that the Olympic Club had not violated the law. These experts reported that the contests exemplified the scientific boxing embraced by respectable classes.

Then Andy Bowen died. Bowen, a lightweight, expired hours after hitting his head on the floor during a fight against George “Kid” Lavigne at the Olympic Club in December 1894. The case against the Olympic was renewed, and with Bowen’s death hanging over affairs, the court ruled against the club. State authorities and citizen reformers had been unable to force their will on the people; Bowen’s tragedy communicated more about the brutality of boxing than any impassioned speech could, and finally public reaction favored reformers. Louisiana’s days as a haven for prizefighters were done. Another state would have to take its place.17

About the time that Louisiana lost its standing in the boxing world, Corbett geared up to re-enter the ring. His play was practically an advertisement for his first title defense. In the 1892 production of Gentleman Jack, the villain hires an Englishmen named Charlie Twitchell to fight Corbett’s Princeton-educated banker character. Jack Royden of course wins, and fans hoped that life would soon imitate art when the real Corbett faced his next opponent in the ring. Charlie Mitchell, the champion of England, wanted the diamond-studded Police Gazette belt and had antagonized Corbett since he became champion. Corbett was willing to let him try for it in the cosmopolitan city of New York. Many New Yorkers were less inclined to give him a chance. Responding to public outcry, the police

16 Ibid., 167, 168–69, 170, 174, 175.
17 Clarence Greeley, “Efforts of the International Law and Order League to Prevent the Fight,” New York Times, January 15, 1894, p. 9; and Jeffrey T. Sammons, Beyond the
stepped in and prevented Corbett and Mitchell from fighting at Coney Island. Both fighters blamed the other for calling in law enforcement. They had to turn elsewhere. The tourist town of Jacksonville, Florida, stepped in to the gap left by Louisiana’s sudden ruin as boxing’s promised land.  

The heads of state in Florida and Georgia responded quickly against the proposed international meeting of superstars. Gov. Henry Laurens Mitchell rejected the fight, and he was certain of his executive power to avert the potential disgrace of Florida. He informed every sheriff in the state to be on the lookout for Jim Corbett and Charlie Mitchell. Both fighters spent New Year’s Eve in a Florida jail. Essentially, they were arrested for suspicion that they might fight. They had broken no laws. Mitchell later mobilized the Ocala Rifles, the Second Battalion of the Florida National Guard, among other units, to enforce his demand to stop the fight. The state treasurer reported that the governor would have to pay for transporting the troops from his own pocket; no provision directed the state to pay the bill. Governor Mitchell did all he could, even exercising authority that might be defined as extra-legal to save his state from the taint of prizefighting.  

Rumors indicating that the fighters might steal across Florida’s border gave William J. Northen, governor of Georgia, the opportunity to display his moral credentials. He instructed the sheriffs in the southern counties of his state to guard against Corbett
and Mitchell and traveled down to the border to personally direct operations. A show of arms from both governors emphatically clarified their position.\(^1\)

Municipal leaders in Jacksonville had their own priorities, which conflicted with the governor’s vision for the state and national reformers’ vision for America. On December 19, 1893, the Jacksonville City Council passed an ordinance permitting prizefights with gloves weighing more than five ounces. Their cause, grounded in inviting northern tourism, had one dissenting vote, Mayor Duncan Fletcher. That motion was a rallying point for the International Law and Order League. The organization counted Louisiana’s recently enforced anti-prizefighting law among its successes, and league leader Clarence Greeley called “the press and the pulpit” to action in Florida. Civic leadership had chosen not to protect the citizens, so external groups needed to act.\(^2\)

A large protest, joined by Governor Mitchell, Sheriff Napoleon B. Broward, Fletcher, and clergymen was met by a fierce anti-anti-prizefight protest. The sports were just as capable of using a demonstration to support their position as the righteous activists were.\(^3\)

In Florida, the type of progress represented by the anti-prizefight cohort had a racial component. Strong words and threats of violence only marginally dimmed the sports’ belief that they, not Governor Mitchell, controlled the situation. The entity sponsoring the fight, the Duval Athletic Club, prepared a challenge for the governor that tested his commitment to preventing prizefights and his perceptions of race. Perry Watkins and Green Harris, black champion middleweights, fought each other for a five-

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\(^3\) “Fights North and South,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, January 18, 1894, p. 8.
hundred-dollar purse at the Opera House in Jacksonville. Their articles of agreement were identical to Mitchell and Corbett’s, yet no militia responded to their event. Long-standing racial standards in the South relegated these black boxers to a shadow realm where they were the Jim Crow champions. The promoters thought enough of Watkins and Harris to use them as a challenge to the law, but the state’s indifference underscored the idea that these men were separate and unequal under the law.²⁴

In this unusual circumstance, both black men and white men committed the same crime, and only the white men were arrested for it. The reason may not have originated entirely in racial prejudice. If Mitchell had Watkins and Harris arrested, he would also have provided a court case to test the law. If the court then ruled that prizefighting was legal, he would have lost his chance to snare his high-profile quarry. Mitchell was not wholly certain about his legal position. In Texas, where the law governing prizefights was also in doubt, the two white men who fought to test the system were arrested. Race, however, cannot be removed from a consideration of Mitchell’s actions. Lynching reached peak numbers in the South around 1890, and Florida had a higher rate of lynching than many other states. Governor Mitchell was apparently more concerned with saving the character of white people than that of the black citizens he governed. By ignoring the bait of Watkins and Harris, Mitchell disregarded his own interpretation of the law, which he assumed was valid.²⁵

His position on the law crumbled underneath him at the most inopportune time.

The contest between Corbett and Mitchell was scheduled for January 25, 1894, at

²⁵ Ayers, The Promise of The New South, 156.
Moncrief Park. On January 24, Circuit Court Judge Rhydon M. Call granted an injunction preventing Governor Mitchell or Sheriff Broward from interfering with the fight. Call ruled that Florida had no law against glove contests, and the advertised spectacle between Corbett and Mitchell appeared to be a glove contest and violated no law against prizefighting. The promoters had rented the fairgrounds, making it a private affair that the county sheriff could not trespass upon. On the twenty-fifth, the soldiers who came to Jacksonville to stop the fight left the armory, bought tickets, and took their seats as spectators.  

Like Henry Mitchell, Charlie Mitchell knew how to play the role of a confident winner. He sauntered into the ring with a felt hat tilted low over his right ear. His brown bathrobe swished behind him as he toured the ring and flourished waves at friends. Sitting on stool in his corner, he joked with Bat Masterson. Corbett was humorless. His pre-fight routine consisted of testing the give of the floor and tension of the ropes. The crowd of roughly twenty-five hundred, including the militia and the almost obligatory titillating woman in men’s clothing near the front row, waited only three rounds for Corbett to defeat the Englishman. He had united the heavyweight championships of England and America and was now truly the heavyweight champion of the world. As soon as Corbett got out of jail for “fighting by agreement,” for which he and Mitchell were arrested soon after his victory, he could get back to the stage.  

A few weeks into his latest theater tour, Corbett took a forced break from
*Gentleman Jack*. In late February 1894, he appeared with Charlie Mitchell before a
Jacksonville jury. Their peers found them not guilty of the misdemeanor of engaging in a
prizefight and the charge of assault and battery. No witnesses could say with certainty
that the piece of paper Corbett received after his win was a check. The jury deliberated
for about ten minutes, and a few jurors later told Corbett they took that long only to
appear to be discussing the case. Standing trial did not dissuade Corbett from planning
his return to Florida to fight later that same year. Jail was just an irritating but predictable
feature of being a prizefighter and not a behavioral deterrent, particularly if an officer of
the law waited until after the fight finished and bets were paid before making an arrest.28

Like Charlie Mitchell, Governor Mitchell was a loser in the Corbett-Mitchell
prizefight. To ardent reformers, Governor Mitchell—labeled “weak,” by the anti-
prizefight *New York Times*—modeled ineffective leadership in a crisis. The *Times*
proposed that an Andrew Jackson–like figure, “capable of making his own laws,” was
what Florida really needed. In 1818, Jackson had invaded Spanish Florida, forcing the
Spanish to cede the territory to the United States three years later. President James
Monroe subsequently appointed Jackson military governor of Florida in 1821. A strong
governor like Jackson would have reversed the “disgraceful” public opinion concerning
prizefighting. The suggestion was that the people could have what they wanted as long as
they knew what was good for them, and it was the governor’s responsibility to tell them.

28 Fields, *James J. Corbett*, 82; “The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight,” *Columbus (Ga.) Daily
Mitchell had failed at that task. The *Times* clearly favored leadership willing to intervene decisively in matters of public morality.²⁹

Specificity in the law was essential for reform, and the prizefight contingent knew that truth better than the authorities. Corbett-Mitchell tested where the power lay in a state government with a divided opinion about the intent and nuance of the law. In Florida, Corbett had successfully defended his title against Charlie Mitchell under the watchful eye of the Florida militia. Although Governor Mitchell opposed the contest, he did not have the final word. The court ruled on the meaning of the law, seemingly in sympathy with the fans of the sport and the townspeople who planned to profit from it. Charlie Mitchell, even with gunslinging Bat Masterson in his corner, could not fell Corbett, just as the Florida governor, with the militia in his corner, could not stop either fighting man. The Florida legislature soon enacted an anti-prizefight bill to ward off another potential disgrace.³⁰

The top levels of state government and the ground-level reformers continued to advance their moral cause, even after the immediate danger had passed. As soon as Corbett finished Mitchell, preachers demanded that people in every state form anti-prizefight leagues to aid the maintenance of order against that “shame to our Christian nation.” According to Rev. S. Edwards Young, the “moral sense” of good people had already defeated dueling and slavery, and prizefighting in all weight classes was certain to follow the doomed path of those despicable practices. Reverend Young watched Corbett’s fortunes closely, for he called on Americans to prevent the fighter from battling

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³⁰ D[avid]. Lang to C. A. Culberson, August 26, 1895, folder 24 (September 21–30), 1895, box 301-154, Correspondence, Papers of Gov. Charles Allen Culberson, Texas State Library and Archives, Austin [hereafter, CAC, TSLA].
his next opponent, Peter Jackson. He preached this sermon a mere three days after
Corbett beat Mitchell.\textsuperscript{31} States outside the South did have to practice extra vigilance
against Corbett’s next title defense. Jackson had a good reason unrelated to his profession
as boxer for avoiding the South.

Even as the champion, Corbett seemed willing to exchange fists over the color
line. By the spring of 1894, all the talk was of matching Corbett with Peter Jackson,
whom Corbett had lasted sixty-one rounds with in 1891. For his own safety, Jackson had
ruled out anywhere in the South as a possible venue. Eager gossip had the pair sailing
across the Atlantic to England, or failing that, the tiny city-state of Monaco. The slightly
less cosmopolitan Sioux City Athletic Club in Iowa then offered to host Corbett and
Jackson for a purse of twenty-five thousand dollars. Corbett accepted. The club promised
Jackson that his training expenses, and anything else he might want, would be covered.
Iowa law made the meeting unlikely. One week later, Sioux City’s mayor committed his
office to keeping the fight out of his jurisdiction. In the Midwest, local and state
authorities were in agreement about prizefighting.\textsuperscript{32}

Although an emerging pattern indicated that states and municipalities might
actually repulse the fighters, no shortage of enthusiastic entrepreneurs lined up to make a
bid for Corbett-Jackson. Legality was a small detail in their large plans, and Iowa’s loss
seemed sure to be another state’s gain. Groups in Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma Territory
all made offers to get Corbett and Jackson together. Filmmakers also the saw the
potential for profit and fame and tried place their match in front of a camera. Their effort

\textsuperscript{31} “A Shame to a Christian Nation,” \textit{New York Times}, January 28, 1894,
\textsuperscript{32} “Brady Goes Abroad,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, March 21, 1894, p. 11; “Sioux City May Get
It,” \textit{Waterloo (Iowa) Courier}, August 22, 1894, p. 1; and “Knocked Out by Fletcher,”
\textit{Waterloo (Iowa) Courier}, August 29, 1894, p. 11.
never bore fruit, sparing lawmakers already grappling with heavyweight title fights the additional burden of controlling a widely distributed film of an interracial heavyweight championship. At one point, Corbett vowed to retire from the ring after fighting Jackson. He wanted to focus on his thespian skills. Jackson, occasionally playing the part of the titular character in a traveling production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, was ready to retire Corbett by winning the title from him. His attempt ended in futility, and was similar to his fruitless effort to fight the color-conscious Sullivan while the big champion was starring in *Open Hearts and Willing Hands*. The white fighters may have worried about facing a black man, but local promoters appeared to hold no such reservations about giving Jackson a chance.33

Whether due to legal restrictions or a new sensitivity to the color barrier, Corbett was not going to fight Jackson in 1894. But he had to face someone. Bob Fitzsimmons, the middleweight champion with the mighty torso and the spindly legs, was the next white man in the queue. They met in New York in October 1894 to sign articles of agreement for a bout hosted by the Florida Athletic Club in Jacksonville. Governor Mitchell warned that he would call an emergency session of the state legislature to prevent Corbett and Fitzsimmons from walloping one another in his state. This time, promoters feared that he might have the conviction and the legal foundation to follow through on his threats. Then Dan Stuart swooped in.34

With Dan Stuart dictating events, the epic of the heavyweight fighters in America became a years-long odyssey. Soon after Florida withdrew its welcome, Stuart began to appear in the papers under most headlines that promised news of Corbett and Fitzsimmons. A gambler from Dallas, he decided to exercise his considerable skill to produce the prizefight of the century. In the process, he rescued prizefighting by outwitting the forces that sought to destroy it. He feared neither moralists nor state militias. His maneuverings demonstrated that reform fervor had spread unevenly throughout the United States, and sometimes within the same state.

One of Stuart’s first tasks required convincing Corbett to break from playing Jack Royden to attend to his other career. Joe Goddard, an Australian heavyweight, had challenged him, but manager William Brady and Corbett declined the offer. The play had been a wild success, and Corbett had no financial reason to desert it for a one-time payout in a fight he might lose. In a four-year period, Corbett had fought against only three major opponents since he beat Sullivan: Charlie Mitchell, Peter Courtney (on film), and Tom Sharkey, in an event both parties agreed to end after four rounds. Only his match with Mitchell was a real fight to the finish. He spent most of his time on stage. Fitzsimmons, the middleweight champion, had done all he could to prove his worth as top contender for the heavyweight title. Although getting Corbett to agree to face Fitzsimmons took no small effort, actually finding a friendly place for them to meet was a Herculean endeavor.35

Texas posed the first challenge. As a southern state that had seceded from the Union, maintained slavery, and had other cultural and economic ties to the South, including the cotton industry, the state of Texas also confronted the problem of image

The citizens of Texas also fussed and clucked over their moral health, much like their brethren in other states North and South in the 1890s. An outstanding quality was their fixation on the way people outside Texas perceived them. As the end of the nineteenth century approached, the roiling force of progressive reform obliged Texans to ally themselves in name to the moral values of the eastern states. The state’s change from half-heartedly disapproving prizefighting to leading a campaign against it was a rapid shift and indicates reform policy was one way that states constructed and projected their image for national consumption.

For three years, Corbett avoided defending his title. Finally, the date for the Corbett-Fitzsimmons bout was announced as October 31, 1895. For five years, prizefighting had been technically legal in Texas, but the lawyers did not uncover such technicalities until the crisis forced them to analyze the laws. To dissuade Corbett and Fitzsimmons, Texas governor Charles A. Culberson issued on July 27, 1895, a
proclamation in which he declared prizefighting illegal in Texas and cautioned all parties who might be considering participation in it. That same week, a Syracuse, New York, jury acquitted Fitzsimmons of a manslaughter charge in the death of his sparring partner Con Riordan. The ruling reminded observers of the dangers of boxing but also showed that the courts had to prove that boxers maimed or sometimes even killed their opponents with criminal intent.38

The challenges of untangling law and precedent were evident in the 1895 prizefighting flap in Texas. An 1889 civil statute provided the means to tax boxing contests, implicitly licensing them. That law implied that prizefights were common enough and well worth taxing, and that they were not morally vexatious enough to outlaw. Gov. James S. Hogg, the first major reforming governor in Texas, assumed office in 1891. His fight for railroad regulation was one example of his expanded use of state power in the service of reform. In 1891, the Texas Legislature had passed a criminal statute that prohibited prizefighting between two men. The state attorney general in 1895, Martin M. Crane, opined that when the civil code and the penal code conflicted, the more recent statute on the matter prevailed. Culberson thought he had the law behind him when he published his executive proclamation against prizefighting in July 1895.39

According to his private secretary, James William Madden, Culberson’s proclamation was in character for the “daring conservative.” That phrase encapsulates better the drive to shield the public from immoral behavior than the name progressive. The daring element was the use of state power to impose one group’s set of values on the

39 Journal of the House of Texas, 24th Legislature, 1st sess., October 1, 1895 (Austin, 1895), 4; Campbell, Gone to Texas, 322; and Alwyn Barr, Reconstruction to Reform: Texas Politics, 1876–1906 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 89.
whole of society. Madden also noted that Culberson’s bold defense originated not with
the governor but from “women, ministers, and others.”40 These people were the
traditional engines of social reform, and from Madden’s perspective, Culberson
responded to rather than directed them.

The governor’s word and the will of Texas’s self-appointed protectors were still
not powerful enough to cancel the fight. On September 2, two white welterweights,
Tommy Cavanaugh and Jess Clark, participated in a prizefight to test the law before the
Corbett-Fitzsimmons bout. Dallas County Sheriff Ben E. Cabell duly arrested them. In
late September, Judge James M. Hurt of the Court of Criminal Appeals ruled that the
1889 licensing law repealed the 1891 penal code, freeing Cavanaugh and Clark.
Culberson needed to fix the law beyond doubt, and he needed to do it fast.41

On September 26, he called a special session of the legislature for October 1 to
pass a specific law against prizefighting by October 31. His reasons rested in the “affront
to the moral sense” and obstruction of the “enlightened progress of Texas” that the fight
represented.42 No less than the “honor of the State” was at stake.43 When the legislature
closed the loopholes in the law the next day, Culberson commended them for their unison
in proclaiming that “brutal and degrading practices . . . have no place among us, and that
there will be no step backward in the progress of the state.” The language used by
governors, legislators, and activists in their attacks relied heavily on their loosely defined

40 James William Madden, Charles Allen Culberson: His Life, Character and Public
Service as County Attorney, Attorney General, Governor of Texas and United States
Senator (Austin: Gammel’s Book Store, 1929), 220, 221.
41 Leo N. Miletich, Dan Stuart’s Fistic Carnival (College Station: Texas A&M
University Press, 1994), 41–45; and Journal of the House of Texas, 24th Legislature, 1st
sess., October 1, 1895 (Austin, 1895), 4.
42 Journal of the Senate of Texas, 24th Legislature, 1st sess., October 1, 1895 (Austin:
Ben C. Jones, 1895), 1.
ideal of progress, which in this case seemed to mean encouraging a better national image of Texas than what had previously existed. Culberson’s rapid and resolute reaction to the situation implied that enlightened progress included social improvements and political reward.44

The possibility of a high-caliber prizefight outraged Texans focused on their state’s national image. A pastor praised Culberson for sparing Texans from “national humiliation.”45 Another admirer pointed to his experience traveling to the East, where his acquaintances expressed their surprise that Texas would condone something so “uncivilized.”46 One Texas legislator remarked on the fact that prizefights occurred nightly in Texas, and as such, Corbett-Fitzsimmons was no emergency. Crushing the top heavyweights projected an image of progress in Texas that outsiders could see, admire, and praise. Madden concluded that Culberson’s stand against prizefighting won him the most acclaim of any act of his administration.47

Proof that the doings in Texas reached far beyond the sporting world came from the hallowed halls of academe. Orin G. Libby, instructor of history at the University of Wisconsin, believed that Culberson’s actions carried consequential meaning. Writing to Culberson to request a copy of the legislative proceedings, Libby remarked, “This session . . . [will be] so full of interest to historical students.” Although Libby’s specific plan for

43 Ibid., 3.
44 Ibid., 18.
45 Alpheus B. Austier[?] to Charles Culberson, November 8, 1895, folder 28 (November 1–15), 1895, box 301-155, Correspondence, CAC, TSLA.
46 J. W. Wiggins to Charles Culberson, October 3, 1895, folder 25 (October 1–7), 1895, box 301-155, Correspondence, CAC, TSLA.
the documents is unclear, his recent landmark work comparing social and economic conditions of a place with its political views suggests one possible avenue.\textsuperscript{48}

In Texas, not all parties were as convinced as Culberson was that he had properly fulfilled his obligations as governor by reacting so forcefully to Corbett-Fitzsimmons. For example, the interests of businessmen who planned to profit from the event conflicted with the new law. A Dallas businessman advised Culberson that Corbett-Fitzsimmons should go on as scheduled, for “a great many in Texas . . . should be taught this art rather than the art of using their guns.”\textsuperscript{49} A serious condemnation thrown at boxing was that it was too violent, but in a violent state like Texas, trading punches was more desirable than gunplay. The businessman appealed to a part of the state’s image represented by such men as recently deceased gunfighter John Wesley Hardin to lessen the apparent brutality of boxing. On one hand, state pride rested in violent but law-abiding men like the Texas Rangers. On the other hand, the uncivilized prizefighters threatened the state’s dignity.\textsuperscript{50}

The wide-ranging values of the electorate were not always harmonious and sorting them out was a challenging task. Sally Culberson, the governor’s wife, issued the plainest analysis of the purpose and power of government at the time, and she frankly disagreed with her husband’s actions against prizefighting. Aggravated sports blamed women for spoiling their fight, but Sally Culberson, at least, was on their side. She


\textsuperscript{49} State Superintendent to Charles Culberson, August 25, 1896, folder 21 (August 23–31 1895), box 301-154, Correspondence, CAC, TSLA.

offered no opinion on the question of violence and brutality, but she was quite clear that her husband was violating democratic principles. She argued that elected officials represented the will of the people, and the people in fact wanted the fight. She also confronted the reform impulse head-on: “I don’t see why one man would have the power to say what the next would do. One man’s judgment is no better than another.” She told her husband that all the uproar was “foolishness” and that he was not doing his job when he opposed what the people wanted. Her perception of the governor’s responsibility, however, was becoming outmoded. Reformers broadened the reach of government by convincing authorities that citizens were incapable of managing their own behavior. In their view, the will of the people was not necessarily the best thing for them.

The men who made the laws were not the only ones who had to accept the mandate of the reformers. Questions about enforcement of the law as it stood in August 1895 indicate some reticence among authorities. Sheriff Cabell informed the governor that he understood prizefighting was defined as a misdemeanor, and he inquired whether he would be justified in “the shooting down of citizens” to prevent the fighters from breaking the law. Cabell’s irritation was also evident in his response to Culberson’s question about whether the sheriff would both accept and act upon the law. Cabell replied that he would do his duty, but he had otherwise given the subject no other thought. That the state’s executive officer questioned a local authority’s commitment to the law

52 Ben E. Cabell to C. A. Culberson, August 16, 1895, folder 20 (August 16–August 22, 1895), box 301-154, Correspondence, CAC, TSLA.
53 Ben E. Cabell to C. A. Culberson, August 20, 1895, folder 20 (August 16–August 22, 1895), box 301-154, Correspondence, CAC, TSLA.
indicates that sweeping moral change from the top down required the cooperation of the physical instruments of change, such as the police.

Governor Culberson sought the opinion of Atty. Gen. Martin Crane about the matter of enforcement, quoting directly from Cabell’s communication. Crane’s logic focused not on the fighters, but on seconds and spectators. Those people, gathered to engage in an illegal activity, constituted an unlawful assembly. An unlawful assembly that resisted legal dispersion became, in legal terms, a riot. He concluded his opinion with article 566 of the Texas Penal Code, which stated that homicide was acceptable when no other means existed to suppress a riot. By tracing the state legal code, he demonstrated that Sheriff Cabell could in fact justifiably shoot a sports fan. Crane signaled that riot laws were a better method of prevention than the prizefighting law as it stood in August. The special legislative session in October was necessary not only to clarify the law, but also to ensure that the lawmen had the legal leverage to enforce it comfortably. With legal and police support in place, Texas appeared to have rid itself of the prizefighters.54

The new law generated in the emergency session of the Texas legislature was not created entirely within the vacuum of the state. In his plea to the state legislature, Culberson declared that every state in the Union had condemned prizefighting in some manner. He listed twenty-fives states that he believed had made it a felony. Florida, California, Nevada, and Iowa were on his list. The common curse of prizefighting invited states to communicate and share methods of regulation with each other. Cultural events moved across state lines, and so did tools to combat them. Culberson contacted governors

54 Martin M. Crane to C. A. Culberson, August 26, 1895, folder 21 (August 23–31, box 301-154), Correspondence, CAC, TSLA.
in other states where Corbett had recently been to gain insight into his own problem and proposed solution.\textsuperscript{55}

He also received a letter of support from Mississippi. That state had its own famous prizefight spectacle in 1889, when John L. Sullivan fought Jake Kilrain near Richburg in the last bareknuckle heavyweight championship bout. By fighting, both men had broken Mississippi law and were subsequently brought to trial. While the jury found them both guilty in separate trials, neither actually had to serve his twelve-month prison sentence. John M. Stone, the governor of Mississippi in 1895, reported to Culberson that the bareknuckle match drew both toughs and “first class gentlemen” from all over the nation. Stone noted, however, a negative “moral effect” on the state as the result. The heavyweight champions had not returned to Mississippi since 1889. A closing thought from Stone congratulated Culberson for curbing the problem in his state, and the Texas governor tallied an approval mark from one of his executive peers.\textsuperscript{56}

The reaction from state officials and ordinary citizens inside and outside Texas reaffirmed the popularity of Culberson’s actions. He was a champion to righteous reformers, and the governor’s admirers touted him as much as their own agendas when they discussed positive developments in American reform. The core of the praise reflected dominant white cultural values in Texas, the South, and the United States.

The concept of white manhood became an obsession in the late nineteenth century. Manhood encompassed many meanings in the 1890s, and one of them was the ability to use power judiciously for the sake of society. For his efforts, supporters from

\textsuperscript{55} Journal of the House of Texas, 24th Legislature, 1st sess., October 1, 1895 (Austin, 1895), 4.

\textsuperscript{56} J. M. Stone to C. A. Culberson, October 13, 1895, folder 26 (October 8–19, 1895), box 301-155, Correspondence, CAC, TSLA.
around the nation bestowed on Culberson a favorite contemporary honor: manliness. The Epworth League of the St. James M. E. Church in Galveston, Texas, part of the international Epworth League for youth organized by the Methodist Episcopal Church, commended the governor for his “manly” actions to preserve “law and purity.” Reform in Galveston emanated from benevolent societies rooted directly in churches rather than from somewhat more secular groups such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. This detail conforms with the argument that Galveston and much of Texas most valued southern cultural ideals.

Voices outside Texas also recognized Culberson for his achievement. The Christian Observer of Louisville, Kentucky, commended Culberson and its own governor, John Y. Brown, for their firm rejection of prizefighters. Brown had recently issued a proclamation against a promoted fight in Louisville. The furor over prizefighting was not reserved only for Corbett, although he galvanized the anti-prizefight movement in fall 1895. Such acts expressed “the growth of Christian sentiment” in the United States. Christianity was the foundation of progress in the nation, and when state leaders supported reform, they implicitly sanctioned the Christian agenda. In Cincinnati, the Presbyterian and Methodist ministers resolved to endorse or praise the deeds of Culberson and Brown. The positive publicity for Culberson coming from so many states made more difficult Dan Stuart’s plan to find a place that would welcome the fighters.

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57 Etta Toothaker to C. A. Culberson, November 6, 1895, folder 26 (October 8–19, 1895), box 301-155, Correspondence, CAC, TSLA.
59 “No Prize-Fighting in Texas or Kentucky,” Christian Observer (Louisville, Ky.), October 9, 1895, p. 1.
60 Sam Austin, “In the Realm of Fistiana,” National Police Gazette, October 26, 1895, p. 11.
Governors were not the only heads of state in the United States. Always willing to probe the limits of the law and the willingness of government to enforce it, Stuart next fielded offers for the fight that challenged the bounds of Native sovereignty. One report claimed that the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma had invited the Florida Athletic Club to bring its pugilistic spectacle to a spot on the Red River across from Paris, Texas. The growing railroad settlement at South McAlester in Oklahoma also extended an invitation to Stuart. Another story ventured that the cash-poor Chickasaws planned to adopt formally Corbett, Fitzsimmons, and the rest into the tribe, putting them outside the jurisdiction of the courts, in exchange for five thousand dollars.  

In early October 1895, Sinclair Taliaferro, U.S. attorney of the Eastern District of Texas, offered his findings on the option of using federal force to stop Corbett and Fitzsimmons from meeting in Indian Territory. Sinclair outlined that the fighters’ white race prevented them from being tried by tribal courts, but the U.S. courts in Indian Territory could try the men for prizefighting. The district court in Paris, however, could try only felonies. The Criminal Code of Arkansas operated in Indian Territory, except where it conflicted with federal law. Under the Arkansas code, prizefighting was a misdemeanor. To cement the ability of a judicial body to punish the boxers, Sinclair referred to the third clause of Section 2150 of the Revised Statutes, which stated that the federal government could use force to prevent “the introduction of persons and property in the Indian Country (for purposes) contrary to the law.” The president could deploy

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military forces against Fitzsimmons and Corbett if they crossed into Indian Territory with the intention of fighting for money.\textsuperscript{62}

The federal government had long tried to decide social morality for Native Americans. Taking seriously reports that the Chickasaw nation would host the fight for a five-thousand-dollar “donation” to its treasury, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Daniel M. Browning notified the tribal governors and department agents that no such event could take place. He cited section 2149 of the Revised Statutes that allowed him to remove, with the assistance of federal troops if necessary, any person whom he construed as disturbing the peace of the Indians. He even referenced the rumor that the Chickasaws would adopt the Corbett and Fitzsimmons into their tribe to protect them from anti-prizefighting laws. The federal government could not let a sovereign nation within its own borders humiliate it by allowing Corbett and Fitzsimmons to do what U.S. states had strictly forbidden. Indian Territory was out.\textsuperscript{63}

Not wanting to support illegal activity, Texas authorities forced Stuart and the others to leave the state without firm plans for the fight’s next venue. Sheriff Cabell subpoenaed Brady, Julian, Florida Athletic Club man Joe Vendig, Stuart’s secretary Dan K. Wheelock, and Corbett’s trainers to appear before a jury in early October 1895 to explain what they knew about Stuart’s plans for a future fight. The intent was to eventually charge Stuart with conspiracy to commit a felony. Contracting to commit a felony, even one in another state, while in Texas was unlawful. Undeterred but certainly


frightened, the businessmen behind the biggest boxing event of the decade prepared to pick up stakes and leave Texas the next day. The Florida Athletic Club, now headed by Stuart, moved its operations to Hot Springs, Arkansas, a state even more toxic to prizefighters than Florida or Texas.64

For the fighters themselves, new laws in Texas translated to delay. Corbett had settled his training quarters in San Antonio near the Alamo, and Fitzsimmons made his preparations in Corpus Christi, Texas. On his way to Corpus Christi, Fitz took the opportunity to make some extra money with his fists without fighting to the finish. At the end of September 1895, he gave sparring demonstrations in Atlanta and Montgomery en route to New Orleans. The exhibitions were small cause for fuss in the South. He had with him his new baby—a lion cub named Nero, whom he had acquired from Bostock and Wombwell’s Traveling Menargie when it played Coney Island. A New Orleans Picayune reporter speculated that with Rose preparing his encampment in Corpus Christi, Bob would soon father “a bouncing Texan.” Given the increasing legal difficulty of being a prizefighter, Fitz’s ability to support his growing family with prize purses only decreased when the strange boxing pageant relocated to the established spa resort of Hot Springs.65

Hot Springs civic leaders, including Mayor W. W. Waters and City Attorney W. H. Martin, trekked to Dallas to meet with Stuart in his time of need. They offered him Whittington Park, the Hot Springs Railroad Company planned to build extra sidetracks for the undoubttable influx of extra cars, and the city’s hoteliers and citizens with rooms

64 “Is After Dan Stuart,” Chicago Tribune, October 9, 1895, p. 5.
to rent readied to meet the needs of the sports. The boosters made a good case for their city, and Stuart had no time to survey the sentiment and legal statutes of Arkansas.\footnote{Larry D. Ball, “Redeemed, Regenerated, and Disenthralled,” \textit{The Record} 18 (Garland County Historical Society, 1977), 16.}

Unlike some other southern governors, James P. Clarke of Arkansas already had a hard position on prizefighting when Jim Corbett came to his state. In 1891, when he was in the state senate, Clarke had voted for a law that made prizefighting a felony. At the next session of the legislature, however, the state representatives voted to amend the law, reducing the crime to a misdemeanor. Regardless of the severity of the punishment, Clarke successfully used the law to forbid Charles “Kid” McCoy (Norman Selby) from fighting Danny Needham on April 1, 1895. When Corbett came to town, the ministers of Arkansas did not have to convince Clarke of their cause. Almost as soon as the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight was announced for Hot Springs, a citizen’s committee formed at the Central Methodist Church. They wrote a manifesto that pronounced the immorality of prizefighting and contended that certain disgrace and a corollary loss of respectable visitors to their tourist destination would result from the big battle. Governor Clarke wasted little time uniting himself with the Citizen’s Committee. Clarke presented his anti-prizefight views clearly but he chose not to follow Governor Culberson’s course in combating Corbett and Fitzsimmons. Citing expense and the important fact that the majority of state representatives favored the law as it stood, Clarke refused to call a special session of the state legislature to foil Dan Stuart. Clarke proved the advantage of other tactics, although he ran up against similar obstacles.\footnote{“No Extra Session,” \textit{Arkansas Gazette}, October 9, 1895, p. 4; “McCoy-Needham Fight Forbidden,” \textit{Chicago Inter Ocean}, April 2, 1895, p. 4; and Ball, “Redeemed, Regenerated, and Disenthralled,” 17.}
Sheriff Reb Houpt of Garland County, where Hot Springs was located, arrested Corbett for conspiracy to commit assault on Fitzsimmons. Chancellor Leland Leatherman, presiding over the chancery court, declared that the anti-prizefight act was unconstitutional due to a procedural error and released Corbett on a writ of habeas corpus. Leatherman demonstrated that Corbett and Fitzsimmons had no intention of engaging in a prizefight. The articles of agreement set up a test of skill between two men wearing gloves and made no mention of any championship riding on the outcome of the challenge. He also opined that the laws against assault and battery did not apply to boxers. Leatherman’s decision about assault and battery charges robbed Clarke of his last-ditch defense against Corbett and Fitzsimmons. Without the backing of the judiciary, laws that aimed to reform society were useless.68

Not all parties in the fight camp reacted to the judge’s decision with extreme disappointment. Jim Corbett just wanted to reschedule. Time spent in court was time not spent training, and he no longer felt prepared for the fight. Fitzsimmons continued to wait in Texas for resolution. Dissatisfied with the decision, Governor Clarke called the case for review at the State Supreme Court in Little Rock. Dan Stuart, the man with the most stamina for legal battles, threw in the towel. No one other than Stuart, Vendig, other Florida Athletic Club men thought that Hot Springs was a dead end.69

The Arkansas Supreme Court explored the legal definition of prizefighting. Arkansas attorney general Edgar Burton Kinsworthy argued that two men in a fight do bodily harm to one another. He presented Corbett-Mitchell as recent evidence. The defense concerned itself not with morality and violence, but with constitutionality—

69 Ibid.
really, a technicality. Martin argued that the legislature enacted the 1891 bill irregularly. The state constitution required a bill to be read on three separate occasions. According to the legislative record, it had not been so read. Also missing were the mandatory enumerations of the legislators who voted for and against the bill. Any future amendments were then null and void. The court ruled, however, that the 1891 law was valid, procedural errors not withstanding. Now that prizefighting was definitely illegal, Fitzsimmons, still training in Texas and refusing a postponement or a new agreement that specified a definite number of rounds, strangely declared his intention to fulfill the terms of the original agreement and come to Hot Springs to fight Corbett within five days.\(^{70}\)

The Supreme Court’s decision was not going to be the final shot in the battle against prizefighting. Clarke’s second salvo included summoning the state militia and issuing arrest warrants for Fitzsimmons, Julian, and Corbett and Brady (again). Every company of “white militia,” including units from Pine Bluff, Helena, and Little Rock, had received orders to invade Hot Springs if the promoters refused to call off the fight. Excited observers in Hot Springs reported that Clarke had exceeded his authority; they believed that protocol required that a sheriff must request the militia before the governor could dispatch them. According to that viewpoint, the militia technically became a mob invading the county. Memories of unwelcome invaders firing weapons to uphold an opposing political or cultural position were as recent as the Civil War. The Arkansas Constitution of 1874 actually granted the governor the power to call up the militia to protect the state, although taking that action to prevent a misdemeanor was still seen as an extreme measure, and even Clarke’s supporters questioned his tactics. Tension relaxed

\(^{70}\) Ibid.
when Corbett and Brady turned themselves in, but they remained in Hot Springs. Clarke eventually recalled the militia before the units left the station at Little Rock.  

If Fitzsimmons could make it across state lines at Texarkana and get to Hot Springs, chances were fair that he would be arrested and still fight Corbett. If, however, authorities captured him and took him to Little Rock, all hope for the fight would be lost. The outcome depended on the loyalties and craftiness of two sheriffs, Houpt and J. T. Dillard of Miller County. The race was on to see who could get to Fitzsimmons first. Of course, if the party ran into Sheriff Grimmet of Magnolia County and his Winchester-wielding posse, all bets were off.  

Garland County sheriff Houpt, who had dutifully arrested Corbett the first time, either suddenly abandoned his forthright allegiance to the law, or was more a partisan of Fitzsimmons than of Corbett. Fitzsimmons had the opportunity to travel on a special train and avoid law officers, but he wanted to make his way as a regular citizen. Houpt intercepted the Fitzsimmons party and tried to get Fitz to come with him so that he would be taken to Hot Springs. The boxer, who had recently become an American citizen, decided to go with sheriff Dillard to Little Rock. He did not want to participate in anything illegal, except for his profession. Governor Clarke issued a warrant for Sheriff Houpt’s arrest.

On October 30, Arkansas attorney general Kinsworthy filed a motion to dismiss the charges against Corbett and Brady in Hot Springs with the intent of hauling Corbett to Little Rock to face more charges. In Hot Springs, Judge Rapley denied the motion, and

promoters continued to sell tickets. Meanwhile, Sheriff Dillard had arrested Fitzsimmons and Julian at Fulton near Texarkana. Dillard executed all his warrants, taking Sheriff Houpt into custody as well. The group boarded a train for Little Rock. Houpt stayed on the platform and was later held by special state officer Lee Giles, but Dillard managed to get the rest of the prisoners to the capital. Corbett and Brady finally agreed to go to Little Rock on a peace bond. Nero and eight-months-pregnant Rose Fitzsimmons had simply waited out events at the Arlington Hotel in Hot Springs but soon arrived in the capital.74

Defeated and jeopardized by the possibility of five years in jail, the boxers agreed to leave the state. Arkansas won a definite victory over prizefighting. Corbett later claimed that authorities in Hot Springs assured him that the governor had no power to keep him from fighting. He also charged Fitzsimmons with “dunderheadedness” for going with Dillard to Little Rock. Even with the militia, sheriffs, and governor out to get him, Corbett still expected to get into the ring and fight his challenger. The principles’ blatant disrespect for governors and unwavering belief in local promoters did nothing to increase the fans’ respect for government authority but it did improve the governors’ respect for each other.75

Each state that tossed out Corbett had a statute that addressed combat between two men. In some cases, the laws intended to prohibit dueling or bareknuckle brawling, but the objective to stop men from fighting each other was clear. Promoters knew that intent was insufficient. The club owners and promoters never pretended to be unaware of the laws. In fact, they had lawyers prepared to argue their positions and were supported

73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., p. 8.
75 Ball, “Redeemed, Regenerated, and Disenthralled,” 22; and Corbett, Roar of the Crowd, 247.
by municipal governments that had passed their own ordinances that defied state law. The challenges posed to the state statutes forced governors and legislators to amend or create new ones, sometimes in a matter of hours. An innovation in the rules regulating prizefighting, the use of gloves, changed the sport, and the laws governing combat had to adjust to their evolution. With those initial regulations as a basis, lawmakers built on a reputation for scorning preplanned combat between two men. Governors Mitchell, Culberson, and Clarke were not starting from scratch as they tried to improve their states so much as choosing an advantageous battleground for moral reform.

