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War and Conscription in Georgia and the Rural South

When the United States entered the First World War in 1917, they did so despite a strong undercurrent of popular opposition. Ordinary Americans largely felt that they had no interest in a war across the Atlantic. Only months before Congress declared war, President Wilson won reelection as a champion of American neutrality. However, the momentum for war had been building long before 1917. A variety of interest groups supported intervention on the side of the Allies. Munitions manufactures and bankers sought to protect and expand their profits. Preparedness advocates believed that America needed to be a stronger force in global politics to protect her interests. A few people believed that the Allies were defending democracy against naked aggression. Nevertheless, throughout the country and particularly in the South, many remained unconvinced. These people viewed the war as serving the interests of Money Power. Lukewarm support among ordinary people made it necessary to draft the men who would fight in the trenches of Europe. In the rural South, conscription was especially unpopular. Southerners objected to conscription on moral grounds comparing it to slavery. Southern farmers felt more strongly than most that the war in Europe was a ploy to enrich Northeastern industrial elites. The practical application of the draft further alienated poor Southern farmers. Federal exemption guidelines blatantly favored wealthy individuals and industrial workers. The local exemption boards caused yet more resentment among poor Southerners. The corruption and favoritism of boards staffed by local elites was patent. For these reasons, rural Southern communities were nearly unanimous in their

opposition to the draft. They encouraged young men to escape the draft and supported those who did. Southern Democrats formed the largest block of Congressional opposition to the war and conscription. However, they largely fell in line with the party after failing to prevent the law from passing. The government ruthlessly suppressed those who spoke against the war. Through imprisonment and censorship, the government created an artificial consensus of support for its activities. These repressive actions went a long way towards silencing anti-war sentiment. However, enough remained to leave a record of a significant population who refused to condone or support the war and the system of conscription.

From the outbreak of the Great War, individuals close to Wilson's administration favored US support for the Allies' cause. Colonel Edward House was a close confidant of Wilson. House had been key to securing Wilson's election as president. In 1914, House visited the capitals of the warring powers. He became convinced that Germany was responsible for the war, and lobbied Wilson for American intervention, particularly in the aftermath of the sinking of the Lusitania by German U-boats. The American ambassador to Belgium openly voiced anti-German sentiment after the German invasion of that country. Even Wilson considered the prospect of a German victory to be intolerable. Walter Page, Wilson's ambassador to Britain, surpassed all of the above in his transparent support of the Allied war effort. Page's support of the Allies went far enough that on some occasions he put it above the interest of his own country. Page even consulted the British on the best way to capture an American vessel on route to

Germany. Despite Wilson's professions of neutrality, the president and his administration clearly harbored pro-ally sympathies from the beginning.¹

America's bankers and munitions manufacturers overwhelmingly advocated for American involvement in the Great War. American businessman Solomon Menken seemed genuine in his belief that the interests of the Allies were in line with America's. During an involuntary stay in Britain in 1914, Menken became convinced Germany was a threat to the United States. Upon his return, Menken founded the National Security League (NSL) to promote this view. Despite his honest intentions the NSL soon drew support from men like J.P. Morgan. Morgan made no secret of his anti-German sentiments. However, he was anything but impartial. As a purchasing agent for the British, Morgan's firm made \$30 million in fees over the course of the war. Loans and munitions sales to the Allies became a significant part of the American economy. Public perception that these private interests were behind the push to war featured prominently in war and draft opposition.²

Many in the South were suspicious of a large federal army. Southerners had held a deep distrust of the federal government since the Civil War and Reconstruction. Even before the war with Germany, Southerners were openly hostile to the Preparedness Movement. Theodore Roosevelt and his wartime friend General Leonard Wood headed the Preparedness movement. They advocated for the United States to implement universal military service. Roosevelt and Wood believed that this would create a stronger

¹ Stewart Ross. *Propaganda for War: How the United States Was Conditioned to Fight the Great War of 1914-1918*. (Jefferson NC: Mcfarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 1996) 150. Ibid, 154. Ibid, 155-56. Ibid, 166-68.

² Ross, *Propaganda for War*, 181. Ibid, 162.

