



Minnesota National Guard
Maj. Gen. Rick Nash Testimony
State Capitol Preservation Art Subcommittee
10:00 a.m., Monday, December 07 2015



Final Draft

As of December 07, 2015

Justice Anderson, Senator Senjem, Representative Loeffler, members of the Subcommittee, interested citizens and media in attendance, also my friends from the History Center, I am honored to be here and in the presence of descendants of those who fought in our Civil War. I am Major General Rick Nash, Commissioner for the Department of Military Affairs and the Adjutant General. Attending with me is Mr. Don Kerr, Executive Director for our Agency and a retired Colonel with the Minnesota National Guard. We have been asked to address the committee and I am aware I do this at my own peril.

We appreciate the opportunity to address this committee in order to provide a perspective on the matter of military,

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specifically civil war, art, paintings that are displayed throughout our capital, as well as the battle flags from previous conflicts.

I will discuss with you why many of the unique pieces should remain on display, and why art depicting this aspect of our history is important. We are truly fortunate that our predecessors – both our militia forces, and our legislature – had the determination and commitment to create and preserve the amazing legacy that we have in Minnesota.

As you know, most of the military art in the Capital depicts Minnesota actions in the Civil War, a period that saw the beginning of the transition of visual art from canvas to camera,

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but also the period from which we draw the lineage of our National Guard, having only become a state a few years before.

As values-based organizations, the Army and Air National Guard place great importance in understanding and honoring the dedication and sacrifice of our predecessors in service. In this, we maintain a continuity of lineage to our earliest units. By remember and honoring the stories of our predecessors, we can inspire and guide members of our current units to perform in a manner that is worthy of the legacy of our past.

While written history is the basis of this connection, the forethought and investment of our state's leaders at the turn of the 19th century have provided us wonderful visual depictions

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that capture the most noteworthy moments of the Minnesota Regiments that were called to federal service.

I fully realize that my Commander in Chief, Governor Dayton, during a meeting of the Capital Preservation Commission, raised a question concerning civil war battle paintings specifically in the Governor's reception area, and how the images may not represent the full complexion of the state. I, like Governor Dayton am not an art historian nor an art expert. We agree this is the right time to reflect on what basis the capital was built, with what intentions to capture the short history of Minnesota up to that time and the legacy, which history has clearly captured, as to preserving the history to that point in 1905, a short 47 years since statehood, but now 110

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years later we have the luxury to address what continues to be important and reflect on where we have been and how those pieces of history influenced who we are today as a state. Those six commissioned artists were provided with factual data from the living veterans and I am sure with some artistic license, presented to the Capitol Commission, and fulfilled what Cass Gilbert intended and for the space he designed. Do they depict violence, of course, they show the unvarnished, tragedy, and horrors of war. Are the detailed, graphic civil war paintings a reflection of struggle, sacrifice, death, and carnage of the conflicts they depict, probably so and in most cases stopped short of showing the very precipice our nation was on for four years, nearly dissolving the Republic we had come to embrace.

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I would argue that these pieces of art are interpretations or a point of time during a battle and do not truly tell the casual observer, visitor, or students, the history behind the named battle. I would encourage this committee to address these obvious shortfalls and provide an expanded explanation through modern and technologically efficient means. There is an overabundance of recorded, first accounts, verifiable facts that can and should accompany any of the paintings. I would encourage the committee to seek the latest methods of restoration and then continue to display with professionally recognized historically accurate explanations. We owe those that see, study and disagree with the depictions of the artist's rendering the full story. We should look at each of the paintings in our Capital as a cover of a book, that catches ones

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eye so that we can fully explore the vastness of what the cover represents with facts, interpretation, dates, strategy and how each piece fits into the totality of history and what part Minnesotan's played during those four terrible years.

These paintings, and more specifically the actual war torn, worn, and bloodied battle flags are artifacts that must not be stored and locked away in a sterile, controlled subbasement.

Regardless of ones feelings as to what the artists captured, they reflect what these conflicts resulted in and our future generations need to understand and have a dialogue as to how our nation and state came close to having a vastly different from of government, economy and social fabric. We must not

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forgot how brothers fought brother, and fathers fought sons, and how close we came to a divided nation 150 years ago. How does one show those in a free society what those that fought to protect it, suffered and died through for over four years.

Words seldom can convey to those of us in uniform, who have seen the dark side of war, that we must think about and reflect through visuals, videos, paintings, writings and yes artifacts, and as a result we must do everything we can to prevent repeating what happened 154 years ago. If a painting or a bullet riddled flag can impress upon our citizens and elected leaders not to take up arms, then they have served a noble public role.

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These paintings are a graphic reminder to start the academic and social discussions and need to be part of our dialogue, our education, our simple awareness in order to never again having a divided country. The military uses these painting's and remnants to teach new Soldiers and staff on their history and legacy. These are static displays but often are used for very active and valuable discussions on professional development, strategy, politics, economic matters, and social justice.