Change was not anathema to the South. A reform project aimed at abolishing a specific type of human savagery could be useful. In the late nineteenth century, the South embraced progress and the on-going work of rehabilitating its image after the Civil War. Even something as small as prizefighting regulation in the scheme of larger issues such as economic recovery and race relations was an opportunity to demonstrate laudable moral fiber to the rest of the nation. State governors exercised their powers to enforce laws that in some instances had been on the books for years. Doing so was an act that confirmed their strength, and once they determined to use their power by enforcing their codes, they were willing to push the limits of their authority. By calling out militias in Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, and Arkansas, they showed that the remedy for the organized violence of prizefighting was the threat of organized state-sanctioned violence, and they believed in their power to use state forces against the prizefighting scourge. Corbett, a high-profile threat, forced their hand. The political “Solid South” represented by Democratic governors Foster, Mitchell, Northen, Clarke, and Culberson was united against prizefighting.
The South as a region advanced in the war on the immorality represented by Corbett and Fitzsimmons. Southern states had tried to prevent John L. Sullivan’s fight against Jake Kilrain in 1889 but failed when the men met Richburg, Mississippi. By staunchly defending their citizens from the wicked prizefighters in 1895, southern governors demonstrated that they were tough on a vice that troubled people in other regions of the country. For example, they shared a common cause with the governors of Minnesota and Iowa. Repulsing Corbett earned them daily press coverage throughout the nation, especially in northern cities like New York and Chicago. While the reporters generally preferred to glorify the fighters rather than the governors, readers still learned that southern leaders seriously pursued reform agendas in their states. Governors also consciously chose to condemn a sport that the North as a region censured while they adopted and promoted college football, a new favorite brutal pastime of elite northerners.76 For Governor Mitchell in Florida, the prizefighting debacle exposed weakness but the fact that the Florida Athletic Club did not return to the state for Corbett and Fitzsimmons established that Mitchell had gained control over the problem.

The tools of government that men such as Mitchell might have depended on to execute their edicts against immorality emerged as forces of opposition. Sympathetic or simply strict judges foiled the governors in Louisiana, Florida, Texas, and Arkansas. Fighter-friendly juries offered little help. Obstructionist sheriffs like Houpt in Arkansas added another layer of difficulty to the pursuit of the prizefighters. Regardless of how

activist the governors were, their power was still limited by other branches or departments of government. Those restraints were advantages to promoters.

Perseverance was a hallmark of Dan Stuart’s success, and he would not quit his quest and bow to authorities who promised to choke the life from the prizefighting industry. Stuart, with his unflagging optimism, offered Corbett’s manager William Brady yet another fight with Fitzsimmons in early November 1895, just days after the two fighters had been originally scheduled to meet in Dallas, and later Hot Springs. Stuart dated his telegram proposal from El Paso, where he said had a site already secured. Dan Reckhart, an El Paso civic leader, wrote to Corbett, his old acquaintance from San Francisco, on November 14. He related that Stuart was doing reconnaissance in El Paso and recommended that the champion would get a “square deal” from the fair-minded citizens of the “border city.”

Corbett waffled, and wags wondered whether Brady was afraid of losing income from Corbett the stage star if the Corbett the boxer lost the match.

The hassle was too much for Corbett. He announced his retirement from the ring in November 1895. In an unusual move, he planned to give his title to his sparring partner and sometimes supporting player in Gentleman Jack, Steve O’Donnell. The heir apparent had to beat one challenger, an Irishman named Peter Maher, to prove his worth. The acknowledged top contender, Fitzsimmons, would have to earn the championship in the ring. Maher knocked out O’Donnell in the first round of their fight in Maspeth, New

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78 “Must Come to El Paso,” El Paso Daily Times, November 15, 1895, p. 3.
York, on November 11, 1895, and immediately wired Stuart to announce his readiness to meet Fitzsimmons. Corbett set out to rehearse his new play, *A Naval Cadet*.  

The effort to match Corbett and Fitzsimmons was a battle between Dan Stuart and the United States. Beginning in 1894, his challenges to the U.S. government, including territories and state and municipal governments provoked armed men and upstanding governors, some of whom otherwise ignored prizefighting. Stuart’s plans forced states with no explicit statutes on the legality of prizefighting to take a stand, with or without the support of their law books or citizens. Stuart stormed his way through the American South to stage his showcase match-up between Corbett and Fitzsimmons. The South responded by spitting out the sour sport of prizefighting. In January 1896, he was back in Texas, the state that had denied him at the eleventh hour just four months before, without Corbett. Even without the marquee strength of Corbett’s name, Stuart and boxing fans were prepared to sacrifice to see a championship fight.  

Peter Maher, the dubious champion, had arrived in America four years before to prove himself to the transatlantic boxing community. The former Guinness brewery employee left Dublin as the Irish champion in October 1891. By March 1892, he was in the ring with Fitzsimmons, then the middleweight champion, in New Orleans, Louisiana, where Fitzsimmons had the better of his challenger. In 1895, they had packed on enough pounds to be heavyweights.  

The articles of agreement announced on December 9, 1895, promised the Police Gazette Championship Belt and ten thousand dollars to the winner of Fitzsimmons vs.

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Maher on February 14, 1896. What remained unclear was where exactly the fight would take place. Somewhere in the vicinity of El Paso, meaning anywhere from three to four hundred miles away, was the only hint Stuart offered. Statesmen in that southwestern region suddenly panicked that their state was next on Dan Stuart’s list. New Mexico was a likely candidate.  

Gov. William Taylor Thornton and the New Mexico Territorial Legislature had considered the evils of prizefighting during the original Corbett-Fitzsimmons crisis. He responded to a petition from the Las Vegas (New Mexico) Minister’s Association to enact a law against prizefighting in the territory with an open letter recounting the life of an 1895 anti-prizefighting bill. He explained that the need for a law existed. Despite a “determined effort” to pass it, the measure failed. Thornton did his best to redirect ire to either the territorial representatives or the general populace. His statement suggested that he was not accountable for the failure of the bill. The imminent threat of the Fitzsimmons-Maher bout successfully prompted in 1896 action that had failed in 1895. One day after Thornton’s reply appeared in print, the New Mexico delegate to the U.S. Congress, Thomas Catron, capitalized on Thornton’s infirmity and introduced an anti-prizefighting bill, the chance for the federal government to stamp the territories with a moral code, in U.S. Congress on February 5, 1896.  

The motivations of New Mexicans in the assault against prizefighting have a different cast than those that manifested in places like Florida and Arkansas. Along with

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81 Bryson, *Down Went McGinty*, 70.
a similar desire to be seen as progressive and civilized by observers outside their state, local politics influenced decision-making. The New Mexico Republican Party had recently split, and the prostatehood faction mobilized to take advantage of the situation. Thomas Catron, a member of the infamous Santa Fe Ring, conspired for statehood so that the federal government could legitimize his underhanded land claims in the territory. A constant argument in Washington, D.C., against New Mexico’s elevation to statehood focused on the “backwardness” of the people. Another element influencing the direction of progressive rhetoric in New Mexico was the public perception that the state’s Hispanic population was plagued by immorality. By taking the lead in introducing moral legislation, supposedly at the request of the citizens, men like Catron could recast New Mexicans as progressive and moral and improve their own chances of gaining permanent control over their land. Federal officials in New Mexico Territory had trumped the state governors by introducing a federal law against prizefighting.\textsuperscript{84}

H.R. 5566, an act to prevent prizefighting in federal territories, was a peculiar piece of legislation. Lawmakers wrote it to stop participants at a specific, one-time only event. Although the rhetoric of the bill did not betray a specific purpose, the delegates’ debates leave no doubt that the bill was meant to close down Dan Stuart’s fistic carnival. Indeed, the language of H.R. 5566 closely resembled the language of the Texas prizefight prohibition. Iowa representative David Henderson explained that Governor Culberson’s law was meant to “catch the same fellows that we were after.”\textsuperscript{85} Catron asked that the

\textsuperscript{83} To Prohibit Prizefighting in the Territories and in the District of Columbia, H.R. 5566, 54th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record 28 (5 February, 1896): H 1339.
\textsuperscript{85} To Prohibit Prizefighting in the Territories and in the District of Columbia, H.R. 5566, 54th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record 28 (5 February, 1896): H 1339
House respond to the bill on the day of its introduction due to the exigency of the situation. The Committee on the Judiciary, rather than the Committee on Territories, was required to hear the bill. The committee did not meet that day; instead, individual members spoke with one another throughout the day and in that manner, the committee immediately issued a positive recommendation. The emergency necessitated that the House of Representatives overlook the rules, and it did. 86

The ensuing discussion was not about the power of congress to decide the parameters of American morality; it was about whether the representatives could do so vigorously enough. The debate over the bill centered on whether the penalty for violating the act, not less than five years in prison or a one-thousand-dollar fine, was too harsh. The response of New York representative Franklin Bartlett reflected the reform zeal that had infiltrated the Congress: “[T]he sentiment of the country is absolutely against this barbarous practice, and if we [Congress] are going to act, then let us do so in such a way as to show our own determination to put a stop to it.” Only two congressmen dissented. Pres. Grover Cleveland signed the bill into law on February 7, 1896. The anti-prizefight bill targeted a specific event, but the law was meant to dissolve a growing slice of popular culture. 87

The uproar over the supposed national plague of prizefighting had finally reached the federal level in the United States. Unlike protracted battles over other reform goals such as a prohibition, Congress struck out against prizefighting swiftly and decisively. President Cleveland signed the new law just two days after Catron introduced it.

86 House, Committee on the Judiciary, 54th Cong., 1st sess., (5 February, 1896), H. rep. 256.
officials in Mexico likewise responded that night with approval for the measure and affirmed their intention to prevent Fitzsimmons and Maher from fighting in a Mexican ring. With Stuart’s move to El Paso and the new law governing prizefighting in U.S. territories, Texas was once again the focal point for both fight fans and reformers.\(^8\)

Without the sponsorship of the Florida Athletic Club, the city of El Paso had to raise ten thousand dollars with subscriptions to get to Stuart to come. At least one subscriber withdrew, believing that the city would not reap a commensurate return. El Paso resident A. K. “Doc” Albers, who had attended several famous boxing matches, countered with an estimated return of five hundred thousand dollars from the well-heeled sports who might spend up to ten days in the city. Regardless of opinion, the impetus for inviting the luminaries of heavyweight boxing was financial reward for the city. Municipal leaders envisioned the prizefight as an economic benefit to their community. Their social activism conflicted with the reform vision of other community members.\(^9\)

The meeting of Maher and Fitzsimmons was supposed to be only one of a series of sporting events to captivate audiences in February 1896. Initially, Stuart juggled logistics for pugilists other than the star heavyweights. With several weight-class belts on the line, the “fistic carnival” that he pitched had the potential to be the unparalleled event that he promised. Other fight cards in the series included 5’ 3 ½” George “Little Chocolate” Dixon vs. Jerry Marshall in a featherweight title fight. Two other black


“Worth Half a Million,” *El Paso Daily Times*, November 22, 1895, p. 3. Incidentally, Albers was one of two people in El Paso and Juarez to whom Fitzsimmons’s camp owed money to when it left town. “They Are Passing Away,” *El Paso Times*, February 25, 1896, p. 3.
fighters, “Barbados” Joe Walcott and Scott “Bright Eyes” Collins would face one another for the welterweight crown. Jim Barry and Johnny Murphy were to contend for the bantamweight title. He scheduled Horace Leeds and Jack Everhardt for the lightweight championship. Although the great carnival had no concrete location, people across the country purchased tickets and made train reservations for El Paso.

The fans had more faith in Stuart to realize his vision than in law enforcement’s ability to stop him. In a reversal of behavior, Stuart stayed several steps ahead of the authorities who had thus far beaten him to the punch. One way to ensure the sanctity of his plans was not to broadcast his scheme, and then give authorities the opportunity to defuse it. Corbett may have quit, but Stuart continued to fight.

After submitting to sheriffs and judges and all manner of condemnation in print, Corbett let others take the heat from the governments and ministers’ unions. On stage, he was just a hero, not a champion and a villain, and made a sound living without resorting to the ring. He signaled that he was ready to move beyond the ring into a different sort of life when he renounced his title. The Naval Cadet was not spell-binding theater, but it was a safe setting in which to profit from his celebrity and boxing skill. As the crackdown on prizefighting in the United States escalated, the business of professional boxing became as dangerous outside the ring as it was inside. Yet fighters such as Fitzsimmons did not shrink. He and the sport still had plenty of fans, like those in Florida, Arkansas, and now Texas, who were as passionate about flouting the law as the men who now created and enforced it. The anti-central government, pro-prizefighting spirit lived on in the West Texas town of El Paso.
Texas had a southern pedigree, but as scholars such as Walter Prescott Webb have noted, it also had some pervasively western characteristics. Geographically and economically, parts of Texas shared more with the western states than with southern ones. For example, the economy of West Texas depended more on the ranch than the farm or cotton field. Military and economic relationships with Mexico also set West Texas apart from the rest of the state in the late nineteenth century. According to author T. R. Fehrenbach, “history has happened to Texans both as Westerners and Southerners.” Historian Randolph B. Scott has argued that Texas was part of the Old West and the New South in the 1890s. Dallas, with its interest in progress and industrialization, belonged to the New South, while places west of the 98th meridian, like El Paso, had closer ties to the mythos of the cattleman’s frontier of the Old West.  

J. Frank Dobie’s histories of Texas emphasize ranching culture and its relation to the West. Although less grand than a military war, the proposed combat between boxers in the established city of Dallas and the young frontier settlement in El Paso was another facet in Texas’s history as both a southern and western state.

As of 1891, prizefighting was legal in Texas. By 1895, the scare caused by the possible fight between Jim Corbett and Bob Fitzsimmons led to an emergency session of the state legislature to outlaw prizefighting, but the decision was not popular in all parts of the state. By pushing through the prohibition against prizefighting, Culberson had helped grow an American system of government that instituted change from above, and

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the Texas Rangers had the duty to keep Fitzsimmons and Maher from breaking the law on the ground. When Fitzsimmons and Maher arrived in El Paso, state authority had every intention of enforcing the law against prizefighting and committed resources to that end. Their success depended on the willingness of American citizens to be policed. The fight between Maher and Fitzsimmons was the latest in a series of fights of the century, but the true struggle matched the resolve of the people of El Paso and the state to see who would claim the power over their lives.
Chapter 3

“The Right Way to Promote Something Is to Prohibit It”\(^1\)

The colossal boxing carnival drove stakes in El Paso in December 1895, weeks before any prizefighter was scheduled to step into the ring. While the promoter and managers dodged arrest, the principals, including Bob Fitzsimmons, participated in permissible athletic diversions. On New Year’s Day 1896, Fitzsimmons, Billy Smith, and some local El Paso footballers competed against the squad from the Albuquerque Indian School in New Mexico. The would-be heavyweight champion/novice right tackle, who enjoyed “throwing Indians head over heels,” helped the El Paso team to a 12–4 victory.\(^2\) On February 12, Fitzsimmons starred at a local bicycle race. A handbill for the event invited “Rangers, ministers, sports, and everybody” to watch him ride three exhibition laps around a 1/3 mile track and promised that public schoolchildren would have a half day off from their studies.\(^3\) The notice targeted the three most important constituencies in town that day. A casual observer might have assumed that Texas’s ban on prizefighting had taken effect, leaving Fitz only alternative sporting activities to showcase his

\(^1\) At least one El Paso local learned a practical lesson from the prizefighters’ descent on the city. He also identified a crucial flaw in the reform agenda: the inability to control the press. Owen Payne White, *Autobiography of a Durable Sinner* (New York: GP Putnam’s Sons, 1942), 61.

\(^2\) “Indian Fitzsimmons at Football,” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, January 2, 1896, p. 4.

\(^3\) “Old Scrap Book Contains Clippings of Events in El Paso Thirty Years Ago,” newscutting, file 5, scrapbook 3, Kohlberg Family Papers, C. L. Sonnischen Collection, University of Texas El Paso Library [hereafter KP, UTEP].
athleticism. These events, however, were merely ancillary escapades before the heavyweight championship fight scheduled for February 14. Armed men from four companies of Texas Rangers and the governor of Chihuahua were not in town to see how fast a pug could pedal.

The parameters of state governance, rather than the morally questionable sport of prizefighting, lay at the heart of the dispute in El Paso. The Progressive reform formula entailed the people and the government working together to change society. Activists in El Paso became statist Progressives when they could find no local support for their cause. The involvement of state and federal government in the reform process by means of regulation boosted the power behind reform movements. Consequently, government also assumed a larger burden for their success. The increasing outlay of political might, capital, and manpower in reform also magnified the risk of failure. Relative distance between the central authority dispensing the law and the willingness of citizens to respect the decisions of their representative government weighed heavily on the outcome of reform. Fitzsimmons-Maher was a high-profile test to the reform system, which also depended on the cooperation of the Mexican government. Texas’s investment in manpower—the Texas Rangers—and the coordination required to monitor Fitzsimmons and Maher confirmed the sincerity of Governor Culberson’s pledge to repel the fighters. The test also revealed that state administration of social reform in an isolated area with limited community support would ultimately be unsustainable without consistent high-priority enforcement.

El Paso boosters banked on the city’s reputation as a Wild West border town nursed at the bosom of debauchery to appeal to the promoter, managers, and fighters who
had tired of other municipalities’ sudden and violent aversion to their brand of degeneracy. The city already had a healthy infrastructure of vice that included saloons, gaming tables, dance halls, and prostitution houses, and only limited desire among the populace to suppress any of it. While these establishments were quite common throughout the United States, they were critical to the economy in El Paso and enhanced its image as western frontier settlement.

Although not technically rural—it had around fifteen thousand inhabitants by the late 1890s—El Paso was isolated from other Texas cities and certainly from the larger United States. Juarez, Mexico, and Las Cruces, New Mexico, were its closest significant neighbors. Mining, smelting, ranching, the railroad, and trade with Mexico were the city’s chief industries, and they attracted Mexicans and Americans, as well as other nationalities, to the area. 4

Descriptions of daily life in El Paso constructed a colorful collage of uncouth behavior. Residents, including the Hispanic and Chinese locals, saw shoot-outs in the streets, bucked the tiger at the faro table in the Gem Building and other gambling halls, and some prostituted themselves—activities associated with the American western frontier. 5 Reverend B. M. G. Williams, rector of St. Clement’s Episcopal Church, described El Paso in the 1890s as a “wide open city” and testified repeatedly that the


town’s economy seemed to revolve around saloons and gambling establishments. Perhaps he was too modest to note the “Utah reservation,” the concentration of whorehouses and cribs on Utah Street. On one occasion, the female proprietor of shooting gallery horsewhipped a local newspaper editor for maligning her reputation in print. The contest suggests that a rowdy element ran the town and propriety was wanting.

The polite society that shuffled down the same sidewalks as whip-toting women offered theological explanations for the condition of El Paso. In a sermon, E. A. Shelton diagnosed the rough-and-tumble nature of the town as the result of a “contagion” that “takes strong hold of a person” who was formerly an “earnest Christian worker.” Those who moved to El Paso, he declared, “lapse into complete ‘innocuous disuetude’” concerning their Christianity, drifting into the “free and easy western life.” One could apparently not be a westerner and a good Christian at the same time. The violence and “free and easy” ways of the people did not strip every inhabitant of his religious conviction or determination to rescue those who had faltered. Church leaders in El Paso had identified the problems impeding the progress of civilization. To overcome them, men like Shelton had to conquer both the debased public and the civic leadership.

Local government was as responsible for the “wide open” society as the general citizenry. Although women and men among the public clamored for the closure of

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Cloth: The Saga of the Frontier Gamblers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

6 B. M. G. Williams, interview with Wilma Cleveland, August 30, 1968, OHC, UTEP.
7 White, Durable Sinner, 49.
8 “A Woman after An Editor,” El Paso Times, January 29, 1896, p. 3
saloons and dance halls as early as 1889, such establishments were too critical to economic prosperity to turn off their lights. Owen Payne White, who lived in El Paso in the 1890s, blamed the failure of reform on civic leaders who were unable to wean themselves from the gushing economic tap of vice. A study of failed attempts to stamp out prostitution in El Paso revealed that a tradition of sanctioned vice in the city, the dependence on revenue from institutions like saloons and brothels, and the political support from owners of such establishments effectively blocked reform for decades. The directors of the reform movement, Richard F. Burges for example, began to win leadership positions in the municipal government after the turn of the century. Change soon followed. In El Paso, protracted reform required the government and the people to act in concert.\(^{10}\)

The arrival of the boxers at the end of 1895 and beginning of 1896 stoked the ongoing struggle between citizens intent on shedding the town’s western frontier image and those who saw no profit in progress. The institutions that made El Paso so attractive to Stuart were the same ones that reform-minded citizens decried. The progressive elements could not strangle the deeply entrenched roots of immorality in their city, but they resolutely combated the new nuisance of high-stakes prizefighting that began creeping in. Their peaceable strategies made a greater impact on distant authorities than on their neighbors.

The El Paso Ministers’ Union, composed of representatives from several sects, led the crusade. Their membership included Leander R. Millican, First Baptist Church;

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Charles J. Oxely, Trinity Methodist Church; E. R. Hallam, First Christian Church; Adolph Hoffman, First Methodist Church; and A. M. Elliot. The extant sources on the challenge to Dan Stuart’s fistic carnival all seem to emanate from organizations that represented white interests. This fact reaffirms that even in a place with a mixed population like El Paso, this type of social reform was mainly a white Protestant endeavor.\footnote{Miletich, \textit{Dan Stuart’s Fistic Carnival}, 133.}

For the union, the true adversary was not the interlopers but the El Paso leadership who welcomed and encouraged sin. The union distributed its own resolutions identifying the failures of the city council to address immorality and its disregard for the law: Sunday laws were violated with impunity; gambling went on night and day; rampant prostitution was lightly policed—the fines levied on this vice by the city seemed to equate to licensing rather than elimination; and the loud dance halls echoed the unchecked offenses against public virtue. The church ministers claimed that they represented the will the people better than government, which routinely failed to meet their needs and enforce their moral standards. The invasion of the fighters and their fans was just one more item added to the churchmen’s list of municipal-government lapses.\footnote{“About the Fight,” \textit{El Paso Times}, February 19, 1896, p. 3.}

The influence of the church did not stop at the state line or international boundary. The church component of El Paso, concerned that Stuart might export prizefighting to New Mexico Territory, appealed to the federal government for help. Reverend Millican wrote to the U.S. attorney general with information, including a map of where the fight might take place just over the New Mexico border. The reverend suggested that “this class of people,” meaning the sports, could not be trusted and that New Mexico’s law
officers would be unlikely to hinder Stuart’s plans. He finally requested that Atty. Gen. Judson Harmon urge New Mexico territorial governor William Thornton to “protect us” and that U.S. Army officers be available to arrest the lot. The ministers had at least some faith that national leadership could rightfully intercede in a local problem of little importance in comparison to crises such as the Pullman Strike in 1894, to which federal troops did respond.13

The church leaders in El Paso believed in their ability to effect change with the assistance of government, and most government agencies that they contacted seem to have rewarded their faith. The El Paso Ministers’ Union reported to Austin that gamblers and toughs beleaguered them, and Governor Culberson sent the Rangers. A foreign leader, Chihuahua governor Miguel Ahumada, received an audience with them to address their fears. They accorded themselves the standing of national statesmen and were apparently granted diplomatic respect. New Mexico governor Thornton responded to their inquiries and warnings, although his answers did not promise action. These officials were not responding only to the entreaties of one cohort but these communications heightened their awareness and concern for the prizefight situation.

In this example of anti-prizefighting activism, the size of the protesting group and their distance from the seats of government hardly diminished the force of their enterprise. Their ability to move freely through different jurisdictions and at least to get the attention of powerful politicians demonstrates that the range of their reform projects

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extended far beyond their own communities. Their failure to energize dissent in El Paso also directed them to seek external aid.\textsuperscript{14}

The collective power of their protest is difficult to measure. The state officials sympathized with them but their local leaders did not. Even the state senator from their district, John M. Dean, had voted against the bill prohibiting prizefighting in Texas. Governor Culberson had already dedicated state law enforcement to preventing the prizefight but the ministers still pressed their offensive. They filled the moral role that they believed their reticent El Paso officials would not. When Stuart cancelled his carnival, the El Paso Ministers’ Union took the credit, but they had help from many corners.

In New Mexico, fear and disgust also seized local church groups, but their pleas to their governor to stop the prizefight had marked differences from those appeals addressed to the Texas governor. Members of the Raton Minister’s Association presented Governor Thornton a petition requesting that he do something to keep the fight out of New Mexico. The justification for their request was based on their fear of being denounced by the rest of the nation. Prizefighting was “condemned by all the best public sentiment in all civilized communities,” and the governor must not allow “such stigma and disgrace” in the territory.\textsuperscript{15} Differentiating the “best” sentiment from the feelings of average citizens who supported or had no opinion about prizefighting was essential to


\textsuperscript{15} Petition to Gov. William Thornton from the Raton Minister’s Association, February 1, 1896, Records of the Territorial Governors of New Mexico, r. 28, ff. 517–519, Center for Southwest Research, Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
activists. Reformers valued only those people from the better social classes who had the “right” view. Although New Mexico had been a territory since 1850, it had yet to win statehood. One obstacle was the belief that the predominately Catholic Hispanic population were not good candidates to be Americans. Aligning with the perceived ideals of the “best public” was important to a greater mission of achieving statehood.¹⁶

The message from the Raton Minister’s Association contained one other notable difference from letters of the El Paso Ministers. Over half of the ninety-one signatures on the Raton petition were women’s. Only men signed the correspondence from El Paso. Possibly to emphasize that women drove this petition and that women’s sensibilities should be observed when morality was at stake, at least twenty-two of the twenty-eight names on the first page of the petition are women’s. The female signatories of the Raton petition were safe within their prescribed gender bounds. They used the church as a conduit to bring reform to their society. The controversy over the boxing match, like other moral reforms, offered women an opportunity to participate in the political process and, as the assigned guardians of national morality, they could expect serious consideration of their opinions.

When they confronted the fight, on the other hand, women in El Paso voiced anxiety over their identities as women rather than expressing fear for society at large. For them, the problems caused by the prizefight lay not only in the realm of sin. Some local women prepared to publicly denounce the events, circulating a petition about Dan Stuart’s rumored decision to allow women to purchase tickets and attend the bout for the heavyweight championship of the world. These El Paso activists worried that even the

¹⁶ For sources on New Mexico Statehood, see Robert W. Larson, New Mexico’s Quest for Statehood, 1846–1912 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968).
implication of a local woman doing such a thing sullied their reputation as upstanding and refined women. The character of every “true woman” was also at stake in the prizefight drama, and all women cherished their standing, which helped define them in society.  

Arising much earlier in the nineteenth century, the ideal true woman recalled a high standard for gender behavior, which emphasized piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Whether they acted for themselves or society, their motivations were founded in the white cultural definitions of womanhood. 

The difference between the visible demonstration by women in Raton and the less perceptible protests of women in El Paso might be based in a regional distinction between notions of womanhood. Historian Judith McArthur has shown that white immigrants to Texas from southern states transported their regional gender identities. Ideals of southern womanhood placed narrow constraints on public life for women, and did not encourage activism. In Texas, the southern evangelical tradition dictated that women’s groups operate as auxiliaries to men’s organizations, and church-based moral reform groups were rare. Women’s clubs in Texas, such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), did not organize until the 1890s, and they tended to be conservative, working for local causes rather than broad progressive moral reform. The first secular women’s club in El Paso, the Current Topics Club, promoted reading and helped to establish a library. El Paso formed a chapter of the WCTU in early 1896, but it appeared not to take position on the upcoming fights. Raton was a comparatively new settlement, stimulated by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, that had less direct ties to southern

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culture than did El Paso. In either case, the final decision belonged to men, many of whom did all they could to get Fitzsimmons and Maher in the ring somewhere near the U.S.-Mexico border.\(^{19}\)

The concerns of the church-based reform element, including church leaders and male and female followers, were met with speedy, sincere responses. These local citizens were eager to share the responsibility for reform with state and national governments. Methods employed by the ministers’ union included sending letters to statesmen, holding meetings, writing letters to newspapers, distributing resolutions and petitions, and organizing spies.\(^ {20}\) They targeted their fellow citizens and statesmen at the highest levels of government. Their spies tailed the fighters, promoters, and newsmen, gathering information that the ministers passed to agencies that they believed could help. According to Owen White, ministers were also keen to make money from their problem by providing room and board to the fight tourists. Despite the border frontier status of El Paso and its distance from the centers of “civilization” in the East, the types of reform favored by activists in this period and the methods used to achieve it had reached the


outposts of U.S. settlement. Their coordinated attack was fairly sophisticated, but so was their opposition, namely Stuart.\textsuperscript{21}

Other than its commitment to vice, El Paso’s outstanding selling point was its close proximity to Mexico. Stuart effectively played two hands at once by having the option of taking his event over the border to Mexico if the Texas government should follow through on enforcing its prizefighting prohibition. Texas and the United States clearly had laws preventing prizefighting but Mexico, specifically Juarez, did not. Stuart did not expect the Mexican government to place any obstacles in his path but his actions instead dragged Mexican officials into the American reform fray.

The indefinite location of the fights, which included the possibility of Mexican territory, was the most formidable challenge to stopping the carnival, and it was Stuart’s greatest advantage against authorities in two nations. Not even the pugilists knew on what soil they would meet in the ring. Stuart expected the press to disseminate false clues, but he also took matters into his own hands. The foxy promoter had contacted Governor Culberson directly about the possibility of the fighters breaking the law by training in Texas for a contest elsewhere, an oblique reference to Mexico. Stuart was obsequious, asking Culberson to advise him if his legal counsel had misinterpreted the law and promising the immediate removal of his people if they had. To soothe the governor, Stuart reported that the headquarters for his operations were in Juarez, not El Paso.\textsuperscript{22}

The U.S.-Mexico border has carried a number of social, cultural, and political meanings throughout its history that were in constant debate. For the purposes of Dan Stuart, the border had one specific and immediate purpose: It demarcated the place where

\textsuperscript{21} White, \textit{Durable Sinner}, 60.
prizefighting might be legal from a place where it definitely was not. In fact, Stuart had traveled to Juarez within two weeks of the cancelled Corbett-Fitzsimmons contest in fall 1895, and hearsay insisted that he planned to ink a five-year deal involving multiple sports there, making Juarez an important sporting capital for both republics. Juarez possessed conditions other than the presumed legality of prizefighting to recommend it. A bullring with seating already stood, and workers could easily construct a boxing ring at the facility. The Plaza del Toros was conveniently located near the international streetcar depot; fans gathered in El Paso could easily navigate the short jaunt to Juarez. The inhabitants of the two cities were familiar with the crossing and needed no extra incentive to move back and forth.23

The connected histories of El Paso and Juarez did not peg them to the same historical trajectory. Although Juarez shared the international boundary with El Paso, it was not the frontier town that El Paso represented in the 1890s. Spanish expeditionaries had named The Pass of the North in 1581. In 1848, the Rio Grande became a border between the United States and Mexico at El Paso as result of the U.S.-Mexico War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The Mexican city El Paso del Norte was a vital part of the nation and was one home of Benito Juárez’s government-in-exile during the battle against the Maximilian government and the French. The city was renamed in his honor in 1888. El Paso became an American outpost when Fort Bliss opened in 1849, and the town began to expand with the arrival of the railroad in 1881. People on both sides of the boundary formed a larger community, sharing trade and culture. Respective national

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22 Dan A. Stuart to C. A. Culberson, January 27, 1895, box 301-55, folder 34, January 15–31, 1895, Correspondence, CAC, TSLA.
politics and military concerns in the latter half of the nineteenth century set the two communities politically apart. Juarez had earned a reputation as a vibrant border city while El Paso owned the trappings of a rough-hewn town on the American western frontier. Stuart’s shell game depended on the wild reputation of one and the lack of prizefighting regulation in the other.

In the eyes of Americans, the border between Mexico and the United States that divided Ciudad Juarez from El Paso also cleaved cultures. The American press emphasized separateness of the two cities. The popularity of the Fitzsimmons-Maher prizefight ensured that American readers would learn the vagaries of the border region as they kept tabs on how many miles a day Fitzsimmons rode his bike, and, given the rumors about his physical condition, how little Maher rode his own. Newspaper reporters from all over the country descended upon the border, wiring stories and updates about the movements of the boxing extravaganza. During their stay, they took in the sights of Juarez and described a culture both familiar and alien. The differences presented by the media were often odds with those professed by residents in the area, suggesting that national perceptions of the U.S.-Mexico border rested less on local knowledge than on established beliefs about race and nationality.

In the country across the border, people lived with different laws and cultural expectations, or so Americans believed. A report appearing in the English-language


*Mexican Herald* noted that Mexico had no law against prizefighting and supposed that the “Mexican mind does not fully grasp the idea of a premeditated and prearranged fight upon a scientific basis.” Middle- and upper-class Americans had recently embraced “scientific” boxing, distinguishing themselves from the working class who watched brutes brawl for money. The *Herald* went on to say that Mexicans fought impulsively, with “a machete or six-shooter” taking the place of a fist inside a glove.25 One American expressed a different view when he opined that officials in Mexico could enforce their own laws without Americans “posing as selfconstituted censors of the morals of the world.”26 The protesters in El Paso beseeching the Mexican government to block the boxers would have to assume that Mexicans were civilized enough to understand that prizefighting was morally wrong. For their part, Mexican officials worried that Juarez was developed enough to attract men like Stuart who were intent on crowning a heavyweight champion.27

The distinctions between the class and culture of the two countries were of course most acute when they were sensationalized. The headline “Juarez Always Asleep” opened *San Francisco Examiner* reporter Annie Laurie’s piece about her visit to the city while she bided time before the big fight. She had already gleaned all she could about boxing from Bat Masterson and fight aficionado Charles “Parson” Davies, so she sought a new subject for her readers. Known as one of the “Sob Sisters,” female journalists who wrote crusading exposés and emotional human-interest stories around the turn of the

25 “Fitzsimmons-Maher Fight,” *Mexican Herald* (Mexico City), 10 February 1896, p. 8
century, Laurie covered events for the Hearst newspaper syndicate.\(^\text{28}\) Her image of Juarez included sensory tidbits—people were always cooking onions—descriptions of local prisoners, beggars, the deformed, and the clock tower with the hands painted on the brick. She overlooked anything modern or even anything ordinary that American readers might recognize positively, with the possible exception of the onions. She gratefully returned to the place where “the hands of the clock go round and people do their sleeping at night.”\(^\text{29}\) Laurie may have declared El Paso civilization, but the city north of the border hardly fared better in her columns. Texans wrote off her criticisms as “ridiculous contortions of the facts.”\(^\text{30}\) Her purpose in El Paso was to provide human details to her readers. She did not attend the actual fight.

Famed sportswriter Bill Naughton had a perspective contrary on Juarez from that of his sister reporter at the *San Francisco Examiner*, but his purpose, and audience, also differed from hers. Naughton, playing a guessing game favored by sports everywhere, reasoned that the boxing match would transpire in the Juarez bullring. He observed that although El Paso and Juarez were close together and shared streetcar lines, Juarez was a bustling town in the time that El Paso was just a village. Juarez had grown from a “city of adobes” to one whose business corridor was “lined with brick buildings and modern architecture.”\(^\text{31}\) Brick construction signified progress. From his perspective, which

\(^{28}\) “Annie Laurie” was the pen name of Winifred Black Bonfils and a popular song in the mid-nineteenth century. For more information about her and other Sob Sisters, see Patricia Schoffer, “A Glorious Adventure,” *American History Illustrated*, February 1981, 28–35; and Phyllis Leslie Abramson, *Sob Sister Journalism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1990).


\(^{30}\) *El Paso Times*, February 27, 1896, p. 3.

\(^{31}\) W. W. Naughton, “In the Juarez Bull Ring,” *San Francisco Examiner*, January 18, 1896, p. 5.
undoubtedly considered the Texas prohibition against prizefighting, Juarez was the right location for an event with international prestige. Regardless of the image presented by the press, Americans who followed human-interest stories and front-page sports gained information about the border in the weeks preceding the fight.

The portrayal of Juarez to which national readers were not privy more closely supported Naughton’s account than Laurie’s. The inhabitants of El Paso saw themselves as people on the fringe of society. Local Texans painted El Paso as the rough border town and admired Juarez. Reverend Williams, who arrived on the border in 1894, reported that Juarez was the center of society functions. Several other residents remembered that Texans were constantly smuggling goods such as cigars and silk into El Paso from Juarez. Even “respectable women” snuck over “nice things” that they could not obtain in El Paso. The smuggling business and the Free Trade Zone in Mexico that created it nettled American merchants who could not compete. El Pasoans also recalled Juarez in the 1890s as a “big flourishing city.” Juarez actually had a population of 6,917 in 1895, a drop from 16,469 in 1887. El Paso claimed 15,568 people in 1896. Although El Paso was the larger of the two cities, Juarez had the more cosmopolitan reputation of the two in the view of the local Americans.

From a strategic standpoint, Juarez seemed the logical choice. Fitzsimmons even trained in the city. Americans, however, did not have all the power in this situation. The

32 B. M. G. Williams, interview with Wilma Cleveland, August 30, 1968, OHC, UTEP.
33 Mrs. Hugh Williams, interview with Leon C. Metz and Robin Fuller, June 3, 1968, OHC, UTEP.
success of the enterprise hinged on the Mexican response to conspicuous, top-level professional prizefighting.

Dan Stuart’s determination to promote prizefighting risked the political and popular images of both the United States and Mexico. The reactions of government leadership to Stuart’s project indicate their relative anxiety about the danger posed by prizefighting. American officials wired worried missives to each other, occasionally several times a day. The Mexican governments treated the apparent farce as diplomatically as they could, offering statements that varied from casual to confident. The social reform movement may have crossed the Atlantic Ocean from England to the United States, but the border between cultures in North America was almost too formidable an obstacle for the anti-prizefighting contingent. That group achieved its desires but not entirely for the reasons they hoped. The final outcome of events scarcely damaged either the United States or Mexico.

Mexicans developed an interest in boxing around the turn of the century. Historian William H. Beezley has identified the 1890s as the decade when Mexican gentleman looked to prizefighting as a leisure spectator sport, and he argues that the tendency was based mostly in the influence of foreigners, the desire of the Mexican elite to imitate them, and the search for excitement in a world that finally had some stability. In one noteworthy event, Billy Smith knocked out Billy Clarke in four rounds in front of a largely Anglo crowd in Pachuca on November 24, 1895. Mexican officials later negotiated the world of prizefighting when American champion Jack Johnson fled the United States and eventually tried to promote black settlement in Mexico.35

35 William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes in Porfirián Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 16, 33, 34; and Gerald Horne, *Black and
The case of the Fitzsimmons-Maher boxing match, particularly the focus on Juarez, Mexico, and El Paso, affords the opportunity to examine how Mexico and the United States negotiated foreign relations in this border region outside the context of revolution or violence against person or property. The popularity of the fight in the American press created a situation that the Mexican and American governments had to address, although the issue was initially much more serious to American authorities than to Mexican officials.

