

Georgia Guardsmen and the Politics of Survival, 1915-1916

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THE First World War demanded a degree of federal planning and authority which appalled many Georgians. Their fathers had fought the Yankee for four bitter years, and in 1915 Southerners saw in the northern based preparedness campaign a reconstruction program more thorough than its nineteenth century predecessor. Old Confederate patriarchs readily acknowledged the necessity of national action against the Kaiser but preferred a bilateral military pact with the North. Local patriots especially resented the numerous northeastern preparedness societies which presumed to instruct Southerners on their obligations to national security.

Of the organizations most active in fostering the preparedness movement, none attained the prominence of the National Security League, created by a New York corporation lawyer, S. Stanwood Menken. The League's originator had conceived his future preparedness group while in London helping displaced Americans return to the United States. Having witnessed Parliament's first clumsy attempts at mobilization, Menken hoped to prevent the same chaos in America by lobbying for national preparedness. Back home Menken quickly gathered the nucleus of his League which included such personalities as international lawyer Frederic R. Coudert, ex-Secretaries of War Henry L. Stimson and Elihu Root, publishers George Haven Putnam and Lyman Abbott, and New York inventor and preparedness enthusiast Henry Alexander WiseWood.¹

The N.S.L. set about its military preparedness campaign at once, appointing committees on the navy, the army, the militia, and the Congress to investigate America's defense posture. Tons of literature revealing the horrors of enemy invasion flooded

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Hawley's meddlesome suggestion that Nash accept donations and even perhaps aircraft from the Aero Club.⁶

Nash had gravitated naturally to the Guard. As a youth in 1880 this native Virginian attended the Georgia Military Academy before returning to Atlanta as an insurance executive. In 1886 Nash joined the Atlanta Rifles and quickly rose to the rank of captain. During these years he promoted a mania for drill and physical fitness among his colleagues who met regularly in the city's gymnasias. The Atlantan's professional stature rose in September 1894 when he won a top managerial position with the city's branch of the American Book Company of New York. For the next four years Nash pursued his career and martial training with equal enthusiasm until the Spanish-American War during which he commanded the Atlanta Rifles in Cuba. At war's end Captain Nash remained in service, climbing to the rank of brigadier general in command of the entire state guard.⁷

Deplorable conditions existed among Georgia's militiamen following the war. Unit commanders paraded their men in tattered uniforms and many troops were without arms. The Federal Act of 1900 changed all this; Georgia companies were completely outfitted with allocations provided by Congress for state debts incurred during 1898. Unfortunately, with this money gone, Governor Allen D. Candler recommended no appropriations for the militia the following year, and he ended the customary state bounty payments to voluntary units. In 1905 the militia was reorganized. Black soldiers both active and retired were abolished. The State's active militia comprised the National Guard and the Naval Militia, with the Adjutant General designated as chief of the Governor's staff and head of the military department. Still a creature of the State, the Guard boasted the right of way on all thoroughfares when drilling, and used regular War Department courtmartial procedures. Local officials might call out the Guard to quell insurrection, and no armed soldiers were allowed to enter the state without the Governor's sanction.⁸

The year 1913 proved disappointing to Nash in his first term as Adjutant General. With his department \$5,000 in arrears