I do not want to leave the commission with the impression that the paintings need to remain only in the Governor's reception room, but they and the flags were in its original Gilbert design, and I would ask at the end of the discussion, in order to honor the building's intent and commitment to those that served,

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their ancestors, and our future Minnesotans, that we continue to have free access to these historical and important artifacts somewhere in the capital. We have generations of people not only from Minnesota but internationally that visit this beautiful capital and expect to see these historical connections to a critical time in our state and nation. They remember seeing them on school tours or from doing political business in the people's house.

To those that oppose the depictions in the artist's work, I am truly sorry, but conflict is graphic and maybe we need to look critically at them and decide we ought not to be sending our young men and women to future wars. That is maybe one reason they must stay here, so our elected officials who send

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the armed forces to conduct wars can see and reflect before they decide.

In regard to the battle flags, these flags normally represented their state and were often times made by the community from which the unit originated. Due to the rigors of war, each regiments would have gone through many flags due to wear and tear. The flag represents the heart and soul of any military formation and that is still true today. It represents where the Commander could be found and was, a rally point for a unit in battle and was never allowed to be left on the field of battle or captured. It served as a communication device for the Commanding officer and was used to organize a charge, defense, or withdrawal. Due to this fact the enemy often

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targeted the color bearer to stop the organization following the unit's colors. A very risky job. As you may know the battle flags were also accompanied by the Nations flag. These were very special and emotional symbols of a unit's very identity and soul and it was a very real connection to home and their state. To relegate the battle flags to a non-public location or to disregard them would be asking to not acknowledge the stars and stripes – both went to battle, so I don't believe anyone would say not to display the US Flag. Both are emotional symbols for those that served during the civil war and every conflict before and after.

Until 2007, The Office of the Adjutant General was responsible for the care of the Civil War and Spanish-America War flags,

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their display at the capital and in storage at Camp Ripley. In 2007, the responsibility to maintain, preserve, and exhibit these state treasures was transferred to the Minnesota Historical Society.

I submit to you that these historical items need to be continued to be displayed in some manner in the locations in the capital where they were clearly intended to be by all historical documentation and comments and be treated like we would the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Magna Carta, Bill of Rights, and Emancipation Proclamation. That is to be openly viewed by our citizens. As time has passed it appears we have lost our reverence and identity let alone the

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importance to those that answered Governor Ramsey's call at President Lincoln's request to serve the nation.

Citizens of this great state need to see physical evidence of what sacrifices were undertaken, we can do this by displaying paintings, art and battle flags, along with appropriate, historically correct documentation.

I would like to address, in some detail, the importance of an often over looked and misunderstood military symbol and rare set of artifacts. This is a report on flags by J.W. Bishop, Chairman of the Committee on the flag day ceremonies of June 14th, 1905 to the Governor John A. Johnson.

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The committee was appointed by the Governor, to arrange for the removal and relocation of the battle flags from the old to the new state capitol, with an expense appropriated of \$1500 for the expense of the occasion.

It was estimated that a thousand survivors of the Civil War Regiments were present, on that June 14th day in 1905, many of them having come from distance homes to march once more and for the last time under the same old flags they had carried more than 40 years earlier.

The report to the Governor goes on to state that the final resting place of the old flags is in the four receptacles constructed by the Capitol Commissioner expressly for them, of

bronze and plate glass, in the walls of the rotunda on the main floor of the capital in plain view of every person entering the building. There may they ever remain in their beautiful surrounding to speak to all who see them of the patriotism and sacrifice of those who bore them in the service of their country.

The Chairman, appointed by the Governor, goes on to state, the parade from the old to the new capital will be led by flag bearers of the Minnesota troops carrying what is left of the flags and to then be deposited in four beautiful steel cases prepared by the Capitol Commission for the immediate reception and future preservation, - clearly the intent of the Commission, the architect, the Governor, the legislature, as to the repository of the battle flags up to that point in our history.

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And now 105 years later we are discussing their future and Minnesota's previous leadership's commitments to those that sacrificed so much.

Prior to their removal from our 2nd Capital, they resided within its walls for 40 years, clearly the intent has been evident as to where these flags were to be displayed. These flags represent more than 1/7 of the entire population of Minnesota that went into service, of a population less than 175,000! [24,500 males, total represented number would be 757,000 in 2010].

General J.W. Bishop spoke at the capital event and stated, "That these flags will be carried and move to the new capitol, to there remain an object lesson in patriotism, long after the men

who carried and followed and loved them so well, shall have passed from the earth”.

I would ask that each of you read Archbishop John Ireland’s address that day, who also was a Chaplain in the 5th Regiment, Minnesota Volunteer Regiment.

