"No Standing Armies!"

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CHAPTER I

ORIGINS OF THE
ENGLISH ANTIMILITARY
ATTITUDE

Long before a standing army was created in England, a predisposition to distrust the paid, professional soldier was discernible. Articulated in casual and general terms, this inclination reflected many elements: geography, the country's traditional system of military organization, social assumptions, and the influence of classical and Renaissance wisdom. The antimilitary sentiment grew from such roots as these, rather than from pacifism or Christian idealism.

The evidence of a negative attitude toward the military at the opening of the Stuart era is scattered and fragmentary. In the absence of an army and of interest, even in the militia,¹ there was little reason for a systematic airing of opinion about military matters. But some direct testimony comes from Elizabeth's reign, when a number of pamphlets were written by a small group of men who argued for a policy of military preparedness.² Barnabe Rich, Thomas Digges, and


Geoffrey Gates, among others, justified war as a positive contribution to national character and tried to vindicate the reputation of the soldier. Paradoxically, their tracts attest to the poor regard in which the professional soldier was held. In 1578, a writer complained that Englishmen “hath always had that faute . . . of being unnatural and unthankful” to professional soldiers. Gates illustrated this point by referring to an ancient literary controversy over which of the professions was the most honorable. Englishmen rated the lawyer first, the merchant second, and the soldier far down the list. According to Rich, the merchant and the lawyer were the “greatest findefaults that . . . invey against soldiers,” but he accused all his countrymen of being selfish, luxury-loving, and lazy.

Evidence from other sources confirms the accusations of these pamphleteers. In 1603, for example, one of the men who was sentenced to die in the Essex conspiracy declared that anyone who advocated reform of the nation’s military system was treated like a dog; in his view it was unlikely that the attitude would ever change. Around the same time, Sir Thomas Overbury characterized the soldier in disparaging terms. John Selden preserved a story that underscored the disregard in which soldiers were held. Apollo, so the tale went, was approached by a group of soldiers who petitioned that war be given the status of the eighth liberal science. Upon hearing of Apollo’s agreement to this proposal, a contingent of butchers protested on the ground that they were more worthy than soldiers because the slaughter they performed was to preserve men’s lives not to destroy them. Persuaded by their argument, Apollo reversed his decision and made the soldier’s trade a mystery instead.

An anonymous antifeminist of the early seventeenth century could think of no more effective way to express his dislike of women than to say that they

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4Geoffrey Gates, The Defence of Militarie Profession, Wherein is Eloquently Shewed the Due Commendation of Martaill Prowesse, and Plainly Prooved How Necessary the Exercise of Armes Is for This Our Age (London, 1579), pp. 9, 10, 12, 18.

5Rich, Allarme, pp. Cii verso, Ciii, Ai-Ai verso, Fiir verso, Gi. Cl. Foure Paradoxes or Politique Discourses Concerning Militarie Discipline, Written Long Since by Thomas Digges, Esq., of the Worthines of Warre and Warriors by Dudly Digges, His Sonne (London, 1604), pp. 96, 97, 100, 102, 111.

6Jorgensen, Shakespeare’s Military World, p. 223.


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were like soldiers, only worse. Sir Francis Bacon, in examining what
made a kingdom great, concluded that history showed that the prince
who depended upon professional soldiers “may spread his feathers
for a time, but he will mew them soon after.”

Contemporary English drama, especially Shakespeare’s plays, also
reflected the general disparagement of the soldier. Literary scholars
have shown that the soldier was portrayed in late sixteenth- and
early seventeenth-century drama either as a cipher, a reprobate, or
a discontent who inevitably clashed with a peacetime society. Falstaff
described his men as “slaves” or “scarecows” in 1 Henry IV and de-
clared they were as “ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth.” In
the recruitment scene in 2 Henry IV, Falstaff chose an old man and
a feeble, emaciated fellow to serve in the army. The famous Pistol,
the epitome of the common soldier, was a filthy, dirty rogue who
displayed none of the martial virtues.