relations with Atlanta officialdom. Still, the reality of German aggression assured the League a temporary audience in Georgia. President Menken enthusiastically received the selection of Atlanta's executive committee. With a roster including Clark Howell, James R. Gray, and James B. Nevin, editors of the *Atlanta Constitution*, the *Atlanta Journal*, and the *Atlanta Georgian*, respectively; William L. Peel and J. W. English, prominent bank presidents; Alfred C. Newell, insurance executive; Frederic J. Paxon, secretary-treasurer of Davison-Paxon-Stokes department stores; Lindsey Hopkins, president of the Atlanta Cadillac Company; Hugh M. Willet, of the firm of Bagley and Willet; and Mayor James G. Woodward, the N.S.L. chieftain envisioned a working committee.¹¹ On November 15 League Field Secretary Frederick H. Chase rapped this distinguished group to order in a crowded hall of the city's Chamber of Commerce Building. A motion to organize an Atlanta N.S.L. branch quickly carried, followed by the nomination of English, President of Atlanta's Fourth National Bank, as permanent chairman. Other officers included bank executive Peel as honorary chairman, the National Guard's Nash as secretary, and automobile dealer Hopkins as treasurer. The group adopted the national bylaws and appointed both membership and publicity committees.¹² Before leaving the city Chase reminded his newly inducted colleagues that national headquarters sorely needed the twenty-five per cent of their membership revenues as provided in the bylaws.¹³ Just how badly Menken's coffers required revenue became apparent on December 7 when headquarters refused Chairman English the complimentary use of its speakers' bureau.¹⁴ Angered by New York's abridgement of earlier promises, Nash refused to appoint delegates to any future out-of-state League functions.¹⁵

On December 18 Menken urged Governor Nathaniel E. Harris to create a state committee on national defense.¹⁶ Governor Harris at first acceded to the League's entreaty since he was permitted to name his own council. With his party in control of the legislature, Harris now possessed sufficient revenues for an informal political machine responsible for implementing all facets of the

uttered by a steadily decreasing minority are deafened by the torrent."¹⁹

The besieged Atlantans maintained a discreet silence. Menken gave the gentleman several weeks and then petulantly demanded a commitment, humorously offering to fund "most of the expense," and warning that he might transfer his offer to Birmingham, Alabama. This conspiracy of silence persisted, and headquarters broke off negotiations only to reschedule its national defense congress for Charleston, South Carolina, the following April.²⁰ During the winter of 1915-1916 relations between Atlanta and New York worsened when English rebuffed an Executive Committee overture to appoint several of his people to national League committees. The mercenary tone of Menken's directive asking for appointees with congressional and financial contacts was particularly offensive to these neophyte patriots.²¹ New York's *Bulletin No. 2* caused further dissension. This memorandum ordered Georgians to foreswear all connections with rival preparedness groups.²² By late December this association hung by a thread.

The biggest split between New York and Atlanta occurred over preparedness strategy. National headquarters supported a large, regular army maintained by universal military training and service;²³ whereas Georgians were threatened by a national army which would either deplete the power of their state guard units or incorporate them altogether. Although the two philosophies differed greatly, both groups hoped to defeat Secretary of War Lindley Miller Garrison's Continental Army Plan. Garrison's recommendation would displace the guard units with a national volunteer reserve copied after the Swiss militia system.²⁴ N.S.L. headquarters doubted that Garrison's Continental Army could be raised from volunteers and pushed for another bill in agreement with their preparedness strategy.²⁵ Nash feared Garrison's plan would relegate his guard to the level of a constabulary force. To block the Garrison bill Nash's colleagues hoped to foster the estrangement between the Department of War and the private preparedness groups until the introduction of friendlier legislation. Fortunately for Nash the National Guard Association possessed

block headquarters' effort. The Georgians correctly interpreted the League's opposition to Representative Hay's army bill as a personal affront. The Executive Committee tried to improve its image with nominal membership fees for guardsmen and letters of endorsement from New York Commander John F. O'Ryan.²⁷ On January 20 the Adjutant General sought one last time to reach an accommodation with the N.S.L. Menken condescendingly replied that he appreciated "the delicacy of the situation" between Nash's volunteer forces and the regular army, but that such questions must ultimately be decided by the League's Army and Militia Committees.²⁸ The following month Menken rebuked English for not harassing Georgia congressmen into supporting specific preparedness legislation.²⁹ During March and April Atlanta's executive committee suffered a procession of embarrassing resignations culminating in the loss of Van Holt Nash. In a polite letter to Menken the Adjutant General confessed a continuing enthusiasm for the League's work in spite of past attempts to "kill off" his beloved National Guard.³⁰ Undoubtedly, Nash's motives went beyond the League's threat to his organization. As a life-long volunteer the N.S.L.'s advocacy of universal military training and service disturbed this Georgian. Menken's program called for the total subversion of the man in a national military machine. Worst of all, it denied the free-will response of volunteering heretofore the core of America's martial tradition.³¹ The loss of this officer's valuable connections among state volunteer contingents quickly resulted in the branch's total collapse and in the demise of Menken's Southern preparedness strategy.³²

