Conclusion

During a conference session in 1994 regarding the National Defense Act of 1920, one historian offered the opinion that the act was a project based on an almost stunning naïveté. In many ways he was right. Both the 1916 and the 1920 defense acts came at a highly unusual time in American history. In the years immediately prior to World War I and for a very short time afterwards, the rapidly growing popularity of universal military training as an act of positive progressive social engineering, together with the near-panic of the preparedness movement, gave the army a golden moment when it could get congressional approval of a military policy at least somewhat along the lines it desired. It was, however, a very short-lived moment. Indeed, the window was already rapidly closing just as the National Defense Act of 1920 was finally legislatively approved and signed. Nevertheless, provisions that the army had managed to have included in the act indicate that its leadership may have mistakenly seen this temporary euphoria as a “new normal.” Three major assumptions along this line seem implicit both in the act and in the army’s actions afterward. First, it was apparently assumed that the nation would embrace and support the citizen army enthusiastically. The importance given in the early 1920s to ensure that its units were spread throughout the country suggests an expectation that they would be popular. Also, the sudden spurt of articles in service journals later blaming its lack of popularity on various subversive or pacifist agencies implies this same expectation. Second, the provisions for the CMTC in the act indicate that it was felt that the nation’s young men would generally come to like military training. Third, the provisions for the Organized Reserve seem to have been based on the belief that a large number of more mature men would find military activity so attractive that they would be willing to dedicate a significant portion of their leisure to a rigorous self-training program to make themselves nearly as proficient as their professional colleagues in the Regular Army.

Within a few years, each of these three basic assumptions was shown to be illusory, leading to such discouragement that, during the budget crisis of 1925, the General Staff gave serious consideration to abandoning the citizen army. Nevertheless, the leaders at that time and afterward chose to continue to develop the program to the extent that allocated resources would allow, even in the face
of public and government antipathy. By 1939, they had much to show for their efforts. Despite setbacks, the need to scale down unrealistic expectations, and ever diminishing budget allocations, especially in the early 1930s, the citizen components of the Army of the United States were organized and gradually grew while gaining in competence and stability. The combat branch organizations were also organized, and each became increasingly successful in terms of socializing and training its officers, in creating a common branch culture, and in developing agencies to promote a modernization of weapons and equipment. Finally, the new army school system provided a rationally organized program of progressive military education to guide officers through their careers and to promote homogeneity in thought as well as adherence to a common doctrine. That all of this was accomplished despite extremely limited support and resources within a society that had become increasingly antipathetic was a truly impressive achievement.

Still, the citizen army created by the 1920 National Defense Act was significantly flawed, as has been noted by its critics. The most frequent fault cited both during the interwar period and since then was the conservative character of the Regular Army. While William Odom has analyzed what he identifies as doctrinal stagnation in the period, David Johnson has focused on the systemic features of the interwar army that hindered technological development, especially regarding tanks. While there is no need to restate all their arguments. In brief, both claim that the army placed a higher priority on maintaining the maximum possible number of officers that appropriations would allow, at the cost of limiting funds for technological development. Since the main reason the army needed as many officers as possible was to support the training of the citizen components, they argue that the more limited degree of technological innovation, especially in the 1930s, was due in part to the commitment to the citizen components. To some extent, this is true, although Johnson tends to overlook the frantic efforts made by the chiefs of infantry and the cavalry to get tanks. Yet it is also true that mechanization was very expensive, and given the extremely limited funds appropriated for the army in the 1930s, it is hard to see how the relatively meager savings that might have been made available by abandoning the training of the citizen components would have made any significant difference with the mechanization program. To have tried to keep pace with advances of the major European powers would likely have called for vastly greater appropriations than Congress, the president, and the American people would have been willing to make.

Another problem with the citizen army was its cost in terms of the Regular Army’s own training. During the summers, the best time of the year for outdoor training, every available regular officer was involved in training the civilian
components. Moreover, the summer training program was exhausting. Finally, in order to save as many officer slots as possible to provide for guard and reserve training, officials decided early in the 1920s to carry out the personnel reductions required by smaller budgets by radically skeletonizing existing units rather than eliminating some of them. This all but eliminated opportunities for training of any but small units. The army was not able to hold major training maneuvers until the summer of 1939. That August, two sets of maneuvers were held, one in Manassas, Virginia, and the other in Plattsburgh, New York. Both demonstrated a surprising lack of readiness on the part of the Regular Army and, especially, the National Guard. Hanson Baldwin, military correspondent for the New York Times, wrote a highly critical report of the maneuvers, pointing out numerous deficiencies, including the fact that more than half of the participating men had never fired their weapons in any type of combat training. An article that appeared later in the Baltimore Sun quoted the opinion of unnamed army sources that the military was less prepared for war than it had been in 1917.

