



On This Day in 1789: First U.S. Standing Army Created; Founders Had Warned of the Danger to Liberty

The Founding Fathers of the United States were not only visionaries of a new nation, but also staunch advocates for limited government and individual liberties. One of the key concerns that occupied their minds was the idea of a standing army. For these framers of the U.S. Constitution, a standing army represented a potential threat to the very principles they sought to establish in the new republic. In this article, we will explore the Founders' opposition to a standing army, and provide insight into their thoughts through selected quotations.



The Revolutionary Experience

To understand the Founding Fathers' apprehensions about a standing army, it is essential to recognize the historical context in which they lived. The American Colonies had just emerged from a bitter struggle for independence against the British Crown. During this period, they had experienced firsthand the oppressive nature of a standing army, as British soldiers were quartered in their homes and imposed martial law.

James Madison, one of the leading architects of the U.S. Constitution, expressed this sentiment in his writings. He said, "A standing military force, with an overgrown Executive, will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defense against foreign danger have been always the instruments of tyranny at home."

Fear of Tyranny

The fear of tyranny was a recurring theme among the Founding Fathers. They were acutely aware of how a powerful standing army — in place of an armed citizen militia — could be used by a government to suppress the rights of its citizens. George Mason, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and one of the framers of the Bill of Rights, wrote, "To disarm the people ... [is] the most effectual way to enslave them."

The Role of Militias

The Founders believed in the concept of a citizen militia as a counterbalance to the potential abuses of a standing army. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence and our third president, emphasized this point: "The constitutions of most of our States assert that all power is inherent in the people ... that it is their right and duty to be at all times armed."

Jefferson's sentiment was echoed by other Founding Fathers, who saw a well-regulated militia composed of citizens as a safeguard against government overreach. They believed that an armed populace could act as a deterrent to any government that sought to undermine the principles of liberty.

In fact, even most proponents of the right to keep and bear arms are aware of the nexus of the



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Founders' opposition to a standing army and the Second Amendment.

In her book "*No Standing Armies!*" Lois Schworer records this now overlooked provenance of the language of the Second Amendment:

One of the main considerations prompting Jefferson, Mason, Gerry, Melancton Smith, and James Winthrop to argue that a Bill of Rights should be added to the federal Constitution was the conviction that security against a standing army in peacetime should be provided. Article 2 of the Bill of Rights [the Second Amendment] was designed to achieve that end.

As one of the chief proponents of adding protection against standing armies to the U.S. Constitution, Elbridge Gerry pointed out that the purpose of a militia, and the protection thereof proposed by the Second Amendment, was "to prevent the establishment of a standing army, the bane of liberty."

Economic Concerns

Beyond the threat to individual liberty, many of the Founders were also concerned about the financial burden of maintaining a standing army during peacetime. Alexander Hamilton, who played a significant role in drafting the Constitution and later served as the first secretary of the treasury, acknowledged the economic implications. He wrote, "A standing army ... will be supported at an enormous expense. There is a wide difference between them [standing armies] and the American militia."

Hamilton's perspective reflected the broader sentiment that maintaining a large, permanent military establishment would place an undue burden on the young nation's finances.

Constitutional Safeguards

To address their concerns about a standing army, the Founding Fathers included provisions in the Constitution to ensure civilian control over the military. For example, the Constitution grants Congress the authority to raise and support armies, but limits funding to two years, ensuring regular legislative oversight.

Additionally, the Constitution designates the president as the commander in chief of the military, but places the authority to declare war squarely in the hands of Congress. This separation of powers was intended to prevent any single branch of government from wielding unchecked authority over the military.

In conclusion, the Founders' opposition to a standing army was rooted in their deep-seated concerns about the potential for tyranny, the importance of individual liberties, and the economic burden of maintaining such a force. They believed that a well-regulated citizen militia, combined with constitutional safeguards, would better serve the interests of a free, safe, and perpetually self-governing society. As we reflect on their wisdom today, may their words and actions continue to influence the principles that guide the United States, and remind us of the enduring importance of safeguarding individual freedoms, and of strictly and expressly limiting the powers of government.



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