The border between the United States and Mexico in the area of El Paso already had a spectacular, sometimes infamous, diplomatic history dating back to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. American filibusters and official actions, such as the order to Gen. Edward Ord to pursue bandits across the border into Mexico, challenged Mexican authority over the border. In the 1870s, both countries officially examined the depredations suffered by their border citizens at the hands of malefactors from the other country, a constant problem throughout the Porfiriato. Both sides claimed marauding by the other. The United States recognized and legitimized the government of Porfirio Díaz in 1878. His policies helped establish a relative calm on the border starting in the 1880s.36

Díaz used the international border as a state-making tool by attempting to assert control over it in his dealings with the United States. He had to tread carefully with the United States, whose businessmen infused Mexico with capital for projects like railroads, while he maintained the sovereignty of Mexico. President Díaz’s response to the question

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36 For a brief overview of the border in the American period until the Mexican Revolution, see Manuel Ceballos-Ramírez and Oscar J. Martínez, “Conflict and Accommodation on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1876–1911,” in Myth, Misdeeds, and

At the end of January 1895, Díaz, when questioned by the American press, stated that the Mexican federal government had no authority over the boxing match. The decision to allow the contest belonged to the state. Adolph Hoffman, the El Paso reverend who spearheaded efforts to stop the bout from occurring on either side of the border, recalled that Díaz proclaimed, “What was not good enough for the United States was not good enough for Mexico.”\footnote{Everett Tipton, “State Troops Prevent Big Prize Fight,” newsclipping, file 4, scrapbook 4, KP, UTEP.} The president also said that despite the fact that no Mexican law actually prohibited prizefighting, allowing the fight to transpire “directly on the frontier” would be “unfriendly” to the United States. Díaz buried his private opinion under his tactful concern for U.S. policy, and he continued to aver that Chihuahua officials, chiefly Governor Ahumada, were responsible for the matter.\footnote{“Díaz Cannot Interfere,” San Francisco Examiner, February 1, 1896, p. 2; “President Díaz’s Views,” Mexican Herald (Mexico City), February 14, 1896, p. 8; and “Cannot Fight in Mexico,” San Francisco Examiner, p. 2.}

Ahumada played the role of neighbor less convincingly, although with no less integrity, than Díaz. The governor arrived in Juarez on February 11 in the company of
Joaquin Cortezar. They left Mexico City with a pledge to stop the fight from occurring on Mexican soil.\textsuperscript{41} Ahumada positioned himself alongside Díaz. With the United States opposed to the fight, he was committed to doing all he could to prevent it. His additional comments revealed far more than Díaz’s had. Ahumada did not want Mexico “to become the dumping ground of a class that was deemed objectionable in other countries.”\textsuperscript{42} One of the insults hurled at fighters by American middle-class reformers was that they were entertainment for the working class, not genteel society.\textsuperscript{43} While Texas governor Culberson called on the Rangers to track every move of the potential outlaws, Ahumada “was not the least excited” about the rumors placing the fight in the Juarez bullring. He was strident but unconcerned.\textsuperscript{44}

Although Ahumada had earlier sent a subordinate in his stead to see Fitzsimmons train, the governor later called on him at his training quarters in Juarez. After complimenting Fitz’s agility, Ahumada reminded him that he should not try to win the championship in Mexico. The Mexican governor admitted that he had no problem with prizefighting and actually wanted to see the fight—if the venue was someplace legal. His visit to admire Fitzsimmons may have been more congenial than cautionary. Rumors variously suggested that Ahumada was either “willing to wink at the whole affair” or

\textsuperscript{41} “No Fight on Mexican Soil,” \textit{Mexican Herald} (Mexico City), February 5, 1896, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{42} W. W. Naughton, “Troops Guarding the Rio Grande,” \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, February 12, 1896, p. 1; and W. W. Naughton, “To Shoot Fighters if They Resist,” \textit{San Francisco Examiner, February 13, 1897}, p. 1
\textsuperscript{43} For more information on the issue of class and prizefighting, see Elliot J. Gorn, \textit{The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prizefighting in America} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
\textsuperscript{44} “Nearing a Climax,” \textit{El Paso Times}, February 12, 1896, p. 3.
prepared give orders to shoot on site. The reality seemed to favor the former gossip rather than the latter.\textsuperscript{45}

Despite his presumed insouciance, Governor Ahumada took a more hands-on approach to policing than his American counterpart in Austin. Like Culberson, he made stern statements to the press, but he was also physically present among the fuss on the border. He visited El Paso on the afternoon of the thirteenth, where the famous former champion John L. Sullivan played bartender and served him. He later checked up on Fitzsimmons at his little adobe in Juarez. Ahumada’s presence gave substance to his (or Díaz’s) opposition.\textsuperscript{46}

Although he continually deferred to Governor Ahumada, President Díaz monitored the situation closely. He eventually directed federal troops to the area with the intent to thwart the prizefighters, but the border was long, remote, and sparsely populated. Even so, he could not risk failure by letting the officials in Chihuahua solely manage the trouble. With the matter still unresolved, Ahumada left the border for the state capital, Chihuahua. Without him, the immediate strength behind Mexico’s position weakened. Culberson still had the Rangers to apply pressure to the problem.\textsuperscript{47}

The Mexican response to the proposed contest vacillated from nonchalance to ardent agreement with the American government and angry El Pasoans, but the reaction

\textsuperscript{46} W. W. Naughton, “Will Not Fight until Next Week,” \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, February 14, 1896, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{47} Everett Tipton, “State Troops Prevent Big Prize Fight,” newsclipping, file 4, scrapbook 4, KP, UTEP; “Lawful Precaution against the Fights,” \textit{Mexican Herald} (Mexico City), February 11, 1896, p. 1; W. W. Naughton, “Will Not Fight until Next Week,” \textit{San
after the match suggests that the Mexicans took greater offense to prizefighting than the Americans. Matias Romero, the Mexican minister to Washington, D.C., had worked with U.S. Secretary of State Richard Olney on the issue of jurisdiction and affirmed Mexico’s intent to stop the fight, regardless of the lack of a clear Mexican statute against it. In early March 1896, Romero informed governor Culberson that he wanted to charge Maher and Fitzsimmons with a crime. Romero had championed good relations with the United States during his long diplomatic career, and the legal action symbolized his dedication to that course. Officials in the Department of Foreign Relations determined that the fighters had at most violated a Mexican police regulation, a non-extraditable offense. Culberson responded to Olney’s inquiry about the situation that prizefighting was not a felony in Mexico and that people in Texas could not be charged for entering into an agreement to do something that was legal outside Texas. The Mexican government dismissed the case in April. After the fight, Americans turned their attention to other problems, such as when and where the next fight for the championship would be, while Mexican authority pursued men who were criminals only under American law.48

The venture proved a foreign relations victory for the Republic of Mexico. Mexico stood shoulder-to-shoulder with its northern neighbor, whether it legally needed to or not. Although their affection grew from a different perspective, the sports also held

Mexico in high esteem, granting it three cheers when they left the border region. The ministers felt satisfied that they had won the cooperation of a foreign government, although they were small cogs in a large and complex diplomatic machine. The Mexican Revolution soon complicated affairs on the border far beyond the powers of men like Stuart, Culberson, Hoffman, and Ahumada.49

Federal and state government in Mexico shaped the outcome of the challenge between the willful Dan Stuart and the laws of Texas State, acting as a third party wavering amid pleas from north of the border and its own legal and cultural predilections. Reform-minded Americans at the turn of the century expected state and national governments to attack offensive practices like prizefighting, and in this example, they expected the same of neighboring nations. The reality of policing a section of the border distant from large population centers checked both nations’ commitment to Progressive-era moral standards. The question of national jurisdiction over the Rio Grande border and a precedent of trouble with it also posed a distinct challenge to law enforcement.

The swiftness with which the matter moved from local to state to national authorities and the dialog that quickly developed between the officials at each level demonstrated the seriousness of the problem at the time. By the first of February, Governor Thornton and Attorney General Harmon were exchanging missives about the possibility of federal troops from Fort Bliss coming to the aid of New Mexico, which could not bring out the militia. On the third, Harmon queried Secretary of War Daniel Scott Lamont about the possibility of deploying federal troops. Harmon argued that

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Legend of Texas Ranger Captain Bill McDonald (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2009), 338 n. 49.
Culberson had saved Texas’s reputation. He and Secretary of the Interior Michael Hoke Smith had warned off the fighters from invading Indian Territory, and as such, New Mexico should be safe from disgrace. The Department of War responded that no known law could authorize troops to prevent a prizefight, but if any such provision existed the president should be immediately notified for only he had the power to send out the troops for a civil situation. That request was not the first the attorney general had received from a state governor asking for federal marshals to stop a prizefight. Just four months earlier, Minnesota officials asked for help in preventing a meeting on the Mississippi River. They requested assistance one day before the event instead of weeks before. Eventually, the attorney general granted U.S. Marshal Edward L. Hall the funds to employ extra deputies to prevent the fighters from scandalizing New Mexico. The territorial, state, and national government working together practically marooned Stuart.

The boon of the unknown location became a bane as February 1896 progressed. Stuart refused to announce a site for an event that was only days away. He had to cancel the four contests for titles in the lighter weight classes. The other events were for show; the heavyweights had to fight, regardless of difficulty. The pressure on him and his men increased. The Rangers shadowed each principal and anyone who might abet them. News from Mexico advocating Governor Ahumada’s willingness to prevent the fights eroded

50 William. T. Thornton to Judson Harmon, February 1, 1896, number 2100, file 14.289, Letters Received, General Records of the Department of Justice, 1849–1989, RG 60, National Archives; Judson Harmon to Secretary of War [Michael Hoke Smith], February 3, 1896; Joseph B. Doe to Judson Harmon, February 4, 1896, Number 2139, File 14.289, ibid; E. C. Stringer to Attorney General, October 12, 1895, Number 14786, File 14.289, ibid; and Larry D. Ball, The United States Marshals of New Mexico and
the prospect of using the Juarez bullring. Providentially, or perhaps deliberately, the headlines in the February 14 editions of newspapers across the nation announced that Peter Maher had developed a severe case of ophthalmia caused by alkali or adobe dust in the air in Las Cruces, where he trained. He could not fight on the fourteenth. Everyone, even Fitzsimmons’s pet lion, had to wait. Stuart gained a reprieve but the noose was still looped around his neck.

Other than the secret site, the great crisis of the week was whether Maher actually suffered any sort of malady of his eyes. In public, Fitzsimmons announced that the delay was a ruse grown from Maher’s fear and the general knowledge that his overall physical condition was much inferior to his own. He finished his harangue in front of a gathering of the fighters, promoters, and observers by declaring that this fight was off and he was ready to fight any man, including Corbett. He then glided away on a bicycle.\footnote{W. W. Naughton, “Agree to Fight It Out Friday,” \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, February 20, 1896, p. 1.}

Maher’s swollen eyes meant that the spectators had to find a distraction. As the press made gunplay seem all but certain over the possibility of two men hitting each other with five-ounce gloves, people on both sides of the border took the opportunity to take in the spectacle of the Juarez bullring. With little else to do but speculate after the postponement of the fight, reporters, fighters, sports, townspeople, El Paso mayor Robert Campbell, Rangers, police from Arizona, Governor Ahumada, “the ladies of El Paso and their friends,” and “the riff raff of the Mexican frontier” all gathered to watch four bulls

be slain, five horses be killed, and two men have their legs ripped open by bulls.

 Apparently legal violence in Mexico was tolerable and worth paying for.\(^{52}\)

 Diaz had prohibited bullfighting in some places during his first administration, but later relaxed his attitude. Ahumada noted that the Ministers’ Union had failed to tackle “the Mexican national pastime.”\(^{53}\) By ignoring bullfighting in Mexico, reform-minded Americans in El Paso limited their influence to only those problems, such as prizefighting, that threatened American society. They were not yet fully invested in challenging another country’s culture.

 Meanwhile, another band of law enforcement officers and politicians, including Billy the Kid’s killer, Pat Garrett, and New Mexico governor Thornton, had arrived in El Paso. Prominent New Mexico resident Albert Jennings Fountain and his eight-year-old son, Henry, had disappeared near Las Cruces at the beginning of February. Blood and some of their belongings found near White Sands pointed to kidnapping, if not murder. The purpose of the meeting was to determine how the investigation should proceed and who should lead it.\(^{54}\) He was the only elected governor in Texas at the time of the fight. After the boxing match, Thornton attended the farewell dinner for the sporting press hosted by prominent El Paso citizens at the Palace Restaurant, where he gave the “meatiest” speech of the evening, discussing the similar interests of El Paso and New Mexico and a possible dam project. Murder was a serious case of violence and

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lawlessness yet the enthusiasm for the prizefight remained undiminished among the general populace.\textsuperscript{55}

The fear of the evil prizefighters stirred Governor Hughes of Arizona to be as willing to prevent sanctioned violence as his southwestern colleagues had been. Although both fighters trained in the vicinity of El Paso and only a few days remained before the advertised date of the heavyweight bout, Hughes had informed the federal department of the interior that a force of marshals would man the border to prevent the men from entering Arizona. No statesman was passing up the opportunity to prove his credentials as a reformer.\textsuperscript{56}

Although boxers and gamblers laid siege to Texas, and Mexican national forces amassed on Texas’s southern border, Governor Culberson left Lt. Gov. George T. Jester to manage affairs in February 1896. The governor needed to attend to other duties in Washington, D.C. But he did have concerns, evidenced by a stack of telegram correspondence with Adj. Gen. W. H. Mabry, who directed the Texas Rangers and Jester about the upcoming prizefight billed for the heavyweight championship.\textsuperscript{57} Given that he led the charge against prizefighting in Texas in July 1895, Culberson’s absence conveyed his confidence in the Texas Rangers to capably extend his authority to the U.S.-Mexico border. The close proximity of Mexico to the fight headquarters in El Paso and the state prohibition against prizefighting matched the Rangers and the fighters in a cat-and-mouse race that darted along the isolated desert boundary between Mexico and the United States.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[55]“Adios, Senors,” \textit{El Paso Times}, February 23, 1896, p. 3.
\item[56]“Nearing a Climax,” \textit{El Paso Times}, February 12, 1896, p. 3.
\item[57]The telegraphic missives between the Culberson, Mabry, and Jester are in the variously in the files and records of the Governor of Texas and the Adjutant General at the Texas State Library and Archives in Austin.
\end{footnotes}
States. With both the Rangers and Dan Stuart equally committed to their objectives, a climax ending several arrests seemed likely.\footnote{Scholarship on the Texas Rangers allots anywhere from a few paragraphs to an entire chapter about the Rangers’ activities concerning Fitzsimmons-Maher. The event was much more important in the history of the Rangers than it was to the chronology of boxing or trouble with Mexico. For example, see Weiss, \textit{Yours to Command}; Robert M. Utley, \textit{Lonestar Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Mike Cox, \textit{The Texas Rangers: Wearing the Cinco Peso, 1821–1900} (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2008); and Walter Prescott Webb, \textit{The Texas Rangers: A Century of Frontier Defense}, foreword by Lyndon B. Johnson, 2d ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).
\footnote{C. A. Culberson to W. H. Mabry, February 12, 1896, folder 8, February 1–15, box 401-438, General Correspondence, Records of the Adjutant General, Texas State Library and Archives, Austin [hereafter AG, TSLA].}  

An issue of state compelled Culberson to leave Texas the day before the proposed fight. The sudden death of Texas congressional representative William Henry Crain in Washington, D.C., on the February 10th drew Culberson east for the funeral. His message to Mabry on the matter of the prizefight expressed his confidence: “I rely on you to prevent fight on any territory claimed by Texas regardless of consequences.”\footnote{C. A. Culberson to W. H. Mabry, February 12, 1896, folder 8, February 1–15, box 401-438, General Correspondence, Records of the Adjutant General, Texas State Library and Archives, Austin [hereafter AG, TSLA].} Any land outside Texas was not a concern. The sport may have been abominable, but the sanctity of state lines was more important than the danger it posed.

The force of Rangers dispatched to foil the prizefight achieved their goal of prevention through intimidation and discretion. Their first objective was to ascertain what exactly their duty entailed. They received assurances that training was okay, and intent was not illegal. To keep a lid on the trouble, they arrested men who ran illegal bunco games and other rascals who had drifted into town, and kept a threatening watch on the principals. The mission also required surveillance to learn the secret of the location, and to that end, some of the Rangers had to maintain a low profile.
Most of all, the assignment required a lot of men. The Rangers already had
Company D, commanded by John R. Hughes, stationed near El Paso. That command
started its clandestine surveillance by the February 6. Bill McDonald’s Company B also
had two Rangers on the case. Adjutant General Mabry, Rogers, and John A. Brooks, the
commanders of companies E and F, respectively, were on the ground in El Paso by
February 9. The band totaled about thirty.\(^{60}\)

Not all El Pasoans were as grateful for the state’s intense focus on the
prizefighters as the ministers. The El Paso city council publicly took exception to the
Rangers who roamed the city and to the governor who sent them. Alderman Edwin C.
Roberts introduced a resolution that faulted Culberson for deploying men who violated
the personal liberties of its citizens and accused him of exploiting the situation to “gain
cheap notoriety.”\(^{61}\) The resolution passed, with several in favor referring to the
governor’s humiliation of El Paso and its elected sheriff. Other members carefully noted
that the Rangers were only following orders, and that indignation should be directed at
the governor. Roberts continued his crusade in the street, speaking on a corner about the
governor’s near imposition of martial law on El Paso.\(^{62}\)

The enmity toward Culberson and the Rangers had a recent origin. In 1895, civic
leaders had pleaded with Culberson to send the Rangers to El Paso to combat the
widespread violation of anti-gambling laws and the associated crime but the reception of
the Rangers was no better then. El Pasoans resented the help that they pleaded for. In the
case of the prizefight, the governor simply imposed the Rangers on El Paso without

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\(^{60}\) Weiss, *Yours to Command*, 108, 109, 111.

\(^{61}\) “Scoring the Guv,” *El Paso Times*, February 14, 1896, p. 3

request from city officials. The deployment seemed like a violation of local control and generated sympathy for the fighters.⁶³

The fighters and some citizens faced a common enemy in the Rangers. The night of the February 13, Fitz, Rose, and her mother came over from Juarez to see *The Wicklow Postman*, which co-starred John L. Sullivan and Paddy Ryan, at the Myar opera house. At the theater, Rangers informed Fitz that he would be under surveillance while he was in Texas, an announcement that discomforted the seasoned boxer considerably. The room where Maher rested was also put under surveillance. Doc Albers, who provided the space, protested to El Paso sheriff W. J. Simmons that such treatment amounted to harassment. Mabry later defended his force and attacked the character of Albers, noting that he kept company with the “keeper of a ‘red light’ joint” and bonded jailed bunco men. Mabry’s assault on Albers’s character revolved around Alber’s supposed immorality. The *El Paso Times* took the position that General Mabry and the Rangers were not heroes, further inflaming local irritation with them. Both sides in the affair were clearly displeased with the other.⁶⁴

The newsmen brought their perspectives to bear on events. An Associated Press correspondent, H. L. Beach, reported to the nation that the crowd in the city was the toughest he had ever seen. The local press responded that the AP man assumed one of the Rangers patrolling the city was a “tough” because he carried a gun. Unlike some out-of-town guests, the locals were not awed by the Rangers, just annoyed.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ “Mabry Still Talking,” *El Paso Times*, March 1, 1896, p. 3
The concentrated force of Rangers raised alarm among local citizens. The constant surveillance compromised their privacy. Prominent businessman had raised the money to lure Stuart to El Paso but the Rangers jeopardized their investment. Other people took offense at the ominous display of state power. The reality of localized state intervention to enforce social reform led to a rejection of that power.

The frequent updates that Lt. Governor Jester and Adjutant General Mabry wired to the traveling Culberson expressed the successes of the detectives attempting to outwit Stuart. On February 19, an unsigned telegram, possibly from Mabry, notified the governor that a spot in Mexico opposite Langtry, Texas, was the likely site for the fight. The closest Mexican troops needed a two-day march to reach the little railroad stop that was about four hundred miles from El Paso. Aware of the difficult circumstance, Ahumada had agreed with the idea that the U.S. troops might come across the border and “chase the fighters away,” should Mexican soldiers not be on hand to enforce the law. Mabry determined not to pursue the fighters past the national border.

The existence of the border did not always obstruct the Rangers in their pursuit of justice. The Frontier Battalion, which began as an Indian-fighting force, had patrolled the border region since its inception in 1874. Mabry had previously shown sensitivity to the border when he instructed Brooks to be mindful of neutrality laws as his men trailed followers of revolutionary Catarino E. Garza. One of the most recent adventures across the border had occurred in 1893. Ranger Frank Jones, the commander of Company D stationed near El Paso, died while he and his men hunted criminals in Mexican territory.

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The Mexican government lodged a complaint about the Rangers’ presence in its country. Any cause for the Rangers to enter Mexico contained a kernel that might exacerbate the tension. Maher’s eye condition gave everything another week to simmer.68

The postponement dampened the tourist business but it escalated the already rampant speculation about the fight’s location. On the sixteenth, Stuart cancelled the carnival, leaving only the main attraction of Fitzsimmons and Maher.69 Each day, the papers carried new rumors of the supposed new location: One day, it was on a barge in the Mexican Gulf, the next, the Chihuahua ranch of William Randolph Hearst associate Jack Follansbee or the Mexican vineyard of a retired American doctor. One collective asked Stuart to consider the Cumberland Gap.70 An offer had come in from the Santa Barbara Wool Company to spirit away all parties on a barge to a battleground outside U.S. jurisdiction (presumably Catalina Island off the California coast). The bids, authentic or fantastic, ultimately amounted to nothing but distraction; the cool Stuart had drawn a trump card.71

Dan Stuart was a resourceful man but he was at his limit. He needed an ally as sure of himself and as gifted at promotion as he was. Judge Roy Bean, “The Law West of the Pecos” and proprietor of the Jersey Lilly saloon in Langtry, fit the bill. Langtry

67 Weiss, Yours to Command, 11.
69 Miletich, Dan Stuart’s Fistic Carnival, 163, 165.
residents depicted the embodiment of American justice in their town as a “filthy old man” with a “big stomach” and “a lot of nerve.”\textsuperscript{72} If Bean were an ordinary man living east of the frontier, history might only remember him as a violent, self-aggrandizing scalawag with an inexplicable penchant for charity. In the West, his adventures earned him a spot in the panorama of Western characters. After traipsing all over the West and northern Mexico, he had settled in West Texas, becoming Judge Roy Bean. He governed by the force of his colorful character, and a gun when necessary. Part of his mythic fame derives from his saloon where beer was a dollar a bottle. He realized that a trainload of thirsty sporting men had the potential to boost his income with little outlay required from him.\textsuperscript{73}

A mystery train crammed with Maher, Fitzsimmons, their retinues, reporters, fight officials, twenty-six Rangers led by Mabry, regular ticket holders, hardy madcaps clinging to roofs and breakbeams, and alcohol rolled eastward into the night at 11:10 PM on February 20. Stuart had posted a notice at 5:00 PM announcing that interested parties should report to his office at 9:45 PM to purchase a $12 round trip fare on a Southern Pacific train. Although the fighters had tickets for Langtry and Del Rio, Texas, beyond, the final destination remained conjecture. Fort Hancock, where ring paraphernalia and a pontoon bridge had been spotted, was still a possibility.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{71} W. W. Naughton, “Agree to Fight It Out Friday,” \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, February 20, 1896, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{72} L’Ada McDowell, interviewed by Fred Carpenter, 28 June 1972, Del Rio, Texas; and Mrs. P. D. Nicholson, interview by Paul Patterson, 1968, Langtry, Texas, Oral History Collection, Southwest Collections/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University, Lubbock.
\textsuperscript{73} For information about the many legends of Bean, see Jack Skiles, foreword by Elmer Kelton, \textit{Judge Roy Bean Country} (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1996); and C. L. Sonnichsen, \textit{Roy Bean: Law West of the Pecos} (Old Greenwich, Conn.: The Devin-Adair Company, 1943).
The daily drama that churned around the fighters, Rangers, sports, and others continued to whirl on the train ride. An oft-repeated story pits Bat Masterson against Bill McDonald: Unhappy with the service of a Chinese waiter, Masterson shook a table caster at him. McDonald grabbed Masterson’s arm and told him not to hit the waiter. The ex-lawman issued the schoolyard challenge: “Maybe you’d like to take it up.” The Ranger responded, “I done took it up,” thus ending the encounter. Recent scholarship demonstrates that the meeting was no more than dramatic western storytelling.75

A more likely, yet no less improbable, episode featured Fitz wrestling a bear chained to the side of a house at a water stop in Marathon. His penchant for rough housing with Nero makes it difficult to immediately dismiss such a tale. Every moment was a chance for the press to sell more print about a sport that lawmakers desperately tried to blot out. Those behaving conspicuously obliged them, and those who did not became the centers of apocryphal legend.76

The culture on the train had a decidedly East/West divide. The split in behavior was along the lines of experience rather than regional stereotype. Men filed in the “East” category were probably from Denver, like Masterson, as well as Chicago and New York. The detachment described by reporter and referee George Siler as “Eastern” happily puffed cigars and tipped their flasks. The “cowboys,” on the contrary, were “sullen and silent.”77 No one was completely sure where they were headed, or when they would

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75 John A. Spellman, Captain John H. Rogers, Texas Ranger (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2003), 85, 86; and Weiss, Yours to Command, 114.
76 Fred C. Kelley, George C. Ade, Warmhearted Satirist (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), 98–99
return, but the visiting sports trusted that they were finally going to see a boxing match. Local Texans could not relax for the adventure so easily. The Rangers, with all their shiny blue hardware, were the soberest passengers.

For the Rangers in the front car, the assignment to protect Texas from prizefighting was not a command to hate the sport. Mabry and a few of the Rangers had traveled to see Fitzsimmons at his training quarters in Juarez. The fighter demonstrated his skill by jolting a punching bag clean from its rope. Then he displayed his might, offering Mabry the chance to hit him. The Adjutant General of Texas’s mighty wallop earned only scorn from Fitz: “Oh, hit me. Don’t jab me like that.” Mabry’s second shot did no damage. The good-humored boxer did get over his irritation with the Rangers for trailing him long enough to recognize their expertise. On the train, he told them that he wished that they would come over to the border to see the fight so that they could protect his winnings. Fitzsimmons and the Rangers spent enough time in each other’s company that each appreciated the professionalism of the other.\(^78\)

The whole crew of a little less than two hundred people arrived in Langtry at about 3:30 on the afternoon of February 21. Within a half hour, both men and their trainers had crossed the Rio Grande to the ring in the Mexican state of Coahuila. Part of the delay was undoubtedly attributable to Roy Bean shepherding the new arrivals into the Jersey Lilly for a bottle of Pearl beer. A train from Eagle Pass delivered a small contingent of fans, swelling the group. Eager Jimmy White, a boy from Toronto, and Joe Vendig, an equally enthusiastic fight promoter, led the crowd over a footbridge crossing the swift stream to the sand flat in the river. Muddy shoes and wet feet were a hardly

\(^78\) John R. Hughes, statement given to Richard F. Burges, El Paso Texas, February 26, 1896, p. 82, box 31, “U,” Scrapbook Series, BPP, UTEP.
hazardous to anyone who had traveled to El Paso, spent weeks there, and braved the train ride to Langtry. 79

The success of the covert endeavor depended on builders who could work with speed and secrecy. In stealth, the ring materials arrived in Langtry the previous night, and forty-two workers assembled the arena after smoothing a path from the bluff to the river. Jim Bates, the president of the Dallas Athletic Club, supervised construction. The site was about two miles from Langtry. A canvas wall about two hundred feet in diameter surrounded the twenty-four foot ring at the center made of boards covered with a canvas that had rosin sprinkled over it. Two small tents next to the ring were the modest changing rooms for Fitzsimmons and Maher, and a small booth meant to house the Kinetoscope stood opposite from the tents. Crisis engineering gave the site semblance of an organized boxing facility rather than a bank robbers’ canyon hideout. Despite the slight improvements to the desolate venue, the presence of the Rangers encouraged the feeling that the boxers were as dangerous a foe as the Dalton Gang. 80

The cliffs around the bank rose about 150 feet, providing natural amphitheater-style seating for those who did not want to buy a ticket and did not mind using a boulder for a bleacher. The women who were present watched from the bluffs, which may have been an obstacle to Mexican forces had they not been over fifty miles away. Many of the train travelers from El Paso carried enough anxiety about their possible slaughter by

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Mexican forces that they invested in accident insurance before boarding the train. The Rangers perched on the overlook on the American side. They made no effort to interfere with an activity that was merely a misdemeanor in Mexico. On the Mexican side, bleating goats and baaing sheep scampered capriciously about the slope.

Culberson later read reports that the Rangers behaved inappropriately. Mabry quickly responded that his men performed their duty and that any tale telling otherwise was the product of Stuart’s manipulation of the press. The manager of the Western Union wire office complained that Stuart tried to extort ten thousand dollars from him for the privilege of using his own office to send out reports about the fight. As always, control and manipulation were Stuart’s heavy artillery.

The crowd was composed of only those true fans who were willing to risk the train ride without knowing the destination, and the locals from Langtry. Some observers, identified as “Indian” and “Mexican,” wearing brightly colored garb, dotted the rocks outside the canvas. Estimations put the paying audience at about two hundred people and several hundred more sought the vantage from the cliffs. Stuart did not complain about the lost gate receipts.

The standard pomp and ceremony that preceded many major boxing events was not in evidence on the little sandbar in the river. The exigencies of the fading daylight

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and the peril of being caught by Mexican soldiers disrupted the rituals of the ring.

Fitzsimmons emerged from his tent in a striped robe with his short dark blue trunks held by an American flag belt. He rolled his black socks down over the tops of his shoes. He donned light green five-ounce gloves. His opponent sported long black trunks with a green belt. Maher’s gloves were dark brown.\footnote{Ibid.} One reporter remarked that Fitzsimmons looked “hard and pink,” while Maher appeared “flabby.”\footnote{“Fitz Won in Half A Round,” \textit{Boston Herald}, February 22, 1896.} Educated guesses put Fitzsimmons weight at 165 and Maher at about 180. Owen White’s father, Albert White, had examined Maher, and he knew for certain that the Irishman was in no condition to claim the champion’s belt. A cold drizzle sprinkled on the participants.\footnote{W. W. Naughton, “Fitzsimmons Wins in One Round,” \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, February 22, 1896, pp. 1–2; “Details of the Great Contest,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, February 22, 1896, p. 1; and White, \textit{Durable Sinner}, 62.}

Naturally, a concern over money delayed the start of the prizefight. Fitzsimmons’s manager, Martin Julian, rejected the presentation of a ten-thousand-dollar check instead of cash just moments before the fighters went at each other. Fitz piped up that he was willing to risk not getting paid and that they should all just get on with it. After years of postponement, no impediment was going to stop the fight just minutes before the start. The official timekeeper, Lou M. Houseman, blew a whistle to bring the combatants to the ready at about quarter to five.\footnote{W. W. Naughton, “Fitzsimmons Wins in One Round,” \textit{San Francisco Examiner}, February 22, 1896, pp. 1–2; and “Details of the Great Contest,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, February 22, 1896, p. 1.}

The great battle that consumed incalculable angst and produced drama worthy of a dime novel lasted less than one round. Fitzsimmons punched wildly with his right. Maher struck with his left. They clinched. Siler warned Maher about fouling by hitting in
the clinch. They punched and clinched again. Maher went for his opponent's jaw as they broke. He missed. Fitz served a right-hand hook to Maher’s chin. The contact sounded like “the clicking of a door lock.” Ranger Hughes commented that from his overlooking angle, “Maher fell and it looked like his feet and hands stuck up and he lay on his back.” Attempts by Maher’s manager, Jack Quinn, to revive him with water squeezed from a sponge failed. The bulletin announcing Fitz’s victory went out at 4:48 PM. He was the champion of the world, at least until popular opinion said differently.

Dan Stuart could not control everything. The limited light from the dark sky prohibited Enoch Rector and his Kinetscope from filming the event. If the cameras had rolled, they would have been the first to capture a championship fight. Stuart offered both men a bonus to fight for six rounds in front of the cameras under sunny skies. The new champion agreed to it for half the net receipts and five thousand dollars. Fitz might have had some eccentricities, but he was no fool. Maher’s people heard that Fitz said he was willing to bet five thousand dollars that he could stop Maher within six rounds. Neither side consented. It was another slice from Stuart’s planned profits.

89 Naughton, _Kings of the Queensberry Realm_, 221–22.
90 John R. Hughes, statement given to Richard F. Burges, El Paso Texas, February 26, 1896, p. 82, box 31, “U,” Scrapbook Series, BPP, UTEP.
91 Naughton, _Kings of the Queensberry Realm_, 222.
93 W. W. Naughton, “Fitzsimmons Wins in One Round,” _San Francisco Examiner_, February 22, 1896, pp. 1–2. A popular photo of the fight shows a man wearing sunglasses, shadows, and the background is an unobstructed view of the hillside, a sight that the canvas wall should have blocked. The long black trunks that Maher reportedly wore have become a short, tight, white garment. His dark brown gloves are nearly as light in color as his brief shorts. Maher has a mustache, which he did not have at the time of the fight. The spectators have their hands their sides or stuffed casually in pockets rather than lifted in cheer or outrage as Maher strikes a blow. They are fighting on dirt when there were supposedly boards with canvas, which are clearly visible in the other picture. Matt Donnellon has noted previously some of these discrepancies between the photographs and newspaper descriptions.
Fitz showed signs of grace in victory. He crouched down and shook the hand of the defeated Irish champion as he lay barely conscious in his corner. W. B. Hull, who ran a printing business in Mexico City, later observed Fitz in the streets in El Paso responding to Maher’s entreaty for a rematch and heard him say that Maher was the best he had fought and that his win was the result of a chance blow. The winner could not be persuaded go again, although El Paso pledged to raise twenty thousand dollars for a repeat.  

Fitzsimmons had priorities when he returned to El Paso. As a professional prizefighter, his first task required him to go to the bank to cash the checks for the purse. The day was the holiday observing Washington’s birthday, so the banks were closed. Hep Russell opened anyway and produced nine thousand dollars in bills and one thousand dollars in gold. After claiming his prize, Fitz immediately closeted himself with Nero to recount his conquest for the beast.

Rose Fitzsimmons and her mother were unsurprised about Bob’s victory. They had waited for results at the Grand Central Hotel in El Paso, where they relocated after moving their household including Bob the baby, Princess the goat—who Fitz procured for milk for the baby—and Nero the lion from Juarez. The reporter who communicated the news of the fight to them described Rose as “handsome,” “intensely womanly,” and “gentle in all her tendencies.” She was anxious to settle down to a “quiet home so dear to the heart of all good wives and mothers.” The reporter took every opportunity to define

Rose with the highest praise of contemporary womanhood, even if she expressed no qualms about her husband’s noxious profession or his enthusiasm for unusual pets.  

Conditions among the El Paso backers of the fight were less tranquil. Controversy ensued about whether to pay Stuart his ten-thousand-dollar bonus for bringing the fight to the vicinity of El Paso. After all, he had not pulled off the event on February 14. The finance committee in the El Paso Times a notice that two people wished to repudiate their subscriptions. The overall assessment in the city was generally positive but the stress on the entire operation ensured that Stuart would not be bringing his carnival back to the border anytime soon. He was already looking to the future.

Even as Fitz had prepared for Maher, the press continued to brew the resentment between he and Corbett. The meeting of the two would be the great climax to the twisting tale. Just days before fighting Maher, Fitz referred to Corbett as a “cur,” and the accused dog responded with a civil threat. Fitz then tasked Julian with creating a response to make the ex-champion “hop.” He complied, alleging that Corbett had been out of shape in Hot Springs and inviting him to come down to El Paso where Fitz waited to “put [him] out of existence.”

The prizefighting community appeared unfazed by the events in El Paso. They had confronted intransigent governors, including Culberson, many times over the past several years and had not yet abandoned their passion. Fitzsimmons’s success only strengthened the desire of the sports to see him fight Corbett. Stuart and the others were more convinced of their ability to outflank any state regulation than they were of

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government’s capacity to stop them. The expansion of state power simply compelled them to be creative. That contingent may not have learned any lessons about immorality from their brushes with the law, but some observers of the prizefight drama discovered defects in the moral agenda.

The battle against vice sometimes overshadowed the more typical problems that lay under the excitement and certainly left ordinary citizens bemused by the flurry of anti-vice activity. A murder in Eddy, New Mexico, convinced the editors of the local paper that the zeal of the reformers had upset their perspective on reality. A scholarly study on gambling and American law claims that moral policy produces more passion than reason, and the evidence from New Mexico justifies this remark.⁹⁹ In response to the avalanche of paper expended (especially by the El Paso Ministers’ Union) on denouncing the prizefight, the editors of the Eddy Current issued a tirade of their own:

Murder and high crimes stalk almost unmolested in our midst, and some church members (not all) sympathize with murderers, thieves and law breakers and hold out the hand of assistance to them. This we all know, but a friendly bout with five-ounce gloves is made the cause of filling a paper with a big howl and the passing of a law, by congress, against prize fighting. . . . Would the better of element of society could be united enough to make life and property safe before energy is wasted on a friendly bout.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Patrick A. Pierce and Donald A. Miller, Gambling Politics, State Governments, and the Business of Betting (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), 32.
¹⁰⁰ Eddy (N.Mex.) Current, 13 February 1896, p. 2.
This direct criticism of the morality brigade makes the point that the desire among reformers for change may not have corresponded with the will of the majority of citizens. Democracy was not enlarged if the public thought that the reforms were absurd in comparison to the daily issues that were the original province of the government: safety of life and property. In this denunciation, at least some of the public tolerated religious reformers in spite of their hypocrisy rather than applauding their efforts to reorganize society on spiritual grounds. The editor also argued that private property, an appendage of capitalist societies, warranted more attention than moral welfare. The contemporaneous movements of the state and federal governments reflected an expansion of government responsibilities that were not entirely welcome at the local level.

The federal government and the Texas state government instituted reform from the top down when they outlawed prizefighting in Texas and U.S. territories. At the local level in El Paso, a vocal minority embraced the rigid stance taken by state and national officials and worked to persuade Mexican authorities, particularly those governing Juarez, to adopt the same position as the American governments. The threat of the fights tested the Mexican commitment to American morality. Other El Pasoans’ enthusiasm for the professional boxers, the tourist dollars that they represented, and the plotting of promoter Dan Stuart sheltered the pugilists from the hazard of the Texas Rangers, whom the governor charged with implementing the law. The negative reception of El Paso citizens to the prizefighting prohibition indicates that without the significant external resources allocated to enforcing the law, Bob Fitzsimmons would have fought Peter Maher for the championship on Texas soil, with plenty of newsmen on hand to advertise the reform’s failure to the English-speaking world.
The cooperation of the Mexican government, the efforts of neighboring New Mexico, the competence of the Texas Rangers, and the vigilance of the El Paso Ministers’ Union forced the prizefighters to consummate their business in exile. The etiquette regarding national boundaries provided the opportunity for the Rangers to execute their orders without preventing Bob Fitzsimmons and Peter Maher from performing theirs. The Rangers successfully continued to exercise the power of the state and establish the state’s interests in homogenizing the moral values of its citizens.

Paid pugilists were a serious problem, and Maher, Fitzsimmons, and Corbett were the faces of it. The composite force dedicated to stopping them ranged from President Grover Cleveland to women from the Raton Ministers Association. Despite the power behind the informal battalion, practical problems interfered with their mission. The sister cities of El Paso and Juarez challenged leadership on both sides of the border to manage the threat of the prizefighters. The El Paso city council was more concerned about the long-term menace to their civil liberties posed by the state government than the temporary, and profitable, disruption caused by the prizefighters. That contest between state-reformed society and the individual freedoms sacrificed to it held no promise for immediate resolution.