Finally, all during the interwar period, it was reasonably clear that the citizen components were not receiving the training necessary to be able to carry out their assigned functions should war occur. This was especially true for the Organized Reserve. According to the Six-Army Plan, the Reserve was responsible for training selective-service inductees in twenty-seven divisions during a mobilization. Yet in 1939 only 100,000 reserve officers were available to do this, which was far too few for that purpose. Moreover, the reservists were essentially self-trained by completing correspondence courses. As regular officers who worked with them pointed out, correspondence courses cannot teach leadership. A relatively few reserve officers were able to attend the two-week summer camps, but only a portion of this meager experience had anything to do with carrying out training related to mobilization. Many individual reserve officers did derive some benefit from their leadership roles in summer CMTCs and later with CCC camps, but their units did not. Although reserve officers were assigned to locally organized units that could meet and might even have a small office, training as a unit did not occur. Outside of the “Defense Test” of 1924, which was ostensibly meant to test the ability to carry out the mobilization plans but had far more to do with public relations, the army carried out no mobilization exercises. Fortunately, the actual mobilization that began after the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, was carried out slowly, keeping deliberate pace with public opinion, and was carried out by the Regular Army. As a result, the original plan for the ORC to carry out the mobilization role assigned to it was never implemented.
Yet these deficiencies were only partly due to flaws in the reserve system. The main problem with this system in the interwar period was that it was seriously lacking in support from the government and the Regular Army, both in terms of finances and personnel. Palmer and others were naïve in their expectation that a large body of civilian men would take such a keen interest in military activity that they would willingly invest significant portions of their leisure time in a self-training program to make themselves competent officers in the event of war. This was especially true in the 1930s, when the world war veterans in the Reserve were increasingly replaced by graduates of ROTC programs, young men who had not had any wartime experience to motivate interest in serving in the Reserve. In addition, most reserve officers found self-training through correspondence courses time consuming and uninteresting. To stimulate their interest in remaining in the program and actively pursue their training, reserve officers needed far more opportunities for interaction with regular officers and with each other in order to feel part of a real program achieving recognizable results. The early controversy over dedicated office space with military accoutrements, the creation of the ROA, and the enthusiasm with which reserve officers participated in the CMTCs and, later, supported the CCC program repeatedly demonstrated this. The army, however, had nowhere near the number of officers nor was it given the budgetary resources to supply this kind of support. On the other hand, the program did provide around 100,000 reserve officers in 1939 who, while clearly nowhere near as competent as their counterparts in the Regular Army, still aided the military considerably in mobilizing and training the forces being raised in this period, a fact recognized repeatedly by the wartime chief of staff, General George Marshall.4

Compared to the ORC, the National Guard appeared to have been somewhat better prepared for war, though it, too, had serious deficiencies. According to the Six-Army Plan, on mobilization the Guard was to provide eighteen combat-ready divisions in thirty days. The National Defense Act allowed it an enrollment of 424,800 to meet this goal. Soon, however, in the social environment of 1920s America, raising the Guard to that level through voluntary enlistments was not possible nor would the army’s consistently diminished annual budgets support it. Therefore, for most of the interwar period, the strength of the Guard was less than 200,000 men. This number was then increased in the late 1930s so that by the time of Roosevelt’s piecemeal mobilization, it had reached 280,000 guardsmen. On August 27, 1940, Congress authorized the mobilization of the Guard units, which began to be called up from time to time for a years’ service. By June 1941, the entire Guard had been mobilized. On December 31, 1941, the call-up
was extended for the duration of the war plus six months. Three months later eighteen of the twenty-nine divisions mobilized in the U.S. Army by that time had come from the National Guard.\footnote{1}

Yet while the Guard had met the quotas set by the Six-Army Plan, the mobilization exposed major deficiencies in its training. Senior regular officers, such as Lieutenant General Leslie McNair, who, as chief of staff for General Headquarters, U.S. Army was responsible for mobilization and training, were openly contemptuous of the Guard. Critics of its performance in the Manassas and Plattsburg maneuvers directed the bulk of their reproach at its officers.\footnote{2} Finally, after a major set of maneuvers in Louisiana in the fall of 1941, McNair undertook a massive purge of senior officers, which fell hardest on the Guard and the Reserve. His major complaint was the “comparatively low training ceiling of the officers which left them unable to maintain discipline.”\footnote{3} Some of this antipathy may have reflected remnants of earlier prejudices against the Guard held by older regular officers. The charge that guard officers were unable to maintain discipline reflected a longstanding belief on the part of regulars that the local recruitment of these units meant that officers and men knew each other, leaving officers less able to treat their men with rigorous authority. Richard Faulkner notes that this attitude was quite observable among regular officers during World War I.\footnote{4} But McNair’s opinion was also shared by Hanson Baldwin, the highly respected military reporter, who had observed the maneuvers.\footnote{5} So there was a major deficiency in the training of National Guard officers that was clearly manifested in the maneuvers and elsewhere.