America that would be able to face the challenges of an ever more dangerous world. They also advocated for Preparedness as a cure for what they saw as the growing unmanliness of American society, in particular, the upper and middle classes. Finally, they thought that military service would work to assimilate immigrants into American culture. These efforts were opposed in the South. Southerners feared that a standing army was a threat to the liberty of the nation. They believed that the nation should be able to call upon its citizens in a time of crisis. However, standing armies were the tools of tyrants.³

Although Congress passed Wilson's declaration of war with a strong majority, members of the president's own party formed a significant opposition to the agenda. Claude Kitchin, the Democrat's majority leader, spearheaded resistance to the war in the House. Representative John Burnett of Alabama recalled his own memories of the devastation wrought by the Civil War as an argument against sending more men to die. However, the opposition failed to stop the declaration and after their defeat, most Democrats threw their support behind the war effort.⁴

Wilson's war measures were not without support in the South. Wilson was a Southerner himself as well as a Democrat, a party that enjoyed political hegemony in Southern states. Intellectuals in Southern cities supported the idea of fighting to preserve democracy. Wilson was also very popular in the South and could depend on personal loyalty to him to translate into support for his wartime actions. The South had a long tradition of militarism. During the debate on the declaration of war in the House,

³ Jeanette Keith, *Rich Man's War Poor Man's Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South during the First World War* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina Press, 2004) 22. Ross, *Propaganda for War*, 186. Keith, *Rich Man's War*, 19-20. Jeanette Keith, et al, "The Politics of Southern Draft Resistance, 1917-1918: Class, Race and Conscription in the Rural South," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 4 (September 2017) 1340.

⁴ Keith, *Rich Man's War*, 13. *Ibid*, 35.

Alabama Representative Tom Heflin called on the memories of Robert E. Lee and “Stonewall” Jackson in support of going to war. He appealed to Southerner’s sense of honor and manliness declaring that Southerners would never “back down to the Kaiser”. Urban areas were also centers of the industrial interest that backed the war. Claude Kitchin received a flood of mail condemning the war. The few declarations of support sent to Kitchin’s office came from trade interest within his constituency.⁵

Wilson knew that entry into the war would bring criticism on his administration. To counter this Wilson set out to create a “unity of public council”. To this end, the administration created the *Committee on Public Information* (CPI). To head the CPI Wilson appointed George Creel. Creel had made a name for himself as a muckraker dredging up sensationalist dirt on public figures and corporations. This experience made him the right man for the job. Under his leadership, the CPI created a vast network of pro-war propoganda. Creel created a sort of national press. The CPI entered into partnerships with thousands of organizations. Newspapers, manufacturers’ associations, libraries, banks, photographers and others all were co-opted to the service of Creel’s propoganda machine. Even filmmakers were expected to create material in support of the war. Although the CPI was criticized after the war, Creel’s methods were effective. In 1917, Congress passed the *Trading with the Enemy Act* and the *Espionage Act*. These bills gave the government broad power to determine whether the content of a newspaper was subversive. Faced with the threat of closure, most of the press fell in line with Creel’s regime.⁶

⁵ Ibid, 36. Ibid, 34. Ibid, 28.

⁶ Nick Fisher, et al, “The Committee on Public Information and the Birth of US state Propaganda,” *Australian Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 1 (September 2017) 55. Ross, *Propaganda for War*, 219. Fisher, “The Committee on Public Information,” 58. Eric Schaack. “The Division of Pictorial Publicity in

Besides the impressive propaganda engine Creel had at his disposal, the government obtained wide powers for the suppression of dissenting voices. On the relatively benign end of the scale, the government could deny hostile publications the recourses they needed through the War Trade Board. Alternatively, they could simply instruct the postmaster not to deliver documents from those organizations. In Georgia, draft critic Tom Watson had his paper the *Jeffersonian* silenced in this manner. The government's most potent tools came from the aforementioned *Trading with the Enemy Act and Espionage Act*. With these, the government gained the power to arrest and imprison people who spoke against the war. They used it. Even before these bills were passed the government had arrested members of the *Farmers and laborers Protective Association* charging them with attempting an armed rebellion against the state. Without the extra prosecution powers of the *Espionage Act*, only two members were convicted despite the overt bias of the presiding judge. Others would not be so fortunate. The socialist presidential candidate William E. B. Du Bois was sentenced to twenty years in prison for his condemnation of the war.⁷

In the Southern states, support for conscription was also strongest in urban areas and amongst the upper and middle classes. However, when the draft was implemented these same classes retained the smallest share of the burden it represented. This further incited their agrarian neighbors against selective service. When Wilson proposed draft

World War I," *Design Issues* 22, no. 1, (September 2017) 33. Leslie DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I*, (Madison: Wis, University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) 105. Erick King, et al, "Exposing the 'Age of Lies': The Propaganda Menace as Portrayed in American Magazines in the Aftermath of World War I." *Journal of American Culture* 12, no. 1 (September, 2017) 35-40. Fisher, "The Committee on Public Information," 57.