The business of prizefighting needed the cooperation of the government and the people to succeed. It found its place where hard currency was more valuable than reputation. Fitzsimmons and Corbett, two of the greatest boxers of all time, were finally going to battle.
Chapter 4
The Ascendance of the Fightocracy in Nevada

Nevada state officials helped prepare a grand extravaganza for St. Patrick’s Day in 1897. They were not, however, celebrating Irish heritage when they supported plans for Carson City to host the “Fight of Century” between Jim Corbett and Bob Fitzsimmons that would determine boxing’s heavyweight championship. Full hotels, busy restaurants, crowded streets, and countless words of free press were the benefits for Nevada state officials trying to resuscitate their failing state. They hoped legalized prizefighting would help achieve their long-term ambitions to increase the state’s permanent population and boost its economy. Boxing fans awaited the results of the contest between Corbett and Fitzsimmons but it was the Sage Brush State that hoped to come out a winner.

By legalizing prizefighting, Nevada refused incorporation into the new moral structure of America and frustrated the development of the Progressive movement. The evangelical reformist vision of heaven on earth had no place for a terrestrial den of inequity. In the course of defending itself from character attacks, Nevada also affirmed its position as a western state belittled by the eastern establishment. When Gov. Reinhold Sadler and the Nevada state legislature began the process of regulating and officially sanctioning prizefighting, they called the bluff of the Progressive moral agenda and continued to carve the niche they were creating for Nevada as a destination for sanctioned
decadence. For Nevadan officials, the spiritual reward for morality and any potential praise they might earn from national statesmen had a lower value than the real dollars that boxing tourists would spend in the state.

As the fighters prepared to test one another, Nevada officials gambled that endorsing an ignominious sport was worth more to their state than complying with the codes of morality causally observed but officially trumpeted by the rest of the nation. With a comparatively low population and depressed economy, Nevada decidedly ranked low in the hierarchy of states and had little to lose in the risk. Women, both supposed prostitutes and recognized members of genteel society, were openly present at Corbett-Fitzsimmons and were a captivating anomaly that amplified Nevada’s daring defiance of the increasingly strident proscriptions of the sport. As women asked to seat themselves in the male world of the pavilion around the ring, they simultaneously fought to win the right to vote in Nevada. The question of who was the best fighter also initiated inquiries about the constitutional right of the federal government to revoke statehood in the post–Civil War era. The social and political drama swirling around the protagonists ensured that the battle in Nevada would absorb national attention from observers with little interest in the punching power of two half-naked men and those who based their livelihoods on it.

Nevada’s economic condition entwined with the larger national issues to create the conditions for the prizefight to occur. The state’s economic decline in the 1890s conditioned much of the population to favor salvation in almost any form. The mineral bonanza that had brought people to what was the western portion of Utah territory beginning in 1859 was the main foundation of the economy. The Comstock Lode had all
but run out before the end of the century, and Tonopah would not yield its riches until 1900. All the treasure that had come from the ground during the nineteenth century was not necessarily invested in Nevada. Absentee mine owners lived well in places like San Francisco rather than enduring in desert isolation. The San Francisco-based Bank of California and future San Francisco mayor Adolph Sutro were among the despised speculators who controlled large portions of the Nevada mining industry from California.¹

The decrease in production was not the only factor damaging Nevada’s mineral industry. The federal government, in the midst of a national economic panic, had demonetized silver in 1873. By the 1880s, the value of the silver that had sustained the Nevada miners and dependent businesses dropped precipitously. In 1878, the estimated coining value of silver produced in Nevada was over twenty-eight million; in 1888, the value was just over six million. Aggrieved speculators joined American farmers to push the national government to adopt the silver standard. With that goal as its cornerstone policy, the Silver Party dominated Nevada politics in the state legislature at the end of the nineteenth century. A. C. Cleveland, who was running for the U.S. Senate, was “too manly to affiliate” with any party that supported a single gold standard. White manhood was apparently one of the most secure coins of the realm. The devaluation of silver left only one major industry to sustain the state.²

Grasslands in northern Nevada supported another iconic western business, cattle ranching. The cattle industry suffered a downturn in the 1890s as well. The annual minimum production of cattle in 1899 was less than the total mineral production of 1890. Without more water, a constant concern in the West, ranching could not replace mining as Nevada’s leading industry.\(^3\) A national agricultural surplus contributed to the problem by deflating the value of the beeves in the stockyards. The downturn of Nevada’s two major industries sent officials of the underpopulated state scrambling to retain and eventually increase the size of the citizenry in the middle of a national economic depression. A reporter at the time summed up the situation: “With a population of less than 60,000 and a hopeless insolvency, the Sage Hen State opened her wide arms” to officially licensed prizefighting.\(^4\)

The economy and the population that drove it were the chief considerations of Nevada state officials as they moved forward with their plan to legalize prizefighting. A short-term boost from boxing tourists would immediately benefit the municipality that won the right to host the championship. The long-term achievements would be in the people who relocated to Nevada on the basis of the fight coverage in newspapers and magazines and the new industry in boxing event-based tourism. Reaching the goals that authorities deemed vital to the state outweighed the criticism of the means that they chose to realize those goals.

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\(^3\) Elliot, *History of Nevada*, 173.

Although the state’s action invited national ridicule, Nevada was about to benefit from its embrace of the impugned practice of prizefighting as it already did for legalized games of chance and soon would for liberal divorce laws. Other states, such as Texas, had recoiled from the professional boxers, but Nevada would spring forward. Officially sanctioned prizefighting brought out objections from citizens in New Mexico, Texas, Arkansas, Florida, and New York among other states in the two years preceding Corbett and Fitzsimmons’s meeting in Carson City and distinguished Nevada in a nation fixated on instituting nationally white middle-class morality consistent with the Progressive Era. To compete for population from the rest of the Union, Nevada lawmakers and opinion makers in the press continued to set the state apart from it.

Several important conditions would have to take root for the project to flourish. Elected officials in the state legislature would have to pass a licensing bill. Once the bill passed into law, all interested parties would have to choose a suitable fight location. The chosen site would then have to construct an arena and prepare for the onslaught of visitors. The entire process had to conclude in just a few weeks. The speedy resolution of each of these matters demonstrated the steadfastness in Nevada’s course and the weight of their peril. To orchestrate it all, Nevada officials relied on a man who was well versed in the trials of putting on a prizefight and who relentlessly quested to achieve his grand vision.

An impresario with gall, Dan Stuart’s plotting satisfied both Nevada’s needs and the desire of the national public for the long-awaited match between Corbett and

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Fitzsimmons. Without his careful machinations, the glove-contest bill would not have come passed in 1897 nor could the fight have occurred in Nevada, or possibly anywhere else. He started laying the groundwork months before the event. Journalist and Nevada resident Alfred Doten noted in his diary on October 18, 1896 that Stuart arrived that day in Carson City to arrange the contest. Stuart had made bold predictions before and shepherded his schemes through hazards large and small. He had doggedly chased the plum match between reigning champion Corbett and top contender Fitzsimmons from Dallas, Texas, and Hot Springs, Arkansas, among other hostile locations, to friendly Carson City. He had learned lessons from his previous experiences. This time, he would have the support of the state government and the city before he made his great announcement. His success depended on his own experiences and the desperation of a state with a sinking economy. With the support of the Nevada governor and legislature, and locals such as businessman Al Livingston—Christian moralizers faulted “Aarons” or Jews for bringing the fight to fruition—Stuart’s three-year odyssey to match Corbett and Fitz would finally end.  

Before any physical preparations started, Stuart had to secure the passage of a licensing bill. A state-issued license would ensure the legality of a prizefight, guaranteeing Stuart’s enterprise and legitimating the sport at the same time. The glove-contest license required applicants to pay a fee, which would bring immediate revenue to the state’s coffers. Assembly Bill No. 8, an act to restrict and license glove contests between man and man, satisfied both the state and the promoter.

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The hurried negotiations and maneuvers in the Nevada state legislature to pass a licensing bill provide a counterpoint to the alacrity with which the Texas government banned prizefighting a little over a year before. The plan to issue glove-contest licenses met with comparatively little opposition inside the Nevada legislature and among the public. The first version of the bill was introduced on January 25, 1897. The committee on public morals, which the Assembly had constituted in the first session of the state legislature in 1864, made only slight modifications to the proposed bill, decreasing the licensing fee from $1,250 to $1,000. The vote in the Assembly was 20–9 for approval, with one abstention. On the twenty-eighth, the Senate committee on public morals recommended no changes to the bill. The vote in the Senate was 9–6 for adoption. The governor reported to the Assembly on January 29 that he had signed Assembly Bill No. 8. Sadler, who was both the acting governor and the president of the Senate as lieutenant governor in 1897, offered little support or opposition but declared that he was enacting the will of the people. The public he served certainly lacked the righteous wrath that urged Texas governor Charles Culberson to pass the prohibition of prizefighting in about the same amount of time that it took Sadler to approve a licensing bill for it.\(^7\)

Historical records attest to support for the bill in Nevada, and a class element was inherent in backing arguments. Working-class men seemed to brawl with little regard for the orderly training, tactical forethought, and ring decorum worshipped by higher social classes. If, through licensing, combat for money could be made to reflect the ideals of the people who set the standards for respectability, then these battles of man against man

\(^7\) Journal of the Assembly, 18th sess., January 25, 1897, p. 27; Journal of the Assembly, 1st sess., 1864–1865, Article 19; Journal of the Senate, 18th sess., January 28, 1897, p. 30; Journal of the Assembly, 18th sess., January 29, 1897; and Nevada State Journal (Reno), January 27, 1897, p. 3 and January 30, 1897, p. 2.
would be less offensive than they had been. One commentator pointed out that while bareknuckle contests were demoralizing, the new scientific glove match, properly conducted, was acceptable to respectable society. Telegrams from concerned citizens reportedly favored the bill sixteen to one. If the proposed rush of licensees appeared, then Nevada citizens would receive a financial boon and improve boxing behavior.\(^8\)

Opposition did exist, but as one editorialist noted, prizefights had transpired in the state for years without interference; with legalization the state would at least derive some badly needed revenue. One petition offered that the legislature might as well legalize stagecoach robbery so that the state could earn revenue from that as well. Seven state governors released statements condemning the democratic process that led to legalized prizefighting in Nevada. The elected leaders of Indiana, Virginia, Montana, Nebraska, Arkansas, Utah, and North Dakota expressed disappointment in the glove-contest bill. They argued that subjugating public morals to the tyranny of dollars was a dangerous precedent to set, especially with a “monstrous” event that would invite outlawry.\(^9\)

Their objections reflected a greater philosophical struggle in industrialized America. The political contest pitted money against morality, but morality was a luxury too precious for Nevada to afford. The Nevada Senate did sponsor a bill to put the question of repealing the glove-contest law before the general electorate in 1898, but the bill did not pass the Assembly. Even after the evil occurrence of the title fight, opponents of prizefighting in Nevada failed to rally support for their cause.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) “Glove Contest,” *Reno (Nev.) Evening Gazette*, January 25, 1897, p. 3; and *Journal of the Assembly*, 1897, 18th sess., January 18–March 13, 1897, p. 42.

\(^9\) *Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal*, January 31, 1897, p. 2; *Reno (Nev.) Evening Gazette*, January 26, 1897, p. 3; “Corbett is Made a Slight Favorite,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 1, 1897, p. 8.

\(^10\) *Journal of the Assembly*, 1897, 18th sess., January 18–March 13, 1897, p. 83.
Bill No. 8 sanctioning glove contests had supporters and detractors; others reserved a verdict. The Missouri legislature wanted to send a committee to witness the fight. The proposed junket was intended to establish whether Missouri should also legalize prizefighting. The Wyoming government tried to rush through a bill that legalized prizefighting with the intention of luring Stuart and his menagerie to a different depressed western state. The Idaho legislature also considered a glove-contest bill similar to Nevada’s with the aim of advertising the state to the rest of the nation. Prizefighting would be legal in Nevada, and some states west of the Mississippi looked upon it as an experiment that might offer a solution to financial and population woes common to the region.\(^{11}\)

The money earned from the actual license was insignificant to the overall objective of enriching the state. Nevada licensed prizefights for a $1,000 fee, paid to the issuing county’s sheriff, with the assurances that a qualified doctor check over the combatants. For Fitzsimmons-Corbett, $846 went the state fund, $94 went to the Ormsby county general fund, and $60 went to the salary fund. Some pundits calculated that the price of hiring special deputies to police the event cost more than the price of the license. The purpose of the license was to lure promoters, fighters, and fans who would spend far more than the fee. The decision to lower the fee from $1,250 to $1,000 indicates that the legislature’s aim was to encourage major prizefights in the state rather than limit them.\(^{12}\)

With the governor’s support official, Virginia City, Reno, and Carson City each vied to host the fight. At an elevation almost 7,000 feet, Virginia City was too high for a

\(^{11}\) *Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal*, February 20, 1897, p. 2; “Wyoming Wants the Fight,” *Nevada State Journal* (Reno), February 5, 1897, p. 3; and *Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal*, February 18, 1897, p. 2.
high-caliber athletic contest. The simple act of breathing during the strenuous exchanges of fists without extensive training at that altitude would make the fight more a test of endurance than of skill. Another practical concern eliminated that option: full-sized Pullman sleeper cars could not navigate the narrow tunnels on the route to Virginia City. The purpose was to promote tourism, and the lack of accessibility would hinder that intention. With the fight less than a month away and the location not yet officially announced, Reno boosters continued to pitch the benefits of their city. Some people in Reno tried to take the moral high ground by saying that Carson City’s reputation for violence and bloodshed would likely sway Stuart and the managers.

The decision came down not to accessibility or the strength of city boosters but to back-room maneuvering and political deal making. The legislators in the capital city had agreed to pass the glove-contest bill but only on the condition that Carson City, 4,015 feet above sea level, host the first officially licensed contest. Stuart conceded that the capital city should derive the benefits from the hard work of the lawmakers. The National Police Gazette stripped away any niceties in typical sensational style, reporting that two senators would change their votes to repeal the bill if the fight did not happen in Carson City. Stuart did not officially announce his choice of Carson City until February 11.

With all the Nevada activity, why was California, the economic core of the Far West and a state that formerly had hosted major battles, on the sideline? Neighboring California had accommodated more than its share of pugilistic entertainment with great

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12 Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, February 18, 1897, p. 3; and Reese River (Austin, Nev.) Reveille, March 17, 1897, p. 3.
13 Siler and Houseman, Fight of the Century, i; Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, February 4, 1897, p. 3; Nevada State Journal (Reno), Legislation Column, January 29, 1897, p. 3; “Reno Versus Carson,” Los Angeles Times, February 9, 1897, p. 3; National Police
success, and without clear legal authority. Although prizefighting was illegal in the state, civil authorities rarely obstructed the popular heavyweight contests. The recent debacle in the ring may have spooked fight-friendly Californians. Choruses of “foul,” “fixed,” and “cheat” dogged the fight scene for months after Wyatt Earp’s decision in favor of Tom Sharkey over Fitzsimmons in December 1896. The Golden State also had far more industries to fill the state treasury than did the Silver State and did not suffer the humiliating problem of population loss. Interested parties from California would simply make the relatively short trip to their profligate neighbor to see the big mill. The police would continue to monitor lesser contests in California from ringside seats.  

Carson City may have lacked the cosmopolitan reputation of San Francisco, but that may have worked to the city’s advantage as it jockeyed for the next “Fight of the Century.” Stuart’s chief requirement was that the state make no effort to prohibit prizefighting within its borders. In his career as a boxing promoter, he had already weathered the menace of a state militia, the threat of unflappable southern sheriffs, and cool, brutal efficiency of the legendary Texas Rangers. Nevada promised to meet that minimal condition, with multiple cities vying for the opportunity to suffer the scorn of the reformers.  

The actual reception of the fighters in Nevada proved that Stuart had made the right choice. Unlike in Hot Springs, the Carson City government and citizens of Nevada made every effort to welcome Corbett and Fitzsimmons. Instead of marching Corbett to

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15 “Fighters All at Sea,” Chicago Inter Ocean, October 31, 1895, p. 4,
the mayor’s office at gunpoint, Nevada officials accorded him his celebrity. Governor
Sadler vowed to protect Corbett and Fitzsimmons from any ruffians, even if he had to call
out the troops. That policy was a significant reversal of Arkansas governor James Paul
Clarke’s and Florida governor Henry Laurents Mitchell’s call to their respective state
militias and Texas governor Culberson’s deployment of the Texas Rangers to stop
Fitzsimmons from fighting Peter Maher just a year before.

With the passage of the glove-contest bill and a location for the fight, creating a
place to hold the fight was the next priority. No existing venue in Carson City could
accommodate the audience, fighters, and film crew. The site selected was a racetrack just
outside town. Architect P. J. O’Donohue planned an octagonal, uncovered arena with a
four-foot-high platform in the center for the ring. Six teams began scraping snow at the
site on February 22, with the first load of lumber arriving that afternoon. An estimated
350,000 feet of lumber was necessary to build the structure three hundred feet in diameter
with tiered seating and eight entrances. Builders constructed a special platform for the
shack that housed the three Veriscope motion film cameras. Filmmaker Enoch Rector had
“Copyrighted Veriscope Film Company” stenciled on the side of the ring facing the
cameras to insure his rights to the film. For convenience, the ring, ropes, and padding
used for the Corbett-Sharkey exhibition the previous June served again in Carson City.
The construction supervisor, a San Francisco theatrical designer, put finishing touches on
the project in the final snowy days leading up to the contest. As the day of the fight

16 Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, February 21, 1897, p. 3.
17 Siler and Houseman, The Fight of the Century, 12, 18–19, 22; “The Arena Started,”
Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, February 23, 1897, p. 3; Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal,
March 5, 1897, p. 3; “The Ring,” Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 16, 1897, p. 3;
“Ring Gossip,” Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 5, 1897, p. 3; and Dan Streible,
came closer, excited fans and the combatants engrossed themselves with matters both technical and emotional.

Weeks before the fight, local citizens grappled with the problems, such as dissolute gambling, that critics of the sport saw as inseparable from it. They had to draw a line between the possibly distasteful practice of prizefighting and the undeniably unsavory vices that seemed to accompany it. As they tried to navigate the challenges, stern voices from the pulpit warned them about immoral behavior while other speakers threw their weight behind Nevada’s enterprise. The resistance mounted by the churches was feeble in the face of popular enthusiasm inspired by the pending prizefight.

Hosting the big fight did create some of the conditions reformers feared. Carson City, and by extension Reno, suffered an “influx of tramps.” Among the group were fifteen toughs and a “gang of hobos.” The Virginia and Truckee Railroad shipped the fifteen tramps to Reno in a boxcar, free of charge. Games of chance were legal in Nevada, and visitors who looked respectable immediately began running gambling games and opening temporary bars and pool halls. Lost revenue, more than increased incidents of vice, concerned the business community in Carson City. The legislature tried to rush through a bill that would decrease licensing fees for such activities to ensure that the state capitalized on these mushrooming enterprises. State residents who had already paid the higher licensing fees grumbled about the plan.¹⁸

Despite the possible rewards of all the advertising, the state’s religious element disagreed over the issue of legalized prizefighting. Fr. Daniel Gartland of St. Theresa’s

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Church prepared a statement that backed the state government. He suggested that the legislature and the governor had to represent the will of the majority, and he cautioned critics that the governor had the state’s best interests in mind. He also compared the relatively benign nature of boxing to the brutality of college football. The local Methodist and Presbyterian preachers opposed the fight as immoral and un-Christian.19

Still seeking to climb the racial hierarchy in an era obsessed with race, the Irish community had to survey the popular sentiment about prizefighting and weigh the risks of supporting Corbett, an Irish American hero. The Irish, as an ethnic group, figured prominently in the varied judgments on the fight. Many Irish employed the language of middle-class America to justify their disgust with the fight. The St. Patrick’s Day convention of San Francisco resolved that “reputable Irishmen” should avoid the fight. Another writer chastised the lesser members of the “Irish race” for disgracing all Irish for the sake of money. That writer’s piece in the San Francisco Monitor called upon Irishmen to avoid the scandal and not disgrace their heritage like men such as Corbett who were the perpetrators of the insult to public morals. The sermon given at the Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco denounced all events that set men against each other, declaring that boxing “is not the manly art, but the art of the devil.” The reverend lamented that St. Patrick, “a good Scotchman” whose teachings the Irish should have followed, was to endure the meeting of brutes on his day.20

19 Reese River (Austin, Nev.) Reveille, March 13, 1897, p. 4.
20 San Francisco Monitor reprinted in Reno (Nev.) Evening Gazette, February 23, 1897, p. 2; and “Pulpit Views on the Fight,” San Francisco Examiner, March 15, 1897, p. 7.
At least one faction of the righteous did stoically withstand the affront to public morals. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) agreed to make a demonstration against the St. Patrick’s Day proceedings: it planned to have the church bell rung in defiance during the fight. (The WCTU made a concerted effort to eliminate prizefighting after 1897.) The WCTU had had some success in regulating vice in the Nevada capital. In one case, the organization helped secure passage of legislation that prohibited legislators from drinking at work. Proscribing objectionable behavior that promised to improve the economic condition of the state, however, was beyond its political reach. Other women’s clubs that might have stirred objection were few in Nevada at that time.21

The media and moralizers across the country stressed the possible consequences that legalization might have for Nevada, but the contemporaneous legislative vote on women’s suffrage, an issue with the potential to really upset the course of the United States, gained comparatively little traction. The vote on enfranchising women was much narrower than the one on legalizing prizefighters. Why would a western state struggling for national prominence choose brutal boxing between men over the nurturing of Victorian women? The suffrage movement earned new supporters by aligning the vote with women’s role as protector of public virtue. Enfranchised women might vote against

degenerate pursuits such as prizefighting. Although not directly engaged in the debate over pugilism, national suffragists focused their efforts on Nevada during in early 1897.  

The National Woman Suffrage Association determined to shift its political efforts away from the eastern states to the western states in 1897. Nevada was on the list of “battleground” states. In an address to the group, Susan B. Anthony proposed several reasons for focusing on the West: eastern people were too conservative; the West had more English-speaking people, who were the only group to have improved the lives of women; and the people of the West were more intelligent than easterners, primarily because most western settlers had been the educated children of good eastern families. Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado had experimented with equal suffrage, but as one scholar has observed, the frontier was closed and the West was no longer a viable place for utopian visions such as political equality. No new states fully enfranchised women between 1896 and 1910.  

Nevada proved to be a hopeful disappointment. Efforts to gain the franchise for Nevada women began in 1869, but it took twenty-six years to get a bill successfully through the legislature. Passing in 1895 was a bill that would have granted equal suffrage, but the state constitution required the incoming legislature to authorize it. On February 16, 1897, the day Corbett arrived in Carson City, the Assembly voted 16–14 against women’s suffrage. The next evening, the final count was 15–15, meaning the bill failed. In 1899, suffragists tried to amend the state constitution by striking the word male wherever it occurred in the Nevada constitution. That endeavor also failed with a tie vote.

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23 “Woman Suffrage Policy,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1897, p. 5; “Hope is in the West,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 26, 1897, p. 8; and Beverly Beeton, *Women Vote in the*
The legislature addressed women’s suffrage at least thirteen times between 1869 and 1914, when a constitutional amendment finally gave them the vote.24

The prizefighting proposal was more conservative than the push to enfranchise women, a move which threatened to reorder society rather than simply compound the immorality of it. The Nevada State Journal ran a column, apparently without the playful irony endemic in the Nevada press, that suggested female suffrage and legalized prizefighting would both be good for the state. The editorial noted that both avenues, once legalized, would bring improvements to the state, but few others took up that logic. Peter Filene has argued that the popularity of organized spectator sport in the late nineteenth century grew partly from a white middle-male need to act out aggression and win victories. In Nevada the male world of politics, where hostility, winning, and losing were daily occurrences, was even more sacred male space than arena of physical aggression. The legislature may have been able to vote against the women’s assault on their hold on political power but when profit was a consideration women invaded men’s territory much more easily.25

For Stuart, who ruled on matters concerning the fight, the equality of a woman to a man was evident in their pocketbooks: a dollar was dollar regardless of who spent it.

When he could not decide whether to allow women in the arena, his lawyer advised him

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25 Reno Nevada State Journal, “The Prizefight and Equal Suffrage Going Hand in Hand with Great Hopes for the Future,” February 7, 1897, p. 3; and Peter G. Filene,
that the glove-contest bill did not discriminate between the sexes for admission. Any well-behaved person with the money for a ticket could gain entrance. Equality was inherent in the law. Stuart’s decision to grant women admission to the prize ring, and the Nevada assembly’s near concurrent vote against suffrage resolved that women had the power to spend money and witness brutality like men, but they could not enter another masculine arena, politics.26

The promoter officially declared that women, who clamored for his permission, would be allowed to attend. His indulgence indicates that the desire of “some of the most prominent men in the State” to bring their wives, not more ticket sales, was his reason. He added, “[Women] are the best judges of what they should see and not see.” 27 That statement appealed to the Victorian idea that women had far more sensitive moral barometers than men. In a jab at the eastern establishment that championed college football, the argument that women whose “nerves can watch the unspeakable brutality of football” could certainly enjoy the “skill and science” of a glove contest appeared in local papers. Opponents, however, could not give any “creature” attending a fight the title woman, “one of the best words in the English language.” 28

Stuart’s consideration of women seeing the fight was a tangible concern. Unlike past occasions when women dressed in drag or otherwise concealed themselves at a boxing match, Corbett-Fitzsimmons was an opportunity for them to openly appear at ringside in a public, outdoor venue. The day was the zenith of notable women’s presence at major prizefights for the period. And they did not sit quietly with their hands in their pockets.

laps, wondering what was going on. Anyone who could read a newspaper could learn the finer points of prizefighting.

Two women from Virginia City made the local paper when they wrote to request that Stuart consider allowing “ladies” to attend the fight. The letters are somewhat suspect: the author of the first, clearly well educated, desired to witness the contest “in the interest of general intellectual expansion.” The second wrote with confused grammar and misspellings that seem practiced. She had once seen a fight at the Carson City dump and displayed easy familiarity with ring terminology. Both writers believed that prizefights were not so terribly brutal that women should not be able to observe them. Together, the two items appeared to represent consensus among women of different classes that taking in a prizefight was an acceptable activity for their sex.29

As welcoming as Stuart was to the ladies, he had expressly forbidden them from acting as reporters. Doten recognized and commented on the presence of his fellows in the sports writing fraternity, but at least one veiled herself from him and everyone else. Nellie V. Davis, wife of Nevada newspaper mogul and writer Sam Davis and sister-in-law of New York Journal reporter Bob Davis, not only attended the big fight but was supposed to have her account published in the Chicago Tribune. The paper requested that she report from a “feminine angle.” She sat ringside in the forty-dollar seats with her husband, near Rose Fitzsimmons. Although she saw only two other women in the crowd,

29 “All Want to See It,” Virginia City (Nev.) Territorial Enterprise, February 7, 1897, p. 1.
“girls from the red light district,” Nellie Davis abandoned politeness when she joined the masses standing on their seats during the furious action of the six and seventh rounds.\(^{30}\)

Despite her shame over the impropriety of witnessing the brutal contest, Davis managed to place a bet on Fitz. The concept of manliness and female propriety informed her choice. Her reasons for wagering on the underdog included “Corbett was no gentleman. . . . He swore at his trainers and was disagreeable in general.” Although her opponent described Fitz to her as a “clumsy clown,” his comparative decorum outweighed physical manliness for Davis. The stakes were a pair of gloves. The Tribune prided itself on the many points of view the paper offered its readers on the fight but Nellie Davis’s perspective never went to press.\(^{31}\)

Ida Fuller was another woman tasked with reporting on the fight. She took her place in a private box next to a male reporter also writing for the New York World, and her impressions were published. The Carson Morning Appeal also ran a slightly different version of Fuller’s account. Fuller, a nationally known actress and dancer who performed in Carson City at the time of the fight, compared prizefighting favorably to Spanish bullfighting, a sight so horrible that she could not watch the final act. She applauded the defensive nature of scientific boxing and suggested that if gloved boxing was taught as an art form, cowardice and deadly weapons would disappear. Unlike Davis, Fuller had a high opinion of the “manly and brave” Corbett, who also had the gift of a “clever conversationalist.” At the conclusion of the contest, she wanted to comfort the fallen man rather than congratulate the bloody victor. Her findings were that women should be able

\(^{30}\) Carson News, March 16, 1897; and “Mrs. Davis Tells Story of Reporting Corbett–Fitizsimmons Fight,” Scrapbook, Microfilm, Samuel P. Davis Papers, Special Collections Department, University of Nevada Reno Library [hereafter SC-UNR].
to watch intelligent men face each other. Their virtue lay in their manly character. She also observed that good weather on fight day showed nature, at any rate, approving of the Nevada legislature’s actions.\textsuperscript{32}

Although Davis’s and Fuller’s adventures as sportswriters gave off the air of stunt, newspaper editors clearly valued intelligence about the match from any perspective, including the novel angle of women, and the increased sales it might bring. The impressions of these fledgling reporters differed little from those of a woman reporter at ringside in the 1920s. In that later era, however, the subject of female fight fans and reporters had evolved into a stage for women to define themselves in society, rather than as only a feat for the pleasure of the news media. The main objective of selling papers did remain in that later period.\textsuperscript{33}

The market for the sports results for events like prizefights reflects the increasing interest in leisure activities in America. Scholars have linked the “new” morality with changes in the marketplace at the end of the nineteenth century. Industrialization led to increased levels of consumption by Americans, particularly those in the middle class. The new morality issued not from the culture of production but the new culture of consumption. By purchasing tickets to events, Americans had become consumers of professional sport. The easiest place to get a fix for their new passion was the sports page in their local newspaper.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} Scrapbook, Microfilm, Samuel P. Davis Papers, SC-UNR; and “The Story of the Contest,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, March 19, 1897, p. 6.
The frenzy of coverage provided by the nation’s newspapers attests to the market for sporting news. The *New York World* unfurled on the side of a rented building a canvas sign proclaiming its arrival in Carson City. The William Randolph Hearst papers—*San Francisco Examiner* and *New York Journal*—ordered a fifty-foot banner for the outside of their headquarters. Not to be outdone, the *Boston Globe* printed a sign depicting the Western Hemisphere, with Boston and Carson City as the only two cities featured. Fitzsimmons signed exclusive contracts to give pictures and signed interviews only to Hearst reporters. Hearst had acquired the *Journal* in 1895 and published one of the first recognizable modern sports sections in his daily newspaper. Fitz let his chaperone from the *Journal* do his writing for him and happily signed the results. W. W. Naughton, one of the great early chroniclers of the ring, worked for the *Examiner* and fight neophyte Robert H. Davis, brother of Carson City newsman Sam Davis, for the *Journal*. Referee George Siler and timekeeper Lou M. Houseman were scribes for the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Inter Ocean*, respectively. The *San Francisco Call* and *San Francisco Chronicle* also had reporters on hand. Other major cities sent reporters as well. The *New York World* men wrote to the home office for back up. Local stringers jockeyed with their big-city brethren but had an advantage, for they did not have to pay to get into the arena.

Whether the papers published debates over the morality of pugilism, day-by-day accounts of heroes’ training regimen, or both, the word *Nevada* would burn itself into readers’ minds around the nation. The inexhaustible press coverage was a key component in creating an image of Nevada that would induce immigration to the struggling state.
Their meticulously detailed accounts convey the significance of the event to readers around the nation.35

Under a clear, crisp sky at a few minutes past noon on March 17, 1897, ring announcer Billy Madden introduced pugilists “Gentleman” Jim Corbett and “Ruby” Robert Fitzsimmons to an anxious crowd surrounding the newly constructed boxing ring in Carson City. Stoked by three years of animosity that included uncounted insults, a tweaked nose, and a refused handshake, the two fighters were more than ready to knock the other out. Fans, among them gamblers nationwide, shared the fighters’ passion. Since January 29, the day that Nevada governor Reinhold Sadler approved the bill legalizing prizefighting, audiences inside and outside the state, as well as across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, had awaited the “Fight of the Century.” Boxing’s world heavyweight champion was to be decided in this obscure western town.

The fight almost happened before the scheduled day. Corbett and Fitz nursed their animosity toward one another as the date of the showdown drew closer, and the friction nearly caused an explosion in an accidental encounter about a week before St. Patrick’s Day. Both men trained in the Carson City area—Corbett at Shaw’s Springs and Fitzsimmons at the Cook ranch. They crossed paths one day while on independent training runs. Corbett and his men strayed into Fitzsimmons and his crew, including his Great Dane, Yarum, while going to investigate the arena. The two groups met and

exchanged handshakes. Fitz offered his palm to Corbett, who refused by saying that he would shake only on the day of the official contest. Eyewitnesses said that the fight may have come off right then had calmer members of each retinue not intervened. Corbett recalled that the altercation was part of his strategy to estimate the confidence of his challenger, which he found lacking. San Francisco Examiner reporter W. W. Naughton, who observed the whole affair, recounted that Corbett went to examine some prehistoric sloth footprints when Fitz came upon him. Regardless of the reality of the matter or just how much was staged for the press, the blood and sweat the two men spattered on the canvas and crowd when they met on the seventeenth was genuine.36

The size and shape of the fighters were as different as their fighting styles. To begin with, Fitzsimmons’s weight was a controversial topic. About two hours after the fight, Bob Davis claimed that Fitz weighed in at 157 pounds on the prison scales. The heavyweight division was for men over 158 pounds—Fitz was technically still a middleweight. Siler noted that Fitz stepped in the ring at 157 1/2 pounds while Corbett was at least 183. A local paper reported Fitz at 167 and Corbett at 187. Another witness later reported that the lanky Cornishman was a whopping 172 and Corbett a lighter 180. Fitzsimmons’s official weight was announced as 167.37 Boxing may have had the markings of a professional industry, but in 1897, the heavyweight division of the sport

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37 Davis, Ruby Robert, 66; “Siler Praises Fitz’s Gameness,” Chicago Tribune, March 18, 1897, p. 2; “Champion Fitzsimmons,” Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 19, 1897,
was still not governed with strict professionalism and administered by any sort of rigid rules. Just as Carson City was attempting to appear sophisticated to the outside world by throwing off its rough and tumble frontier image, so was the boxing business still working on the rougher edges of its presentation.

With a significant weight advantage, Corbett was the favorite among the pool-room bettors. Odds makers gave ten to six in his favor on the day of the event. Yale men favored the upright appearing Corbett over the gawky, balding Fitzsimmons. Corbett had visited Yale and received a letter bearing the school’s blue silk pennant, which he hung in his corner in the southeast of the ring. He claimed that the Yale flag was the most prized token he had received. Bat Masterson had initially touted Corbett but later advised that Fitzsimmons would prevail. Earp had laid everything on Corbett, leaving the former lawman to hedge his bets during the seventh round. Fitz had backers among his native countrymen who worked in the mines in Grass Valley and the Comstock. Miners of Irish descent stood for Corbett, and he wore the colors of Ireland and the United States in the ring against Fitzsimmons.  

The preparations for the championship, from building the arena to training incidents and learning the particular favorite of the mining population and Ivy leaguers, had garnered so much press that even the tickets earned a few columns of newsprint. Sam Crescenzo Sr. of Austin, Nevada, had the first ticket sold—Right A, Row A, seat number one. The price paid by state senator George Ernst, who had voted against the bill

p. 2; and George T. Pardy, “The Slugging Blacksmith,” *Street and Smith’s Sport Story Magazine*, August 2, 1937, p. 60.

legalizing the event, for Cresenzo’s pass was twenty dollars. Admission prices ranged from five dollars for the perches farthest from the ring, about 150 feet and seventeen rows up, to forty dollars for the private boxes closest to the action. In describing the tickets, one writer compared them positively to a “finely executed Government greenback.” Governor Sadler’s entrance permit was a special affair: A ticket printed for the Corbett-Mitchell fight of 1895 with “Governor’s Box” handwritten on it. From chairs occupied by the reporters pressed against the ring to the cheap seats in the top tier benches, the assemblage anticipated a memorable fight.39

Ticket holders who were less familiar with the sport than others clutched small cards displaying the Marquis of Queensberry rules on one side and an advertisement for Trib, a locally made liniment marketed at athletes, on the other. The rules on the promotional cards did not contain modifications created by Siler for article two of the Queensberry rules. The referee did not want to chance the fight being won on a foul, so the fighters could hit with one arm in clinches and on breakaways, which did not appeal to Fitz. This change is another example of the loose institutional regulation of the sport and the importance of the referee in administering decisions. Rule cards were also available at bookstores for five cents. Other fans toyed with miniature boxing gloves, shamrocks, or other novelties hawked by vendors. As the day warmed from the chilly morning to the afternoon, spectators shed their coats and other articles of clothing, which began to pile up in the aisles.40

Morning Appeal, February 15, 1897, p. 3; and “Woman in a New and Bad Light,” New York World, March 18, 1896, p. 3.
39 “Austin First,” Reese River (Austin, Nev.) Reveille, February 27, 1897, p. 3; “Box Sheet Open,” Reese River (Austin, Nev.) Reveille, February 25, 1897, p. 3.
40 Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 16, 1897, p. 2; “The Rules of the Fight,” Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 12, 1897, p. 3; Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal,
The composition of the crowd at the fight and those milling about the proceedings perhaps best reveals the level of respectability prizefighting had attained in America by March 17, 1897. The people present at the fight reflected the western region of the United States. Former Kansas senator John J. Ingalls saw in the “huge bowl” amphitheater “average American citizens, miners, merchants, farmers, cowboys, ranchman, lawyers, with some toughs and crooks.”

Miners from the Comstock and farm families wandered about inside and outside the arena. Newspapermen from local and national papers were present, and Governor Sadler and his son observed the mill from a box obscured by the three cameras filming the event.

Standing in sharp contrast to the gentility lent by state officials were more than fifty lawmen, including Bat Masterson, Pinkerton detectives, regional police, and local law enforcement, who patrolled the crowd of roughly six thousand to keep the thugs and crooks in line. Although he ran gaming operations in Denver, Masterson was never far from a big fight, where he acted as both sporting man and gunman. Masterson may have attended in an official capacity, but Wyatt Earp, who took in the fight from a box a few rows back from the ring, attended solely as a sportsman to enjoy the spectacle.

March 17, 1897, p. 2; and “Fitzsimmons in 14 Rounds,” Carson City (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 18, 1897, p. 1.

“As Seen by John James Ingalls,” Chicago Tribune, March 18, 1897, p. 2; “The Eve of the Battle,” Carson City (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 17, 1897, p. 3.


George Siler, “Details of the Fight,” Chicago Tribune, March 18, 1897, p. 3; J. G. Mansfield, “Corbett Clearly Too Brash,” San Francisco Examiner, March 18, 1897, p. 4; George Siler, “Both Men are on the Edge,” Chicago Tribune, March 14, 1897, p. 3; “Detectives to Shadow the Crooks,” Chicago Tribune, March 17, 1897, p. 2; “The Eve of the Battle,” Carson City (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 17, 1897, p. 3. Alfred Doten estimated a crowd of between six and seven thousand; other sources reported between five and eight thousand. Doten, Journals of Alfred Doten, p. 1946. For more on
At least a few women, some more respectable than others, watched the contest. Women had repeatedly demonstrated their interest in prizefighting, and their fervor peaked for Corbett and Fitzsimmons. Never one to dismiss an opportunity for the sake of convention, promoter Dan Stuart sponsored a Ladies Day at the pavilion on the sixteenth. According to a Carson City reporter, most of the women in town inspected the site that afternoon. Given that women enjoyed watching the fighters, particularly the well-formed Corbett, train prior to the match, fight observers had anticipated their presence at ringside. On the day of the battle, journalist Alfred Doten saw twenty or thirty women in the audience. The headwear of the female fans stands out among the men’s boaters, hombergs, and stetsons in photographs of the fight. Some women belonged to the “peroxide blonde order,” and, according to one witness, were “not particularly difficult to classify.” Among those women outside this category were Fitzsimmons’s wife Rose, stage performer Ida Fuller, and local reporter Nellie Davis.44

Women were not the only minority who invested themselves in the phenomenon in Nevada. Local Native Americans were also visible during the festivities. At a train stop in Wells, Nevada, ex-champion John L. Sullivan greeted a group of Indians led by Runaway Horse, who had reportedly traveled one hundred miles to meet him. Dave Numana, whom Doten introduced to Stuart as “Chief of all the Piute [sic] tribe,” received a ticket to the match. An unnamed Paiute traveled to visit Fitzsimmons at his training quarters. The pugilist favored the man with conversation and an invitation to come in to

Masterson and boxing, see Robert K. DeArment, Bat Masterson: The Man and The Legend (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979). 44 Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 17, 1897, p. 3; Doten, Journals of Alfred Doten, p. 1947; Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, February 13, 1897, p. 3; W. W. Naughton, “Jim Tells His Weight,” Chicago Tribune, March 1, 1897, p. 3; and W. W. Naughton, ed., The
his house for drink, which observers barely prevented. If he had offered the “forbidden
tanglefoot,” he would have been guilty of a jailable offense. The visitor did leave with a
new dollar coin, a souvenir from his gracious host. “Stolid” Paiutes and “somnolent”
Washoes wondered among the crowds in the days before the fight. Reporters contrasted
the Indians with the Chinese, who were “chattering like magpies.”

