"No Standing Armies!"

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CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION: EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ECHOES

The general inclination to disparage the professional soldier, which was discernible at the opening of the seventeenth century, became by the eighteenth century a political and constitutional principle of enduring significance. In 1578, a little-known pamphleteer wrote that Englishmen had the "faute" of underestimating the value of the professional soldier. In 1697, John Trenchard asserted that a standing army in peacetime was a threat to freedom and a menace to the English constitution. Over these years, successive political and constitutional confrontations between the king (or protector during the Interregnum) and his critics in Parliament and the press resulted in a full development of the antiarmy attitude and profound constitutional changes. Men of all political persuasions came to believe that a professional, permanent army in the hands of the central government was undesirable, but the most persistent and articulate opponents were intellectuals and reformers on the left, who had been deeply influenced by seventeenth-century libertarianism and republicanism. The tracts they wrote stimulated and reflected what was said in Parliament and were of enormous influence in spreading and continuing the antimilitary tradition. The parliamentary contests were of near equal importance because they articulated and disseminated ideas and were decisive in the achievement of constitutional changes.

As early as 1628, country gentlemen protested Charles 1's policy of keeping in England the troops he had raised for expeditions against
Spain and France. Appealing largely to precedential law and history, these men drafted the Petition of Right, which, for the first time in English history, challenged the monarch's authority to billet soldiers in private homes without the consent of the owner and to impose martial law without observing certain restraints. The Petition also reflected anger at the intrusion of an armed central government, through the agency of the deputy-lieutenant, into local affairs. Antimilitarism was, in part, the jealous parochialism of the parliamentary and county gentry. Throughout the century, the Petition of Right served as a precedent in arguments against the central government's armed force. In 1642 and 1643, radical Parliamentarians and pamphleteers took on the task of justifying Parliament's assumption of command of the militia. Thereafter, legislative control of the military became, no matter the discretion and circumspection with which it was handled during the Restoration, a central assumption in the anti-army attitude. The cry "No Standing Armies" became politicized in the 1670s by the parliamentary opposition which attacked every army Charles II raised and fulminated against English soldiers serving in the French army, the militia in Scotland, and the king's Guards. Dislike of a standing army was one reason for the Revolution of 1689. Parliament's control of a peacetime army was spelled out in Article VI of the Bill of Rights.

The military settlement at the Revolution was a watershed in the evolution of the antiarmy sentiment. Many of the major reasons for criticizing a paid, professional army were dealt with in the Bill of Rights. Thereafter, billeting, martial law, and the right of Protestant subjects to bear arms ceased to be the burning issues that they had been. Article VI marked a genuinely revolutionary change; it established that there could be no standing army in peacetime without the consent of Parliament. The power of the monarchy had been broken in its most essential feature. Although the king retained many prerogatives, and struggles between crown and Parliament recurred, the effect of Article VI was to transfer sovereignty to Parliament. The point was tested a decade later when the standing army controversy reached a climax in Parliament and press. From 1697 through 1699, the question was skillfully argued on both sides. Although William's army project received more support than usually credited, the outcome of the confrontation was never in serious doubt. The principle of Article VI was reaffirmed. Parliament reduced the army first to ten thousand men, then to seven thousand native-born subjects and sent home William's favorite Dutch Guards.
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In Parliament, the motives of the army's critics were always mixed. Principle, propaganda, partisanship, parliamentary tactic, parochialism, and personal advantage played a part. The issue was seen on every level of understanding. At any point in its evolution, the argument contained a cluster of considerations—social, economic, moral, and political. But for most men, the most important element was political—the fear that permanent soldiers would destroy Parliament, law, and liberty, would impose tyranny, and would disrupt England's mixed and balanced government either by force or by corruption through patronage and influence.

The pamphlet controversy in 1697-99 seeded a tradition, whose echoes were heard for another century in England and the American colonies. The pamphlets which Trenchard, Fletcher, and Molesworth, in particular, had written were regarded as the repository of antimilitary ideas and were used to persuade eighteenth-century Englishmen of the dangers of paid soldiers in peacetime and the advantages of relying upon the fleet and a remodeled militia. They were reprinted many times. Trenchard's *Short History* went through three editions in 1698, and it or the preface to it were reprinted in whole or part eight times in the eighteenth century,¹ the last time in 1782 under the auspices of the Society for Constitutional Information. Fletcher's *Discourse concerning Militias* appeared six times (London, 1732, 1737; Glasgow, 1749; London, 1755, 1792, and 1798). Molesworth's *An Account of Denmark* was published in part or whole ten times, the last in 1814.² Trenchard personally helped to maintain the vitality of the antiarmy attitude by continuing to write tracts against standing armies. In the 1720s, he collaborated with Thomas Gordon³ in writing a series of tracts, *The Independent Whig* and *Cato's Letters*, which were bitterly critical of government on many counts. In *Cato's Letters*, the menace of standing armies to liberty and a free government whether established by king or Parliament, the corruption of Parliament by army officers, and the overweighting of the power of king and ministers were stressed in terms so close to those Trenchard had used twenty years before that a critic charged "Cato" with adding