It may be concluded that there was extant a general predisposition
to disparage and condemn the military at the beginning of the seven-
teenth century. Why should Englishmen have been so inclined
decades before they had had any direct experience with a standing
army in peacetime? One consideration is the geography of the coun-
try. Surrounded by water and protected by her navy, of which almost
everyone approved, the country enjoyed a sense of psychological
security, which neither conquest, threat, naval disaster, nor foreign
landing diminished. Examples could be readily produced to show
that geography has been endlessly used to justify the idea that the
nation should not depend upon a large, permanent military establish-
ment. For example, an English pamphleteer wrote in 1579 that if the
country were not an island, men would “know and value the soldier
and lick the dust off the feete” of an army.

A second reason for the disparagement of the military was the
character of the foot soldiers with whom Englishmen had had experi-
ence. In times of emergency, during Elizabeth’s reign and again in
the 1620s, men from the lowest reaches of society were pressed into

9 Tracts Written by John Selden of the Inner-Temple, Esquire. The First Entitled
Jani Anglorum Facies Altera, Rendered into English, with Large Notes Thereupon by
Redman Estcot, Gent. (London, 1683), pp. 18 (misnumbered)-21. In reporting the
comment Selden seized the opportunity to call the man a “dirty fellow!”

From “Of the True Greatness of Kingdoms and Estates.”

11 Jorgensen, Shakespeare’s Military World, passim and pp. 120-23, 128, 133-35,
143, 208, 216, 217, 227.

12 Gates, The Defence of the Militarie Profession, p. 18.
service to form the armies that were sent abroad. At the end of the hostilities, the army was disbanded and returned to the counties where they had been levied. Elizabeth herself referred to the men in her armies as "thieves [who] ought to hang."13 A recent study of Elizabeth's army has shown that the recruitment system was riddled with corruption and graft and operated so that vagabonds, misfits, and prisoners, who traded their sentence for service in the army, filled the regiments.14 The method of conscription operated with the same results in the 1620s.15 When the emergency was over and the men were discharged, the responsibility for providing for them and reintegrating them in society was laid on the local shires. The indifference of local authorities to the needs of the disbanded soldier was widespread throughout England. The Privy Council was constantly dispatching scolding letters to the counties urging that the soldiers be cared for. The character of the soldiers, the cost of providing for them, and the importunities of the central government did nothing to recommend to country gentlemen the idea of creating a permanent, professional corps.

A third factor is the lack of genuine leadership from the center of government in establishing a permanent force. Although the king's military prerogatives were not spelled out in statutory form until the Restoration, in practice the crown always claimed ultimate authority over the defenses of the realm. If a step so monumental as creating a standing force was to be taken in the sixteenth century, the initiative for it would have had to come, as it did in fifteenth-century France, from the highest level. Although Elizabeth and her council considered various proposals to strengthen the nation's defenses, none was promoted.16 The tracts on military matters, that have been mentioned, were not endorsed by the government. In a phrase grown famous, Elizabeth said that her soldiers were the "loves of her people." Sensitivity to public opinion prompted her to drop at least one scheme to strengthen the defenses of the country. Her most important advisor, William Cecil, lord Burghley, had no use for professional soldiers in peacetime, observing that "soldiers in peace are like chimneys in summer."17 General ignorance about military affairs,

13 Jorgensen, Shakespeare's Military World, p. 144. The law against pressing men to serve in a land army was, of course, freely ignored.
14 Cruickshank, Elizabeth's Army, pp. 17-36, 130-42, 280.
as a contemporary charged, may also explain Elizabeth’s aversion to a permanent force.¹⁸ As for James I he was too sincerely the pacifist, or as some observers would have had it, too much the coward to advocate a standing army. James was proud of being a “peaceable king,” and towards the end of his reign reminded his Parliament, in his inimitable style, that while he ruled everyone had been able to “live quietly under his own vine and fig tree.”¹⁹ For both these monarchs, the failure to introduce an element of permanence and professionalism was because neither could have paid for an army from his own resources nor could have expected a grant from Parliament for such a purpose. The historian of Elizabeth’s army confirms that the economy was simply not strong enough to support a permanent military establishment, and this was true for James I also.²⁰ Further, neither James nor Elizabeth (except for a few years) felt a need for a permanent establishment because of foreign obligations or threats; in fact, there was general peace between 1562 and 1588 and again from 1604 to the 1620s.