Children also took a keen interest in the contest. Charles Lynch, described in a
contemporary newspaper account as “our friend, Chas. Lynch, a colored boy,” collected
souvenirs from the fight. He had two of the Trib pocket cards with the Marquis of
Queensberry printed on them. Lynch also kept a scrapbook devoted to boxing, which
included editorial cartoons humorously depicting the outcome of the fight.

The crowd at the pavilion indicates that public boxing matches held an appeal that
reached far beyond working-class white men. That cohort often bore the brunt of
criticism for popularizing prizefighting. The fight and gamblers certainly filled the
stands, but a festival atmosphere clearly brought together a wide range of society to
participate in the day. In that regard, Corbett and Fitzsimmons were a strangely
democratizing force.

The sun that shined so clearly the morning of the seventeenth, replacing the snow
and wind of the preceding weeks, boded well for a good fight that afternoon. The day’s

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*Sullivan Arrives,* *New York World,* March 17, 1897, p. 2; *Journals of Alfred Doten,*
pp. 1946–1947; “The Box Sheet Open,” *Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal,* February 25,
1897, p. 3; Ogden Switch, “A Sensible View,” *Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal,* February
10, 1897, p. 2; W. W. Naughton, “Jim Tells His Weight,” *Chicago Tribune,* March 1,
1897, p. 3; and Siler and Houseman, *The Fight of the Century,* 32.

*Untitled Clipping,* Ephemera 99-61/2, Charles Lynch Ephemera; Queensberry Rules,
Ephemera 99-61/2, Charles Lynch Ephemera; and Scrapbook 99-61/1, Charles Lynch
Ephemera, SC-UNR.
events started at about 10:30 with a parade of pugilistic stars challenging the winner.

Overweight and out of shape, John L. Sullivan made his offer, representatives of Australian Joe Goddard made theirs, and Tom Sharkey followed them.

Shortly before noon, the principles appeared in their robes and made their way to the ring. Fitz left his dressing room in a pink and blue robe for the ring at 11:59, kissed Rose at her ringside box, and climbed through the ropes. Corbett followed in a drab-colored robe two minutes later. Under his robe, Fitz wore small dark blue trunks with a belt decorated with small American flags. Corbett, sporting skimpy green trunks that exposed much of his backside, wore a red, white, and blue belt and a green buckle and rosette. Both men wore thin-soled shoes with socks rolled over the tops. In the ring, Siler shook hands with each fighter. Fitzsimmons now boldly refused to shake with Corbett. Dr. Simeon Lemuel Lee then checked their pulses and examined the gloves. Madden addressed the audience, reminding them to “keep order,” before introducing Fitzsimmons and Corbett. After having their gloves put on—Fitz’s were pea green—testing the ropes and pads, removing their robes, and conferring with Siler, the fighters quickly unleashed the collected energy of three years’ anticipation.47

Both men displayed their strengths in the first five rounds. Fitz fought aggressively, breaking his thumb in the first. Corbett ducked and feinted early but landed solid hits as the pace picked up in the third and fourth rounds. Both men tried to gain an advantage in clinches and after breaking away, Fitz found space to smile and throw glances at his wife. Gentleman Jim drew first blood in the fifth with a shot to the face that

broke open Fitz’s lower lip and another that gashed a wound behind his right ear. Corbett looked to have the best of the gore-encrusted Fitz as the gong sounded at the end of the round.48

In the sixth, Fitz’s blood flowed freely as he tried to strike blows in a clinch. Corbett worked his advantage, landing uppercuts on his opponent’s face and short hits on his body. Finally a right connected solidly with Fitz’s mouth, making him reel. To avoid a heavy swing, Fitz clinched but he continued to take punishment. As Corbett freed himself from a clinch, he landed a blow that burst open more of Fitz’s face and knocked the challenger down to his right knee. Corbett pulled back his bloody glove, but did not return to his corner for the count. According to Corbett, referee Siler started his count late, and Fitzsimmons crouched on the ground for more than the ten seconds required to score a victory by technical knockout. Observers overheard Corbett exhorting Siler to count faster, which Siler later substantiated. Freckled Bob righted himself at the count of nine, and Corbett did not pursue the attack. Siler noted that he had devised a new timing system that he first instituted in the fight that day. Timekeeper William Muldoon would yell out the count while moving his hand up and down in time. The advantage was that the count could be seen if not heard. When the fight film was shown in New York, Corbett’s manager had the projection speed slowed to make the count appear to last thirteen seconds. Patrons who did not understand how the technology could manipulate the film believed the “proof.” This discussion, however, was academic; the men carried on into the middle rounds.49

48 Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 18, 1897, pp. 1, 2. Complete round-by-round accounts of the fight are widely available in the major newspapers of the day.  
49 Corbett, Roar of the Crowd, 263; “ Wanted the Advantage,” Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 20, 1897, p. 3; George Siler, Inside Facts on Pugilism (Chicago: Laird
Fitz predicted that he, despite the odds and educated guesses, would win in the seventh round with a left-hand punch to the body. He did abuse the champion’s body in the seventh, and regained momentum after he suffered in the sixth. Feinting, wild swings, and clinching characterized the eighth round. Although he was a dripping red mess, Fitz seemed the stronger of the two. Tired now, both men continued to swing and clinch. Between rounds, Fitz’s red-sweatered seconds had their red satin edged fans at the ready keep him comfortable while other trainers sponged away the gore. During the ninth, Corbett had to spit two bloody teeth to the canvas. The awkward Fitz revised his calculation for the finish from the seventh to the fourteenth round after Madden rang the gong, announcing the end of the thirteenth. Corbett had now lost some of his composure.

By this point, fans near the ring would have heard Rose as she yelled with abandon at ringside. Corbett remembered her acting as an official second to her husband, and he later remarked that she acquitted herself well in that stead. One observer reported that she screamed at his seconds “You idiots . . . Do as I tell you now or I will make you wish you had.” The local press supported that description, according her the rank of “Director General” and advising that she knew more about boxing than all of her husband’s seconds put together. She, or possibly another raucous female fight fan, shouted encouragement, unabashedly urging Fitzsimmons to “hit [Corbett] in the slats.” Corbett recalled hearing those words and described the woman making that exclamation

as a “big, blonde, and very excited woman, her hair loose, hat jammed down over one ear, the blood from Fitz spattering her own face.”

In the fourteenth, Fitz marched to the center of the ring with confidence while Corbett’s vigor appeared to have faded. After Corbett landed a quick left, Fitz began to pound his opponent’s face and head with both hands. They exchanged hooks and uppercuts before clinching. After breaking away, the balding, gangly Fitzsimmons shifted his right foot forward and shot a left to the stomach just below the heart. Corbett crumpled. He could not rise until well past the ten-count. Siler reached down and touched Corbett’s shoulder to let him know that it was over.

Fitz, unaware that he was the victor, socked his second Jack Stelzner, who had entered the ring, in the gut to launch him back behind the ropes. Siler thought that the new champion worried that he would be disqualified for having another man in the ring during the fight. Although the match had ended, Corbett in a daze tried to continue punching, but Fitz did not engage him. Seconds and partisans were more than willing, however, to try and land a few kicks and windmill punches on their enemies. A local reporter observed that participants in the melee, including Pinkerton detectives, had drawn guns. “The touch of a trigger,” he wrote, “[would] make the place a powder mill.” Corbett later claimed that he was only trying to shake Fitzsimmons’s hand. A famous exchange then ensued:

Corbett: You’ll have to fight me again.

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Fitzsimmons: I’ll never fight you again, Jim. You gave me a bloodly good lickin’.

Corbett: You’ll have to fight me again, or I’ll lick you everytime I meet you on the street!

Fitzsimmons: Jim, if you ever hit me I’ll shoot you.55

Upon his victory, Fitz leaned through the ropes and kissed his wife, “leaving a little group of red stains upon her trembling lips.” Or he at least shook her hand.56

In a far less romantic version of events described by Wyatt Earp, Rose was actually prepared to draw Corbett’s blood rather than receive a loving smear of her husband’s. Although the new champion backed down from striking Corbett in the confusion after the fight, Rose came through the ropes to take his place against the deposed man. The intervention of Earp, whom Fitzsimmons’s manager and brother-in-law Martin Julian called over to escort Rose from the ring and protect her from harm, spared her further violence and almost certain scandal. After the excitement abated, Earp returned to Fitz’s corner to make amends: “Bob, I’m your friend now.”57

In just under an hour, Corbett had lost the crown he had worn since 1892, as well as two of his teeth. When the defeated Corbett left the arena, he threw himself onto his cot and cried. His brother Joe admonished him to act like a man.

54 Corbett, Roar of the Crowd, 266.
55 Ibid., 266–67. Naughton supplies similar language in his telling of the encounter. Naughton, Kings of the Queensberry Realm, 256–57.
56 Davis, Ruby Robert, 63. The San Francisco Examiner also reported the red kiss. “Lanky Bob is Champion of the World,” San Francisco Examiner, March 18, 1897, p. 4.
57 Wyatt Earp, “Corbett Hasn’t a 1 to 10 Chance,” New York World, March 18, 1897, p. 4.
The victor was in only slightly better shape. Dr. Lee had to stitch up Fitz’s lip and see to his broken thumb. At his wife’s urging, the new champion claimed he would retire, proclaiming, “I met the enemy and he is mine.”

Outside the ring, Governor Sadler and Sheriff Kinney found no ill effects in the immediate aftermath. Sadler reaffirmed his view that the fight was an advertisement for the state when he said that the people who came would return to their homes speaking enthusiastically of the mines at Virginia City and well of Nevada in general. In his assessment, his state “rose nobly to the occasion.” He also reminded people that boxing matches were preferable to college football. For his part, the sheriff reported that the audience was orderly and that the crimes in the city, including a murder, were not the byproduct of the visiting crowd. As civic representatives, the men necessarily made statements that evaded the boxcars full of hobos shipped away and the scramble to regulate the sudden influx of gamblers and pick pockets.

The national news wires crackled with round-by-round results, despite the efforts of the U.S. Congress to prohibit the transmission of prizefight details. Tens of thousands of expectant fans in major cities encircled news tickers and results boards outside newspaper offices. The New York World set up manikins that men manipulated to replay the exchange of blows as the bulletins came through. The Battery D Amory and the Cylcorama in Chicago entertained fans eagerly waiting reports off the wire, while thousands gathered at Tattersall’s exhibition hall to hear the results while they watched

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58 “Fitzsimmons in 14 Rounds,” Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 18, 1897, p. 2; and Naughton, Kings of the Queensberry Realm, 257, 260.
59 “As Seen by Gov. Sadler,” San Francisco Examiner, March 18, 1897, p. 8; and “Didn’t Hurt the State,” Los Angeles Times, March 19, 1897, p. 2; and Naughton, Fight of the Century, 15.
women participate in a six-day cycling race. The *San Francisco Examiner* assured its readers that a team of carrier pigeons would fly the news the 275 miles from Carson City to San Francisco should the telegraph fail. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* combined boxing with another major sport of the day, horseracing, to bring their audience the fastest coverage. Messengers ran from the ringside to jockeys awaiting news atop Evans, Soning, and Sheriff, who sprinted to the telegraph offices in forty-eight seconds. Stuart charged $2.50 admission every time a messenger came into the arena. He understood that the profit was not in the outcome of the fight but in controlling the spread of the results. The information about the fight was at least as valuable a commodity as the event.  

For the first time, the analysis of a boxing match did not depend solely on the opinions of eyewitnesses. With the recent advent of motion photography, audiences across the nation could see the spectacle and draw their own conclusions. Stuart, the fighters, their managers, and reporters seized the moment and gained a new revenue stream that could increase the appeal of professional boxing to fans and potential fighters. Fight films multiplied reformers’ problems by the number of audiences that could see the film. As with the actual fights, reformers petitioned the state and federal government to lop off the many heads of this new monster.

One year after the swift action of Congress that made prizefighting illegal in the territories, H.R. 10369 wended its way through committee. “Transition by Mail or

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60 U.S. Congress. House. Transmission by mail or interstate commerce of picture or any description of prize fight. 54th Cong., 2d sess., 1897. H.R. 3046.

Interstate Commerce of Picture or any Description of Prize Fights” (H.R.10369) reinforced the federal government’s commitment to eliminating deleterious practices. The report from the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce on H.R. 10369 listed prizefighting along with dueling, lotteries, polygamy, slavery, and divorce. Only intemperance and prostitution were absent from this line-up of the late-nineteenth century’s most infamous crimes against morality and American character. “More advanced States,”—those that had forbidden pugilism—needed the protection of the federal government from the “degrading sport.”62

This language revealed that Washington, D.C., ordered states not only by size, wealth, or racial content, but also by their proclivity for national values. The Committee insinuated that morally rebellious states could threaten the union of the nation. Utah and the struggle over polygamy certainly qualified as a contemporary example of that outlook. Congress may have had an identifiable agenda to fight moral degradation but it left open loopholes that subverted its programs.

Within the text of the report on H.R. 10369 was the hole through which poured the very substance the congress tried to stop. Newspapers, probably the primary source of information for most Americans, could report on a fight as a “matter of news.”63 The authors of the bill failed to disclose the criteria that separated the iniquitous prizefight from the newsworthy. They did make a distinction between the reputable press, which described prizefights on the basis of competition, and the unnamed other, probably the National Police Gazette and the like, which promoted and venerated the sport.

62 U.S. Congress. House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, Transmission by Mail or Interstate Commerce of Picture or any Description of Prize Fight, 54th Cong., 2d sess., 1897, H. Rep. 3046.
63 Ibid.
Newspapers could treat readers, including those who despised boxing, to round-by-round accounts of big fight. In this way, Congress planned to allow the proliferation of the vice it expended time and energy to erase.

Engaging in the fight guaranteed Corbett and Fitzsimmons each a share of the twenty-thousand-dollar purse and the chance to benefit from large side bets, but the profit for all parties lay in the film. Three veriscope cameras in four separate boxes set up in the southern end of the arena churned out over eleven thousand feet of film, capturing each of the fourteen rounds. Contemporaries, who did not always keep pace with the speed of technology, continued to refer to kinetoscopes when filmmaker Enoch Rector had improved on Thomas Edison’s technology with the veriscope. Siler told Stuart that “moving pictures” was the only way he was going to make any money. Stuart did secure the film rights, taking half the profits and leaving the remaining half for Corbett and Fitz to divide between them.64

The film of the fight played just about everywhere, even in locations were the actual fight could not. The Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight premiered at New York’s Academy of Music in May. Engagements ran in Dallas among other places that refused the fight in three dimensions. Small towns, like the agricultural community of Bakersfield in central California, were as viable a market for Stuart and the other principals as the major urban areas. The success of the film proved that Americans did want to see prizefights.65

Advance publicity for the film brought denouncement and action from states and another country. Canadian officials immediately barred Corbett-Fitzsimmons by making the exhibition of prizefight films a misdemeanor. In Illinois, state representative William O. La Monte, a “peaceful man . . . of the Republican faith,” did not want the film to shame his state. He proposed a bill prohibiting the display, which might “degrade, corrupt, and injure the morals of the citizens of this State,” specifically those morals of young men and children. That women might be in the theater as well seemed not to enter Williams’s mind.66

The reformers were no more sanguine about the replay of the fight than they were about the live version. Moralists lobbied local and state governments to prohibit the film from showing in theaters. Film historian Dan Streible has argued that Stuart organized such a successful campaign for the film that authorities did not censor it. Stuart’s promotional efforts included reports that women, the keepers of morality, had attended the film. Those people who deplored the sport might have expected to use the intense reportage to support their argument against the sickening brutality but not all the evidence was damning.67

The degree of violence at the boxing match was not as high as some critics anticipated. Although the two men mashed each other and blood flowed freely, the reality was less than the expectation for at least one observer. That disappointment fostered the criticism that prizefights were not brutal enough. For former Kansas senator John J. Ingalls, the fact that the violence was premeditated seemed to be the most irritating aspect of the event, and the gap between reality and imagination left a negative impression.

Although he founded his original disdain for prizefighting in the common rhetoric that it was brutal and morally evil, his ongoing disregard stemmed from a nearly reversed evaluation.

He began his narrative for the Chicago Tribune by contrasting the popularity of Pres. William McKinley’s inauguration with the coronation of Fitzsimmons. In terms of news consumption, the public seemed to favor celebrating the victor of bloody coup to the induction of democratically elected leader. Siler remarked that more news chronicling the prizefight crossed the country on March 17 than the ceremony of the presidential inauguration on 4 March. Ingalls compared the atmosphere in Carson City to that of the conclusion of presidential campaign. Most of the crowd was men under thirty. All strata of society had representatives, although the clergy may have been in costume. Orators debated one of the great questions of the day.\textsuperscript{68}

The senator concluded that the whole spectacle had the air of theater, and, with several dismissive comments, he declared that the performance was not one he needed to take in again. The fighters were “grotesque” in their breechcloths, stockings, and flat-soled shoes, and he compared the duel to a “comic opera.” He felt that neither Corbett nor Fitz seemed particularly anxious to hit the other: “The object apparently was to avoid rather than inflict injury.” The gladiators’ prophylactic methods minimized any possible sense of danger. The tameness of the whole affair in and out of the ring led Ingalls to resolve that no man’s or woman’s morals could ever be imperiled by the prosaic industry of prizefighting. His response to prizefighting in 1897 was far more sanguine that it was in 1891, when he declared the sport “the very worst, the most dangerous, spoke in Anglo-

Saxon progression” and that women who watched the mills “must possess hearts of singular callousness.” His commentary in 1897 intimated his disappointment that the combat was not brutal enough. Professional boxing was as rough as it had been earlier in the decade, although a greater emphasis on defense did exist. Was Ingalls truly inured to it or was he pandering to an audience that was rabid for it? His flippant analysis elevated him above the average fans who loved the sport without impugning their moral character, allowing him to appeal to a broad spectrum of readers and retain his status as a statesman.69

Despite Ingalls’s analysis, the hazards and brutality of the sport quickly resurfaced. Two days after Fitzsimmons knocked Corbett to the canvas, reporters invoked the now-famous solar plexus punch when Edward Gibbons died after a sparring match with Samuel S. Perry in Philadelphia. The blow that felled him “was similar to the one that knocked out Corbett.” Police arrested Perry and principals from the Tenth Ward Democratic Club.70 Even as men like Ingalls testified that the imagined evils inherent in Corbett boxing Fitzsimmons were actually toothless, this report made Fitz once again the specter of boxing death and refueled anti-boxing activists.

Although witnesses minimized the viciousness of the fight and tried to compare it favorably to bullfighting and college football, no evidence appeared to shake the faith of prizefighting opponents who stressed its basic brutality. The pervasive round-by-round accounts that appeared in newspapers across the country rarely skimmed on the grisly

68 “Ingalls on Fights,” Chicago Tribune, March 17, 1897, p. 1; and “Siler Praises Fitz’s Gameness,” Chicago Tribune, March 18, 1897, p. 2.
details. In Nevada’s favor, the fight produced buckets of blood, and only one murderer among the thousands of visitors to Carson City in March 1897. Although the death count was low and few people were worse for the wear, Nevada still faced intense national scrutiny as Americans articulated biases and assumptions about each other in the context of the fight.

Nevada’s choice to legalize the sport stimulated a broad public conversation about differences in American society that debaters often couched in terms of sectional East and West. Both sides employed sectional language but westerners addressed the entire East more than easterners would use the term to describe themselves. The eastern press focused chiefly on Nevada State rather than the entire western region. The prizefight was an opportunity for the western states to debate the East about its conceit and hypocrisy, and a host of other issues. Local newsmen in Nevada gleefully castigated eastern states for their moral duplicity concerning prizefighting. Nevada’s defenders, including the state’s citizens, shielded their decision at every turn. In the process, they also claimed a particularly western American identity for themselves.

Opinions condemning Nevada for legalizing boxing for money poured in to newspapers across the nation. National conversation reflected at the state level the growing class distinctions among Americans. One Massachusetts editorialist noted that Nevada had “won the reputation of being the lowest in the rank of intelligence and decency among American States.” Decency apparently outranked solvency. Westerners leveled their own charges aimed particularly at New England.  


71 “As Others See Us,” *Boston Advertiser*, reprinted in the *Nevada State Journal* (Reno), February 19, p. 2
The great bastion of reform and morality was a favorite target of Nevada’s newsmen. The *Carson City Appeal* framed the passage of the glove-contest bill as a snub of East, the “land of the goldbug and the money shark, and the ‘old and effete East,’ the mythical seat of culture and refinement and morality.” How could a region that glorifies brutal football question the morality of western states, asked the author of a column entitled “A Sensible View”? The *Reno Gazette*, although less vociferous in the fight’s defense than the Carson papers, also stood up to the hypocrisy of the rest of nation. In an especially cutting column, one editor noted, “The Southern States have the latest styles in lynchings, but not one of them would tolerate a prize fight.”

Economic-minded observers expressed sectional resentment during the period of the debate. This writer did not equivocate about the disparity between East and West and the true source of the divide:

If Congress would favor Nevada one-hundredth part as much as it does New England, there would be no cause for complaint about its scant population. . . . If New England was treated as Nevada is by the General Government, it would not have ten inhabitants to the square mile, and Boston would be abandoned to the owls and bats.  

Rumor had it that Nevada was the victim of a major western state as well. Hearsay accused California men of manipulating neighboring Nevada’s government. Circulating through the state was story that an officer of the Southern Pacific Railroad

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and the Western Union telegraph company contributed over one hundred thousand dollars to aid the passage of the licensing bill. Given the legislation’s relative popularity in Nevada, only twenty thousand dollars were needed to achieve that goal. Each company had a respective monopoly on services to Carson City. The reporters and fans would have only one choice to reach the contest and get their stories out. Western Union also enjoyed the advantage of the nation’s committed gamblers. The telegraph company exclusively controlled the round-by-round bulletins that would reach the bars, poolrooms, and hotels across the nation and for which it would charge twenty dollars in advance. Although no proof emerged, the Nevada press flogged the theme of the state as a victim of power and wealth.74

The collected group of fight fans, curious and knowledgeable women, and national newsmen often gave the impression in print that the state of Nevada was exceptionally western. The locals embraced that identity, and they fixated on their reputation for violence. Murder, rape, theft, knife fights, and arson had been part of everyday life on the Comstock. That type of violence may have slackened but the citizens apparently had scarcely softened.75 One argument ran that while people in Nevada might enjoy a prizefight, the state was hardly overrun with hoodlums and bullies who picked on the weak and vulnerable. The revolver ensured that people in Nevada actively defended themselves. Western violence, symbolized by the revolver, actually prevented Nevada

74 “Can This Be True?” Reese River (Austin, Nev.) Reveille, March 13, 1897, p. 2; and Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, February 20, 1897, p. 2.
75 Bryan Lorenzo Lucero, “Horse Thieves, Hoodlums, and Hanging Judges: Crime and Punishment on the Nevada Frontier, 1855–1878,” (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 2002). Scholars who argue that the western frontier was not a violent as legend suggests include W. Eugene Hollon, Frontier Violence: Another Look (New York:
from suffering from the petty crime that plagued the East. That reasoning insinuated that easterners could improve their society, not through gentle reform, but with the threat of immediate physical penalty for bad behavior.76

Even if Nevada had adopted an identity more reformed than that of wholesome western territory, personalities at the fight and historical memory would have conspired against it. Bat Masterson arrived in Carson City on the March 15 as a hired gun, commanding Pinkerton detectives to keep violence from erupting outside the ring, with assistance from local law enforcement and the chief of the San Francisco detectives. Their other task was to keep audience members from breaking Stuart’s monopoly on images from the fight by patrolling for cameras. In that role, they defended corporate interests as well as public welfare. Of all the appellations that famed Masterson could have worn, the Reno Evening Gazette gave him “pugilistic celebrity,” but he did win part of his fame by hanging around prizefights with a ready pen and pad. Masterson was transitioning from western lawman to sportswriter and had long followed the fight game. He reportedly put up half of the ten thousand dollars that Fitz needed to meet the conditions of the articles of agreement for his fight with Corbett. Masterson’s past followed him to Carson City: a concerned citizen warned Governor Sadler to look out for Masterson, for he belonged to the Wyatt Earp gang.77

76 “Nevada’s Defenders,” Caron (Nev.) Morning Appeal, February 9, 1897, p. 2. 
77 Reno (Nev.) Evening Gazette, March 15, 1897, p. 3; “Detectives to Shadow the Crooks,” Chicago Tribune, March 17, 1897, p. 2; “Who Put it Up,” Caron (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 23, 1897, p. 3; and [J. C.?] Bo[u?]field to Reinhold Sadler, March 1, 1897, folder 21, box 2, Governor Sadler Incoming Correspondence, Executive Records, Nevada State Library and Archives, Carson City [hereafter GS, NSLA].
Earp, known as sporting man by the turn of the century, still inspired gossip as a crafty gunslinger. He had arrived in Carson City in the company of Sharkey, the beneficiary of his foul call, on the March 15. His hotly contested decision led one commentator to suggest that in the upcoming match, any man who entered the ring with a gun on his hip would be quickly removed. After the scuffle in the ring following the fourteenth round, Earp, by his own account, offered his friendship to Fitzsimmons.\textsuperscript{78} Time and his enduring reputation had evolved the truth into a dramatic encounter better suited to the Earp legend than his own words:

The pugilist felt a cold, clammy sensation on the right side of his neck, and, glancing down, he saw the glowing barrel of a well-developed shooting-iron resting on his shoulder. Visions of death in his fighting shoes passed swiftly before the pugilist’s mind. He could feel that the gun was clasped by a muscular hand, and then he felt the arm of the gun wielder thrown about his left shoulder. . . . A voice whispered in his ear, “Keep quiet, Bob; you’re perfectly safe. The first galoot that moves a finger at you will get perforated with lead till he looks like a porous plaster. Wyatt Earp’s your friend.”\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{79} “Whose Fake Is This?” \textit{Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal}, May 9, 1897, p. 3.
In the telling, Earp wants to protect Fitz from possible danger to erase his debt for the bad call. Another report of drawn guns in the crowded confusion of the fight’s aftermath supplies a touch of reality to the western tale.\(^\text{80}\)

*The Ring* magazine ran a cover story in 1947 celebrating the golden anniversary of the contest. In the piece, Carson City was a “pioneer, border-of-civilization outpost.” The author further romanced the setting, calling it “the sort of place you read about in books about Tombstone, Arizona, and the days of Billy the Kid.” To complete the picture, “the Earp [sic] gang showed up at ringside,” although it did not effect the outcome in any way. He accorded the rough bunch more civility than the mobsters of the forties, who did not have the Earps’ “sense of sportsmanship.” The disputed decision for Sharkey was apparently forgotten. Also lost was the memory of the pistol-packed fight in Texas that really did transpire on a sparsely populated border and was the very real place described in books about the Old West.\(^\text{81}\)

Gun violence mixed with the fistic ferocity in Carson City. W. H. Smith of the new Randsburg mines in California shot Faro dealer W. F. Bradford of Anaconda, Montana, at the Magnolia saloon around nine PM during the night of the seventeenth. Doten remarked that the sharp increase in the number of gamblers and games reminded him of California in the goldrush year of 1849. Pugilist “Mysterious” Billy Smith, who boxed and lost after the main event, drew a pistol and threatened another man on a train later that night. Gunplay, famous western lawman, the extraction and cattle industries,

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\(^\text{80}\) *Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal*, March 18, 1897, p. 2.

and Nevada’s choice to buck eastern morality all added to the wild western identity that alarmed those Americans who believed that an ethic of restraint should govern society.\textsuperscript{82}

Reformers could neither stop the fight, nor destroy the fight film, but they did find a much larger target at which to fire their rhetorical salvo. One commentator opined that the citizens of the “so-called State of Nevada” should be mortified that their state existed only to support the “fightocracy.”\textsuperscript{83} As the Progressives moved forward in time and refined their tactics, they increasingly relied on the state to combat the evils they identified. A government, such as Nevada’s, supported by cancers posed a greater long-term threat to their overall reform mission than two men fighting in a ring ever could.

The ubiquitous coverage of the events from January through March invited on a grand scale negative attention that might have endangered Nevada’s existence as a state and the viability of other states undergoing similar decline. Many of those other states were in the western region. Antagonists wanted to use federal power to eradicate the immorality that they saw festering in Nevada by reducing its share in national governance. If federal legislation could target specific groups or institutions for reform, then it might also be employed to reform an entire state in a single stroke.

For Nevada, preserving and enlarging a permanent population was particularly important in political terms. The process by which territories become states outlined in the Northwest Ordinance called for a territorial population of 60,000. The exigencies of the Civil War brought Nevada into the Union in 1864 with fewer than the required number of inhabitants. The silver strike of 1859, which became the Comstock Lode, attracted hordes of mineral seekers just as the strikes in California, Colorado, Montana,

\textsuperscript{82} Journals of Alfred Doten, pp. 1947–48; and “Last Night’s Shooting,” Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal, March 18, 1897, p. 2.
Arizona, and Idaho had. As was typical for American mining frontiers, the miners and the complementary industries that they drew stayed only as long as the boom lasted. In 1890, Nevada with just over 45,000 people, a little over 25 percent fewer inhabitants in that year than in 1880, was the least populous state in the Union. The premise of a state on its deathbed ran through several opinions on the subject of Nevada’s statehood. A columnist in the Chicago Tribune suggested that Congress had the power to “deal with” a state that had few prospects and that was “flickering out.” The solution he offered was to strip Nevada and Wyoming, if improvements did not appear by 1900, of statehood. A column in the Congregationalist lamented the fact that the Constitution did not afford the power to cast out a state for encouraging prizefighting and other offenses. Another opinion stated that legalized prizefighting was insult to the injury of having too few citizens and that “the cup of Nevada’s delinquency” was now full. The author of that piece urged Congress to amend the Constitution so that a state that lost 25 percent or more of its population over a ten-year period and had fewer than the half the required number of citizens required for a single congressional representative during a twenty-year period would revert to territorial status. An alternate proposal suggested barring the state’s delegation from Congress until such time that the population increased significantly. A proponent of this course noted that Delaware earned statehood despite a low population that did not increase considerably but could not be denied, as it was one of the thirteen original colonies, and therefore part of the unassailable East.

85 “How to Deal with Nevada,” Chicago Tribune; “The Blot on the Escutcheon,” Congregationalist, March 25, 1897, p. 405; H. M. J., “The Obligations of Statehood,”
Nevada had a defender, William E. Smythe, who placed the state’s difficulties with population and productivity in a particular western regional context familiar to early inhabitants and twenty-first century denizens of the Trans-Mississippi West: aridity. He noted that 95 percent of the state was public land, but national disinterest in irrigation reform proposed by Nevada congressman Francis G. Newlands, who would succeed with the Newlands Act in 1902, had doomed any possible growth of agriculture. Corporate reconstruction or internal imperialism was one solution to dry land. Smythe suggested that “districts” might be granted to organizations, such as the Salvation Army, that “might reclaim and colonize them in cooperation with philanthropic persons.” Smythe believed that regardless of the strategy, saving Nevada should be a national project bringing together the East and the West and “developing a better understanding between the sections.” His solution to sectional conflict was not to unite East and West but have the two sections better appreciate the differences between them. Whatever the idea, people in the late nineteenth century were well aware of sectional division in culture and environment. 86

Other voices, although not as ardent as Smythe’s, came to Nevada’s aid by lessening Nevada’s degree of wickedness and evoking its patriotic heritage. One reformer in the anti-saloon camp dismissed those who attacked Nevada as being blind to liquor, the real foundation of evil. Prizefighting, he claimed, ruins only one man for one hundred that the saloon “brutalizes.” The Washington Post ran that opinion piece and reprinted from the Omaha World-Herald another that tried to recall a legacy for Nevada as the

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Battle Born state, referring to the idea that Nevada earned statehood to secure Abraham Lincoln’s reelection in 1864. A moderate observer pointed out that the press was at fault for promoting fistic contests while it also cynically printed screeds against them. The Nevada legislature, although disgraceful in action, was at least “manly” in intention and had not joined in the hypocrisy of the effete eastern press.87

The West may not have been “good,” but at least it was honest. Measuring which was more important in the Progressive Era is difficult. The values of these two ideals, one symbolized by a state characterized by its “westernness” and the other most strongly represented by voices from eastern states, came into conflict over prizefighting. Sectional differences that arose from so many other facets of American life had yet another outlet that encapsulated not only cultural divergences, but economic and environmental dissimilarities. Despite the spirited tone of attack and able defense, nothing came of weeks of public debate, and outraged Americans turned their attention to other social, political, and economic ills that required constitutional amendments or local reform.

Nevada did not care whether critics thought it morally “good” but whether the state had successfully advertised itself to prospective residents. The barrage of condemnation did not dissuade newcomers who seemed to value land and opportunity over propriety. Several letters referring to the big mill arrived in the offices of the governor from the end of January to late March 1897. The contents of those communications revealed divided results on the use of prizefighting as a promotional tool for a state.

Irate Americans clearly stated their position on the downward direction of Nevada. From Massachusetts came a letter chastising Sadler for contributing to the demoralization of young men and judging “the whole affair disgusting in the extreme.” A man from Prescott, Arizona, compared Governor Sadler to Nero watching Rome as it burned with the fuel of his own kindling and also made parallels between Sadler and Nero as he fed Christians to the lions. While the point that Sadler willfully seeded the possible destruction of his state may be apt, the comparison to Nero is perhaps less suitable. The economic status of Nevada was already in deep decline, and Sadler’s swift approval of the prizefighting bill suggests he was looking to improve the state, not intentionally destroy it.  

Most missives to the governor did not contain tidings like the one comparing Nevada to the Roman Empire; rather they were evidence that the coming fight was directly serving the state’s broader purpose. “By seeing so much in the papers about the fight I would like some information as to your state,” wrote a man from St. Louis interested in a new home for his family. Sadler himself earned praise. A lawyer in Cincinnati, whose business had become “dull,” queried Sadler about job prospects in Nevada after getting “most favorable impression of [Sadler] through the daily papers.”

The press from the contest did secure at least one prominent citizen for Nevada. Edwin Ewing Roberts came to see the fight and stayed to be a schoolteacher. He then became a lawyer and later served as a congressman. Citizens elected him mayor of Reno.

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territorial and early statehood period, see Political History of Nevada, 10th ed. (Carson City, Nev.: State Printing Office, 1997).
88 J. W. Otis to Reinhold Sadler, March 18, 1897, folder 21, box 2, GS, NSLA; and H. Leonard to Reinhold Sadler, March 18, 1897, folder 21, box 2, GS, NSLA.
89 B. F. Brunk to Reinhold Sadler, February 22, 1897, folder 20, box 2, GS, NSLA; and E. R. Van Martels to Reinhold Sadler, February 25, 1897, GP, NSLA;
in 1923. In that post, he opposed temperance, putting self-serve barrels of whiskey on street corners. In the person of Roberts, the fight created an intangibly valuable legacy for Nevada. While the overall goal of increasing permanent population was not met, a few people did move to Nevada on the basis of one fight’s national coverage.  

Population statistics offer concrete evidence that the free promotional press accompanying legalized prizefighting did not bring hordes of permanent settlers. The federal census counted only 42,335 people in the Nevada in 1900, a decrease of about 6 percent from 1890. An occasional prizefight of international importance was hardly enough to reverse the effects of the decline of industries that employed people year round.

“The battle, undoubtedly, was the most important and the most talked of in American history of the ring.” Widely respected sportswriter and boxing referee George Siler made that proclamation about Corbett-Fitzsimmons. The sportswriters certainly spoke and wrote countless words about every aspect of the fight, from the supposed long count on Fitzsimmons to the exact effects and legality of the solar plexus punch. Yet Siler’s statement contained more truth than he perhaps intended. Americans spoke of the battle as a test of the nation’s commitment to standards of class behavior; prizefighting became a vehicle to raise Nevada’s economic condition, and inquiries about the state arrived; other states reconsidered their own negative stand on the sport as Nevada experimented with a model to reap economic benefits from it; women’s voices, veiled as they were, entered the growing body of the sportswriting chorus; after the

everyone went home, the film of the fight became one the highest grossing products in the early era of moving pictures.

Although the masses did not materialize in the expected numbers, trainloads of spectators rolled into town, and prominent national newspapers opened temporary satellite offices in Carson City. Most importantly, people from other states became interested in relocating to Nevada. The state also won the opportunity to host future fights that would improve its tourist industry and that helped to secure the immediate future of the Far West as the capital for major championship matches.

After a delay of three years, the celebrated boxers had at last found a place that embraced not middle-class prerogatives of the citizenry of other states but the undeniable popularity of their sport and the revenues that it could create. So many contests were heralded as “The Fight of the Century” in the early decades of the gloved era that the term entered the sports fan’s lexicon. The showdown in Carson City, where Bob Fitzsimmons finally won the crown from Jim Corbett, actually lived up to the name. Thirteen years later Nevada would host another famous “Fight of the Century,” Jack Johnson vs. Jim Jeffries, but not before trying to join respectable society with a bill to make prizefighting a felony. Fortunately for the sporting world but perhaps not for white America’s’ sense of moral superiority, Nevada remained the nation’s prizefighting outpost, and may have gained even greater notoriety for the lightweight title fight between Joe Gans and Oscar “Battling” Nelson in Goldfield in 1906 than it did for its first foray into glove-contests in 1897. For the centennial celebration of Corbett vs. Fitzsimmons, the state Senate honored licensed prize fighting, “which has been gloriously

successful beyond the imaginations of its initiators,” by declaring 1997 “Nevada’s Centennial Year of Championship Gloved Competitions.”

In the process of licensing and staging the World Heavyweight Championship match between Corbett and Fitzsimmons, Nevada’s citizens engaged and defied the tide of progressive change rushing over the nation and mounted a discourse that affirmed its position as a western state at the mercy of the eastern establishment. The state’s bold posture joined other states in all regions in the controversy over national morality. Some Nevadans saw and supported the bill for what it was: an expedient for bringing more people to the state. They also recognized that social mores might take a conservative turn, or that some citizens hoped they would, once the state became more settled and civilized. Partisans supporting the glove-contest bill in January 1897 agreed that the law could be abolished when it no longer served its function. The debate and resolution of Nevada’s fight to host the world heavyweight championship demonstrated that economic crisis trumped the threat of the nation’s eastern-based moral police, reaffirming that middle-class American morality was not a sweeping, unbeatable force as it climbed to the heights of its political influence.

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94 *Journal of the Senate*, 1905 “An Act to Prohibit Prize Fighting or Glove Contests, to Prescribe the Penalty Therefore, and to Repeal all other Acts or Parts of Acts,” Assembly Bill 122, 1907, Folder 36, Legislative Bills Collection, NSLA; and *Senate Daily Journal*, 69th sess., March 17, 1997, Senate Concurrent Resolution no. 20, Commemorating the 100th anniversary of boxing in the State of Nevada.