⁷ Ibid, 57. Keith, *Rich Man's War*, 109. Fisher, "Committee on Public Information," 57. Keith, *Rich Man's War*, 92. Ibid, 100.

legislation, he assuaged the opposition of Southern Representatives by promising equitable treatment of agriculturalist in the distribution of occupational exemptions. His promise was blatantly ignored. Wilson wanted to prevent the damage to industry that had occurred in Britain because of the drain on industrial labor. Under federal guidelines farming exemptions only applied to corporate farmers. Not only did this exclude the vast majority of Southern semi-subsistence agriculturalist, but it served as a vehicle for wealthy landowners to obtain exemptions for their children. Powerful men such as Bob Kleberg, owner of the largest ranch in Texas, could simply turn over nominal control of their enterprises to their sons and keep them from the fight. Wealthy Georgians could call on the local draft boards to give exemptions to their own laborers tightening the hold of the planter class on the labor market.⁸

Federal guidelines concerning dependency exemptions were equally problematic from the perspective of Southern farmers. George Marshal determined that for a man's family to be considered dependent that man must have an income in excess of the salary he would receive from the army. The argument was that his army salary would substitute his ordinary income leaving his family no worse for his absence. The obvious problem was that this heavily and openly favored the upper classes. Once again the people who had supported going to war were not being called upon to fight it. In Southern agricultural communities, income based dependency exemptions were even less popular. Southern agriculture was largely subsistence farming. This meant that much of the product was never traded on the market and therefore produced no measurable income.

⁸ Ibid, 7. Ibid, 23. Margaret Levi, et al, "The Institution of Conscription," *Social Science History* 20, no. 1 (September 2017): 137. Keith, *Rich Man's War*, 65-6. Ibid 117. Gerald Shenk, et al, "Race, Manhood, and Manpower: Mobilizing Rural Georgia for World War 1," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (October 31) 624.

Besides farm families depended on their men for a host of tasks that were vital to the maintenance of the homestead that could not be measured in dollars earned. The federal authorities either did not understand these issues or they simply ignored them.⁹

The scope of federal propaganda and censorship under the *Committee on Public Information* made it impossible to determine the true extent of opposition to the war and the draft. In Georgia, the *Atlanta Constitution* presented an image of a community absolutely united in support of the war effort. One article depicted an anti-draft rally that subsequently turned into a show of support for the war. The *Constitution* printed statements by Georgian politicians voicing support for the federal government's conscription policies. They spread rumors that opponents of the draft were German agents and a threat to the safety of the community. This was a common practice in the US as paranoia of German infiltrators was pervasive. The *Constitution* ran articles implying that volunteers were flocking to enlist to fight in France. This was manifestly inaccurate. Even supporters of the war understood this reality. Senator John Williams argued in support of conscription by pointing to the dismal numbers of volunteers coming to enlist. In the thirty-five days in which the government was required to attempt to raise a volunteer army, only 3,500 men enlisted.¹⁰

⁹ Keith, "The Politics of Southern Draft Resistance," 1345. Keith, *Rich Man's War*, 65-6.

¹⁰ "Anti-Draft Meeting Turns Into Patriotism." *Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945), 12 August 1917, (accessed 27 September 2017). "Sentiment of Patriotism is Strongly in Evidence at DeKalb Anti-Meeting." *Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945), 21 August 1917, (accessed 27 September 2017). J. Corrigan Jr, "Adamson Defends Conscription Law." *Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945), 29 July 1917, (accessed 27 September 2017). J. Corrigan Jr, "Vinson Supports Conscription Plan For Raising Army." *Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945), 29 July 1917, (accessed 27 September 2017). "Draft Proclamation Issued By Governor; Calls on People to Exhibit Patriotism." *Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945), 22 May 1917, (accessed 27 September 2017). "Every Atlantan within Draft Ages Urged to Register by Dr. Bricker." *Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945), 09 September 1918, (accessed 27 September 2017). "Stabbing Their Country." *Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945), 09 July 1917, (accessed 27 September 2017). J. Corrigan Jr. "Anti-Draft Men Aiding Germany." *Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945), 16 August 1917, (accessed 27 September 2017). "Draft is opposed in North Carolina Trouble Feared." *Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945),