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¹London, 1703, 1706, 1731, 1739, 1749, 1751, 1782. Trenchard's *An Argument, Shewing*, was reprinted in 1698, 1703, 1706, 1726, 1727, 1728, 1750, 1751, and 1817.
nothing new. Cato's Letters were many times reprinted in England, going through at least six editions before 1754. Other seventeenth-century works dealing with questions of military power and organization that were reprinted in the eighteenth century were Harrington's Oceana, Henry Neville's Plato Redivivus, and Ludlow's Memoirs.

The reprints were often made around the time when questions concerning the army were being most heatedly debated in Parliament. There the danger of standing armies was used by the opposition to embarrass the Hanoverian monarchy, the Whig minister, Robert Walpole, and the Whig oligarchy. Just as in the seventeenth century, the outcry against the standing army was used as a propaganda tool and a parliamentary tactic to frustrate the "establishment." Regularly, the debates on the size of the land force, on the passage of the Mutiny Act (especially in 1717), and on the Hessian troops afforded opportunity for the critics of the government to raise the specter of a standing army. "Long and warm" debates were the rule. Some men repeated with monotonous regularity the identical arguments which Trenchard and his friends had advanced. They referred admiringly to the figures which the parliamentary sessions of 1697 and 1698 had fixed, warned of the dangers to law and the constitution, and offered once more the "club's" favorite example, Denmark's Revolution of 1660, to illustrate the folly of allowing a large standing army. Reflecting the same kind of xenophobia that had marked the earlier debates, these critics of the Hanoverian monarchy were especially hard on the Hessian troops, introducing time and time again motions that they be disbanded. Archibald Foord maintains that the issue of standing armies was "manufactured" by the Tories as a debating point. Assuredly, there was more propaganda than principle in the

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4Censor Censored; or Cato Turned Cataline (London, 1722), p. 23. Cato's Letters, or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious (London, 1733), nos. 25, 33, 59, 62, 63, 64, 65, 94, and 95, especially deal with political power, liberty, and armies.
5Oceana in 1737, 1771; Plato Redivivus in 1737, 1758, 1763; Ludlow's Memoirs in 1721, 1751 (2 eds.), 1771.
6For example, Cobbett, Parliamentary History 8: 46, 377; 9: 870.
7For one example, the staunch Tory, William Shippen. He was committed to the Tower for a speech he made in 1717 against a large standing army in peacetime (Cobbett, Parliamentary History 7: 505-12). Shippen apologized for the repetitions (ibid., 8: 497, 771; 11: 249).
8Ibid., 7: 536; 8: 61, 383, 405, 677, 678, 890, 1255; 9: 525; 10: 376.
regular attacks on the army in the eighteenth century. Significantly, no one seriously suggested that England could do with no professional army at all. At the very least, the establishment of 1697-99 was recommended, which testifies to the acceptance in principle of the need of some permanent force. Compared to continental armies, the English peacetime military establishment in the first half of the eighteenth century was always pitifully small, averaging around twenty thousand men. Although the government wanted a larger army, it did not violate the constitutional reforms that had been achieved in the seventeenth century—annual review of the army's size and appropriation by Parliament and civilian control in peacetime of the military. On the other hand, the Whig oligarchy stood guilty of the charges that the army, a source of royal and ministerial patronage, corrupted Parliament and enlarged the influence of the crown. Government spokesmen had no convincing response to allay the fear that an army under parliamentary control was still a potential menace to the country's liberties and form of government. Who is to say that there was no genuine anxiety reflected in the charge that the army would "alter the frame of government from a legal and limited monarchy to a despotic," by corruption if not violence? Whatever the proportion of principle and propaganda, which were always intermingled in the attacks on the armed forces, the menace of a standing army was regularly raised in parliamentary debates by the Tory opposition, and thus the antiarmy attitude was kept alive.