95 *Carson (Nev.) Morning Appeal*, January 27, 1897, p. 3.
The progressives needed both its social and political reformers to tackle the problems with prizefighting in New York State, where Fitzsimmons planned to defend his title.
Chapter 5

The Big Fix: Prizefighting in New York

Jacksonville, Florida; Carson City, Nevada; and even an uninhabited parcel of Mexican mud had hosted heavyweight championship fights. New Yorkers had traveled all over the United States and across its borders to see the great men of the ring defend their titles, but never had they been able to simply stay home. In 1893, for example, the combined forces of the pulpit and the newspaper had driven away Jim Corbett and Charlie Mitchell. Reformers from the “enlightened community” in Brooklyn quashed Dan Stuart’s dreams of staging Corbett’s showdown with Fitzsimmons in the mid-1890s. New York State’s Horton Law in practice legalized prizefighting from 1896 to 1900, and a fan could catch regular bouts between fighters in all weight divisions on many nights of the week. Yet New Yorkers had to wait until Bob Fitzsimmons stepped up to defend his title against James J. Jeffries in 1899 to enjoy the spectacle of a heavyweight championship in their state. That epic contest featured power, skill, endurance, and psychological strategy. After the repeal of the Horton Law in 1900, nearly an entire generation of fighters retired from the sport before New Yorkers saw another championship won at any level.

Faked bouts and dishonest political control of the fight game were the main reasons for the repeal of the Horton Law in New York. The rhetoric damning
prizefighting in the South and West had focused on the arguments that the contests were immoral, degrading, and potentially fatal. In New York, the crusade against corruption both within the sport and within the governmental bodies tasked with regulating it were the most effective facets of the anti-prizefight campaign. Although events such as Tom Sharkey’s win by foul against Fitzsimmons in San Francisco had raised alarm over fixed fights, and police purposefully ignored boxing in many states, the melding of corruption inside and outside the ring was most evident in the New York fight scene. Reformers waged the battle against prizefighting in New York by attacking on two fronts: crusaders for purity launched volleys against traditional immorality while soldiers for municipal reform marched against the political corruption tied to the sport. Prizefighting was the mutual enemy of political and social reformers in New York, and both groups had a stake in outlawing it.

The legal status of prizefighting in New York was intimately connected to the clout of opposing reformers and dishonest, entrenched public servants, and to the ability of each to win public office at the municipal level. While other states mustered armed forces to prevent prizefights in the 1890s, New York State considered legalizing contests. The East, especially New York, had the most far-reaching plans for social and political reforms, and armies of citizens devoted to their implementation, yet the most prominent statewide experiment with regulated, licensed boxing matches—not prizefights—also occurred in that region. State Democrats were the strength behind the licensing movement. Their fall from power at the end of the century corresponded with a temporary end to legal professional boxing in New York.

In New York City at the turn of the century, progress entailed much more than social or political reform. The new urban America, created by large concentrations of immigrant workers, factories, complex transportation systems, new habits of consumption, and, most importantly, massive influxes of capital, matured and transformed the centuries-old settlement. The city was the economic capital of the United States and a commercial center for the Western world. The social problems that mounted with unchecked corporate growth and immigration spurred reformers to act against old problems such as rampant alcoholism and new ills such as overcrowding in tenements. New York in the Progressive Era was unique not only for the diversity and scale of its economic and social projects but also for its role as the leading edge of them.  

Corporations rapidly changed the face of American business in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the nexus of corporate America at the turn of the century was in New York. Although the Sherman Anti-trust Act had foiled the industrialists’ efforts to consolidate their businesses into trusts, the laws did not prevent them from forming holding companies. With major financial institutes such as J. P. Morgan and Company and Lehman Brothers promising capital, industrialists moved to the city in droves. New York became a writhing metropolis fueled by money, power, and millions of toiling souls. Although El Paso and Nevada State used prizefighting as a promotional tool or as

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the catalyst for a much-needed financial windfall, those considerations were not evident when the fancy and the fighters finally returned to Gotham.\(^3\) Another important difference between New York and many of the other fight sites was the dense urban population. The police census of the city in 1895 counted 1,851,060 inhabitants.\(^4\) Greater New York City was established with the division of the five boroughs in 1898. By 1900, more than twice as many people, 1.8 million, lived in the borough of Manhattan alone than in San Francisco, New Orleans, Jacksonville, Dallas, Hot Springs, El Paso, and Carson City combined. Those nearly two million people crammed themselves into a little more than twenty square miles. With a flourishing economy and people in search of housing spilling into hallways and onto the streets, progressive reformers had priorities other than policing the pugs, yet they maintained their vigilance against them.\(^5\)

The city presented reformers and lawmakers with a set of problems more complicated than those faced by their counterparts in less densely populated areas. While reformers in New York shared some issues, such as the struggle for temperance, with their brethren in the rest of the country, sheer size gave a different texture to political and social conditions that motivated reformers. The large-scale, fast-moving changes affecting the city prompted reaction from all corners of reform. Gross amounts of money and staggering numbers of people over-run the existing structures supporting them. New


\(^5\) *Twelfth Census of The United States, Population, Part I, Statistics of Population, Table 8: Population of Incorporated Cities, Towns, Villages, and Boroughs in 1900, with*
laws to organize finance and novel plans to improve the lives of the teeming masses were only a few tokens of progress in New York City. Organized intensity and urgency characterized the reformers’ attack on conditions in the city. Recognition by the state empowered their efforts to sustain their war on both vice and the environment that fostered it.⁶

Reform was not a unified activity in other parts of the country, and New York was no different in that respect. Cohorts expressing a wide array of philosophies and strategies represented the reform movement. Mugwumps, often identified as Republicans who bolted from the party during the 1884 election, advocated the merit system of political reward rather than cronyism of traditional politics, and the strength of individuals to improve themselves. They also rejected public welfare. Civic virtue and economic liberalism were tenets of their brand of progress. Groups such as the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and the Society for the Prevention of Crime promoted social purity and had ties to long-standing Christian-based policies that encouraged clean living. The society clarified its position in its annual report of 1897: “To fight with vice is to fight with the devil,” and the devil sharpened his pitchfork on evils such as infidelity, intemperance, poverty, prostitution, and prizefighting.⁷ Preventive societies moved beyond conventional tactics like moral suasion by forming their own voluntary units aimed at policing vice. Charles Parkhurst and Anthony Comstock

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⁷ The Twenty-third Annual Report of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (New York, 1897), 27, 55.
represented urban moralists of this mode, although the government actually sanctioned Comstock’s crusade.  

In the 1890s, both traditional reform subjects and methods and new problems and approaches commingled in the lab of the city. Social activism had become an intellectual policy, and schools of higher learning trained students willing to confront the trials of the changing world. Settlement houses, workers’ rights campaigns, public health organizations, and other institutions concerned with social welfare put the city, and Manhattan in particular, at the forefront of a new age of reform. These men and women believed that government needed to take an active role in regulating American life. Historians have identified the union of the purity parties and the municipal reformers as catalyst for the political awakening of the American middle class. These voters were essential for electing officials who could realize the goal of increased government oversight and sweep out government corruption. The size and economic power of the city were only two elements that spawned difficulties and stirred activism.

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Political reform was a third branch of progressive change in the city. The dubious persons elected to manage the growing problems of the city aggravated those issues. The reality of the unseen “state” was the actual people who made policy decisions. If the state had the responsibility, as some reformers believed, to regulate the lives of its citizens, then the people who ran the state had to regulate themselves effectively. New York politicians in the second half of the nineteenth century provided some of the most vivid examples of the abuse of power American history. Many notorious figures belonged to New York’s Democratic Tammany Hall. The protracted struggle to reform New York united disparate forces against the evils of corrupt government.

By focusing on politicians and municipal government as the cause of problems, several types of reformers also inversely saw government as a possible solution to them. Evangelicals promoting the Social Gospel and even their more secular cohorts began to target the corruption of the Tammany Hall political machine, aiming to destroy its deleterious influence in the city. The politicians were depraved, their handpicked policeman needed handcuffing, and many of the poor whom they served were mere pawns in their schemes. Several of the most prestigious members of the Tammany Hall political machine were also personal and professional promoters of the prize ring, and boxers had a decades-old relationship with machine politics in New York. A few famous fighters had part-time careers as shoulder-hitters—physical enforcers of political will. Yankee Sullivan, who committed suicide in San Francisco, had also worked as a shoulder-hitter in New York. The former champion, John Morrissey, actually formed his

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own political machine, the Irving Hall Democracy, which challenged Tammany supremacy in the 1870s. The “goo-goos,” or good government advocates, were poised to purify the putrid ranks of political power in the city, and if they could flush away the machine men, they would improve their chances of expunging prizefighting as well.\(^{10}\)

The fascination with corruption in politics was linked with the immorality associated with the brutality of boxing. The Rev. N. Pearse of the New Lots Avenue Reformed Church of Brooklyn saw prizefighting as a small problem when compared to the corrupt politicians who colluded for its success at Coney Island:

> When corruption . . . abounds to an alarming extent in our city and in the management of its affairs; when prominent officials band themselves to violate law and protect each other, and when they go so far as themselves to assist in forming an organization and renting a building whereby they may get pleasure and money out of prize fights, and when remonstrated with defy and insult the decent community—we think then it is time to speak out even from the pulpit, and on the eve of an election, and ask the citizens whether, in the vote that he is to cast, he should not take all these evils in to consideration and determine to vote as he prays.\(^{11}\)


The statement is a clear expression of the idea that the election booth contained the source of power to change society. The correlation between a “decent” society and Christian values was nothing new in America. Pearse exposed the widening chasm between the officials who administered its society and Christian values. Ernest parishioners could still organize to help their communities but their Christian work alone was insufficient to accomplish these ends. Prizefighting was just one symptom of a dangerous social and political disease, not the pathogen itself.

The preachers and press made their stand against prizefighting in New York with the standard moral rhetoric but they also reflected the new and broader trend to see in government the solution to social problems. Absent from their sermons and editorials were the glossy statesmen who had either been urged to prevent prizefights or led the charge themselves. Charles Culberson had made himself a national figure when he stepped in to prevent prizefighting in Texas, but New York had no comparable political figure. The want of such a galvanizing person was further evidence to the pulpit and the media that bad government behind closed doors encouraged bad behavior in the city streets. The solution was to vote for respectable reformers and against machine men.

The political machines, both Democratic and Republican, in New York blanketed nearly all aspects of city life. Machine politics depended on personal relationships, fear, some good intentions, and a raging river of graft money to endure. Tammany Hall, an organization dating back to the American Revolution, had firmly entrenched itself in the city after the Civil War. Some of the most infamous Tammany Hall schemers included William Magear “Boss” Tweed, “Honest” John Kelley, and Richard Croker. Croker ran
the show at the turn of the century, and he relied on his specially selected men in high places, such as Mayor Robert Van Wyck and Police Commissioner William S. “Big Bill” Devery, to keep the money pouring in.

The police were central to the workings of the system. By and large, candidates won appointments to the police department with a bribe to a police commissioner or with the support of a local political functionary. These officers collected tribute money from the many purveyors of vice, such as pimps, prostitutes, saloonkeepers, and gambling den owners, for Tammany Hall. The policeman who partook in the scheme received a cut of the payment.\(^\text{12}\)

By the 1890s, the suppression of vice directly dammed the flow of cash into the machine, and dishonest police were no less troubled about their probable loss of income than the bosses. The fewer prostitutes, the fewer payouts. The police could not permit such a generous source of graft to disappear. The Lexow Committee, formed by the Republican-controlled state legislature, investigated the New York Police Department in 1894 in response to widespread tales of graft. Some choice findings included the revelation that police once arrested the proprietor of a brothel intending to quit the business. Having to pay a vice protection fee to everyone from patrolmen to captains had taken the profit from operating a brothel, and the owner had thought that closing down was a sound financial decision. The police wanted to force the man’s wife to keep the women in service. When city voters replaced the Tammany mayor Hugh J. Grant with fusion candidate William L. Strong in 1894, they voiced their disgust with the police. The

\(^{12}\) Oliver E. Allen, *The Tiger: The Rise and Fall of Tammany Hall* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 188.
incoming president of the Police Board was Theodore Roosevelt, who engineered a new image for the New York Police Department. Even so, the corruption continued.\textsuperscript{13}

The voters had a spotty record of removing sleazy politicians. One of the most popular and most important to the history of prizefighting in New York was Tammany man Timothy D. “Big Tim” Sullivan. Voters in the Five Points slum elected Big Tim or “Dry Dollar,” as he was sometimes known, to the New York Assembly when he was just twenty-three. From that first political win in 1886 until his death in 1913, the “King of the Underworld” influenced city and state politics and inspired worship among his constituents on the Lower East Side. Other Tammany Hall leaders may have had more impressive boss credentials than Sullivan, but scholars have demonstrated that he consistently played his chips during the vital moments in Tammany history.\textsuperscript{14}

His political career was closely tied to his forays into amusements and show business. Big Tim invested heavily in vice, and even employed it to build a positive myth around his character. He apparently encountered a prizefighter beating up a woman in front of the famous city prison, the Tombs. He toed up against the thug and prevailed against him in a fistfight. By using boxing skills for a righteous cause, he secured the support of the local community. Manly chivalry had currency in even the most depraved parts of town. He eventually won election to the state senate in 1893. In Albany, Sullivan


championed licensing popular leisure activities, such as prizefighting, that were also identified as vices.\textsuperscript{15}

Sullivan starred as the popular but corrupt Tammany politician, and his supporting cast in the police department included William Devery. Twice investigated by the New York State Senate for fraud and corruption and twice removed from the position of chief, the red-faced man with the drooping mustache was the constant enemy of reform. He led by example, giving the New York Police Department a reputation for ignoring and even profiting from vice. Devery played an essential role by negotiating between the desires of his Tammany Hall political patrons and the actual duties of a policeman. Together, Sullivan and Devery mastered the fine art of extortion, among other crimes, and left reformers in the sorriest parts of the city with little support from local officials and authorities.\textsuperscript{16}

When Tammany Hall ran Robert Van Wyck for mayor of New York against the incumbent William Strong in 1897, their rallying cry was “To Hell with Reform.” Voters agreed. The experiment with fusion candidates who promised fair and accountable rule was over, and the Tammany men regained control. The fewer bonafide reformers in office, the better the odds that the incumbent heavyweight champion, Bob Fitzsimmons, would fight a challenger for the title in New York.\textsuperscript{17}

Prizefighting was a political issue, and the probability of Fitzsimmons making his stand at Coney Island was linked to the political party in power. Corbett and Mitchell had been prepared to sign articles of agreement to fight in Brooklyn in 1893. Curiously, the

\textsuperscript{15} Allen, \textit{The Tiger}, 197, 200; and Czitrom, “Underworlds and Underdogs,” 541, 558.

\textsuperscript{16} Allen, \textit{The Tiger}, 197, 198, 200.

decision on whether they would be allowed to do so was delayed until after the 1892 election. The incumbent Democratic mayor of Brooklyn, David A. Boody, called off the fight during the heat of election season. Two major scandals had already blotted Boody’s term as mayor. John Y. McKane, member of the Board of Supervisors for the town of Gravesend and the de facto leader of Coney Island, scoffed at the idea that any mayor could decide anything in his territory. Boody lost to reforming Republican Charles Schieren anyway. Frederick W. Wurster, Scheiren’s Republican successor and the last mayor of Brooklyn, stood firmly against boxing and prevented Corbett and Fitzsimmons from fighting at Coney Island (McKane had since gone to jail). After Greater New York City was established in 1898, Brooklyn and Coney Island were at the mercy of Tammany Hall and their man, Mayor Van Wyck.18

Although Mayor Boody felt pressure to block the Corbett-Mitchell fight and Wurster did take on Corbett-Fitzsimmons, the politicians in New York seemed less likely than many of their counterparts in other states to associate their status as good public servants with their stance on prizefighting. The proliferation of nightly fights decreased the likelihood that the threat of a prizefight would become a single, all-consuming issue. The combined power of the press and the pulpit succeeded in preventing major fights, such as Corbett-Mitchell, but the majority of small-time bouts continued with only occasional hindrance from the police. The Eagle Athletic Club scheduled lightweights Billy Ernst, “The Fighting Dutchman,” and Billy Vernon, “The Haverstraw Brickmaker,”

to fight on January 29, 1894, at Benner’s Gove Hall at Ridgewood. At the city level, the machine approved and profited from vice.\textsuperscript{19}

At the state level, even Gov. Theodore Roosevelt, who was elected in 1898, supported the manly art. His view contrasted with the positions of the governors who worried about their credibility with progressives. As police commissioner, Roosevelt already had a proven record as a reformer. While serving in that office, he had attended the fight between Joe Choynski and Peter Maher at the Broadway Athletic Club and found no evidence of immoral brutality.\textsuperscript{20}

The opinions of governors and the mayors were important and determined whether some battles occurred in the state, but the state legislature was responsible for the changes to the legal status of prizefighting over time. At the same moment when other states moved to eradicate prizefighting, the law in New York granted leeway to its existence. This policy demonstrates that many New Yorkers, and their elected leaders, did not fasten prizefighting to their moral sense of self as people in other regions did. Regardless of what statesman wrote into the legal code, the police were the final arbiters of the law. Their complicated moral conventions often counteracted prizefighting regulations.

As reformers began looking to civic and state leadership for resources and help with their progressive projects, they ran into a serious roadblock. The worst offenders against public morality were often the public leaders. Officials like governor Roosevelt who had generally positive views of boxing could not be counted on for support. Another

\textsuperscript{19} “Fights North and South,” \textit{Brooklyn Eagle}, January 18, 1894, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{20} “‘Slugging Matches’ Revived,” \textit{New York Times}, November 18, 1896, p. 4. Mike Donovan recounts the joy that Roosevelt took from boxing in \textit{The Roosevelt That I}
obstacle that reformers had to defeat was state law, and in the 1890s, restrictions on prizefighting were loosening.

Just as the reform wave of the second half of the century gained the energy to effect social change, New York moved toward the legalization prizefighting. The state had prohibited prizefighting before the Civil War. “An Act to Prevent and Punish Prize Fighting” was introduced in the state senate in 1858 and approved in 1859. State legislators in 1859 had essentially prohibited prizefighting in section 458 of the penal code. Although it did not mention fists or gloves as some of the other acts addressing boxing did, section 458 specified that a “prize fight” was illegal, and anyone who participated in or helped a combatant train for one was guilty of a misdemeanor. The next year, the legislature amended the code to compel violators of the law to act as witnesses against one another. That the law was strengthened suggests that the police attempted enforcement but needed additional backing in the courts.21

The police were the fickle connection between the legal code and the fighters. By the time that John L. Sullivan had emerged as the great American heavyweight in the 1880s, the police had set a precedent for interpreting the law on site. Police captain Alexander “Clubber” Williams attended several of John L.’s matches at Madison Square Garden, calling to a halt a few fights that eclipsed his personal high-water mark for brutality. His rule of thumb seemed to involve the moment when one fighter became too dazed to stand, as in Sullivan vs. Charlie Mitchell and Sullivan vs. Herbert Slade. Williams and the ranks of officers who accompanied him to these affairs knew the law,

Know: Ten Years of Boxing with the President and Memories of Other Famous Fighting Men (New York: B. W. Dodge, 1909).
but like Devery and the men who succeeded them, they made their own choices about its meaning. Although Williams decided not to enforce the letter of the law, he at least applied it with some consistency.\textsuperscript{22}

Then, in 1884, he arrested John L. and Alf Greenfield for violating section 458. Bloody gloves were presented as evidence. The jury of middle-class men acquitted the defendants, but a clear message rang out: No more prizefighting in New York. Historian Michael T. Isenberg surmised that the violence exhibited at Sullivan-Mitchell energized reformers, including ministers and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, for example, to rediscover section 458. As the most famous boxer in America, Sullivan was the focus for reformers that Corbett later became when he won the championship. Whatever the cause, Sullivan was driven out, but a new crop of game fighting men soon matured to liven the stands of Madison Square Garden, and police again had to make choices about enforcement.\textsuperscript{23}

On December 26, 1891, New York Police superintendent William Murray pledged to arrest any pugilists who participated in “knocking-out’ matches,” or what a promoter might call a fight to the finish. He gave this warning specifically to Corbett and Mitchell, who had an agreement to fight at Madison Square Garden in February 1892.\textsuperscript{24} Perhaps not coincidentally, Peter Maher made his debut in America in 1891 by knocking out both Jack Smith and “Sailor” Charles Brown on the same night at Madison Square Garden, just a week before Murray made his announcement. The chore had taken Maher

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 178, 180.
all of three minutes to complete. Believing Murray to be in earnest, neither Maher nor his next proposed opponent, Jack Dempsey, appeared to sign articles of agreement on December 28, 1891. Frank Williams, a representative of the Olympic Club in New Orleans, jumped at the opportunity to match the aimless fighters milling around New York. In January 1892, he made several offers of large purses, and the fighters decamped for New Orleans, which hosted a string of high-profile matches, including Maher vs. Fitzsimmons and Corbett vs. Sullivan, in 1892. Occasional exhibitions still occurred in New York but heavyweight championships went to other cities.25

The New York Democrats, led by Tim Sullivan, tried to bring them back. During the reigns of Corbett and Fitzsimmons, many states considered outlawing prizefighting. While other states deliberated about immorality, their image in the nation, and the state of their treasury, New York had already tried prohibition and rebounded to regulation. The Horton Law, sponsored by Assemblyman George S. Horton, amended penal code 458 by permitting “sparring exhibitions” in official athletic clubs for members. The local mayor and police board exercised authority over boxing by granting licenses for the exhibitions. The intent of the Horton Law was to stop prizefighting but encourage its sophisticated cousin sparring; the reality was much different. Money, in the form of purses, gate receipts, and bets, was still on the line, even while prizefighting remained a

misdemeanor. The law enabled boxing matches, even if prizefights were not exactly legal.  

Why then did Corbett never defend in New York? Unlike in other states where promoters pushed the limits of similar laws and went to court to defend their interpretation of them to get their dream match-ups, the promoters generally steered clear of New York when they finalized the dates for heavyweight championships. Long-running negative press from organs such as the *New York Times* and protest from groups such as the Law and Order League continued to hammer them when they tried to return. Reformers had two major successes, Corbett-Mitchell and Corbett-Fitzsimmons, on their scorecard. Another possible reason was the difficulty of working within the political system. Dan Stuart had a record of controlling, or attempting to control, every aspect of the fights, including the politicians, that he promoted. Even a masterful promoter like Stuart had no chance to infiltrate and direct the system in a city ruled by machine men.

Politics, the never-dull desire of fight fans, and enterprising managers and promoters took full advantage of the Horton Law. They twisted the law to their own ends, and they did not need lawyers or out-of-state promoters to help them do it. As the reform movement gained traction, sophisticated and progressive New York set an unglamorous precedent as the state to create a legal gray area for the evil prizefighting. Machine politics made those conditions possible. Apparently intended to encourage healthy demonstrations of the manly art in a club setting, New York’s experiment with “sparring exhibitions,” which sometimes ended in knockouts, built yet another avenue for crooked

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politics and questionable policing in New York to travel down. Often, that road skirted the seashore on Coney Island.

New York had several areas in the city dedicated to debauchery. The Five Points district and the Bowery were perhaps more famous for their varieties of vice than was Coney Island, but the southern tip of Brooklyn had a special claim on prizefighting. Promoters, club owners, and politicians had chartered a deluxe boxing destination in Coney Island by the 1890s. Staying in business required a careful balancing of local police and elected public officials with the somewhat erratic reform zeal within the community. During the brief period governed by the Horton Law, clubs were most likely to lose their licenses not in pitched reform battles but when personal politics came into play.\textsuperscript{27}

Coney Island grew out of several important turn-of-the-century trends. The stunning population growth in the city, greater spending power among the working class, and more leisure time for them combined to create the circumstances for mass culture amusement to flourish. The technological innovation of electrified trolleys and short-line railways and ferries, among other forms of transportation, carried the people and their money to new amusement destinations. Coney Island was a two-mile stretch of beach cluttered with self-contained amusement parks, mechanical rides, freak shows, shooting galleries, fortunetellers, food vendors, restaurants, saloons, and hotels, including one building shaped like an elephant. Tourists from respectable classes had their own spaces, but they shared the strand with the working class as well as prostitutes and criminals.\textsuperscript{28}

Men and women from several levels of the social strata intermingled at Coney Island to witness sporting events and gamble. The popularity of horse racing in the 1880s at Brighton Beach, the Sheepshead Bay Racecourse, and Brooklyn Jockey Club established Coney Island’s national reputation for thoroughbred racing. The precedent set by the ponies encouraged the formation of the Coney Island Athletic Club in 1892 at Paul Bauer’s vacant casino. The ten-thousand-seat venue changed hands several times over the course of the decade, but it hosted the most important boxing matches, and was the source of a shady political dispute that threatened to undermine the most powerful political machine in the United States.²⁹

As powerful as Tammany was, it was not politically all-powerful, and Tammany leaders occasionally faced serious challenges to their authority. Coney Island is in Brooklyn, where Hugh McLaughlin, not Tim Sullivan, controlled Democratic politics and exercised jurisdiction over the most important sports club and boxing venue, the Coney Island Athletic Club, in the late 1890s. Sullivan was a part owner of a competing club, the Lenox Athletic Club in Manhattan. When, during the Horton era, Fitzsimmons agreed to defend his title against Jim Jeffries, the two rival bosses exemplified the transparent depths of corruption in municipal government, which presented a much more pressing and extensive problem for reformers than the prizefighters.

The Coney Island Athletic Club represented the problem with politicians and prizefighting. The club went through several iterations, the most successful of which had

strong political associations. John McKane, who helped develop Coney Island, unofficially controlled “Sodom-by-the-Sea” as the police chief and Democratic political boss. Fellow high-ranking police officials Richard Newton and James G. Tighe were respectively the matchmaker and promoter for the club in 1892. As the *New York Times* put it, “There was hardly a public official of prominence in Brooklyn or Kings County who was not an open ally of this prize-fighting club, and many of the Democratic machine leaders were believed by the public to have a direct connection with the club.”

The club was quite profitable and staged sixteen fights between May 1892 and September 1893. The only dark mark was the loss of Corbett-Mitchell to Jacksonville.

When McKane was convicted of fraud in 1894, the club dissolved. Mayor Schieren refused to grant a license to the newly installed Seaside Athletic Club, but the Supreme Court in Brooklyn ruled that the mayor had to grant the license. Justice William J. Gaynor’s opinion implied that law enforcement was the domain of police, and it was their responsibility, not the mayor’s, to prevent prizefights. Given the history of enforcement over the past few years, that ruling was cold comfort to reformers. Warren Lewis later leased the building and called it the Greater New York Athletic Club, which lasted only a few years. Then Jack Dowdell, a local saloonkeeper, tried his hand at club management. In February 1899, the same month that managers were accepting bids for Fitzsimmons-Jeffries, an ownership group took over and rechristened the Coney Island Athletic Club. William Brady, Martin Julian, and Brooklyn Democrat Alexander Brown had interests in the club. Brady, in fact, became the president of the new Coney Island Athletic Club. The showman managed Jeffries, was the majority stakeholder in the club,

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31 Riess, “In the Ring and Out,” 98.
and planned to distribute the fight film. A politician with such power was suspicious to the reformers; Brady, however, was just a savvy businessman.32

In this environment, Big Tim Sullivan and Big Bill Devery put on their best show. A face-off pitted the men who controlled the boxers and Brooklyn Democrats against Devery and Sullivan. Brady and Julian directed the fighters and the front-running venue for the fight in the political territory of Hugh McLaughlin. Tim Sullivan operated a competing club in Manhattan, controlled the chief of police, and had the power to influence the sparring exhibition licenses that were necessary under the Horton Law. The reason for the political scrap was no less than the proposed title fight between Jim Jeffries and Bob Fitzsimmons. The stakes were the right to host the fight and claim political dominance in Greater New York City. For reformers, the result proved that local government and police were the appropriate objects of their discontent.

The managers and fighters settled on the Coney Island club. Fitzsimmons had been reluctant to commit to Sullivan’s Lenox club, believing that he would not have been treated fairly there. Informed spectators wondered if Sullivan might try to exact revenge on the champion for disparaging his club. The police board, the license-granting body, met three times before issuing a license for a “sparring contest” at Coney Island, and Brady believed “certain New York politicians” were behind the holdup. One certain politician was Sullivan, who was irked that his club lost the bid. Only the intervention of McLaughlin, at the behest of Alec Brown, convinced the board to grant the license. The fight was set for June 9, 1899.33

The infighting among the Democrats was solved with more fraud. Sullivan backed down but only after he won concessions for his political domain. In the future, the Lenox Athletic Club and the Broadway Athletic Club, both in Manhattan, would share the important fights with the Coney Island Athletic Club. The outwardly nonpolitical boxers and businessmen seemed to take the tempest in stride, as if such machinations were standard in their business. Fitz had not previously voiced much concern about the government leaders who arrested him, but he did worry that Tim Sullivan might try to cheat him. In this respect, the fighters and the law-and-order crowd each had something to fear from the corruption in New York City government.34

Devery’s vacillations in position on the law leading up to the fight were also indicative of the on-going power plays behind the scenes. Devery had decreed in late March 1899 that no boxing exhibitions could transpire in theaters, which were not clubs as the law stipulated. Terry McGovern and Tom Sharkey were penalized, but Fitzsimmons, who had also been boxing at a theater, was allowed to go on with his work. The promoters and newsmen had advertised the contest for the heavyweight championship between Fitzsimmons and Jeffries for weeks. Three days before the fight, Devery issued a statement expressing his concern that “a genuine, old-time slugging match” might be the secret intention of the gentleman listed for the sparring exhibition at the Coney Island Athletic Club. He reached that conclusion only after reading the opinions of “experts on the prize ring,” although he and a current and former police commissioner were among spectators who had watched Sharkey knock out Kid McCoy on January 10, 1899.35 Devery assured the public that he would oversee events at ringside

34 Riess, “In the Ring and Out,” 101.
35 This particular McCoy is one possible original “Real McCoy.”
to prevent any “heavy hitting.” Gossip suggested that the police commissioner’s newfound interest in policing occurred at the behest of Sullivan. This “sudden spasm of virtue” fooled only the foolish. The next day, rumors fluttered everywhere that Hugh McLaughlin had instructed Devery to soften his tone. McLaughlin apparently held greater sway in Brooklyn than Big Tim.

The prizefighting conspiracy among New York machine Democrats was evident to the observers of the time. The complicity of the police in those affairs was out in the open, and anything the police or politicians promised were hollow words to the reformers. A few well-placed men could easily defuse the strength of the reform movement, although an election year weakened their ability to do so. The balance of power did not completely favor the agents of corruption, and the ballots that made them could also break them. Not long after the turn of the century, they did. For the time being, however, Coney Island was the big winner in the Fitzsimmons-Jeffries stakes, and preparations were in order.

Unlike the hastily assembled wooden skeletons that Dan Stuart tried to build in the West and that he never filled to capacity, permanent indoor structures housed fights in New York. Those buildings brimmed with fidgeting bodies in standing-room only conditions. Another important difference between the outdoor venues in the West and the arenas in New York were the overhead lights, which facilitated the latest in moneymaking endeavors, the prizefight film. Club directors actually changed the start


time of the Fitzsimmons-Jeffries fight when the Vitagraph film company determined that artificial light produced better quality pictures than natural light. The company erected an elaborate structure of twenty-four overhanging lights to aid filming. The fighters were becoming more sophisticated in their art, and so were the technicians who captured their bouts.  

The New York commissioner of buildings, John Guilfoyle, inspected the Coney Island Athletic Club before the fight and ordered improvements to exits and aisles. Code violations were one method employed to shut down clubs. A safety inspection by the recently created Buildings Department was a definite sign that some elements of the reform agenda had crept into the world of the boxers. The arena was designed to seat about six thousand people, but modifications expanded it to fit between eight and nine thousand. The total estimated crowd for the fight was about ten thousand, with five thousand more fans, including women, waiting outside in the muck on the wet night June night.

Even with the assurance that police were unlikely to halt any “sparring matches,” the clubs had to resort to subterfuge to create the semblance of obeying the law. As for the crowds clamoring for a seat, only those who were members of the club could file into the building. Box offices simply dispensed passes displaying the words “membership ticket,” thus meeting the conditions of the Horton Law.

40 New York Assembly, Report of the Special Committee of the Assembly Appointed to Investigate the Public Offices and Departments of the City of New York and the Counties Therein Included, vol. 2 (Albany: State Printer, 1900), 1951.
Inside and out, the building came alive that night. Lines “stretched like the living, breathing arms of some giant octopus with a wooden body.” Many members of the “fairer sex” hovered outside the queues, wishing to spend their money on the spectacle. New Yorkers took a harder line against female fight fans than the liberal Nevadans. The “sporting men of the West,” from cities like San Francisco trekked east to the opposite coast, just as the their counterparts had come to them in years past. Together, they jammed the house, waiting to see if the frisky Fitzsimmons could fend off the young giant, Jeffries.41

Fitzsimmons had brought the championship belt back to the East Coast, and he finally prepared to defend it in 1899. Jeffries had worked his way up the ranks, defeating Joe Goddard, Peter Jackson, and Tom Sharkey in 1897 and 1898. Jeffries’s manager, William Brady, and his trainer, Billy Delaney, who had helped to train Corbett, had another champion-caliber pugilist on their hands. Brady, of course, readied to build another entertainment empire around a prizefighter.

Jeffries had seen Fitzsimmons before. In fact, the twenty-two-year-old Jeffries had helped Corbett train for Fitzsimmons in Carson City. Opinions varied about his future in the sport, but anyone could see that the tall, thick, solid man had the attributes to make a great fighter. Thirty-seven-year-old Fitzsimmons, who avoided contenders in general and a rematch with Corbett in particular, thought that Jeffries looked like easy money, something that he badly needed.42

The differing approaches of the champion and the challenger were evident in their training. Fitzsimmons had not changed his patterns considerably since he won the title:

41 “Jim Jeffries Knocks Out Fitz,” National Police Gazette, June 24, 1899, p. 3.
The Sunday before the fight, he honored the Sabbath by playing with his children, going for a ride with Rose, splashing with his piebald Shetland pony in the bay at their home in Bath Beach, Brooklyn, and napping for three hours. When he trained with other boxers, he stood and let them smash him. Jeffries only took half the Sabbath off. He worked a wrist machine, went for a run, tossed the medicine ball, and skipped rope twelve hundred times before going for a drive. On regular days, he boxed to keep his opponents from laying a glove on him, and he planned to sling left-handed hits at Fitzsimmons from a protective crouch. One training strategy planned for a short, physical fight; the other a drawn out affair. The barely heavyweight Fitzsimmons had defeated larger men before and had no reason to prepare for this fight much differently than he had any other.43

According to Brady, Jeffries’s physical appearance turned the tide of the fight before it ever began. At six feet tall and over two hundred pounds, Jeffries had matured into a world-class fighter by 1899. Fawningly mythologized as a “handsome, shapely young giant . . . a worthy representative of The Golden West so famous for its magnificent types of men,” Jeffries was born in Ohio but had moved to Los Angeles with his family when he was sixteen.44 He added brawn by working as a boilermaker. Brady, once Corbett’s manager, stewarded Jeffries’s career toward a match with Fitzsimmons for the crown. While some observers celebrated Jeffries as a Hercules-like figure, Brady advertised the primitive masculinity of the “Grizzly Bear,” noting the “long shaggy hair

on his breast, big thick jaws and all the other attributes of the ideal prize-fighter.\textsuperscript{45} As either an ideal of muscular health or a beastly slugger, Jeffries was an imposing figure. Even so, a tough encounter with black fighter Bob Armstrong in 1898 had resulted in a broken hand and a loss of reputation.

Fitzsimmons had never seen Jeffries stripped to fight before the night of June 9, 1899, and Brady knew it. As part of a scheme to get Fitzsimmons into Jeffries’s dressing room, he manufactured a disagreement with Martin Julian about hitting in the breaks. He suggested that the fighters work out the issue between themselves. The 158-pound champion strode in and eyeballed the 205-pound naked Jeffries stretched out on a cot. Jeffries, barely able to suppress his laughter at Fitz’s shocked expression, growled and glowered at his best. That sight, in Brady’s opinion, scared the champion. The smaller man may have been frightened, but he did not hesitate to get in the ring.\textsuperscript{46}

When he went to his corner in his blue bathrobe, Fitz received a giant floral horseshoe, which seemed to hearten him. He had hammered out many horseshoes for friends and well-wishers during his career, and now he received one in return. He stood ready in black shorts with a belt of tiny American flags. Jeffries climbed in and removed his dark pants and garnet sweater to reveal white shorts. George Siler read them the rules, and the first round opened. Shortly after, half the lights burned out, ruining the film. The men continued to box.\textsuperscript{47}

Jeffries had learned something very important from his first sight of Fitzsimmons fighting in Carson City. He had to avoid the dangerous solar-plexus punch and other hard

\textsuperscript{45} Brady, \textit{The Fighting Man}, 176.

\textsuperscript{46} Brady, \textit{The Fighting Man}, 176–77; and Jeffries, \textit{My Life and Battles}, 35.
hits that were so crucial to Fitzsimmons’s repertoire. In the first round, the contender stayed low and out of reach, frustrating Fitz’s efforts. He guarded with the right and punched with the left. In the second round, he struck with a straight left, sending Fitz careening into his corner. Devery had declared that he would stop the action and make arrests the moment someone hit the ground. The blood dripping from Fitz’s nose onto Jeffries arm in the third mocked Devery’s resolve.48

Fitzsimmons came out swinging in the third, piqued by the knockdown. The champion unfurled a hard right that seemed to have little effect on Jeffries. They generally adhered to their strategies: Fitzsimmons going after Jeffries at every clang of the gong and Jeffries crouching and counteriting. In the fourth and fifth, Fitz’s onslaught continued. He tore a gash in Jeffries’s eyebrow with a hard left. Although he frequently tucked, Jeffries landed bracing shots of his own as he began to work Fitz’s body.

The furious action continued in the sixth and seventh. The champion pounded away with his best blows, included hard smash hits to the heart, solar plexus, and throat area. Even when he found openings for his fierce right hand, Jeffries appeared unfazed. Fitz carried these middle rounds with his aggressive style but Jeffries consistently landed his own crowd-pleasing punches.

The momentum started to swing toward Jeffries in the eighth, ninth, and tenth. Jeffries won the fans’ approval for a strike to Fitz’s nose. The champion laughed and went on the attack. His held his right hand poised for victory in the ninth, but Jeffries continued to counter his punches, occasionally jarring Fitzsimmons. At the end of the

47 “Jim Jeffries Knocks Out Fitz,” National Police Gazette, June 24, 1899, p. 3; Jeffries, My Life and Battles, 35; Naughton, Kings of the Queensberry Realm, 266; and Streible, Fight Pictures, 102.
round, Fitzsimmons scored the solar plexus punch with his left, causing Jeffries to shrink. In tenth, Fitz seemed as if he had weakened, but, as prizefighters had been known to do with some success, he could have been acting. Then Fitz rushed right into a hard left to his chin. He went down but sprang up before the count of ten, and then gingerly returned to his corner at the end of the round.

