



## THE BATTLE OF ATHENS (TENNESSEE)

"The advantage of being armed, which the Americans possess over the people of almost every other nation ... forms a barrier against the enterprises of ambition, more insurmountable than any which a simple government of any form can admit of." -- James Madison (1788)

As a direct descendent of Tennessee Patriots who were veterans of every major conflict in defense of American Liberty from the American Revolution forward, I stand in reverence of my home state's distinguished list of Patriot sons and daughters. From 19th-century notables like Andrew Jackson\*, Davy Crockett, Sam Houston, Nathan Bedford



Forrest\*\* and Sam Davis, Vets firing on McMinn Jail to a long list of 20th-century Patriots headed by Alvin York, warriors from the "Volunteer State" have distinguished themselves in battle with honor and courage. Even our state's nickname was earned in recognition of the valiant service of volunteer soldiers during the War of 1812, most notably during the Battle of New Orleans.

There was a group of lesser-known Tennessee Patriots, however, whose efforts to defend Liberty at home in 1946 were no less noble. This group of World War II veterans took up arms to restore [Rule of Law](#)

in the quaint east Tennessee town of Athens (McMinn County), between Chattanooga and Knoxville. That fight became known as the Battle of Athens.

Given the rigorous efforts by the current regime of [Socialist Democrats](#) occupying the Executive and Legislative branches of our federal government, revisiting the Battle of Athens provides a timely lesson in Patriot devotion to Liberty. Democrats today have nationalized the corruption of the electoral process by both overt efforts (blocking measures such as Voter ID, and endorsing voter intimidation at polls) and much more insidious covert measures (increasing the rolls of [voting village idiots](#) who are dependent on [wealth redistribution](#) for their livelihood -- those who vote for their living rather than work for it).

In 1945, more than 3,000 battle-hardened vets returned home to McMinn County and found it brimming with political corruption. The GIs, who had fought for Liberty in the European and Pacific theaters, were not going to surrender it to corrupt politicians on their own soil. A spokesman for these Patriots proclaimed, "The principles that we fought for in this past war do not exist in McMinn County."

Despite numerous complaints about the corruption since 1940, the U.S. Department of Justice, under the control of Franklin Roosevelt, ignored citizens' charges of election fraud and did not respond.

I first read the history of this incident almost 30 years ago, but I did not know until I was researching the Battle of Athens for this essay that a distinguished Republican lady, whom I have known for more than three decades, was an eyewitness to this battle.

Lill Coker is the daughter of Dr. Horace Thomas, one of the veterans who gathered with others to restore

Liberty in Athens that night. She recalls the events well.

Her father had given Lill permission to go up to the roof of their home and watch the events unfold at a distance. She listened to accounts being broadcast live by the local radio station, WLAR, which was located across the street from the jail, and recollected that the radio announcer was broadcasting from under his desk to avoid bullets whizzing through his studio.

The Battle of Athens pitted Lill's father and other seasoned GIs against a large contingent of sheriff's deputies. The "law enforcement" officials were agents of Sheriff Pat Mansfield and his predecessor, wealthy state Sen. Paul Cantrell -- both benefactors of a corrupt statewide Democrat political machine controlled by E.H. "Boss" Crump from Memphis. In order to ensure the election and re-election of politicians running that machine, Mansfield and Cantrell had sheriff's deputies rigging the ballot boxes in Athens -- thus undermining the integrity of elections, the most basic expression of Liberty and the will of the people in our constitutional republic.

By 1946, some veterans were determined to challenge the Cantrell/Mansfield corruption machine, and they qualified for several posts on the upcoming election ballot. One of these men was Knox Henry, the GI candidate for sheriff of McMinn County. Endeavoring to ensure honest elections, a month ahead of the primaries they petitioned the FBI to send election monitors. As with previous requests for help to restore Rule of Law, their requests were ignored.

On Election Day, 1 August 1946, Mansfield imported some 200 strong-armed "deputies" to ensure the election would go his way. Mansfield's men ejected the veterans from polling sites, and in one instance a deputy pointed his gun at them as they attempted to re-enter a poll and shouted, "If you sons of bitches cross this street I'll kill you!" Mansfield arrested one GI poll watcher, Walter Ellis, who insisted on monitoring polling in the courthouse. One black voter, Tom Gillespie, was shot after a confrontation with a Mansfield deputy who denied him the right to vote.

After a long day of disputes at the polls, Mansfield and about 50 of his men gathered up all the ballot boxes and took them to the county jail "for protection."

The veterans weren't about to let the 1946 election cycle fall to the same corruption that had undermined the previous three elections. In the early evening, a group of vets who had been ejected as poll watchers mustered up some fellow vets. Being short of arms and ammunition sufficient to challenge Mansfield's crew and retrieve the ballot boxes, these men "borrowed" keys to the local National and State Guard armories and requisitioned three M-1 rifles, five Colt .45 pistols and 24 British Enfield rifles.