A fourth consideration in explaining the early inclination to dislike professional soldiers was that England had preserved her ancient system of military organization and obligation without fundamental change until 1645. This was in contrast to continental states, which since the middle of the fifteenth century, had been undergoing a “military revolution,” including the maintenance of standing armies in peacetime.²¹ The English system contained neither customary nor statutory place for a standing army. Recently scholars have argued that medieval monarchs (whatever their ambitions) depended even in war upon soldiers who were “for the most part professional and mercenary.”²² These men were always disbanded after the emergency. In the late fifteenth century, following the battle at Bosworth Field, Henry Tudor established the Yeomen of the Guard to secure his new throne. In 1539, his son added the Gentlemen Pensioners. Thus,

there were permanent royal guards to protect the king, garrison strategic castles and forts, curb the ambitions of the great magnates, and partake in court ceremonials. A distinguished military historian has remarked that these guards contained not even the "germ" of a genuine standing army. Englishmen were, of course, aware that the traditional system of military defense did not include a permanent, professional army, and this was one consideration that inclined men to an antimilitary attitude. A tract printed in 1648, whose purpose was to plead for the disbanding of the New Model Army, declared that "if there were no other argument against it, it is enough that it is a thing was never used in this Kingdom." Further, the nature of the two "constitutional" elements in England's military system, the citizen militia, and the feudal array predisposed men to distrust a permanent army. Both reflected hierarchical social values and the fear of arming the lower classes. The equation of military responsibility and socioeconomic status encouraged the belief that military talents were inherent in the well-to-do classes. Although the feudal array was in the early seventeenth century and before a military anachronism, romantic chivalric myths and hierarchical ideas about military responsibility remained. For example, a pamphleteer wrote in 1578 that "the knowledge, and practyse of the acts and feates of armes, principallie and properlye are of the profession of noble menne, and gentlemen of great revenues." Or again, Sir Edward Coke referred to feudalism as "excellent military policy" and regretted that it was now "utterly altered." Lawrence Stone notes the revival of the chivalric ideal in literature with Malory's Arthurian legends and Stephen Hawes's The Pastime of Pleasure. In a parliamentary debate on November 26, 1621, a speaker was roundly critical because so few retainers were armed. At the beginning of the Civil War the

23 Cruickshank, Elizabeth's Army, p. 11.
25 The term is used by Francis Grose, Military Antiquities Respecting a History of the English Army from the Conquest to the Present Time (London, 1812), 1: 8.
27 T. Procter, Of the Knowledge and Conducte of Warres (London, 1578), preface.
29 Stone, Crisis of the Aristocracy, p. 131.
30 Notestein, Relf, and Simpson, Commons Debates, 1621, 6: 318.
chivalric ideal motivated more than one man to side with Charles I.\textsuperscript{31} Such notions inclined the English upper classes to disdain a man who fought for pay.

In a similar way the organization of the militia predisposed men to an antimilitary attitude. Like the feudal array, the militia was a venerable institution. Although the word first appeared in the English language around 1590, the seventeenth-century militia was directly descended, if not from the old fyrd, at least from the Anglo-Saxon customary obligation that every able-bodied freeman between the ages of fifteen and sixty should defend his country.\textsuperscript{32} Henry II’s Assize of Arms (1181) and Edward I’s Statute of Winchester (1285) had translated the custom into law and specified the military obligations of a subject according to his income. This early correlation between militia responsibility and social degree was akin to the hierarchical notions implicit in feudal theory. Tudor legislation, which in 1558 created a new structure for the militia and instituted the new office of lord-lieutenant of the county, was based upon the same assumptions. By it the militia was placed directly in the hands of the lord-lieutenant, who was almost always a peer, and his deputy-lieutenant, who was chosen from the gentry. Although ultimate authority over the militia remained with the king and Privy Council, the actual command was exercised by the lord-lieutenant and the deputy-lieutenant. In carrying out their militia duties, the lieutenancy regularly conferred with the country gentry, who, as a class, officered the militia and largely financed it. The administration of the militia occupied a very important place in the life of the gentry, who consequently resented any effort of the government to centralize control, to require personal service, or to insist upon payment of militia assessments.\textsuperscript{33}

In 1573, the “trained bands” were established. These were men who had been selected for training from among the adult males in the counties. Although the “trained bands,” numbering over one hundred thousand men, were not organized on a regimental basis until the Civil War, they were regarded as the “core” of the militia system.

