The modern American citizen army as we know it was largely created in the years between the two world wars. The foundations for that structure were laid in the three decades before America’s participation in World War I. During that time, a new organizational structure based on a general-staff system was created that essentially transformed the army from what had been primarily an administrative organization into a tactical one while endowing it with centralized leadership. In addition, the military created schools providing various levels of professional education, fitting them into a hierarchical structure corresponding to the needs of an officer at various points in his career. More important, a new generation was taking over the army, officers who accepted the idea that successful leadership in war rested on an acquired professional education rather than on mere personal experience. And, finally, officers in leadership positions increasingly accepted the idea that building a new army could not take place as a series of random developments but needed to be an enterprise guided by a distinct military policy that enjoyed the support of the nation. In short, the earlier period provided many of the elements out of which the modern U.S. citizen army would be built.

Yet the modern American citizen army itself was actually assembled in the 1920s and 1930s, known as the interwar period. It began with the legislative ratification of a long-sought military policy in the National Defense Act of 1920. The act established the concept of a three-part military, with the professional Regular Army at its core, joined in times of emergency by one or both of two citizen components, the National Guard and the Organized Reserve Corps, and provided the basic blueprint for constructing that force. It organized the various professional schools into a single progressive system and carefully defined the jurisdiction of each element. The National Defense Act finished the transformation of the U.S. Army itself into a European-style mass army by completing the creation of the combat branches, which not only guided the further development of those parts of the army under their competence but also took over from the regiment the task of socializing new officers into the culture of military service. Finally, the army began the process of adapting itself to the opportunities
and challenges associated with the rapid industrialization of societies. In the interwar period this meant initiating the process of mechanizing firepower and movement. All of these—the citizen army with its three components, the progressive system of professional military education, the branch structure, and the creation of mechanized forces—remain the central features of the American army in the twenty-first century, were created between 1920 and 1939.

A modern army, even one that was as small as the U.S. Army in the interwar period, is a highly complex and multifaceted organization composed of a myriad of different units. Any effort to carry out an encyclopedic history that would chronicle the changes experienced in every element of the army, especially in the detail needed to understand how those changes took place, would end up so massively detailed that no common thread could be seen. Hence, I have restricted this study to examining the development of what I consider to have been the four major characteristics of the modern American army:

1. The creation of the citizen components of the new army.
2. The development of the branches as the structural basis for organizing the army as well as the creation of the means to educate new officers and soldiers about their craft and to socialize them into military culture.
3. The creation of a rationalized and progressive system of professional military education.
4. The initial mechanization of the combat branches.

In addition, the army’s development in this period was greatly influenced by its interaction with the government and with American society, so this interaction is discussed as well.

Although change is often best understood by means of a chronological narrative, treating developments in each of these areas together in a single narrative proved impossible. Hence, I have broken this study down into four chronological periods. The introduction covers the period from 1878 to 1920, during which time the primary issue was the creation of a nationally accepted military policy upon which a modern army could be built. That policy was finally established by the National Defense Act of 1920.

Part I then covers 1920–25, when the principal focus was on the creation of a new national army based on the defense act and the development of the civilian components of a citizen army that was the centerpiece of the policy established by the act. The army’s experience with this effort, along with its interaction with both the American government and with American society in this early period, was discouraging and disillusioning. This, together with the fact that the work of
creating the citizen components was largely complete by 1925, meant that during the next four years the army tended to direct its attention and efforts inward to building its own structure and culture. So, Part II, while continuing the story of the development of the citizen components as well as the army’s ongoing relationship with the government, is primarily concerned with the development of the army’s branch structure during the years and the development of its system of professional education. In doing this, I have focused only on the four main combat branches of the army—the infantry, the cavalry, the field artillery, and the coast artillery—since they best illustrate the changes being made and were the elements most involved with the development of the new citizen army and with mechanization. Chapter 6, devoted to the infantry, also illustrates the principal means by which branch structures as well as their culture and identity were developed in the 1920s. Chapters 7 and 8 then deal with the histories of the field artillery and the coast artillery, respectively, for the entire twenty-year period. While these branches, especially the coast artillery, underwent important changes in this period, neither was significantly involved with mechanization—the focus of the last section—so it seemed best to treat their stories all at once rather than arbitrarily divide them among the sections.

Part III concentrates on the army in the 1930s and its main concern of the interwar period—mechanization. Issues related to the further development of the citizen components are treated in chapter 10. The final two chapters are then devoted to the two branches most involved with mechanization, the infantry and especially the cavalry. Since the cavalry was most involved with mechanization and responded to it within the framework of its own long-term development, its entire story during the period is told in chapter 12.

This approach means that as a history of the army in this period, this work is scarcely encyclopedic. The stories of the development of the air service (later air corps), then part of the army; the development of the many support services such as the quartermaster corps or the transportation corps so vital to the success of any military operation; and the massive efforts behind the development of mobilization plans that consumed enormous blocks of the General Staff’s time and effort are not covered. Fortunately, these aspects of the army’s history in this period have been examined elsewhere. Also, this story involves only the experience of officers, especially those in top leadership positions. The U.S. Army was a top-down organization, with the basic changes being the result of decisions coming from its senior leadership. Lower-ranking officers then carried out these decisions. The experience of enlisted men and, especially, noncommissioned officers is a story that has not been told and should be, no matter how challenging
it would be to construct. But, as important as all these topics are, they had little
to do with the four-part development of the army. The aviators in the air service/
corps were focused on establishing the autonomy of their arm as a means of
carrying on strategic warfare based on long-range bombing rather than acting as
tactical air support for other elements of the army, so they rarely interacted with
the soldiers in the ground forces. One notices the virtual absence of any discus-
sion of the air service/corps in the branch-oriented professional military journals
of that period. The various service bureaus also had their own stories of change,
but theirs are not particularly related to the issues that are central here. With
those caveats in mind, it is my hope that this volume will provide a look at how
the modern American citizen army was created and how it established itself in
a period of almost revolutionary proportions in the ways wars would be fought.

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