

The Debate Over an Army of Militia Versus a Standing Army

By Mark Richardson

In my last article, I said I would recommend some reading related to the unique debate in America over the use of militia forces to fight the Revolution versus the use of a professionally trained army to combat the forces of the Crown. Two books I'm going to suggest are:

***A Respectable Army, The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789*, by James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender and, *A People Numerous & Armed, Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, by John Shy. Both books follow the development and use of the militia during the French and Indian War. They look at the use of the militia during the Revolution, in what John Shy referred to as, *la petite guerre*. Martin and Lender look at the significance of Washington's Army becoming more like the forces they opposed. In other words, the only way to defeat the best equipped and trained army in the world was to copy them.**

Certainly Washington's Army lacked equipment, at least until the French offered their assistance, but for Washington, the importance of keeping an army in the field meant the hope for independence was still alive. He could not keep that hope alive without a standing army. It wasn't easy to obtain a standing army. After all, it was the presence of a professional standing army in Boston and elsewhere that patriotic Americans objected to, and many Americans feared what would become of a standing army after the war. Certainly the militia had earned its laurels during the Colonial War era. These troops were organized within the various colonies at the county level. Their leaders were most often the most influential men of property and wealth who were respected within their local communities. Such men received their commissions from their colonial legislators, and they raised regiments for temporary service on specific campaigns or for specific periods of time. The men in the ranks, particularly in New England, most often elected their company officers and noncommissioned officers, in what appeared to be an exercise of Democracy by popular vote. Once their

service was complete, these men returned to their homes and families, and then they waited until the next emergency required their service.

At the time of our Revolution, this is the model of military experience Americans knew, but, with the issue of independence on the line, was it the right model for the emerging American Army? When newly appointed General George Washington arrived in Cambridge, he found what resembled a militia army in disarray. He found officers from one colony not recognizing the commissions of officers from other colonies. Often times, the troops themselves refused to obey orders from officers who did not directly command them. The enlistment of various companies and regiments ranged from a matter of weeks to three months, six months or up to a year maximum. It was difficult for General Washington to get a handle on what he had for troop strength, because he constantly had to deal with the comings and goings of militia companies and regiments, as their enlistment ended and new regiments arrived in camp.

In his published journal, *The American Revolution, from the Commencement to the Disbanding of the American Army*, Dr. James Thacher wrote in September of 1776, "Since the troops from the Southern states have been incorporated and associated in military duty with those from New England; and, a strong prejudice has assumed its unhappy influence, and drawn a line of distinction between them. Many of the officers from the South are gentlemen of education, and unaccustomed to that equality which prevails in New England; and, however desirable, it could scarcely be expected that people from distant colonies, differing in manners and prejudices, could at once harmonize in friendly intercourse."

So, communications and discipline were difficult to come by, and any attempt to organize training was next to impossible. Regiments in camp practiced various manuals-of-arms, which not only complicated the movements of troops on parade, it also had the potential of wreaking havoc with troops movements on a battlefield. Some regiments practiced the British manual of 1764, while others used a new manual introduced by Timothy Pickering. Some Southern regiments used the Norfolk manual, and throughout the army, there was an assortment of French, Spanish, Prussian, German and Dutch manuals in use as well. Washington quickly

came to realize that he needed a full time, professionally trained, standing army, and he set out to convince Congress of this need. He would not see his dream come true until the end of 1776, when Congress agreed to reorganize the army and to recruit soldiers for three years or the duration of the war. Dr. Thacher goes on to say about Washington, "It is gratifying to the army that Congress have conferred on their Generalissimo more ample powers, and appointed him Dictator for the limited term of six months; to reform and new-model the military arrangements, in such a manner as he may judge most advantageous for the public service. Much good is expected to result from this measure."

While many in the army expected good results, Congress still had doubts, as did some Americans of better means and Washington's rival, General Charles Lee. During the first two years of the war, the army relied upon the militia, but who were these "sunshine Patriots?" Recruiting regulations instructed officers not to enlist anyone who did not own property, indentured servants, the poor, vagabonds, strollers, slaves, Indians or Negroes. By instruction, this meant that the militia had to be composed of white men with property. These men were farmers, artisans, merchants and various others from the middling class, and because of their social status, they also tended to be somewhat middle aged.

By 1777, the new standing Continental Army would embrace all those who had been rejected from militia service, and the average of a soldier dropped dramatically. For their service, these new soldiers were rewarded with land. Those people of better means naturally had some fear as to the power these newly armed property owners might wield once the war was won and independence was gained. As for General Charles Lee, he had relied upon the spirit of the militia during the disastrous New York campaign of 1776. He had also been captured by the British and held as a prisoner until he was exchanged during the spring of 1778. He still favored the use of militia forces to fight the war, and in his absence from the army, he did not comprehend the changes Washington had made.

Coming out of Valley Forge in June of 1778, General Lee was placed in charge of Washington's advanced guard in pursuit of the British who had evacuated Philadelphia. Washington had instructed Lee to attack, but Lee lacked confidence in the new army. He felt an all out attack would fail, and

he began to withdraw from the field once contact with the enemy was made at Monmouth. He believed militia forces were best deployed in hit and run type tactical maneuvers, and not as stand up fighters in an all out linear battle. Lee failed to comprehend the reorganization of the Continental Army or the training they had received at Valley Forge under the watchful eyes of General Von Steuben. Consequently, Washington dismissed Lee from the field, and took direct command of the army during the battle.

While the Continental Army survived the criticism it received during the war, it was close to falling apart on numerous occasions. Congress often failed to provide adequate food, clothing and pay for the soldiers in the field, yet they fought on. After the soldiers favorite commander, Benedict Arnold, betrayed their cause, the soldiers still fought on. When the first three year enlistments ran out in 1780, the ranks were depleted, regiments were consolidated, and the land bounties of 1777 were no longer offered to entice new recruits into the ranks, but still the soldiers fought on. Even while the mutiny of Continental forces filled the air in January 1781, the soldiers promised to return to their stations should the enemy attempt an offensive operation against them.

While Washington and others lobbied Congress for half pay pensions for officers after the war, no one was looking after the needs of the soldiers, and still they fought on. After the war, the land bounties were virtually useless, because no one knew exactly where the land was going to be. Congress offered to buy back the 200 acre land vouchers for twenty inflated Continental dollars, and many land speculators also paid the soldiers in near worthless currency for their vouchers. It is safe to say that these young men of lesser sorts truly fought for the promise of a better life once the war was over, while their counterparts in the militia fought for a way of life they already enjoyed. Those who feared this group of vagabonds, indentured servants and former slaves for what they might do to the country after the war, failed to recognize them for what they accomplished during the war.

It would take Captain Daniel Shays of Massachusetts to remind all Americans of the sacrifices these men made during the war and of the promises their country made to these men when they enlisted. As we just

observed Memorial Day for the year 2000, let us never forget the sacrifices of those in service to our country who came before us.