I would like to give you one extract from his lengthy comments, [I quote] “What America is today comes of the triumphs of the defenders of the Union in the Civil War. Had they failed, the continent was surely partitioned off into a number of weak republics, each without power or respect, the notion of America merely a geographical expression.

The America of today! We owe it to the old Flags. The old flags!
For the America which they and their sister flags of other states
saved and perpetuated, Minnesota takes them to its breast, to
love them forever, to worship forever.” A new capital has been
built to Minnesota. Thithers are the old flags to be borne from
their resting place of forty years. There are they to be
enthroned, as they deserve to be, for long years to come,
within the palace of Minnesota’s statehood, to enjoy, as it
befits them, Minnesota’s sweetest and most hospitable core.

Governor Johnson concluded the acceptance of the flags after
giving a very moving and elegant speech by adding; [I quote]
“On behalf then of a grateful people remember the sacrifice
you made and the hardship which you endured, I accept these

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symbols of your valor and your patriotism, and hope that in the splendid edifice newly erected as the capitol of your state that they will be deposited as the most sacred treasure of our state government, there to be viewed by the generations yet to come with that reverence that is their just and honest due.

Johnson was a visionary when he closed his comments by saying that “This marble building may crumble and decay. It may be that these flags may cease to be, but I am firm in the conviction that as long as Americans lisp the language of the founders of our Republic, so long will the tongue of the people tell of your achievements you will be held dear in the hearts of the American people, but no marble shaft could so well tell the story of your valor and chivalry as these drooping standards

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under whose folds you marched into the very jaws of death, that this land might be “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” So does it not implore us as the tongue of the people of the past and the intent of our collective predecessors to continue to tell of their achievements so future Americans still hold those that gave us our freedom their due reverence?

Reverend J.J. Lawler closed with his benediction by saying “We now close this day’s impressive ceremony by depositing the battle flags of our state in their final resting place. Here let them rest, furled forever beneath our magnificent dome. They will float no more over the haste of war. They deserve their niche in the gorgeous temple, where they may receive the

highest civic recognition from all of the people. Their work is done and nobly done.”

“They will repose here to remind the future citizens of our country of the appalling price that was paid for our heritage of liberty.”

“In all the ages to come Minnesota, great, prosperous and powerful will make pilgrimage to this shrine of lofty patriotism here to learn the record of her magnificent sons of other days, here to receive inspiration for deeds of heroism, here to study the lessons of unselfish loyalty.”

When reading the passages and the beautiful words and prose along with carefully scripted words and accolades that prominent speakers and political leaders delivered on June 14, 1905 to those gathered, I am at a loss to find words 110 years later that could better describe the intent from Cass Gilbert and his deliberate design for Commissioned paintings and battle flags and enclaves for prominent Minnesotan's in terms of statue locations inside of our capital.

I would be remiss if I also did not mention that while the flag ceremony was going on at the capital, Colonel William Colvill, the most prominent civil war leader from Minnesota, in my personal opinion, and who was to attend the ceremony, died the prior day and his body was laying in state in the west

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corridor of the new capital outside of the office of the Attorney General, an office he once held from 1866 to 1868.

Colonel Colvill commanded the 1st Minnesota Volunteer Regiment and came to national attention on July 2 1863 on cemetery ridge, Gettysburg, PA. Colvill was ordered by General Winfield Scott, 2nd Corps Commander under George Meade, to charge three regiments from Alabama in a creek bed called Plum Run in order to prevent the center of the line from being penetrated. The Regiment conducted a bayonet charge with 262 Soldiers and suffered 82% casualties but repulsed the attack and saved the union line. Colvill was wounded twice and nearly died. Hancock placed the 1st Minnesota heroism highest in the known annals of war.

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President Coolidge considered “Col Colvill and those 8 companies of the 1st Minnesota are entitled to rank as the saviors of their country.”

I would ask each of you to fully read the remarks from that day in 1905 in their entirety and reflect on the period of time, the input and decisions as to the design and construction of the capital, the reflection on the war four decades earlier and what Representative Urdal wrote from his vast historical perspective that, [I quote] “the building was constructed as a monument to the civil war.” A large number of the legislators at the time were civil war veterans. Are we now to dismiss, minimize, forsake, disavow, or repudiate the clear direction and intent of

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a broad base of Minnesotan when the people's house was built? My purpose was to try and be the voice of those that are no longer here, to possibly represent what they might say, although I am sure I have not captured the passion of how they might have testified.

Let me leave you with this final comment before I take questions: "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion." [extract from the Gettysburg Address – President Abraham Lincoln]

I firmly believe this committee will make enlightened recommendations, that can satisfy well intended objections, by reasonable and concerned citizens, political leadership, and still keep faith with the words and implied promises given to our civil war heroes, their families and descendants. Thank you for your efforts and what you continue to do.

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