Rose Fitzsimmons could not watch. She stood in the passageway waving a white handkerchief through the second round then retired to Bob’s dressing room. She returned briefly for the sixth and seventh rounds, but again sought refuge in the bowels of the arena. Great cycles of cheering brought her rushing back to the action in the ninth. Back and forth she went in the ninth and tenth, fighting her own battle with anxiety.49

Jeffries, despite a damaged eye, various bruises, and patches of blood on his body, started to feel fine at the start of the eleventh. Fitz, however, had not given up. He charged at Jeff, swinging with his left. They exchanged tight punches and clinched frequently. Both men had opened their stances. Jeffries crunched Fitz’s jaw, but Fitz did not fall. Jeffries pounded his head, but Fitz did not fall. Finally, a right swing to the chin hit the spot. Fitz fell on his face then rolled to his back, his unseeing eyes twitching involuntarily through the ten-count. His seconds had to carry him to his corner.50

Rose saw that final blow and rushed to the dressing room. There she encouraged his bruised spirit, and hid her own disappointment. Her performance earned the grade of “pathetic,” in contrast to her “plucky” display in Carson City. In New York, a wife screaming near-obscenities while standing on a chair was more laudable than one who

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50 Naughton, Kings of the Queensberry Realm, 266–77; Jeffries, My Life and Battles, 36; Siler, Inside Facts on Pugilism, 180–87; and “Jeffries Wins in Eleven Rounds,” New
fretted and sobbed in a womanly fashion. In his summary of events, Bob Davis, Fitz’s friend and sympathetic biographer who had done his best to preserve Rose’s feminine virtue in his account of the Carson City fight, preferred in his telling of the story to keep her waiting for results at Bath Beach with the children. That pose was still the best light in which to paint an ideal wife.\textsuperscript{51}

Fitz tried to claim that he was “doped” before the fight, but nothing came of such accusations, and at least one witness, William Muldoon, had seen him drinking heavily the night before. Martin Julian told Fitz that the hard shot he took in the second round did indeed drug him. Fitz was no longer the king of the heavyweights, but he was far from finished in his career as a professional boxer. His play, \textit{The Honest Blacksmith}, was no showcase for real talent, and he would meet Jeffries again.\textsuperscript{52}

The \textit{National Police Gazette} forecasted that Jeffries had taken up his laurels as a “people’s hero” in the vein of the great John L. The first champion’s conqueror, Corbett, “was not a favorite of the masses; he had not endeared himself to the people.” Fitz, it seems, was a placeholder champion with no interest in reestablishing Sullivan’s glory. The sport may have risen in popularity over the course of the decade but went without a mythological hero the stature of Sullivan, who had first turned the tide of culture to favor prizefighters in America. How could reformers contend with popular or mass hero

\textit{York World}, June 10, 1899, p. 1. Some sources report a right, others a left for the final punch.
\textsuperscript{52} Jeffries, \textit{My Life and Battles}, 35, 36; Davis, \textit{Ruby Robert}, 74; and Edward Van Every, \textit{Muldoon: The Solid Man of Sport} (New York: Frederick Stokes, 1929), 244.
worship? If the Gazette’s appraisal were true, prizefighting was destined to become even more popular now that it was again represented by a well-liked champion.53

The aftermath of the Jeffries-Fitzsimmons fight was less spectacular than the consequences of several of the other recent heavyweight championship fights. The result was not surrounded in controversy. No one went to jail, and no popular movement emerged to revoke New York’s statehood. Even righteous hand wringing was minimal. Political opponents had compromised on their interests in the fight game, leaving the corrupt system intact. The match had been hard-fought by both men, and Jeffries’s victory satisfied the scribes and fans. With such positive results, the demise of prizefighting in New York in less than a year’s time seemed unlikely. But boxing had enemies within its own ranks, and they and their co-conspirators hastened the end of the Horton era.

Politicians did not have the market cornered on corruption in New York. Fixed fights had longed plagued the reputation of pugilism, and boxers taking a dive continued to tar the sport during the Horton era. These conditions bred yet another type of reformer: one who liked prizefighting but had no tolerance for the fix. Several high-profile examples of fights accused of being frauds contributed to the eventual repeal of the Horton Law.

“Bunco pugilism,” a reference to a scam dice game that swept the nation in the 1880s and 1890s, had several different forms. A fighter could fall to the canvas, suffering a “knockout,” during a prearranged round. In a similar scenario, the split of the purse could be agreed upon ahead of time, and neither man might make much of an effort to

53 Sam C. Austin, “Jim Jeffries Knocks Out Fitz,” National Police Gazette, June 24, 1899, p. 3.
win. The third man in the ring also had the ability to create a false outcome. A referee could spot a “foul” and award the fight to the victim. He could also declare in favor of the fighter the fixer paid him to choose. The men who set up the fights sometimes played a role in the scheme. Huckster promoters might promise a fight card with well-known names and present two “corner loafers” in their place, after the money had already been collected. Brooklyn suffered all these varieties of the fix.54

As early as the 1870s, New Yorkers lamented corruption in the ring. The author of an opinion piece from 1871 disagreed wholly with the painful physical effects of the manly art, but he identified fakery as the key element that demoralized an already degraded practice:

The trickery and fraud which have corrupted the higher strata of society, which of have introduced in the conduct of corporations systemic swindling by respectable directors; which have made what was once the science of politics a mere game of cheating, in which the scrupulous are the most successful; which have reduced legitimate business to the level of a sharper’s trade. . . .[P]ugilism, always coarse and brutal, has also become knavish and fraudulent, and . . . the drift of the age toward trickery and swindling [is] also apparent in almost all organized movements of society.55

The brutal nature of fighting was inherent in the bloody results, but the puffy cheeks and black eyes on the fighters registered honesty and virtue. Technically, the man who

54 “Boxing Show Frauds,” Brooklyn Eagle, January 9, 1893, p. 7.
55 “The Demoralization of the Prize Ring,” Brooklyn Eagle, May 12, 1871, p. 2.
remained standing was the better fighter. When the fix was on, any redeeming manly aspect of fighting was gone. For the writer, the emerging problem with fraud in the ring correlated directly with the sweeping corruption prevalent in post–Civil War America.

Both fight fans and fight critics agreed that corruption in the ring was intolerable. Fixed fights damaged not only the fans’ enjoyment of the sport but also undercut their argument that prizefighting was far less immoral than reformers portrayed it. From a practical standpoint, gamblers without an inside tip detested a predetermined outcome. A rash of questionable fights in several weight classes in the late 1890s aggravated the issue. The heavyweights, as usual, could not escape the attention of the public when something went wrong.

Tom Sharkey was a good fighter who incited controversy on two coasts. His victory over Fitzsimmons in 1896 soured many Californians on prizefighting. In New York, he was at the center of three other ring dramas. Both Sharkey and Peter Maher had the distinction of being not-quite champions due to the imprecise system of succession in professional boxing at the time. The two men met at the Palace Athletic Club in New York on June 9, 1897, for a scheduled twenty-five round contest. Sharkey lost his temper after the bell closed the seventh round and struck both Maher and his second. Policemen stormed the ring and arrested the whole group. Magistrate Cornell of the Harlem Police Court relied on his reading of events in the paper rather than the police witness to rule that no prizefight had occurred. Everyone walked down the courthouse steps with their freedom. They had places to go and matches to make in a city that showed little inclination to stop them. The fight was no fake, but the official response demonstrated
that the courts were unlikely to hear a complaint on a bogus fight if they were not going
to agree that prizefights even existed.\textsuperscript{56}

The ambiguities of the point system were prominent in another Sharkey contest.
In a break from precedent, Jeffries immediately answered challenges after winning the
title. Although Jeffries feared defending his title as much as his predecessors did, his
motivation, according to William Brady, was due to financial need. His turn as Davy
Crockett in the play \textit{Davy Crockett} lacked the popular punch of Corbett’s performance on
the boards. Jeffries selected Sharkey as his opponent for his first title defense. The two
stout men had fought in San Francisco in May 1898, and Jeffries won the twenty-round
challenge on points. On November 3, 1898, Sharkey, the perennial bridesmaid to the
heavyweight champion, went the twenty-five-round distance with Jeffries. Notably, the
low-hanging arc lights set up to facilitate filming heated up so intensely that both men
had their scalps scorched. The Horton Law disallowed fights to the finish; so referee
George Siler awarded the win to Jeffries. Not all observers regarded the decision as a fair
one. Fraud in the point system lacked the drama of one of the fighters taking a dive and
was more difficult to prove, but Siler’s decision to give Jeffries the win resulted in many
fans throwing up their hands in disgust over the perceived injustice. Several days later,
the police prevented Sharkey and Jeffries from sparring as part of a theater performance,
which the Horton Law forbade. Suddenly, the police were on the case when boxing
appeared on the matinee program for “Around New York in Eighty Minutes.” The points

\textsuperscript{56} “Maher and Sharkey Free,” \textit{New York Times}, June 11, 1897, p. 5; and “Both Fighters
Go Free,” \textit{Brooklyn Eagle}, June 10, 1897, p. 3. Sharkey and Maher were arrested again in
Philadelphia in 1902 and released with a pledge not commit violence against one another.
The fight that night showcased the art of the “love tap” before the referee called it off
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system may have cost Sharkey a victory, but it certainly sacrificed the respect of many fans.\footnote{Brady, \textit{The Fighting Man}, 179, 180; Streible, \textit{Fight Pictures}, 106; “Jeffries The Winner after a Great Battle,” \textit{Brooklyn Eagle}, November 4, 1899, p. 6; and “Wrestling instead of Boxing,” \textit{New York Telegraph}, November 8, 1899, p. 4.}

On November 22, 1898, the Sailor’s match with Corbett at the Lenox Athletic Club ended when Corbett’s second, Jim McVey, jumped into the ring. Reporters also noticed that George Considine, Corbett’s manager at the time, had also come through the ropes. Referee John Kelly called a foul, which the Police Gazette rules demanded. In the absence of a defined penalty, Kelly decided to award the victory to Sharkey for the infraction. Some people thought that Corbett had agreed to lose the fight; others believed that the outcome saved Corbett from the possibility of an embarrassing loss, although he later said that he would have won the fight. An ensuing investigation launched by Tim Sullivan and other club officials to establish the honesty of the Lenox Club basically accused Corbett’s seconds of fixing the fight. Observers deemed that Sharkey fought hard and clean, leaving Corbett’s corner in suspicion. Kelly also called off all bets when he rendered his decision, disappointing the gamblers who may have organized Sharkey’s victory. Even without proof, the reputations of boxing and the ex-champion were in jeopardy.\footnote{“Corbett-Sharkey Fight to Be Investigated,” \textit{Brooklyn Daily Eagle}, November 27, 1898, p. 11; and James J. Corbett, \textit{The Roar of the Crowd: The True Tale of the Rise and Fall of a Champion} (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1925), 274. See also Thomas Myler, \textit{The Sweet Science Goes Sour: How Scandal Brought Boxing to Its Knees} (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2006), 73–76.}

Sharkey’s experiences typify the legends of corruption that dogged boxing, and were evidence for those people who railed against the law on the books. The Horton Law was already controversial for allowing prizefighting to exist. Blights like fixes involving
the most prominent fighters of the day further scarred the law. The New York legislature moved to repeal the Horton Law in 1899. The final bout of the Horton era starred Jim Corbett and Kid McCoy. The fight featured the very problems that led to the repeal.

Corbett had battled Jeffries and lost his bid to regain the title with a twenty-third round knockout on May 11, 1900. His comeback was not over. He prepared to take on Kid McCoy on August 30, 1900, one day before the Horton Law expired. McCoy already had a reputation for ring fraud, and questions had risen about Corbett’s ability to act convincingly in the ring. Weeks before the fight, the hot news was that McCoy planned to “lay down.” Corbett contended that he and McCoy were scientific fighters, and therefore less likely to constantly bash one another. To the untrained eye, their style made them seem as if they were avoiding heavy contact. In the fifth round, McCoy abandoned care and began swinging wildly. Corbett attacked his stomach, and McCoy was soon doubled-up on the ground. The referee, Charley White, granted Corbett the victory, although McCoy revived quickly at the expiration of the ten-count. Suspicion in the crowd gave way to angry disappointment. The venerable referee and sportswriter George Siler had warned his readers of a fix and felt the result vindicated him. Over at the Broadway Athletic Club, the crowd sang Auld Lang Syne at midnight to mark the passing of the Horton era. The next month, the Police Gazette predicted, “Heavyweights will now have to go West to fight.”

Corbett-McCoy was an end to many things. The ex-champion fled to Europe with his manager and Margaret Corneille, “a music hall singer.” Mrs. Vera Corbett quickly

59 Corbett, Roar of the Crowd, 296.
60 Myler, The Sweet Science Goes Sour, 81; Riess, “In The Ring and Out,” 104; Van Every, Muldoon, 259; and Sam C. Austin, “Corbett and McCoy Accused by Many Smart
sued him for divorce on the grounds of “extreme cruelty.” She claimed that he once threatened her by holding a burning cigar to her cheek. Her most damning accusation appeared the day after Corbett disappeared across the Atlantic. His exodus, she claimed, was timed to avoid facing the fact that everyone knew the fight was fixed. Corbett had fought Jeffries in a bid to regain the crown in May 1900 and lost. Now, he was enmeshed in a personal and pugilistic scandal. His temporary departure from America and the prize ring was ignominious for a gentleman.

These examples are only a few of the suspected fixes during the Horton era. In New York, fraud and the standard arguments citing immorality and brutality were the combination that finished prizefighting in 1900. Reforming politicians, who momentarily diminished Tammany strength, fixated not only on the deceit in the ring but also on the Tammany men who permitted it. Repealing the Horton Law was part of a greater movement against dishonesty in city life.

Republican legislators did not ignore the obvious corruption of Tammany Hall, including the blatant disregard for the Horton Law. Governor Roosevelt established an investigative committee headed by Assemblyman Robert Mazet to pursue fraud in the city. The restored Chief of Police William Devery once again withstood a barrage of questions that implicated his malfeasance. Once again, Devery was creatively unwilling to admit any misconduct.

His testimony concerning his presence at Fitzsimmons-Jeffries proved that he had no fear of the committee and was too quick-witted to be cornered by their pointed

Sporting Men of Faking Their Battle,” National Police Gazette, September 22, 1900, p. 11.


Myler, The Sweet Science Goes Sour, 82.
questioning. When asked why he and his men were in the Coney Island Athletic Club the night of the fight, he answered that the police were on hand in case a prizefight broke out. Devery watched closely to ensure that the knockout was only for points, and he claimed that the sight of the unconscious Fitzsimmons sprawled on the canvas was no evidence for brutality. Fitzsimmons had simply “slipped down.”

Accounting for gashed foreheads and dripping blood, he said, “In such hot weather as this any man might bleed from weakness.” The fighters may have epitomized a certain type of masculinity, but Devery, at least, imagined that their physical frailties could protect them from the law.

The chief maintained his definitions for determining a violation of the Horton Law. Brutality, he said, occurred when “there is any punching and clinching, or where men don’t comply with the referee’s request, or in any way where it terminates in slugging of any description.” When queried about knockdowns, he replied that he might not interfere given that a man might “slip or catch his heel.” Jeffries and Fitzsimmons, he admitted, “may have fought for a prize, but it did not turn into . . . a prize fight.” The distinction for Devery was the difference between the London Prize Ring Rules and the Marquis of Queensberry Rules. Wrestling and bareknuckle punches typified the former, while upper-body punching with gloved hands characterized the latter. When the committee’s chief council, Frank Moss, began referring to the championship bout as a “fight,” Devery corrected him, “glove contest.” Despite long lines at box offices, Devery had noticed no money paid to see a sparring contest. He, as an officer of the law, had certainly never paid. He evaded any question put to him about Jeffries and Fitzsimmons fighting for money: “They may have been,” he answered to several forms of the same

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64 “Devery Tells Why He Kept Quiet,” New York World, June 11, 1899, p. 3.
inquiry. The fact that newspapers ran stories describing the size of the fight purse before the event also escaped his attention.⁶⁵

Devery was aware of the class-based arguments favoring boxing as healthful recreation. He tried to polish the prizefights by extolling the benefits of exercise, scientific skill, and fair play. “Self defense and manly art,” he argued, could be quite useful to a man who might need to protect his wife or girlfriend if no police officer was nearby. Women were typically absent from formulations of the value of boxing as self-defense. The scene Devery conjured relied on his knowledge of daily urban life, which daily put women at risk, while the champions of scientific boxing imagined afternoons spent working with a professor in a club or attending to affronts of honor or ruffians who might attack in the street.⁶⁶

The Mazet Committee asked Devery about all manner of corruption in the city. He did not flinch while the examiners clearly grew increasingly frustrated with his obfuscation. Devery may not have revealed himself as a crook, but he did communicate a great deal of information about the meanings of boxing. To maintain his position, he had to understand the varying social perceptions of the sport. He knew the proper language to distinguish prizefights from boxing, and he appealed to ideals of manhood to protect his own interest in the sport. In that regard, he shared a common principle with former police commissioner and current governor Theodore Roosevelt.

In previous examples, state governors took a hands-on approach to policing heavyweight championships. In New York, the chief of state said that he had no intention of interfering with the match. According to the Brooklyn Eagle, Roosevelt received no

requests to stop the fight between Jeffries and Fitzsimmons. He was willing to hope publicly that Jeffries would prevail. His interpretation of the law placed the onus of enforcement on local police, and if they failed, they would be accountable. The shame of the fight belonged neither to the governor’s office nor to the state, a major departure from the attitudes of the southern governors. The matter was simply one of local jurisdiction, with no larger political points to be won or lost by the governor. Governor Roosevelt was of course a known patron of the manly arts, something other governors simply could not admit, even if they were. The *New York Times* once lamented that Florida needed an interventionist governor to prevent prizefighting. New York’s governor was not very Andrew Jackson-like in this regard, but Roosevelt did have a high threshold of tolerance.\(^{67}\)

Fraud was not acceptable. William Brady believed that corruption finally motivated Roosevelt to attack the Horton Law, and the governor’s speech on the matter supports that conclusion. Governor Roosevelt used his annual address to the legislature on January 3, 1900, to recommend an end to prizefighting. He called the Horton Law “an offense against decency,” citing the excesses that an otherwise healthy endeavor can acquire once money is involved. In fact, the “demoralizing and brutalizing effect” of the sport was secondary to his concern about the evils introduced by money.\(^ {68}\) Roosevelt liked boxing, which was sometimes a bloody practice, but cheating he could not abide. His objections were rooted in a code of manly honor, while many other critics of the sport, including the cadre of female reformers, pointed to older Christian concepts of evil


\(^{67}\) “Governor Will Not Interfere,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, June 8, 1899, p. 2; and “Gov. Roosevelt’s Comment,” *New York World*, June 11, 1899, p. 3.
and sin. He was no “effeminate reformer.” Incidentally, Joe Choynski lost a fight to Kid McCoy at the Broadway club on January 9, despite the fact that he had knocked McCoy down and McCoy had fouled him. Boxing was self-destructing without Roosevelt’s censure.

New years bring new resolutions, and Assemblyman Merton E. Lewis introduced a bill into the state legislature to repeal the Horton Law in January 1900. Tim Sullivan warned that the opposition had hours worth of arguments to make against the repeal, and the votes in the assembly and senate would not be complete until March. William Brady established February 1 as the final day that he would take bids on the Corbett-Jeffries fight. Four New York clubs—Coney Island, Broadway, Utica, and Buffalo—put in offers. Even if the bill passed, at least one more title defense would transpire in New York.

Arguments for repeal pounded the themes of brutality and political corruption. Reverend Hite of the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church denounced prizefighting in the names of fathers and mothers whose children suffered from the sport. He offered no clear examples of how the sport affected children but still connected it to an overall negative environment. The repeal bill’s sponsor added to the brutality rhetoric and introduced

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69 Roosevelt’s definitions of manliness appear throughout his writings. Some basic tenets include courage, honesty, bravery, and physical development of the body. He also abhorred moral corruption. For examples of his views, see “The Strenuous Life,” “Character and Success,” and “The American Boy,” in The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses, by Theodore Roosevelt (New York: The Century Company, 1905), 1–21, 113–21, 155–64, respectively.
party politics into the conversation: “If this Horton law has any supporters, they are to be found among the Democratic members, not the Republicans, and you will find that those who are most active to defeat this bill are those who are personally interested and who represent the sporting element of New York City.” He did not call Senator Sullivan by name. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union also sent male representatives to Albany to demand the repeal of the Horton Law.\(^73\)

Support for the Lewis Law came from a surprising corner. Fitzsimmons favored the legislature’s action, citing the collusion among the club owners. He fingered “these two clubs, which are run by virtually the same promoters,” for his predicament. The unnamed clubs were likely the Coney Island Athletic Club and the Sullivan-backed Lenox Athletic Club. Fitz complained that he and “the other big men” had no choice but to fight at these two places, “or we shall not fight in the state.” In Fitz’s assessment of power dynamics, the clubs run by the politicians ruled over the fighters and the legislature. His experiences had shown him that a clever promoter could arrange a fight and that purses could be rich even in remote locations, and he apparently did not fear renewed exile from New York. Usually, politicians made fighting difficult for Fitzsimmons by trying to enforce proclamations against prizefighting. In New York, the corrupt politicians who bent the laws to see him box inspired him to want to leave.\(^74\)

The final vote was close, and it demonstrated that partisan politics and backroom deals were as much a part of social reform policy as any other aspect of representative lawmaking. In the state senate, the Democrats attempted to block the repeal of the Horton


\(^{74}\) “Woe among the Fighters,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 29, 1900, p. 14. Fitz probably did not actually speak with such refined language. Other writers recorded his Cornish–New
Law. Republican senator Henry J. Coggeshall from Oneida County had suggested that he would vote with the Democrats, who would then pass an agricultural bill as a return favor. Coggeshall then decided to rejoin his caucus for the actual vote. Barring one person, Republican Charles T. Willis, the vote fell strictly along party lines, with 26 for and 22 against. Tim Sullivan had lost his big fight.  

Reformers did not rest after the repeal, and neither did the fighters, managers, and promoters. The Rev. Thomas J. Fulton, a member of the City Club, wrote to Mayor Van Wyck when he learned that bantamweight Terry McGovern was set to fight Frank Erne at Madison Square Garden. The Garden was not an incorporated athletic club but a facility, and as such could not hold “sparring” contests. Chief Devery received notice that he should investigate the matter and act on it. The fight’s manager produced paper work demonstrating that the Twentieth Century Athletic Club had a one-year lease on the venue. Devery allowed the event, to the delight of more than twelve thousand fans. A stockholder in the building claimed that the stockholders had approved no such agreement. The police commissioners had decided that after the vote on the repeal, they did not have to grant licenses to clubs wishing to hold matches until the September 1 cut-off date. For about a five-month period, the normally lax administration of boxing became even less formidable. The repeal momentarily worsened the prizefighting outbreak in New York.  

75 “Governor to Sign It at Once,” Brooklyn Eagle, March 28, 1900, p. 3.
Boxing did not evaporate completely after September 1, 1900. Private clubs still held matches that typically lasted from three to six rounds without police interference, as long as they charged no admission fee and only club members attended. Clubs began taking advantage of the system, leading Republican governor Frank Higgins to direct Sheriff Nicholas Hayes to stop prizefighting in Manhattan. Clubs closed briefly, but Tammany-backed clubs soon re-emerged. Higgins’s successor Charles Evans Hughes, also a Republican, vetoed new boxing legislation. The club system remained in place despite the penal codes forbidding it. John A. Dix, a Tammany-approved Democrat, won election to the governor’s office in 1910. The Democrats also controlled both sides of the legislature that year. Dix signed the Frawley Law, which created a state Boxing Commission and allowed for fights between licensed fighters in licensed clubs, in June 1911.\textsuperscript{77}

The rise and fall of the Democratic political machine closely mirrored the legal status of prizefighting in New York State. The points at which Tammany Hall exerted the most influence over city, and to some extent, state politics, corresponded with the zenith of prizefighting in New York at the end of the nineteenth century. Tim Sullivan in Manhattan and Hugh McLaughlin in Coney Island represented the strong connection between prizefighting and politics. With the assistance of William Devery and his policemen, major boxing matches, both legitimate and fraudulent, made weekly headlines in the state. The corruption endemic in boxing and politics finally gave reformers the advantage over the pugilists in New York. They battled for years against the sport they despised and the elected officials who facilitated it.

\textsuperscript{77} Riess, “In The Ring and Out,” 107–12.
Anti-prizefight reformers in New York tended to be more inward looking and less concerned about what people outside their state thought about them than reformers in other states. Rather than suddenly and ferociously striking out at one particular fight only, the forces allied against prizefighting in New York maintained a constant assault on the sport. They used sophisticated political organization, such as sending lobbyists to the state assembly, to demand change rather than ringing church bells to protest prizefighting. Western and southern states had used regional rhetoric to defend their positions for and against prizefighting. The rallying cry in Texas, New Mexico, and even Nevada, among other examples, against prizefighting incorporated anxieties about seeming backward, uncivilized, immoral, and brutal to other parts of the nation, particularly the East. Nevada claimed abuse from the East, while Texas and the larger South despaired that the East might not see them as cultural equals.

Although fears about how a state allowing prizefighting would appear to the other members of the Union were much less prevalent in New York than they were in other states, a discernable insecurity still existed. Some New Yorkers agonized about being coarser than the very people whom they looked down upon. When Corbett and Fitzsimmons seemed to be headed for the Empire State in 1895 and 1896, critics appealed to their assumed superiority, declaring the event so loathsome “even the Texas authorities would not allow [it].” Texas, the supposed land of the savage Indian and the violent cowboy, could not be better than cosmopolitan New York. When Jeffries and Fitzsimmons fought in 1899, the same type of logic appeared: “In the new, raw, and less civilized States of the Union, policemen, constables, sheriffs, and citizens defend the

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78 The regional distinction between western and eastern methods of reform has been noted in Pivar, The Purity Crusade, 87–88.
repute and good name of the community from such assaults, and Governors have been known to call out the militia to prevent a prizefight.” New York, with its “fine society,” “costliest opera in the world, unnumbered churches, great wealth, and high civilization,” offered little resistance to the brutes. The irony of New York’s lively prizefight culture was not lost on reformers.  

Older states, represented by the New York, saw themselves as more refined than the “new” states, but that condition apparently made them less resistant to the onslaught of prizefighting. The notorious corruption in politics and in the prize ring damaged the sport but seemed to have little effect on the East as national leader for purity reform. By reducing the influence of Tammany Hall and reversing its position on prizefighting, New Yorkers proved their commitment to progress. Progressives like Theodore Roosevelt also added a masculine dimension to the culture of reform. Now that New York had prohibited prizefighting and planned to enforce it, or at least quiet the sport, would the pressure increase on the outstanding holdout, California, to follow suit? Jeffries’s home state’s moral quandary over prizefighting in the twentieth century took on a dimension different from any of the previous examples.

In 1910, Jim Corbett was forty-four years old, and Bob Fitzsimmons was forty-seven. Like John L. Sullivan before them, they now wore the mantles of elder statesman. Fitzsimmons, still a great fighter but no longer a challenger to the massive Jim Jeffries and his successors, had spent two years as the light heavyweight champion of the world. Corbett had appeared as the lead in the stage version of George Bernard Shaw’s *Cashel Byron’s Profession*, among other productions. Jeffries, their conqueror, had retired as the heavyweight champion in 1905. Marvin Hart and Tommy Burns were successive champions after Jeffries’s retirement, but they never reached the heights of their predecessors in either skill or style. Fighting his way up through the ranks was a Texas giant named Jack Johnson, whose father had been a slave. Johnson and Jeffries linked the first generation of gloved heavyweight champions to the next. The permissive states of California and Nevada were a thread of continuity between the two eras as well.

Racial fears were the primary motivation behind the abrupt enforcement of California’s long-standing state code prohibiting prizefighting in 1910. California, particularly the Bay Area, had capitalized on the repeal of the Horton Law in New York and the tendency of other states to ignore illegal prizefights but march out the militia for
heavyweight championships. All three of Jeffries’s title defenses after 1900 were in held California. Marvin Hart fought his single defense in Los Angeles. Then Tex Rickard, the new king of the national boxing promoters, planned a match between Jeffries and Johnson in California for July 1910. Suddenly, California’s governor, James N. Gillett, became aware of and deeply distressed about the state’s problem with unlawful boxing matches. Losing out to Nevada in 1896 for the Corbett-Fitzsimmons championship, California would not have a “Fight of the Century” for the twentieth century either.

Reform may have stimulated progress, or, at the minimum, change in the United States, but the era of improvement was also a time of retreat. The hardening of racial barriers, evident in the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), and the eugenics movement, indicated a vision of white progressive America. Certainly, not all progressives were racist; rather, racism and progressivism were competing and sometimes complementary trends that shaped American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Only the sporting press, by promoting the merit of black contenders, seemed to support the progress of people other than the white race. In California in 1910, racism accomplished what progressivism could not.

Over a fifty-year period, California State had reaffirmed on several occasions that fighting for money was unlawful within its borders. Since 1850, no state law had even vaguely approved of prizefighting. State legislators had emphatically established that prizefighting was illegal in 1893. This consistent course seemed to support the legislature’s continued rejection of the sport in the twentieth century. San Francisco enacted its own boxing codes, which permitted sparring exhibitions that often were

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1 The character of Cashel Byron was a heavyweight champion who sought the attentions of a sophisticated woman. See Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London:
prizefights in fact. Then state politicians realized that the city, with its fuzzy regulatory approach, had a more tenable and more popular position on fighting than the state. Rather than feebly trying to impose its will on San Francisco, the state adopted a policy similar to the city’s.

Henry Gage, a lawyer with ties to the Southern Pacific Railroad, was the one-term Republican governor (1899–1903) who signed the bill paving the way for legalized prizefights. Gage’s term as governor was fraught with difficulty, including accusations of being a puppet of the railroad men and his outright denial that the bubonic plague was ravaging San Francisco. Gage also wanted San Francisco political boss Daniel M. Burns to win election to the U.S Senate. At the time, legislators elected their state’s senators, a corrupt system that political reformers would soon reconstruct with the Seventeenth Amendment, the direct election of U.S. Senators, to the Constitution. Burns, the candidate supported by the powerful railroad interests, tied with U.S. Grant Jr. in 1899. The seat remained empty. Burns lost officially in an election during a special session of the legislature the following year. Gage and Burns were both unfavorably linked to the new prizefighting code.²

One of the “scandals of the Legislature,” Assembly Bill 588, passed in March 1899 with Gage’s approval. The amendment to part 412 of the California penal code allowed “exhibitions” of a limited number of rounds with gloves weighing not less than

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five ounces to take place at licensed, incorporated clubs. License fees had to be paid to municipal bodies. Combatants also had to pass a physician’s examination. Gyms that sprouted up in response to the health movement were the type of establishment for which lawmakers created an exemption when they allowed clubs to host sparring exhibitions. The clubs that existed to promote prizefighting often sponsored events at larger facilities such as Mechanics’ and Woodward’s pavilions in San Francisco. Outside clubs, fighters were guilty of a felony and spectators, a misdemeanor. Although state law still prohibited prizefighting, cities now officially had the power to grant licenses for fights. The intent of the law was to help prevent fraud. This same logic had middling results in New York during the Horton era, which was about to end as California was preparing to experiment with licensing. The San Francisco Call, for one, took a dim view of the law. John D. Spreckels, the paper’s owner, was one of the candidates for the U.S. Senate who thought that machine was going “get” him the election over Burns. On the West Coast too, politics and prizefighting were connected.3

State lawmakers continued to amend the code in March 1903 when the rampant abuse of the rules became apparent. Assembly Bill 149 explicitly defined challenge as “any words, spoken or written, or any signs uttered or made to any person, expressing or implying, or intended to express or imply, a desire, request, invitation or demand to engage in any fight.” Denying that any challenge existed between two fighters may have been one avenue that offenders had used to wiggle out of punishment. The Committee on Public Morals then created section 420 of the penal code, which made a misdemeanor of

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gambling on or stakeholding for a fight. Under this provision, gamblers not attending a
fight were still guilty of wrongdoing. The state also updated the code to force municipal
authorities to establish rules for the conduct of sparring exhibitions. These were the last
changes to the code until 1915. Jim Jeffries, Jim Corbett, and the local governmental
bodies thought little of all this state legal activity when they fought for the heavyweight
championship in San Francisco on August 14, 1903.4

California and New York both enacted regulatory laws to prevent prizefight fraud
in the late nineteenth century. These two large states with coastal urban centers populated
by large immigrant Catholic populations were the boxing capitals of the United States.
They followed a path different from the southern and midwestern states that chose
prohibition over regulation. For example, San Francisco had won the right to host
Jeffries’s fifth-round knockout of “The Akron Giant” Gus Ruhlin in 1901 by default after
Ohio governor George K. Nash halted the championship fight planned for Cincinnati.
While those parts of the country dreaded reputation-wrecking vice, and used early
nineteenth-century rhetoric to justify their actions, the states that explored regulation
worried about industrial-era corruption.5

San Francisco had already suffered repercussions for a famous fix in 1896 but
vice was good business. By 1902, predicting fixes was a public sport. Yet, local
government acknowledged the problem but then shut its ears and eyes. The city
eventually assessed over thirty thousand dollars in licensing fees for “boxing exhibitions”

4 The Journal of the Senate during the Thirty-fifth Session of the Legislature of the State
of California (Sacramento: State Printer’s Office, 1903), 114, 938; and The Statutes of
California and Amendments to the Codes, Passed at the Thirty-fifth Session of the
Legislature, 1903 (Sacramento: State Printer’s Office, 1903), 410.
in 1902. Only nickel slot and liquor permits brought in more leisure-based revenue for the city. Not even the involvement of famous fighters awakened their interest enough to change local prizefighting practices.6

Predicting the outcomes of prizefights had ceased to be a science that relied on comparing the skill and experience of two fighters. Secret telegrams recommending to a gambler where to lay his money could be “proof” of a fix. Reporters sometimes received missives containing the details of a fight, down to the final round and the method of knock out. Disappointed fans and gamblers had suffered through enough frauds to give such reports credence. Reports of a fake overshadowed the upcoming contest between Jim Jeffries and Bob Fitzsimmons, but the San Francisco fight machine geared up as usual for another heavyweight championship. Meanwhile, church leaders petitioned Governor Gage to prevent a proposed bullfight carnival, which was prohibited by state law. Perhaps the activists had grown enfeebled in their fight against white American brutality, but Mexican toreadors, their race working against them, could not break the laws of California State.7

The branches of municipal government ignored state law, and even local law, and prepared for the experiences of the fight on July 25. The Board of Supervisors granted the San Francisco Athletic Club a permit to build an arena at Valencia and Fourteenth streets. The Grand Jury warned the fire and police chiefs that they and their men should be alert

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7 “Toreadors from Mexico Will Not Be Permitted to Break the State Law against Bull Fighting,” San Francisco Examiner, July 22, 1902, p. 3.
and take precautions for the fans’ safety. Alec Greggains even made arrangements with Police Chief George Wittman the week before to have off-duty officers work as security at the fight. Wittman sat ringside in plainclothes. Even the most forgiving reading of the code put the police and all other participating agencies in violation of state law.8

Bob Fitzsimmons, now called “Foxy Grandpa” by some observers, was on the comeback trail in 1902. He trained at Skaggs Springs near Healdsburg, California, for a title fight with Jeffries. Even Fitz was not immune from accusations of fraud, having once been reported for taking a dive against an old opponent from Australia, Jim Hall, in 1890. The fact that Fitz was fifty pounds lighter and fifteen years older than Jeffries was a more immediate problem but the alleged fix had greater consequences for the ex-champion.9

The Foxy Grandpa had his way with the champion through most of the fight. Blood flowed from Jeffries’s nose in the first, and his eyes were swollen and black a few rounds later. Fitz controlled the action through the sixth, and then the momentum shifted. The elder fighter had busted all the knuckles on his right hand. The end came in the eighth. A hard Jeff left to the body stunned Fitz, and a following left to the head knocked him to his knees. Referee Ed Graney counted ten, and Jeffries was still the champion of the world.10

8 “Many Strangers Arrive,” San Francisco Call, July 23, 1902, p. 8; and “Arrangements for the Fight are Perfect,” San Francisco Call, July 26, 1902, p. 2.
New technology had closed the distance between Rose Fitzsimmons and the ring when she was unable to attend Bob’s fights, and the phone was more immediate than the telegraph. She heard the reports of his loss to Jeffries over a telephone provided to her by the San Francisco Examiner. She was stunned. Although she announced that Bob had promised her that he would never fight again, she had heard it before. Her husband was still a popular man, and thousands applauded him and waited to shake his hand after the fight.11

Bill Naughton, the Examiner’s sportswriter, was absolutely convinced that the fight was a fake and sent Mayor Eugene E. Schmitz the pre-arranged details. A distraught Fitzsimmons met with Schmitz to convince him of his integrity. The results of the contest convinced Schmitz that the fight was indeed faked, and he initially claimed that neither man would participate in an “exhibition” in the city again. Then he decided that he had nothing more to say about the matter, invoking more important issues that needed his attention. The Board of Supervisors had a similar reaction: They were angry and disappointed but they determined that the future of fight permits depended on public sentiment. The supervisors suggested that they might need to protect the public from fraud, but ultimately, they kept alive the prizefighting business. The Call, the Examiner’s rival paper, resolved the issue by trying to make a fool of Naughton. The Call declared that the fake rumor originated with Isabelle Hall, a friend of Jeffries, who had told the champion’s fortune and seen his future in the eight of clubs, and the fight had finished in the eighth round. Ring scribes Lou Houseman and George Siler were satisfied that both

11 “Battle Attracts Enormous Amount of Spectators, Who Cheer Former Champion for His Marvelous Showing,” San Francisco Call, July 26, 1902, p. 3; and “Fitzsimmons’ Wife Heard Fight by Phone,” San Francisco Examiner, July 26, p. 4.
fighters were on the level. Nothing more came of the accusations but the phantom of the fake continued to haunt professional boxing in the United States.\(^{12}\)

With two losses in two attempts with Jeffries, Fitzsimmons was no longer a contender, but another ex-champion stood next in line. Jim Corbett took his second turn at Jeffries, and San Francisco hosted its third consecutive heavyweight title defense. Corbett had already lost to Jeffries in 1900 at Coney Island, but he boxed well in that twenty-three round battle. On the night of August 14, 1903, Corbett was no match for the bigger, stronger, and younger man. The large crowd at Mechanics’ cheered another victory for Jeffries, but they also gave the ex-champion his due for his courage against the better man. Although they were past their prime, Corbett and Fitzsimmons were still heroes to fans, who cherished memories of them in their greatness. Unlike Fitzsimmons, Corbett never fought a professional bout again.\(^ {13}\)

With his old foes soundly defeated and no one left to fight, save the black men whom he refused to face, Jeffries pondered retirement. Jeffries and Fitzsimmons had embarked on a tour together after the former beat the latter, and, as was convention for such a tour, Jeffries challenged any man to stand four rounds with him. Jack Munroe, a miner, had stepped out of crowd in Butte, Montana, and not only finished on his feet, but


had clearly scored points on the champion. He was the best competition that Jeffries chose to find and that the American public would accept. On August 26, 1904, he finished off Munroe in two rounds at Mechanics’ Pavilion. At the urging of his wife, Frieda, Jeff announced his retirement from both the stage and the ring on May 2, 1905. The first great era of the heavyweights was coming to a close.¹⁴

The West Coast, and San Francisco in particular, had benefited from Jeffries’s success. The champion may have been a bit of an embarrassment to people concerned with civilizing the city, for Jeffries had neither the charm nor the aspirations of California’s own Gentleman Jim, but he drew large numbers of boxing tourists to the state. Regardless of his origins, the nation identified him as a man of West and symbol of California. Like Corbett before him, Jeffries later unretired to defend his heavyweight crown. In his absence, however, a vigorous resurgence of racism and California’s emergence on a global stage reshaped the conditions that had previously enabled Jeffries to fight in California.