While the Tories criticized the military establishment in Parliament, the most famous of Tory writers of the early eighteenth century, Henry St. John, first viscount Bolingbroke, attacked Walpole's government.12 His contributions to The Craftsman during the years 1726-36 and his Letters reveal how heavily indebted he was to Trenchard's and Gordon's views about armies.13 Stressing the corrupting influence of the military, Bolingbroke insisted that a standing army, by its

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nature an institution separate from society, promoted factions in society. In *A Dissertation on Parties*, he declared that history showed that a standing army inevitably destroyed liberty. Arguing that a military coup d’état was more difficult to execute than men realized, he explained that he feared more the slow and sure corruption of Parliament by an army. When that happened, he warned, the whole edifice of government would crumble, because the integrity and independence of Parliament was the keystone of the constitution.

Another theme Bolingbroke reiterated was that luxury had an enervating effect, which led men to accept mercenary soldiers instead of shouldering the burden themselves of providing for the defense of the country. Reflecting Bolingbroke’s broader political and philosophical assumptions about society and government, these strictures about standing armies testify to the continued viability of the anti-military tradition.

Many other eighteenth-century tracts of less importance argued against the size of the military establishment, oftentimes referring to tracts by Trenchard and Fletcher, or to *Cato’s Letters*. Some pamphlets are so deeply indebted to Trenchard as to be guilty of plagiarism. For example, *Reasons against a Standing Army*, printed in London in 1717, is nothing more than a piecing together, with connecting sentences and paragraphs appropriate to the situation in 1717, of Trenchard’s *An Argument, Shewing and A Short History of Standing Armies*. William Harris’s history of the reign of Charles II was heavily dependent upon Trenchard’s *Short History* for an account of the army during the Restoration. The fact that such tracts and books appeared throughout the eighteenth century and that in 1793 David Buchan should entitle a pamphlet *Letters on the Impolicy of a Standing Army, in Time of Peace* testifies further to the continued appeal of the anti-army sentiment throughout the century.

The anti-army tradition was also spread through the works of many eminent eighteenth-century constitutional writers and historians.

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17 In the United States, the largest number of the less important eighteenth-century tracts on standing armies and the militia is in the Houghton Library, Harvard University.
18 Another late eighteenth-century example is John Hampden, *Some Short Considerations Concerning the State of the Nation* (London, 1792).
Roger Acherley, who published *The Britannic Constitution* in 1727, found after a leisurely examination that a standing army in peacetime was inconsistent with England's mixed and balanced government. In *The Constitution of England: Or an Account of the English Government* (1739), J. L. DeLolme praised the "astonishing subordination" of the military to the civil power in England and explained that although the king was commander-in-chief of all the forces, his military power was strictly limited. Each year, he said, Parliament must decide not whether the army should be disbanded, but whether it should be established anew. The famous jurist, William Blackstone, whose *Commentaries* appeared from 1765 to 1769, regarded the militia as the "constitutional security" of the nation. He asserted that the laws of England knew no such state as a perpetual standing army, and declared that peacetime troops were wholly dependent upon the annual judgment of Parliament. Blackstone regarded the navy as England's "greatest defence," as "an army from which however strong and powerful, no danger can ever be apprehended to liberty." James Burgh hoped that his *Political Disquisitions: Or, an Enquiry into Public Errors, Defects, and Abuses, etc.* (1774) would prove the point that a standing army in peacetime imperils liberty. He stated flatly that it is "one of the most hurtful and most dangerous of abuses." He followed Trenchard and Gordon in arguing that a free Parliament and a standing army were incompatible and declared that the corruption of Parliament could invalidate Article vi of the Bill of Rights. An army was always the "creature of the court," and every officer increased the influence of the king and his ministers. The proper security for a free island people was the navy and the militia, but the militia must be in the hands of men of property, otherwise "it is . . . but a mungrel army." Lamenting the enervating effects of luxury, Burgh declared that the possession of arms was the "distinction between a freeman and a slave." Contemporary historians David Hume and William Robertson had the gravest misgivings about paid troops and believed that despotic power in Europe flowed from their introduction. G. Dyer's *Four Letters on the English Constitution* (1789, 1812, 1817) drew heavily on the pamphlet literature of 1697-99.