The vets then went to the jail, where they offered the deputies safe exit if they would turn over the ballot boxes. The deputies declined and shot two of the vets. The GIs returned fire in a pitched gunfight that would continue into the early morning hours of 2 August, when a number of vets from neighboring Meigs County improvised explosive devices (baled dynamite sticks) onto the jail's porch in order to soften up the resolve of the occupants. Shortly thereafter, the deputies did surrender and the GIs secured the building and ballots. (Cantrell and Mansfield, cowards that they were, had abandoned their deputies and fled into the dark early in the battle.)

The non-partisan veterans delivered this message to the radio announcer at WLAR: "The GI election officials went to the polls unarmed to have a fair election, as Pat Mansfield promised. They were met with blackjacks and pistols. Several GI officials were beaten and the ballot boxes were moved to the jail. The GI supporters went to the jail to get these ballot boxes and were met by gunfire. The GI candidates had promised that the votes would be counted as cast. They had no choice but to meet fire with fire. In the precincts where the GI candidates were allowed watchers they led by three to one majorities."

The following morning, the armory weapons were cleaned and returned, and the ballot boxes were turned over for a legitimate count.



Knox Henry Elected Sheriff

In the final count the GI candidate, Knox Henry, was elected sheriff of McMinn County, and three other vets filled key county positions. In order to thwart future corruption, the town of Athens formed a new police force. In addition, elected county officials

agreed to a \$5,000 pay limit. In the decade that followed, the McMinn County reforms were adopted in many other counties across the state.

Summarizing her recollection of events, Lill Coker told me, "I was so proud of all the veterans and my father for taking a stand and doing what had to be done to make sure Rule of Law was restored. They had to go against those who were supposed to be upholding law and order. The vets had gone to fight for our country in World War II and came home to find that a political machine had robbed their fellow citizens of their rights. We must be eternally vigilant against corruption of our electoral process. I am very proud of our Tennessee legislators for passing the voter ID law. We can lose our freedom just as the people of Athens did during the war years when no one stood up to the sheriff's bullies at the polling places."

The Battle of Athens was much more than an extended gunfight between small-town political factions. Historian Dan Daley wrote, "It was a violent but decisive clash of two social and political cultures, between the past and the future of rural, state, and ultimately the federal government, and a reconfirmation of the deeply ingrained ideal that Americans can assert themselves against tyranny, even when it was taking place in their own backyard."

Indeed, the corruption in the small town of Athens is but a minuscule example of constitutional abrogation that has now been nationalized by the Democrat Party. Indeed, the corrupt [Chicago politics](#) that herded a

local charlatan "community organizer" into the presidency represents fraud on a grand scale.

Among the lessons learned from the 1946 events in McMinn County are these two:

First and foremost, this incident, like so many before and since, affirms why our Founders codified in the [Second Amendment](#) the unalienable right of the people to "keep and bear arms." As Justice Joseph Story (appointed to the Supreme Court by our Constitution's author, James Madison) wrote, "The right of the citizens to keep and bear arms has justly been considered as the palladium of the liberties of a republic; since it offers a strong moral check against the usurpation and arbitrary power of rulers; and will generally, even if these are successful in the first instance, enable the people to resist and triumph over them." History records the appalling 20th-century consequences of [disarming the people](#).

The second lesson is that those of us who have pledged by [sacred oath](#) to "support and defend" the Liberty enshrined in our Constitution against "enemies foreign," must be equally devoted to the defense of Liberty against insult by "enemies domestic."

One certainly hopes we can defeat the [socialist corruption](#) undermining our Constitution nationally, with [ballots, not bullets](#), but one way or the other, the [next American Revolution](#) is just over the horizon. Perhaps the next battle call will be "Remember the Athenians!"

(For a full accounting of this case study in grassroots restoration of Rule of Law, we have photos, a chronology and media reports at The Patriot's [Battle of Athens](#) resource page.)

\*Jackson makes my list of notable Tennesseans because of his brilliant military leadership in the War of 1812, but I concur with David Crockett's criticism of Jackson as president on the removal of the Cherokee. Jacksonian Democrats did much to undermine our Constitution.

\*\*For the record, Forrest did NOT found the KKK, and as it's intimidation practices became more violent toward carpet baggers and black people, Forrest turned his back on the Klan. If you want to know more about the character of NB Forrest, I suggest you read about his early life and his leadership. If you want to know more about his views on racism and blacks, I suggest you read his 1875 address to the Independent Order of Pole-Bearers Association, a

national organization of black folks which invited Forrest to deliver a key speech. Of that speech, the New York Times wrote at the time, "when offered a bouquet of flowers by a black woman, he accepted them as a token of reconciliation between the races and espoused a radically progressive agenda of equality and harmony between black and white Americans." (You probably missed that in History 101.)