\textsuperscript{33}See Wake, \textit{Musters, Beacons and Subsidies}, pp. xxxi, xlvii; Boynton, \textit{The Elizabethan Militia}, pp. 82-91 passim. For the militia in one county see, for example, William B. Willcox, \textit{Gloucestershire: A Study in Local Government, 1590-1640} (New Haven, 1940).
Considerable attention was directed to assuring that the “best” men of the county were chosen by the lieutenancy at musters. Gentry or well-to-do yeomanry, not servants, were to be picked. The men were to be “well-affected” in religion and politics. Although the gentry, notwithstanding their identification with the militia, regularly evaded their military responsibilities, the notion that men of substance should compose the trained bands and should be prepared to defend the country persisted.

Elizabethian interest in strengthening the militia was dissipated in the early years of James I’s reign. For example, in 1603 the Statute of 1558 was repealed, thus, legally speaking, removing the militia from the authority of the lord-lieutenant. In practice, however, no such change occurred and the militia functioned very much as it had before, with the lord-lieutenant still regarded as the military leader of the county. The repeal, it should be noted, created substantive, legal reasons for questioning the actions of the lieutenancy, which were freely exploited during Charles I’s reign by the critics of the crown. Or again, James’s government took no interest in mustering and training the militia and did not call for a general muster until 1612. But after then, as Lindsay Boynton has shown, interest in strengthening the militia increased. On the part of private citizens, it became the fashion to drill under the tutelage of an expert. The Privy Council sent out orders to replace weapons, train soldiers, and exact payment of the militia assessment. A sympathetic hearing was given the suggestions for reform, which were put forward by men who had served as volunteers in continental armies. A Council of War, a kind of high command over the army and navy, was created.34

Neither the militia nor the feudal array were viable military instruments in the early seventeenth century. They are important not for what they did but for the attitudes they encouraged. Based on socially elitist assumptions, their theoretical organization (however disparate the actual condition) encouraged Englishmen to disparage the professional soldier. Both were mythologized. The country became accustomed to a military force that was inefficient and unreliable. Efforts on the part of the crown to strengthen the militia were regarded as unjustifiable interference verging on tyranny. They came to nothing in the last years of James’s reign but helped to precipitate the collapse of Charles I’s government.

Another important factor in explaining the country’s inclination to distrust a professional army was the influence of classical and

humanist philosophy to which all literate men were exposed. Two
lines of speculation about war, soldiers, and how a country’s defenses
should be organized had already been developed, one best exampled
in the works of Desiderius Erasmus and Sir Thomas More, the other
in the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli. Recent scholarship has
shown that a large and important part of the thought of Erasmus and
More was concerned with war and peace. Their interest in the ques-
tion was not new. Long before, classical writers such as Seneca,
Plutarch, and Pliny the elder had sought to explain and condemn
war. The early Christians had developed primitive ideas of nonvio-
lence that had survived during the Middle Ages along with the Augus-
tinian doctrine of the “just” war and had been reinvigorated later
by such thinkers as John Wycliffe and the Lollards. In the early six-
teenth century the Biblical scholar, John Colet, developed a critique
of violence, war, and soldiers that was new both in method and in-
sight. Erasmus, More, and Juan Luis Vives carried on and enlarged
Colet’s view. In their writings were such ideas as the “folly,”
corruptness, and destructiveness of war; the moral depravity, crim-
inality, and incompetence of the paid soldier; and the essential baseness
of the ideals of military honor and glory. More was emphatically
against a country’s keeping an army during peace. The history of
France, Rome, Carthage, and Syria illustrated the dangers. That the
resources of the nation are drained, the character of the people cor-
rupted, and the moral fiber weakened by such a system was made
plain in The Utopia. The defense of the land should be entrusted to
its own citizens. The popularity of The Utopia (it was reprinted
four times in English in the sixteenth century) spread this message.
That More’s attitude towards soldiers had an impact is verified since
he was specifically targeted by one of the Elizabethan pamphleteers,
who favored a stronger military establishment, for “most unwisely”
writing that an untrained subject could defend a country better than
a paid, professional soldier.