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in an effort to persuade readers that Parliament must be reformed or a military government will result. By the end of the century, the view that a standing army was incompatible with freedom was so deeply imbedded in the national consciousness that Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote an important feminist tract, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, printed in 1792, used the analogy of soldiers in a standing army to illustrate the existing plight of women.24

In England, the antistanding army attitude which Trenchard, Fletcher, Molesworth, and Gordon had promulgated had some practical effect. Opposition politicians in Parliament were vigilant in their efforts to keep the size of the nation's regular forces small. Their annually reiterated warnings acted as a brake on the military plans of the government, and England remained militarily weak in comparison to other European states. Throughout the century, moreover, politicians and pamphleteers argued for militia reform. Tracts appeared which offered the old arguments, chastized the gentry for not taking on their responsibilities to lead and revitalize the militia, and asserted that the militia would allow the army to be drastically reduced, if not eliminated.25 Between 1745 and 1757, when threats from Spain, France, and the Young Pretender strained the nation's defenses, a serious attempt at reform of the militia was made. That effort and the arguments in Parliament and press have already been studied by J. R. Western, who concludes that the attempt was "the only serious political movement" in mid-eighteenth century England.26 Although the militia act of 1757 was the product of complicated international tensions, it also reflected the ongoing influence of the antistanding army ideology.

The antistanding army bias was transmitted to the American colonies in the eighteenth century, where it was enthusiastically received. There the sentiment became a basic assumption of almost every political leader. Contemporary scholars have shown that the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English libertarian tradition was the most important intellectual force shaping the thought of the Ameri-


25Two examples are: *An Essay for Regulating and Making More Useful the Militia* (London, 1701); *Observations upon the Subject-Matter Relating to the Militia and RecruIt-Bills* (London, 1711).

26Western, *The English Militia in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 125 and chapters 5 and 6 passim. An example of a tract is Charles Sackville, *A Treatise concerning the Militia in four sections* (London, 1735) which repeats the major themes of Trenchard's *Short History*. 

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can colonists. 27 For reasons peculiar to the American circumstance, this tradition had special relevancy. 28

From the early 1720s, the tracts that had put forward the radical Whig philosophy, which included the antiarmy sentiment, were circulating in America. Trenchard’s and Gordon’s Cato’s Letters, Bolingbroke’s The Craftsman and his Letters, and Trenchard’s An Argument, Shewing and A Short History of Standing Armies were read, along with many other classical, legal, and reformist tracts by Aristotle, Polybius, Machiavelli, Coke, Harrington, Neville, Sidney, Burnet, and Burgh. 29 In the middle of the eighteenth century, the radical tradition was designedly carried to the American colonies, largely through the efforts of Richard Baron and Thomas Hollis, both of whom sent many pamphlets and books to Harvard. 30 The holdings in university, public and private libraries reveal the popularity and availability of the works in the Whig canon. 31 The tracts from the 1697–99 controversy were included. A catalogue (dated 1817) of Hollis’s books to be sold contains such titles as “Army: 13 tracts relating to the army in the reign of William III,” “Trenchard’s A History of Standing Armies in England,” “Fletcher’s Political Works (1737 edition),” “Molesworth’s An Account of Denmark,” and “Rev. John’s Works (1710).” 32 Cato’s Letters were especially popular, being “quoted in every colonial newspaper from Boston to Savannah,” and exercising an “incalculable” influence in spreading ideas about government, liberty, and military authority. 33 They created what Bailyn calls a “Catonic” 34 view, one of

31Colbourn, The Lamp of Experience, appendix 2, for a useful list of the holdings in colonial college, public, and private libraries.
32Harvard University Library, A Catalogue of the Very Valuable and Highly Interesting United Libraries of Thomas Hollis and Thomas Brand Hollis. To be Sold by Auction by Mr. Samuel Sotheby on Tuesday, April 22, 1817, pp. 7, 22, 31, 35, 42, 62.
34Bailyn, Origins of American Politics, p. 54.
whose principle elements was a fear of standing armies in peacetime. In 1788, James Iredell could flatly assert, "Our jealousy of this danger [i.e., of a standing army in peacetime] has descended to us from our British ancestors."\(^35\)

These readings nourished an aversion to standing armies which was confirmed by experience and events. The appointment of military governors illustrated the warnings.\(^36\) Some colonists publicly expressed their indignation over the quartering of soldiers.\(^37\) The annual oration memorializing the Boston Massacre was aimed at preserving "in the Minds of the People a lively sense of the Danger of standing Armies."\(^38\) In 1773, the town of Boston testified that its citizens had not forgotten that lesson by declaring "standing armies have forever made shipwreck of free states" and by asserting that the militia was the natural and best defense. The letters, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and orations of American colonial figures including John Adams, Samuel Adams, John Dickinson, Elbridge Gerry, Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, and Josiah Quincy, Jr. reiterated the conviction that a standing army in peacetime was inimical to liberty, destructive of a mixed and balanced constitution, dangerous—no matter the restraints imposed on it—susceptible to corruption, and morally indefensible. All these men believed that the defense of the country should be in the hands of the militia.

