



## Dispatch the War Department

However small or large a government you consider ideal, whether you're left, right or center, you probably agree that the military is indispensable and legitimate. You may quibble about its size and purpose (defensive versus policing the world), but almost no one wonders whether we need an army.

It's time we did.

Questioning the military's necessity puts us in good company, specifically that of the Founders. Many of them vehemently opposed a "standing" army (*i.e.* one that is professionally, permanently established and remains intact rather than disbanding after beating off an attack. That definition encompasses cops as well: the Founders would never have drawn the artificial distinction we do between a force that fights overseas and one that wars on its own citizens. Indeed, the Redcoats patrolling Boston in the 1760's and '70's fulfilled the functions of modern police).



So Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts articulated popular wisdom when he damned standing armies as "[the bane of liberty](#)" during Congressional debate in 1789. The heroic Patrick Henry, too, denounced bellicose professionals because they "[execute the execrable](#) commands of tyranny."

Even James Madison, among the most Federalistic of the Founders, listed the horrors that "proceed" from armies: "debts and taxes; ... [which] are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few." At the Constitutional Convention, [he cautioned](#), "A standing military force, with an overgrown Executive, will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defence against foreign danger have been always the instruments of tyranny at home. Among the Romans it was a standing maxim to excite a war, whenever a revolt was apprehended. Throughout all Europe, the armies kept up under the pretext of defending, have enslaved, the people."

Despite these warnings, the [Constitution assumes that the Feds will maintain not only an Army but a Navy](#), too. Why? Perhaps partly because of a debate then ongoing — and one that still rages among historians and military buffs: could the militia, which simply means armed citizens as opposed to professional soldiers, have prevailed against the British Army by itself? After all, Patriot militia won several battles, including the essential one at Saratoga. Or was the United States' victory in the Revolution impossible without the professional, full-time Continental Army?

Then, too, during the years that a Convention debated and states ratified the Constitution, Americans fretted about the precarious peace the [Treaty of Paris](#) brought in 1783. England refused to withdraw its



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troops from the Northwest Territory (modern Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin) despite the Treaty's stipulations to do so — to say nothing of Britain's vast beachhead, Canada. And France might demand more than mere amity for the money and soldiers it had lent the Continental Congress for the rebellion.

Were these Americans correct? If Britain and France — or today's terrorists — were truly as threatening as feared, was a professional army under politicians' control the safest and most efficient way to counter them?

Government is inherently incompetent, as it obligingly demonstrates every day in everything it does. Whether we're talking graduates of its schools who can't read, write, or reason; letters its Post Office takes days to deliver to the next block; or its Ponzi Scheme for retirees' pensions that keep both the retirees and the scheme on the verge of bankruptcy, government fails everywhere, all the time. Why, then, would we entrust to it a life-and-death matter like defense? Why would we expect it to handle that any more competently than it does its security checkpoints at airports?

Indeed, Leviathan's ineptitude in matters military is sweeping, legendary, and very, very expensive. For proof, read the journals or letters of virtually any participant in virtually any American war. Whether an inexperienced Congress desperately juggles a Revolution against the world's most powerful government or whether a professional Pentagon in the world's most powerful government desperately struggles against terrorists skulking in caves, American wars always abound in bungling and inefficiency, graft and corruption.

But those aren't a standing army's worst evils. Rather, it installs the "tyranny at home" that Madison deplored. Politicians understand far better than their conned constituents that an army and its concomitant "military-industrial complex" exponentially increase their power. They also know that they must keep soldiers on the public payroll busy lest voters ask why they're paying [\\$663.8 billion](#) in FY2010 alone — which doesn't include such allied costs as veterans' benefits — for [1,368,471 "active" forces and 848,056 "selected reserves"](#) to twiddle their thumbs. And then there's that irresistible urge to rule not just Americans but the world.

In contrast to their officials, the American people despise imperialism — or did until recently. They wanted nothing to do with conquering other countries. And so the Feds euphemized their evil, changing the War Department's name in 1949.

But the Department of Defense has yet to fight a defensive war. America has suffered mighty few actual invasions; just as the Founders predicted, her geographic distance from the Old World and its quarrels protected her. Indeed, we might argue that the last invasion to which politicians responded legitimately was the War of 1812. Yes, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, as Al Qaeda did American aviation on 9/11 — but the [administrations that learned](#) of both [murderous plots in advance](#) chose to manipulate rather than prevent them. Besides, even if George Bush had tried but failed to intercept 9/11's hijackers, bombing Iraq for the slaughter [a group of Saudis committed](#) doesn't count as an appropriate reaction.

So, without much to do in the way of defense, our rulers post their troops worldwide — [57,000 in Germany](#), [26,000 in South Korea](#), [33,000 in Japan](#), [419 in Qatar](#), [2200 in Djibouti](#), to name just a few examples. Predictably, murder and mayhem follow. And even if soldiers swaggering among civilians whose language they don't speak behaved themselves impeccably at all times, their "duties" would sow resentment. Imagine your fury should [Iraq's army](#) establish [checkpoints](#) at the interstate ramp nearest



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your home and search your car each time you entered or left the highway, as Americans do to Iraqi citizens. And how many of us would take kindly to Afghani soldiers marching through our neighborhoods? Yet Americans in combat gear stride through theirs.

None of this could occur without a standing army.

Militias, i.e., armed citizens, don't go adventuring. They don't fight phantoms either, no matter how many "wars" politicians declare on drugs or terror. Instead, they defend their homes and neighborhoods from attack — genuine, physical assault — then return to earning a living.

And that is precisely why politicians and their court historians dislike and disparage armed civilians: militias don't attract bribes—sorry, campaign contributions from corporations hoping to secure billion-dollar contracts, nor can [presidents send the militia overseas to distract us from their adultery](#) or on [a vendetta against a dictator Daddy didn't like](#). The very few wars militias must fight are always defensive.

I hear the army's partisans scoffing, "It's a hostile world out there. Militia only? You're nuts! It'd never work!"

As if the current arrangement does.

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