In spite of the measures taken to suppress it an undeniable undercurrent of dissent remained. One of the most outspoken anti-draft activists in the South was Tom Watson. Watson was a Georgian lawyer as well as editor of the *Jeffersonian* a local newspaper in Thomson Georgia. Watson used both of these positions as a platform for opposition. In the *Jeffersonian* Watson encouraged Georgians to petition their Congressional representation to modify the selective service bill to prohibit conscripted troops from leaving The United States. the *Jeffersonian* contained constant criticism of Wilson and the war. Although the *Committee on Public Information* censored Watson, his knowledge of the law helped him to avoid saying things that left him open to prosecution and imprisonment. Watson challenged conscription in the courts. He argued that conscription violated the Thirteenth Amendment by forcing people into involuntary servitude. Emory Speer, the judge who heard the case, ruled that conscription was constitutional because a soldier could not be compared to a slave. The largest impediment to Watson's work was that people were afraid to participate. As was intended by George Creel and the administration people felt a compulsion to support the government's war.¹¹

Other acts of defiance received less attention than those of Tom Watson, but they were no less determined. Resistance most commonly took the form of noncompliance. Men who failed to cooperate with draft officials earned the title "slackers". Slacker originally meant draft dodger, but eventually described anyone who showed insufficient support towards the war effort. All of Liberty County in Southeast Georgia was labeled a

24 April 1917, (accessed 27 September 2017). Stephen Gross, et al, "The Perils of Prussianism," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 35, no 1 (September 2017) 51-78. "The Volunteers Answer." *Atlanta Constitution* (1881-1945), 16 August 1917, (accessed 27 September 2017). Keith, *Rich Man's war*, 43.

¹¹ Ibid, 102. Ibid, 105-6. Ibid, 108. Fisher, *Committee on Public Information*, 61.

“slacker county” when the sheriff and members of the draft board in Liberty County refused to buy liberty bonds. This was an act of dissent because buying bonds was seen as a symbolic act of support as well as practical assistance to the war effort. Throughout America, between two and three million men avoided registering for the draft. In the South, the practice was to obtain an exemption if at all possible. Of those Southerners who registered for selective service, 80% requested exemptions. Ninety-five thousand Southerners deserted during the war or 28% of the country’s total desertions, a disproportionate figure to the South’s population.¹²

In the most inaccessible parts of the South, resistance to conscription sometimes turned to armed insurrection. Violent resistance to conscription manifested itself in isolated encounters with federal and local authorities and acts of sabotage rather than organized rebellion. In the summer of 1918, a detachment of federal troops left Cherokee County Georgia. They had gone there to search for deserters and had troubled anti-draft activists. On their way, they passed over a bridge that collapsed under the weight of the truck. Three soldiers died and nine were injured. An investigation of the incident found that the supporting beams had been mostly sawed through, a clear act of sabotage. In Union County Georgia, officials claimed that a group of fifty or more deserters were in cahoots with the County Sheriff. After the shooting of a federal Marshal, the adjutant general requested federal troops to round up the deserters. North Georgia’s foothills were a hotbed of anti-draft resistance along with parts of Tennessee and Mississippi.¹³

¹² Keith, *Rich Man’s War*, 171-2. *Ibid*, 1-2.

¹³ Keith, *The Politics of Southern Draft Resistance*, 1335. *Ibid*, 1358-59.

The First World War was not universally popular. Prior to 1917, most Americans preferred to have nothing to do with what they saw as a European war. They believed that the pro-war movement served the interest of wealthy elites. Although this position softened it never went away. In the South, suspicion of elitist motivations and disinterest in European affairs were augmented by a deep distrust in the federal government and of a standing army. Southern farmers felt they had no economic interest in the preservation of European democracies. In addition to opposing the war, Southerners felt that the implementation of the draft treated them unfairly by favoring industrial professions. The government managed to suppress much of the dissent through the application of extraordinary wartime powers of censorship and prosecution. However, they failed to completely silence the opposition. Men like Tom Watson and William Du Bois continued to fight the injustices that they perceived. Du Bois did so at the cost of his freedom. Ordinary people also resisted. Some aided deserters and some took up arms against the government. Overall the mobilization was a success. However, it came at the price of the repression of American liberties and did not represent the will of many of America's people.

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