This point of view had a practical political effect on the American colonies. The dislike of standing armies figured in the indictment of Great Britain. The Declaration of Independence complained that a standing army in peacetime had been kept up among the people, that troops had been quartered in the houses of unwilling civilians, and that an effort had been made to "render the military independent of and superior to the civil." The same ideas appeared in state constitutions, such as those for Virginia and Massachusetts. In Jefferson's several drafts of the Virginia constitution, it was explicitly provided that there should be no standing army except in time of actual war


and that no free man should be debarred the use of arms. 39 In *A Report of a Constitution or Form of Government for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, one article asserted that the “military power shall always be held in an exact subordination to the civil authority, and be governed by it.” 40 Members of the Continental Congress expressed reservations about giving the Congress the power to raise a peacetime army. In 1784, Samuel Osgood reported that there was “an inconquerable Aversion in many to any Thing that looks like a standing Army in Time of Peace.” 41 At the Constitutional Convention held in Philadelphia in 1787, Gerry argued against giving the Congress the power to raise and finance armies because he feared that peacetime forces were implied in that authority. He also opposed vesting in the Congress ultimate power over the states’ militias. 42 The erosion of the powers of the states as well as the traditional fear of a standing army in peacetime were part of his concern.

The federal Constitution attempted to limit the military authority of the executive. While making the president the commander-in-chief of the army and navy, the Constitution specified in Article I, section 8, that the Congress should have authority to raise and support armies, to call out the militia, to discipline the forces, and to declare war. It was also stated that no appropriation of money for maintaining an army shall be for more than two years. But for many men, these restrictions were not enough. 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. 43 Article 2 of the Bill of Rights was designed to achieve that end. It read, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed.” Gerry stressed that the intent was to prevent Congress from passing laws that would prohibit the states from keeping militias. In his view, the purpose of a militia was “to


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prevent the establishment of a standing army, the bane of liberty.”

It is worth noting that the original draft of the amendment included the idea that a person might be excused from military service because of religious scruples. The clause was dropped. Article 3 gave further protection to the individual, asserting that soldiers might not be quartered in private houses without the consent of the owner in peacetime and only as prescribed by law in war.

Concern about standing armies did not end with independence and the adoption of the federal Constitution. The opposition to peacetime forces took on a decided partisan coloration, with the Jeffersonian Republicans adopting the sentiment as their own. The Debates and Proceedings of the Congress of the United States (the Annals) reveal that in the 1790s familiar arguments about the dangers of a standing army and the value of a militia were advanced. Some occasions were in 1790 when Henry Knox, secretary of war, introduced his Militia Plan; in 1792 at the time of the Whiskey Rebellion; in January 1793 when there was a motion to reduce the nation's military establishment to 2,128 men; in the spring of 1794 when a crisis with Great Britain led to a series of proposals to increase the size of the army; and finally, in January and February 1797, when the Republicans introduced a motion to reduce the army. The justification which Knox offered for his Militia Plan reflected all the arguments Englishmen had crafted over the generations. Knox maintained that “an energetic national militia” was the best security for a free republic. Arguing that vice, laziness, and luxury made a standing army necessary, he declared, “It is when public spirit is despised, and avarice, indolence and effeminacy of manners predominate, . . . that a standing army is formed and riveted for ever.” Believing that the militia must not be composed of substitutes, he asserted that men of means have an obligation to serve. Refusal to participate in the militia should be grounds for denying a man the right to hold public office or receive public honor. A militia made up of all male citizens, serving on a rotating basis, would defend the nation, encourage love of country and obedience to laws, promote good health, and improve the national character.

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The American colonists, then, inherited a tradition which had been developed in seventeenth-century England. That tradition played a part in the indictment of Great Britain, in the Declaration of Independence, in the coming of the Revolution, and in the creation of a constitution with a Bill of Rights. At the end of the eighteenth century, it acted as a brake on the power of the executive. The fear lingered on. In 1812, the second Federalist president, John Adams, wrote, “The danger of our government is . . . that the army possess [sic] more power than Congress. The people should be apprised of this, and guard themselves against it. Nothing is more essential than to hold the civil authority decidedly superior to the military power.”

That warning can still be heard from some quarters today. To men concerned about current public policy respecting military power and the relationship between the executive and legislative branches of the American government, the seventeenth-century English tracts and parliamentary debates which articulated an antistanding army ideology are still relevant. With all their anachronistic and elitist prejudices, they could serve to remind readers that luxury and indolence enervates, that citizenship in a free society imposes obligations, that history has lessons which free men ignore at their peril, that military power, even with constitutional controls, is inherently menacing, and that there is a danger in entrusting the defense of any free state to professional soldiers or to a volunteer army.

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