After he retired, the city underwent drastic changes, not all by choice. San Franciscans had invested themselves in “civilizing” their city since the nineteenth century, but new forms and methods for this project rose to prominence in the twentieth century. For example, proponents of the “City Beautiful” movement had a canvas to fill in after the devastation of the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. The rise of California’s Progressive reform generation, including James D. Phelan and future governor Hiram Johnson, launched campaigns against challenges to social and moral order such as saloons and houses of prostitution. They also attacked corruption in government, as

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exemplified by the transparent influence of the Southern Pacific Railroad in California politics.\textsuperscript{15}

Even in the age of reform, graft still influenced the administration of prizefight policy. Like in New York, securing fight permits had a political facet in San Francisco. The Democratic-controlled Board of Supervisors sometimes took politics into consideration when awarding permits, creating competition between four main promoters, Eddie Graney, Jim Cofforth, Morris Levy, and Willis Britt. The political victories of the Union Labor Party in 1905 created the conditions for a new permit distribution system. The four men formed a sort of prizefight trust, and the board awarded up front all the permits for the coming year of 1906. Abe Ruef, the most important political boss at the time, brokered the plan and received an eighteen-thousand-dollar fee from the promoters for his effort. He forwarded part of his payment to Mayor Schmitz and part to members of the Board of Supervisors. Complementary tickets issued for fights were also used by elites as political chits. The failure of the Ralston anti-prizefighting bill

\textsuperscript{14} “‘Quits Forever Fighting Game,’” \textit{San Francisco Call}, May 3, 1905, p. 10.
in the state assembly in 1905, amid charges of graft, was a reminder that that reform was a work in progress.\textsuperscript{16}

Proponents of white racial superiority never pointed to the cleverness and nerve required to achieve some of these schemes as evidence of their eminence. But they were quick to note the ways in which they were superior to the growing population of people of color in California.\textsuperscript{17} The environment in which Jack Johnson prepared for his fight against Jim Jeffries was rife with racist thought that prevailed in the United States in the early twentieth century. Social Darwinism and eugenics were two such ideas that “proved” scientifically that blacks and other races were inferior to whites. Even so, whites feared competition from blacks at every level of society, and the heavyweight division of professional prizefighters was perhaps the most visible of all competitions.\textsuperscript{18}


The preoccupation with the advancement of white people had already crept into the world of prizefighting in San Francisco. In 1892, the San Francisco Morning Call sounded the opinions of prominent citizens about prizefighting. The question the paper posed, “Would the suppression of prizefighting benefit the race?” revealed the white anxiety about the degeneration of the Anglo race. Preserving presumed white racial dominance was the greater part of the crusade against prizefighting at that moment. Mayor George H. Sanderson, explicitly connecting prizefight reform with the elevation of white culture, said, “The suppression of prize-fighting would benefit our race.” Fire Chief David S. Scannell, Judge John F. Finn, and Dr. R. Beverly Cole agreed. Attorney Clara Feltz favored prizefighting and muscular culture as a way to save the physically depraved white race so that it may become “a race fit to rule the earth.”

Black athletes posed a serious challenge to the campaign for white racial dominance. For many people, white superiority in the ring, on the diamond, or around the track translated directly to overall social supremacy. The muscular Christian movement was an obvious manifestation of a white commitment to bodily health with a larger social purpose of strengthening Christianity. The evangelical push to spread the word of God included the conversion of black people, who could experience Christian enlightenment.

In the secular world of professional sport, however, the white body, the symbol of physical human perfection, represented something that a black person could never achieve. Historian Donald J. Mrozek has argued that the emergence of professional sports in America was a consequence of an obsession with creating the perfect body as a means

of preserving racial stock. Historian Gail Bederman has shown that boxing matches between white and black competitors were seen as battles between civilized manliness and primitive masculinity. No white heavyweight boxer wanted to be responsible for the disproving the social-scientific theories of race.²⁰

Jack Johnson, a new heavyweight champion, upset boxing and American society in the first decade of the twentieth century. One of the greatest fighters of the gloved era, Peter Jackson, had built his reputation in America with his early fights in California. His race posed little threat at the time. He had fought Corbett when the latter was not yet the champion. The West Indian had played his role as Uncle Tom, and never had the chance to fight a champion; so, defenders of the white race needed not worry about him. Johnson was altogether different. He had the chance to fight the white champions, and no one could ever confuse him for an Uncle Tom.

The Johnson-Jeffries heavyweight championship fight has been dissected many times. Historians tend to focus on either racial meanings of the event, the meanings of manhood encapsulated in it, or on the actual skill and style of the two combatants as they trained and fought. Those interpretations place the fight respectively in a larger context of the evolution of race relations in America, the reshaping of gender, or in the physical progress of the sport of prizefighting. The reading in this dissertation gives the greatest of all fights of the century, its due not for boxing, for it really was not a match between

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²⁰ “Would the Suppression of Prize-Fights Be Beneficial?” San Francisco Call, October 23, 1892, p. 8.

equals, but as the event that finally tipped the balance of power from local to state in California in the arena of prizefight policy.\textsuperscript{21}

While the prohibition of prizefighting in most American states had curbed the momentum of the sport, the lack of a heroic champion was beginning to deflate its popularity. The heavyweight division was in crisis in 1907. Jeffries’s retirement opened the door to nearly forgotten titleholders Marvin Hart and Canadian Tommy Burns (Noah Brusso). Hart, Jeffries’s successor, managed to hold onto the crown for six months. The combined reigns of the previous three champions lasted fifteen years. Part of the secret of Corbett’s and Fitzsimmons’s longevity was that they rarely defended their titles, but contemporary observers despaired that these new heavyweights had neither the style nor the personal appeal of the old gladiators. Hart and Burns were never celebrities in the fashion of Corbett, and they lacked Fitzsimmons’s punch and panache and Jeffries’s physical domination. The fighting public was losing interest. The paucity of notable white heavyweights was the opportunity the black fighters needed to assert their claim on the title of best boxer and challenge existing notions of racial dynamics.\textsuperscript{22}

The savior was a black man who many Americans saw as a devil. Jack Johnson ruled over the aging Bob Fitzsimmons in 1907, Tommy Burns in 1908, Philadelphia Jack O’Brien in 1909, and the best of the black fighters: Joe Jeannette, Sam McVea, and Sam Langford. Although he had lost to Marvin Hart, he appeared to be the best of the

professional heavyweights when he took the title from Burns. Already feted as the black heavyweight champion, Johnson was the obvious choice to fight Burns. Without other legitimate challengers, Burns had to face his black rival, but not in the United States, where no promoter had the asking price. Hugh “Huge Deal” McIntosh brought the Canadian and American together in Australia. Once Johnson beat Burns at the stadium in Rushcutter’s Bay in Sydney, the search began for a white redeemer. With a reluctant Jeffries convinced to return to training, decades of segregation at the heavyweight level in America was about to come to an end.  

Johnson’s arrival as a serious heavyweight fighter illustrated the new dimension that race lent to the enforcement of state prizefighting laws. Born in Galveston, Texas, Johnson rumbled around the local fight scene, punching his way through eight- to ten-men Battle Royals, and he went to Chicago in the late 1890s for seasoning. Joe Choynski, Corbett’s old nemesis and a very good fighter, came to Galveston in February 1901 to fight Johnson. Choynski beat Johnson in the third, just in time for Captain Brooks of the Texas Rangers to arrest them both for violating the state’s anti-prizefighting statute. Rather than being released after a day or two as was customary in other such cases, both men spent twenty-four days in jail before bonding out. The white fighters’ games with law enforcement turned serious when a black heavyweight was involved.


Although he was the “Boilermaker” and the “Grizzly Bear,” Jim Jeffries is better known to history as “The Great White Hope.” Before anxious whites bestowed that moniker on him, he had retired from the ring, citing ill health caused by malaria and rheumatism and the fact that no strong challengers remained. He officially retired on May 14, 1902, after his final performance in Chicago as the titular character in *Davy Crockett*. The character of Crockett required him to be the picture of healthy white western ruggedness, and despite any effects of illness, he succeeded. He may not have had the acting chops of Frank Mayo, who originated the role, but “he got away with it.”

The life of a stage actor, however, held little for a man who preferred hunting and farming to social climbing.

Like many fighters of his day, Jeffries had crossed the color line several times during his career but shied away from it once he wore the champion’s crown. He once risked his reputation by fighting Jackson, the most fearsome black heavyweight of the 1890s, in March 1898. Jackson was past his prime, and Jeff whipped him in three. His match with Bob Armstrong in August 1898 almost cost him his shot at Fitzsimmons. After winning the championship, he appeared reluctant to get into the ring with black fighters. He refused a battle with “Denver” Ed Martin, who was a contender for his title. By 1904, Jeffries had drawn the color line without remorse.

The heavyweight class, more than any other, was subject to the racist intrusions. The promoters and fighters, as George Siler observed at the time, bore a large responsibility for encouraging and throwing up racial barriers. A notable exception was

when Bob Fitzsimmons, who had difficulties staying retired, decided to take on any legitimate opponent, regardless of color. He had less to risk from a loss as his career, particularly as heavyweight, had long since waned. “Ruby Robert” lasted only two rounds with Jack Johnson in 1907.\textsuperscript{28}

The sporting press was a liberal voice in discussions about race. Its writers published articles about all-white contests, interracial fights, and battles between two black men. Even the “Terrible Chink“ Ching Fang had his activities written up like all the other fighting men. Many of the sporting men wanted to see the best athletes matched with one another, regardless of race, and said so. “The fighting game is not a calling that permits such finally drawn socially distinctions,” said a columnist in the \textit{Police Gazette}. Race was “a shallow excuse” for one fighter to avoid another. The sports-wise public knew that Jack Munroe, whom Jeffries destroyed in two rounds at San Francisco in 1904, lacked both the record and the fighting skill for a shot at the championship. “The dark meat branch of the Swatter’s Union” may not have been a polite way to refer to the black fighters, but organs such as the \textit{Police Gazette} championed their right to fight the white men. A least one small segment of the white population appreciated and supported colored fighters.\textsuperscript{29}

California hosted not one but two interracial boxing matches featuring Johnson in 1909. He fought Al Kaufman in San Francisco on September 9, 1909, in a ten-round

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exhibition that was seen as a defense of the heavyweight championship, and “Michigan Assassin” Stanley Ketchel (Stanislaus Kiecal) in Colma on October 16, 1909. Ketchel, a middleweight who had enough punching power to knock Johnson down, was outweighed by nearly fifty pounds. The event turned ugly when Ketchel put Johnson down. The giant quickly retaliated, knocking Ketchel out cold. Kaufman and Ketchel, along with Jack O’Brien had failed as “white hopes.” If Governor Gillett took issue with a black champion defeating white men in his state, even if during an “exhibition,” his inaction on these two fights did not betray him. Nor did he disclose objections during the first months of arranging for the July 4, 1910, bout between Johnson and Jeffries.  

Promoters Tex Rickard and Jack Gleason had not initially planned on California. Rickard’s first choice was Salt Lake City, which had had an active fight scene over the years. Los Angeles, near Jeffries’s home in Burbank, and Richmond, near San Francisco, also entered bids. The two promoters haggled from December 1909 through March 1910. Gleason, a San Francisco native, finally prevailed. The always amenable Board of Supervisors, who had agreed to issue an unusual permit for a fight of up to forty-five rounds, balked in the end. The mayor and councilors of the Alameda County city of Emeryville, born of the nearby New California Jockey Club racetrack, suddenly found itself hosting the “Fight of the Century.” Protests soon emerged. Oakland pastors united against it. The Trirotarians of Oakland resolved to condemn it. Emeryville relented, announcing that authorities would stop anything other than a sparring contest. San Francisco authorities then agreed to give a permit to the promoters. The complaints again


rang in the city, where churchmen called for the governor to prevent San Francisco from becoming “the Paris of the West.” John L. Herget, the head of the Board of Supervisors who had fought as a middleweight as “Young Mitchell” in his youth, supported the final decision. Throughout the negotiations, New York senator Tim Sullivan, also the fight’s stakeholder, stood ready to help. The dickering between Gleason and Rickard threatened the final event in no way. City planners and architects moved ahead with construction for yet another arena in the city. The real hurdle was the national protest that overshadowed any uproar California officials had contended with before.  

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Faith-based protestors were becoming more sophisticated. Preachers had sermonized against prizefighting for years without a successful response from city leaders or the governor’s office. In Cincinnati, a million-postcard campaign urging Governor Gillett to stop the fight began. The San Francisco Church Federation, adopting a modern strategy, immediately made an appointment with the district attorney to lodge its protest. When that failed, it redirected the group’s indignation toward the governor. The federation’s representative was its attorney, J. E. White. When White addressed a letter to the governor, he made no mention of the state’s reputation or the brutality of prizefighting, as the El Paso Ministers’ Union had done, but plainly outlined the state law. He requested, “the executive power of the state should be exerted” on this occasion when local authority had denied its ability to interfere. The basic issue was the same as it

had been in Texas: local authority was unresponsive and the governor was the next logical civil power. That sort of pressure had achieved little in the past, but a second force bearing down on the governor was more than he could carry.\textsuperscript{32}

Gillett had actually promoted the fight while in Chicago in May 1910. With the old booster spirit, he declared that the event would bring hundreds of people to the coast and argued that state law clearly did not intend for professional prizefights to be prevented. He pointed to the clause that required the fighters to be examined by physicians and remarked, “If the law anticipated amateur contests, it is not likely the provision would have been made.” He celebrated the symbolic magnitude of the fight: “To the people of the United States . . . it is bigger than the passage or defeat of important legislation, Roosevelt’s triumphal tour, or even the approach of the comet.”\textsuperscript{33}

The prospects of hundreds of tourists bringing their wallets to California was alluring, but Gillett soon decided that the possibility of millions of tourists was far more tantalizing. The congressional vote for the location of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915 was due in June. San Francisco was a top candidate. The world’s fair was supposed to commemorate the completion of the Panama Canal, and planners intended it to be a monument to the progress of the white race. Jack Johnson had serious potential to be an impediment to Gillett’s designs to capture the exposition for his state.\textsuperscript{34}

On June 15, Gillet announced that the prizefight had to be stopped. That same day, the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs was planning to choose the host city

\textsuperscript{32} Roberts, \textit{Papa Jack}, 94.
\textsuperscript{33} “Gillett Boosts Fight,” \textit{San Francisco Call}, May 19, 1910, p. 13. Earth was due to pass through the tail of Halley’s comet on May 18.
for the exposition. San Francisco’s main competition was the old capital of prizefighting, New Orleans. New Orleans mayor Martin Behrman pitched his city to the congressional committee: “We are not opposed to [San Francisco] having the Johnson-Jeffries fight. We are not an applicant for that fight, because we did not think we were the logical point for it.”35 Those remarks earned laughter and applause from the committee at San Francisco’s expense. Inside information suggested that communications between Rep. William S. Bennet of New York and San Francisco Chamber of Commerce president William R. Wheeler led to Gillett’s sudden change in course. Bennet apparently warned Wheeler that the “moral sentiment” of the country opposed the fight. He further informed Wheeler that “church organizations and various reform bodies” throughout the East were pressuring their congressmen to vote against San Francisco on the basis of the Johnson-Jeffries fight.36

Fans and the pugilists were wise to Gillett’s scheme. Jeffries said, “I think there is a dirty lot of politics mixed up in this affair.”37 The governor received letters chiding him for his sudden reversal, suggesting that his integrity was suspect. Others applauded his courage for confronting the prizefight menace. Judge William M. Murrow of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco celebrated Gillett’s savvy for waiting until the local authorities failed before taking control of the situation. The governor’s wife, Isabella, received congratulations for her husband’s actions; conversely, she was also

37 Joseph Murphy, “Jeff Thinks Politics is Mixed Up with Governor Gillet’s Orders Forbidding Promoters to Hold Fight Here,” San Francisco Call, June 18, 1910, p. 6.
blamed for them. The criticisms and plaudits were no help to Gillett, who had to enact a strategy to prevent the fight.38

Every possible evil that reformers had pinned to prizefighting seemed to be present in 1910. Beyond the larger social issue of racial superiority, accusations of the fix, profligate gambling, the obvious-but-ignored unlawfulness, and the ageless criticism brutality had their place at the table. Governor Gillett had a broad range of choices to justify his assault on Johnson-Jeffries. Like many state governors before him, his motivation was public image, but unlike the other chiefs of state, he had an immediate, material reason for trying to make his state seem progressive. With the Panama-Pacific Exposition and national and international prestige as the high stakes, Gillett had to go toe-to-toe with prizefighting, and he had to win.39

Gillett’s opening move was to let other branches of government do the fighting for him. On June 15, after construction had already started on an arena at Eighth and Market streets, he announced that under state law, prizefighting was a felony. He then ordered Atty. Gen. U.S. Webb to investigate whether the July 4 contest was going to be a “sparring exhibition” or a “prizefight.” Knowing the answer, Gillett assumed that the courts would prevent the fight, but if they failed, then Webb had to gather evidence to arrest the Johnson and Jeffries, along with promoters Rickard and Gleason, should the

38 William M. Murrow to Governor Gillett, June 22, 1910, San Francisco, folder 59, box 1080, James Norris Gillett Collection, part 1, California State Library, Sacramento; Leroy W. Nelson to Isabella Gillett, June 16, 1910, San Francisco, folder 26, box 1083, James Norris Gillett Collection, part 1, California State Library, Sacramento; and Anonymous to J. N. Gillett, June 16, 1910, ibid.
opening bell for the fight ring. Courts had conflicted with governors’ wishes about prizefighting on several previous occasions. Gillett was taking no chances.  

Officials in San Francisco remained as defiant as they had been for the past twenty years, and they did so initially with the governor’s approval. The San Francisco District Attorney, Charles M. Fickert, told Gillett that he had no intention of interfering with the fight. An athlete and former head football coach at Stanford University, Fickert was well aware of prizefighting in San Francisco. He had pursued manslaughter charges against lightweight Owen Moran in the death of Tommy McCarthy in April 1910. The charges were dismissed. McCarthy’s death set off agitators, who pressured Gillett anew to stop Jeffries-Johnson. Death was not enough for Gillett to change tack. He said that prizefights were a city and county matter. When the governor became an expert on prizefight law in June, San Francisco mayor P. H. “Pinhead” McCarthy was unimpressed by Gillett’s assertion of power: “I am running San Francisco. I am taking no orders from Gillett or his Attorney-General. . . . We know what we want and we get what we want when we want it. . . . We run [San Francisco] to suit ourselves.” This petty brinksmanship went nowhere. Three days later, McCarthy denied ever making the statement. Political power and thus civil authority was shifting toward the capital in Sacramento.

Gillett stayed with the tried-and-true system of ordering out the militia to defend the state from prizefighting. He demonstrated his commitment by dispatching the

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41 “Fickert Says He Cannot Interfere,” *Los Angeles Herald*, May 21, 1910, p. 6; and “Small Bail in Fight Cases,” *San Francisco Call*, May 1, 1910, p. 29.
California National Guard to San Francisco to prevent Al Kaufman, a white heavyweight, from fighting Sam Langford, a black fighter, on June 19, 1910. Gillett drew up an order declaring martial law at ringside if the fight was not stopped. The governor promised to withdraw the order if police chief John Martin agreed to enforce the law. Promoter Louis Blot flinched, canceling the fight. The show of arms worked. In reality, the power over the fight lay neither with the mayor nor the governor, but with the promoters.\textsuperscript{44}

With these results from what amounted to a test of Gillett, Rickard and Gleason did not dally about moving the fight. Unlike their predecessors, particularly Dan Stuart, they had neither the time nor the patience to test the governor further. Rickard had already successfully promoted the Joe Gans–Battling Nelson fight in Goldfield, Nevada, in 1906 and knew that Nevada was the best hope. The mayor of Reno had no such moral or social qualms, and Nevada was the only state where actual knockout, purse-winning prizefighting was legal. Still in the throws of economic peril, Nevada statesmen had positively experienced the prizefight boom, and were ready to make another strike. In 1905, the bout between Jack Root and Hart to decide Jeffries’s successor as heavyweight champion had been held in Reno without incident. In 1910, Nevada governor Denver Dickerson invited everyone over the state line, promising not to interfere. The promoters could make the July 4 date, but they had little time to prepare.\textsuperscript{45}

The unexpected complication of the vote on the world’s fair and the storm of national protest that flooded congressional offices with petitions and prayers to stop Jeffries-Johnson drove the fight to Reno. The U.S. Congress was prepared to give San Francisco a July 4 date, but the lack of time to prepare...

\textsuperscript{44}“Martial Law May Rule at Ring,” \textit{San Francisco Call}, July 18, 1910, p. 1; and “Blot’s Rebellion Has Quieted Down,” \textit{San Francisco Call}, June 19, 1910, p. 6.
Francisco the chance shine in the international spotlight as the host of the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915. James Gillett was no reformer, but another of the railroad governors. He had not stepped in to save Kaufman or Ketchel from Johnson, and he had not intended to shield Jeffries either. Only the promise of a financial boon for his state and the railroads that would bring people to the city motivated him. The hand-wringing churchmen from across the nation had not done much for Kaufman or Ketchel. Jeffries, The Great White Hope, the symbol of white American manhood, was another story.

The weight of an entire race was quite a load for one man to bear. Johnson lightly tossed the burden over his shoulder and stormed the battlements erected against him. He was in territory chartered only by a man of a much different character, cycling champion Major Taylor, who bore with gritted teeth all he could before he escaped to Europe. Where Taylor had abstained from drink and refused to race on Sundays, Johnson could not quench his thirst for alcohol, or for white women, and drove his car as fast as he liked on any day of the week. He was the fearless rampaging black man who white people feared. During the pomp of the Fourth of July fight, Johnson, like many of his white predecessors, wore an American flag belt. He was his own army of black liberation.46

The defender of this racial ivory tower was filled with uncertainty. Jeffries could not sleep; he could not lose weight; he could not regain his step; he could not avoid his fans; he could not convince himself that the fight was not fixed; he listened to everyone who gave unsolicited advice; he worried that all his friends had put their money on him. His former trainer Billy Delaney was working with Johnson. Governor Gillett criticized the fight. He was not in the mental or physical condition to fend off the threat, and he

seemed to know it before he ever laced up his shoes. Fitzsimmons remarked that Jeffries was “not there.”

The fans were more ready for the day than Jeff was. They came from everywhere—from ten miles up the road to destinations across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans—to be pressed through the four entrances of the hexagonal arena in Reno. They moved in a mob of at least fifteen thousand strong. Cartoonist Rube Goldberg was ringside with his sketchbook. Author and boxing aficionado Jack London, who had urged Jeffries to save the white race from Johnson, took a seat with pen and paper.

The trappings of the American West that had been so prominent in 1897 had faded but were still present. Although Bat Masterson, now comfortable in his career as a New York sportswriter, was not manning security, firearms were still checked at the gate.

Masterson was now strictly a journalist, who looked in on both camps for the benefit of his readers. He made a marked effort to distance himself from his western past in 1913 when he sued the *New York Globe* for defamation of character. The paper had run a story in 1911 describing Masterson as “an alleged bad man and gun fighter, who made his reputation shooting drunken Mexicans and Indians in the back.” Wyatt Earp had moved on to the Alaska, the last frontier. The West as a defining characteristic of American prizefighting had diminished considerably since Carson City’s brief moment as a global capital in 1897.

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48 “Great Arena is Completed,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 1910, p. 16.

Times had also changed for women. No longer did promoters hem and haw about whether to allow women into the arena. Hundreds of women bought tickets, attending the fight alone or with escorts. Wealthy women, including the governor’s wife, made the scene, although they had private curtained boxes to accommodate those who felt socially more comfortable in a cell, protected from the male space of the prizefight ring. Throngs of “respectable women” mingled with the men in the general seating below the boxes. Novelist Rex E. Beach’s wife joined him at ringside, despite her husband’s objections and Mrs. Rickard’s belief that she was not “game” enough for it. Attending a prizefight had become a social game of dare. Continuing a tradition, Helen Dare, columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, was on hand to cover the fight. The most fascinating female in the crowd was Etta Duryea, Johnson’s white wife. Her presence was another facet of Johnson’s overt challenge to the conventions of American society. Frieda Jeffries, unable to bear the stress, awaited results at the Western Union office.  

The smell of fresh pine and sage surrounded the spectators. Sticky pitch seeping from the unpainted pine bleachers left them with an unexpected souvenir. The canvas in the ring was red, rather than white, to cut down on the glare of the afternoon sun. The red fabric also would not show blood as easily as the lighter coverings would have. The Reno Brass Band layered the sweet pine smell with patriotic tunes “America,” “Dixie,” and the Civil War standard, “Just Before the Battle, Mother,” which caused Jeffries to cry in his dressing room. The band also trotted out the popular song “All Coons Look Alike to

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*Advertiser Association*, New York Supreme Court, Appellate Division (New York: Stillman Appellate Printing, 1913), 6.  
Me,” which had greeted Major Taylor before a thirty-mile race in 1898. Taylor lost that day.  

The pre-fight rituals had not changed much since Nevada’s last all-consuming heavyweight spectacle. The gallery of titans strode to the center of the ring during pre-fight festivities in Reno. Corbett and Fitzsimmons joined the distinguished stars, which John L. Sullivan still anchored. Also in the line-up was the underappreciated Sam Langford and the overly influential politician Big Tim Sullivan. William Muldoon, the big wrestler, warned the crowd hostile to Johnson that sport was about fairness, not race. Jeffries entered the ring wearing a gray suit and cap and Johnson, an embroidered bathrobe. Billy Jordan, the same announcer who called Corbett and Fitzsimmons to the center of the ring in 1897, announced Johnson and Jeffries, and Jeffries refused Johnson’s hand. Jim Corbett, who had once depended on a younger Jeffries, now sat in Jeff’s corner. Jordan gave the signal, “Let ‘er go,” and the fight of the century that eclipsed all others began.

Jeffries furiously jawed a giant wad of gum. Johnson smiled and joked through much of the fight with a sass that sometimes recalled Fitzsimmons’s ring antics, although Johnson’s display was a conspicuous challenge to all white Americans rather than just his opponent. The first three rounds were the peak of Jeffries’s performance. His reach was too short to land a punch with much power behind it. Although he occasionally reverted to his famous protective crouch, he was for the most part fighting on a vertical axis. A flurry of Johnson’s punches to his jaw put him on the horizontal in the fifteenth round. Corbett, whose main purpose had been to antagonize the Texas Giant, begged Johnson

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not to hit Jeffries anymore. Jeffries did rise, but only to stand for series of hooks that landed him on the canvas once more.\(^5^3\)

Jeff had never been knocked down before. The men in his corner knew it was over. Sam Berger, his trainer, asked Bob Armstrong to get the white towel. “Don’t let him be knocked out!” One of Jeffrìes’s seconds launched himself into the ring. Tex Rickard, who was also the referee, had to the call the fight to an end for a foul committed by Jeffries’s corner. In that moment, a new era began.

His seconds hauled the swollen, cut, and bleeding Jeffries back to his corner. The crowd fell silent, as befuddled by the racial implications of the outcome as they were disappointed by the loss of all the money they had gambled on Jeffries and their racial hopes. Johnson had a telegram declaring his victory sent to his mother. Frieda Jeffries was just glad to have her husband back from the public that had stolen him from her. With the equanimity that only a sportswriter seemed capable of at the time, Fred R. Bechdolt of the *San Francisco Call* concluded, “A good man lost. A good man won.”\(^5^4\)

The immediate local consequences were relatively tame. Dour masses trudged back to the trains with empty pockets, wondering what had happened. Jeff returned to Frieda, and Johnson, Etta, and his crew went to a roadhouse. The outrage brewing was far from Reno, and in the cities the tens of thousands of fans crowded bulletin boards and re-enactors, black and white, at newspaper offices across the country. The *Salt Lake Herald*

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Republican ran a large picture of Jeffries alone with the headline, “Johnson Is Easily Victor of the Battle.” Johnson’s own face with his headline was too controversial. The film of the fight showed that Johnson clearly was the better man, and the visual proof that could be played again and again was horror to progressive reformers far worse than the first fight films that spread images of brutality to men, women, and children across the nation.55

Race reformers feared the film would be far more devastating to society than the boxing itself. After the fight, a series of race riots broke out across the United States, and the worst of the violence was in the South and in New York, where rioters set fire to a tenement housing black people. Activists who had raged against movies of fights between two white men were now apoplectic about the films of Johnson’s victory spreading race rebellion. The United Christian Endeavor, which had four million members, jumped to action to stop the film from being shown in cities and towns everywhere. Governors, especially those in the South, and even Theodore Roosevelt, responded to the organization’s call to ban the film. Governor Gillett, however, returned to local mayors authority over the question of the fight films.56

The danger eventually passed. San Franciscans went to work planning the Panama-Pacific Exposition. Jack Johnson, after one more defense against “Fireman” Jim Flynn in Las Vegas, New Mexico, on July 4, 1912, was driven from the United States for a violation of the Mann Act, which made it illegal to transport women across state lines

for prostitution or any other immoral purpose; that is, Johnson was arrested for taking his white consort at the time over state lines. He fled the United States. In the moment, the violence precipitated by Johnson’s victory seemed to express the deep racial anxieties of white Americans. The legally instituted racism that was part of the “progress” of the Progressive Era dissolved the threat of Johnson. 57

If Progressivism was truly founded on bringing white, middle-class values to America, the reformers’ final major victory in California was a more complete realization of that dream than any settlement house or dry county could ever be. The destruction of Jack Johnson’s career in California demonstrated that whiteness and its superiority were essential to national “progress.” The pugilistic success of Jack Johnson united reforming forces inside and outside California. The result was actual substantive policy enforcement in California and soon after his victory in Nevada, the nation.

Even without Johnson in the country, Californians resumed their obsession with prizefight law but in a new political arena. The successful thrust against Johnson-Jeffries and the years-long preparations for the Panama-Pacific Exposition that contributed to the triumph over the fight provided a platform for reformers to continue their crusade. In the second decade of the twentieth century, reformers did not need a boxing event to secure their victory over that vice. Progressive political culture ensured that the will of the people would be known without obfuscation or opinion. The introduction of the direct ballot was one of the major political reforms of the Progressive Era and a significant element in California’s internal political reform. First-term governor Hiram Johnson introduced initiative, referendum, and recall as a means of giving Californians direct

democracy. California’s Progressive transformation incorporated initiative into the political process and added another chapter to the story of prizefighting in the state.\textsuperscript{58}

After sixty-four years, the people, rather than their representatives, made the decision about the legality of prizefighting. Voters had already succeeded in suppressing gambling on horses and, through the initiative, were poised for another victory. The 1914 election presented the voters of California with an initiative to prohibit “engaging in or furthering in any way prize fights or remunerative boxing exhibitions, training therefore, or betting thereon,” which addressed fighters, promoters, trainers, referees, witnesses, and owners of venues but also provided for the survival of amateur boxing in four-round contests of no more than three minutes each. Participants had to wear either six or eight once gloves, depending on their weight, and the police had to stop bouts between unevenly matched men. The focus on health and fitness maintained boxing’s social value among elites who still supported the sport. The proposal barred any amateur exhibitions from transpiring on Sundays or Memorial Day. The anti-prizefight camp argued that young men had to be prevented from taking up a demoralizing sport as a vocation. Barbarity was still the chief trouble with prizefighting but activists also recognized, with the word \textit{vocation}, that it was a viable profession.\textsuperscript{59}

With the opening of the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915 just months away, Californians were aware of that the world was focused on them. Last on the list of points

\textsuperscript{57} Ward, \textit{Unforgivable Blackness}, 312–17.
\textsuperscript{59} Amendments to Constitution and Proposed Statutes with Arguments Respecting the Same to be Submitted to the Electors of the State of California at the General Election on Tuesday, November 3, 1914 (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1914), 96.
favoring the initiative was a reference to the world’s fair. Californians ought to be “in harmony with the enlightened sentiment of the civilized world.” Condemning prizefighting had become an act of national patriotism, state pride, and economic necessity.60

State senator D. P. Regan wrote the argument against the initiative. His defense mentioned the benefits of “manliness,” the good character of Jim Corbett, and the support given the sport by society’s professional elite. Although he could not directly counter the brutality argument, he noted that football, baseball, polo, and the new sport of auto racing injured far more men than boxing did. Regan also counted on international opinion. He claimed that boxing was a sport enjoying “international vogue” and “encouraged by the English government.” Patriotism also figured into his reasoning. He highlighted the fact that the enlisted men of the army and navy were participants in healthful boxing training.61

The voters passed the ballot measure, which went into effect in 1915. These prohibitions of prizefighting in California were the strictest yet. Dewitt Van Court, the boxing instructor, marked 1915 as the end of boxing’s “golden era” in California. He commented that voters were split by an urban/rural divide. The urban centers, San Francisco and Los Angeles, voted against the initiative, while the “country” was for it. Reform may have had an urban association but the people in the interior of the state were the ones who finally brought about change. This direct democratic action was the final word on prizefighting in California until 1924. The electorate’s resounding voice stripped

60 Ibid., 96–97.
61 Ibid., 97.
local authority of the power to issue permits and killed the legislators’ abilities to use prizefighting statutes as a source of graft or for political horse-trading.\textsuperscript{62}

Governor Gillett enforced the state law when California’s stand on the superiority of the white race and California’s progress became an international focal point. On these issues, California came to heel with the states in the Union, other than Nevada. The initiative, one of the chief symbols of the political Progressive Era, demonstrated that for people other than politicians and people in the prizefighting business, the question of morality was still at the forefront of the prizefighting debate. Yet, never again would passions erupt so powerfully over prizefighting that they upended the political balance of power between city and state.

\textsuperscript{62} Dewitt C. Van Court, \textit{The Making of Champions in California} (Los Angles: Premier Printing Company, 1926), 14, 15. The crusade for alcohol prohibition in California had fewer legislative successes than the war on prizefighting. See Gilman M. Ostrander, \textit{The Prohibition Movement in California, 1848–1933} (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1957).
Conclusion

Moral reformers engaged in a legal battle with prizefighting in the second half of the nineteenth century, but by the 1890s, they also had to challenge state and local governments for the power to define the moral character of Americans. Unyielding local governments consistently demonstrated that at the community level, Americans did not always accept the position of the reformers. Political exigencies particular to cultural regions south, east, midwest, and west forced state governors, some of whom were indifferent to prizefighting, to act against it. In each place, the effectiveness of enforcement determined whether the prizefighting industry would succeed. By the twentieth century, the racial beliefs common in the Progressive Era became a destructive weapon in the reformers’ struggle with the state.

Equals in passion, the prizefighters and the reformers fought each other for two sets of stakes. For the pugilists, the honor was in being the best at their craft and earning monetary rewards for their skill. They followed that pursuit, even when they punched for the cheers of only their most ardent fans in outposts such as Langtry. For some pugilists, Corbett and Johnson for example, boxing was a conduit to improved social standing. Both goals depended on clubs, promoters, and sports to put up prize purses, gamble, and otherwise support the business of prizefighting.
Anti-prizefight reformers feared for the moral health of men and children when they campaigned local, state, and national governments for change in the 1890s and after the turn of the century. Prizefighting put at risk the present and future character of the nation. Although those moral fears remained, their methods for achieving their goals of prohibition and the enforcement of anti-prizefight codes changed as time progressed. Church organizations and reform groups such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union began to employ lawyers to lobby government officials on their behalf as well as continuing to use petition and demonstration to pronounce their fury at the declining moral condition in the United States. Eventually, anxieties about race, made poignant by Jack Johnson’s fight with Jim Jeffries in 1910, directed them to seek not only an end to prizefighting but also a stoppage to the transmission of prizefight images. The federal government complied with that request, but never the demand to outlaw prizefighting nationally.

Government mediated between the fighters and the reformers. Of the three groups—reformers, fighters, and government officials—the elected and appointed authorities were the weakest. Governors often asserted no certain position on the problem of prizefighting until a political expedient forced them to. In places where prizefighting was a common activity, a heavyweight “Fight of the Century” was often the issue that obligated them to act. The cultural region and the strength of community traditions in that place often informed their views. Anxieties about public image, corruption, and race were the most common causes for governors to dispatch state law enforcement to combat prizefighting.
As instruments of the state, the militias and the Texas Rangers effectively enforced the directives of the governors. Although only the Rangers ever engaged the prizefighters and their supporters, the threat of military violence was enough to dissuade promoters from executing their plans for heavyweight prizefights. In their zeal to appear concerned for the moral health of their citizens, heads of state came close to abusing their power when they mustered the militias. They were, however, successful in applying the threat of force to expand the state’s power over local authority.

The courts were considerably less effective than the military at fulfilling the wishes of the reformers. Judges typically ruled from a narrow reading of applicable law. The juries who tried fighters for crimes ranging from assault and battery to manslaughter tended to acquit the fighters. Jury members, who represented the electorate broadly, were much more sympathetic to Jim Corbett and Bob Fitzsimmons than to the reformers who represented a smaller segment of American society.

Reformers had the least control over large urban areas. As the economic powerhouses of California and New York respectively, San Francisco and Greater New York did as they pleased, rejecting or manipulating state code to suit their interests in professional sport. Smaller and less economically independent cities such as El Paso also endeavored to defy the legal authority of the state. Provincial communities had as few reservations about challenging state law as cosmopolitan cities but were far less successful than the large urban areas at maintaining their autonomy from state-imposed moral conventions.

Despite the fact that many states instituted and enforced anti-prizefighting statutes from 1890 to 1910, prizefighting did not recede into dark alleys. Americans and
Europeans maintained their enthusiasm for the sport and supported it as an industry. The promoters and fighters continued to make matches and sell tickets. By the 1920s, prizefights were once again regular events throughout the United States.

Jess Willard took the championship from Jack Johnson in Havana, Cuba, in 1915. New York installed the Walker Law in 1915. Soon after, Willard defended the heavyweight championship in New York for the first time since 1900. Nevada, unwilling to abandon prizefighting to please reformers, adopted a racist policy in 1919. The state legislature had set a maximum round limit of ten in 1914, but increased the limit to twenty-five in 1919 and included the language “Contestants must be white men” in the amendment to the statute. A new generation of fighters were generally much more free to pursue their avocation than their predecessors had been.¹

The champions and their foes relaxed with age. Like old soldiers, their experiences bonded them, even when they had been enemies. Scenes of them together from the 1910s through their senior years in the 1940s and their respectful and sometimes loving tributes to one another testify that for all its real physical and emotional brutality the world of the prizefighter was not devoid of humanity. When Fitzsimmons died, the longest obituary had the byline Jim Corbett. Tom Sharkey and Jim Jeffries were often photographed together, sometimes in comic poses, in their later years. They all did benefits for the ailing emperor of the heavyweights, John L. Sullivan, who died in 1918.

Jim Jeffries and Tom Sharkey embarked on tours of America throughout the 1920s. They gave boxing exhibitions and vaudeville performances. Sharkey worked in various saloons and at racetracks during the remainder of his life. He also was a character actor. Jeffries Barn in Burbank, California, became a hotspot for local bruisers to fight in

¹
the thirties and forties. The ex-champion declared himself bankrupt in 1923, but regained some of his fortune through real estate dealings. Jeffries Barn is now a building on the lot of Knott’s Berry Farm in Anaheim, California. Both Sharkey and Jeffries died in spring 1953.²

Rose Fitzsimmons died in 1905. Bob married twice more after Rose passed away. His third wife, Julia Gifford, had to contend literally with the light of Bob’s life. Fitz had an illuminated five-foot transparency made of Rose in her acrobat days. When he brought the newest Mrs. Fitzsimmons home, he dutifully turned on Rose so that she could grace the proceedings. Nero, now stuffed, looked on. Married for a fourth time in 1915, this time to actress Temo Ziller, Bob Fitzsimmons died in 1917.³

Jim and Vera Corbett reconciled not long after his return from Europe following the alleged McCoy fake. He remained in the spotlight for the rest of his life, continuing to act on stage and occasionally on film. He died in 1933, with Vera at his side. Corbett’s life became fodder for a great actor. Errol Flynn played him in the 1942 film *Gentleman Jim*. He was the best-remembered of the turn-of-the-century prizefighters, having achieved his goal of acceptance in a wider social world.⁴

“Nearly every man in the world loves a fight... The preacher may preach against it the next day, the legislator may legislate against it, the editor may denounce it as brutal, but until the question of which is the better man has been decided all their views are usually forgotten.”

The turn-of-the-century boxers were not good men or bad men but they were fighting men. The reformers who challenged them could not defeat the delight that humans take from competition.

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