Erasmus leveled biting satire against war and soldiers in his
famous In Praise of Folly. War was depicted as a foolish game,
“played by parasites, panders, bandits, assassins, peasants, sots,

35 See Robert P. Adams, The Better Part of Valor: More, Erasmus, Colet and Vives on
Humanism, War and Peace, 1496-1535 (Seattle, 1962), pp. 4, 6-9, 11, 21, 24, 28, 29.
28-29, 31.
37 See R. W. Gibson, comp., St. Thomas More: A Preliminary Bibliography of His
Works and Moreana to the Year 1750 (New Haven, 1961).
bankrupts, and such other dregs of mankind." In many treatises he stressed the bestial aspects of war. The widespread popularity of Erasmus's antiwar criticisms is shown by the fact that *The Education of a Christian Prince* was translated into English and was printed at least thirteen times before 1600, while *In Praise of Folly* appeared in English three times before 1600. These works must have confirmed the general English predisposition to distrust the professional soldier. But it must be stressed that seventeenth-century Englishmen were a bellicose rather than a pacifistic people and that as the antistanding army sentiment emerged in the seventeenth century, this strand of humanism did not have a direct influence.

The second theme inherited from the Renaissance was that mercenary soldiers were dangerous to a free government and that free states should be defended by their own citizens. This idea was advocated by Machiavelli, especially in *The Art of War*, *The Prince*, and *The Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, which appeared in the early sixteenth century. Machiavelli both summed up and added to a tradition that, as recent studies have shown, already enjoyed a long line of development. Although Machiavelli drew freely on the work of classical and early Renaissance thinkers, he did more than reiterate their ideas about militias and mercenaries. The main difference between Machiavelli and his forerunners is that ideas of force and military organization were central considerations in Machiavelli's concept of politics and the state. In brief, Machiavelli identified the professional soldier with an absolute form of government, insisted that in a free state the armed force should be a citizen militia for practical and moral reasons, and argued that a good citizen should serve his government in both a political and military capacity.

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That Machiavelli's thought was familiar to educated Elizabethan and early Stuart Englishmen has long been established by scholars. *The Art of War* was translated into English by Peter Whitehorne in 1560 and appeared in two subsequent editions in 1573 and 1588.45 *The Discourses* and *The Prince* were also known before their appearance in translation in 1636 and 1640 respectively. How widely read they were is impossible to say. Felix Raab believed that at the turn of the century Machiavelli "directly affected the thinking of only a small minority" but that his influence spread at the "second, third and fourth hand."46 The "Elizabethan martialists" read and were instructed by *The Art of War*, and Bacon47 was not alone in the interest expressed in Machiavelli's ideas. Machiavelli's writings undoubtedly contributed to the predisposition to disparage the professional soldier, but no tracts were written specifically about the evils of professional soldiers that might have revealed the extent of his influence at the beginning of the century.

A negative attitude towards the professional soldier was present in England at the opening of the seventeenth century. Justified by the security offered by geography and the absence of pressing international requirements, the sentiment was nourished by hierarchical social ideals that were implicit in the country's traditional system of military organization, the militia and the feudal array, and by classical and humanist ideas, especially those about the value of the citizen militia conveyed in the work of Niccolò Machiavelli. These were the distant origins of a viewpoint that could have remained fragmentary. It took the presence of an army in England and a deepening alienation between crown and parliamentary gentry to create a genuinely identifiable antiarmy attitude by 1628.

47The classic study of Machiavelli’s impact on Bacon is N. Orsini, *Bacone e Machiavelli* (Genoa, 1936). For the spread of Machiavelli’s ideas see Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli*, chapter 2. The scholarship on the Elizabethan martialists mentioned in note 2 refers to Machiavelli’s influence on their treatises.