The passage of the Hay bill on June 3, 1916, meant the salvation of Georgia's National Guard as an independent fighting unit and as a pillar of its state-rights platform. Menken never understood that universal military training and service offered to Georgia's militia a long-range threat as real as Garrison's national volunteer reserve.³³ The Adjutant General sought a dual existence for his troops—to be the militia, with concomitant freedom from federal regulation in peacetime and simultaneously to be a part of the U.S. Army and the recipient of generous federal funding and

766-69; See Margaret Ripley Wolfe, "The Border Service of the Tennessee National Guard, 1916-1917," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXVII (Winter, 1973), 374-75.

⁹Reports of the Adjutant General of the State of Georgia for the Year(s) 1913, pp. 98-99; 1914, pp. 137-38.

¹⁰*Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Georgia at the Regular Session of the General Assembly* (Atlanta, 1915), 104-6.

¹¹Letter from Atlanta N. S. L. Committee to "Dear Sir," n.d., Record Group 22, Adjutant General's Office, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

¹²*Program of Meeting, National Security League, Held November 15, 1915*, Record Group 22, Adjutant General's Office, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

¹³Letter from Frederick H. Chase to Adjutant General J. Van Holt Nash, November 17, 1915, Record Group 22, Adjutant General's Office, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

¹⁴Letter from Henry L. West to Adjutant General J. Van Holt Nash, December 7, 1915, Record Group 22, Adjutant General's Office, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

¹⁵Letter from Adjutant General J. Van Holt Nash to S. Stanwood Menken, December 23, 1915, Record Group 22, Adjutant General's Office, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

¹⁶Letter from S. Stanwood Menken to Hon. Nathaniel E. Harris, December 18, 1915, Record Group 22, Adjutant General's Office, Georgia Department of Archives and History. Governor Harris declined to view the European war as a threat to the United States for not until the mobilization of his guardsmen for duty on the Mexican border on June 20, 1916 did the Governor document the arousal of a martial spirit in his state. There were other considerations; namely, that as the last of Georgia's "Confederate" governors and a participant in that conflict, Harris saw the Guard as a State force; that in his 1914 gubernatorial race Harris' victory margin was due to Tom Watson's machine, and that General Walter A. Harris, the Governor's son, served as Nash's liaison with the Capitol. Harris apparently realized that a state defense council would be directly answerable to the parent Council of National Defense in Washington. Harris, *Autobiography*, 453-57. Comer Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (New York, 1938), 431-50.

¹⁷Executive Order of Nathaniel E. Harris, n.d. Record Group 22, Adjutant General's Office, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Seward W. Livermore, *Politics Is Adjourned: Woodrow Wilson and the War Congress, 1916-1918*, (Middleton, 1966), 142.

¹⁸E. Woodward Duke, "Nationalization of the National Guard: How to Make an Efficient Force of Our State Troops," *Scientific American*, CXIII (November 6, 1915), 394-95; N. S. L. "Remarks of S. Stanwood Menken at the Opening of the Conference of Delegates from Branches at Chicago, November 27, 1915," p. 6. [Photostatic copy of pamphlet in possession of the author.

¹⁹*Who Was Who in America with World Notables*, IV (Chicago, 1968), 998; Henry L. West, *Federal Power: Its Growth and Necessity* (New York, 1918), 197.

²⁰Letter from Henry L. West to General J. Van Holt Nash, December 18, Letter from S. Stanwood Menken to Adjutant General J. Van Holt Nash, December 30, 1915, Record Group 22, Adjutant General's Office, Georgia Department of Archives and History.

²¹Letter from S. Stanwood Menken to "Organized Branches," December 11, 1915, Record Group 22, Adjutant General's Office, Georgia Department of Archives and History.