But, as the performance of the guard divisions in the ensuing war demonstrated, these deficiencies were not due so much to the nature of the Guard as an organization as they were to the conditions under which it was developed during the interwar period. As was the case with the Organized Reserve, Palmer and others basically saw the Guard as a citizen component that would largely train itself. While the Regular Army was committed to assist both the Guard and the Reserve in their training, the drastic personnel reductions in the opening years of the 1920s and the subsequent budget reductions severely curtailed its ability to do so. As many observers pointed out, all this put a heavy burden on guard officers, who had to plan and execute the training programs for their own units and complete the correspondence courses needed for their advancement, leaving little time for their own training. Nor did the army’s limited budget allow guard officers much opportunity for the kind of field exercises and maneuvers that would have given them both practical experience and training in leadership. The result was the brutal crash course in leadership training during the mobilization of 1939–41 that many in the Guard failed to survive.
Conclusion

Early in June 2020 my wife and I had a special private dinner in our apartment graced by one of the best bottles in my small cellar. It was June 4, and we were celebrating the 100th anniversary of the passage of the National Defense Act of 1920. It is quite possible that our dinner may have been the only observance of that centennial anniversary held in the country. If so, that is too bad, since even though that act has been followed by many more defense acts, the basic organization of the army it created has remained largely unchanged. The army is still a citizen military that includes the Regular Army and the three main civilian components—the National Guard, the Officer Reserve Corps, and the Reserve Officers Training Corps—that were given their formal place in the overall structure by the 1920 National Defense Act. The act also formalized the branch structure of the Regular Army. While the branches play less of a role in the organization of the army now than they did in the interwar period, they still very much exist and remain critical in orienting and socializing new officers into the army. Indeed, most officers will spend their entire careers within their branch. And while many new schools have been developed, the basic educational program set up in the 1920s under the act is still operating.

Moreover, the two-year period following the end of World War I was the first and only moment since the writing of the Constitution that the nation actually had the opportunity to choose the type of military organization responsible for providing its security. Two very different options were clearly available. One, the March-Baker plan, would have given that responsibility to an entirely professional Regular Army, which would be augmented in time of major emergency using a draft. The other option was the citizen army proposed by Palmer and the reformers in the General Staff. Brian Linn states this dichotomy succinctly, observing that the issue “was [would] the U.S. Army . . . be a small, highly trained, technologically sophisticated mobile elite or would it serve as the cadre for a large mass army such as the American Expeditionary Force in World War I.”

From a strictly military point of view, the March-Baker plan may have been the superior policy. But Congress and the nation chose the citizen army, doing so because, regardless of its drawbacks, it was based on the nation’s traditions and values. As Palmer warned in the Report on the Organization of the Land Forces in 1912, “The practical military statesman . . . does not propose impracticable or foreign institutions but seeks to develop the necessary vigor and energy within the familiar institutions that have grown with the national life.”

During the first five years of the 1920s, the Regular Army worked diligently to make a success of the new citizen army, but with discouraging results. The United States had not embraced the new citizen army as its own, as the skepticism
toward the military that had long been part of the American tradition returned. At the same time, the efforts to create the citizen components were discouragingly less than successful to the point that leaders in 1925 were questioning whether to give up on the project. Moreover, alternatives to the citizen army soon began to look more attractive. The first of these was the cavalry’s effort to remake the First Cavalry Division into a new force that could be the arm of decision on the battlefield by restoring mobility to warfare. This was followed by the introduction of the fast tank and, with it, the idea of a mechanized force that could carry out a new form of ground warfare that would replace the bloody and senseless attrition of the western front with open-war maneuvering and replace the mass armies of the world war with small, mobile, professional armies possessing highly sophisticated arms. The subsequent experiments with the mechanized force raised enthusiasm among some officers in part because it seemed to make the return of maneuver to warfare a real possibility. This vision, and its accompanying enthusiasms, did not die with General MacArthur’s disbanding of the mechanized force before it was even established. The cavalry under Generals Henry and Kromer continued in the effort to create a mechanized cavalry force that would act as an arm of decision that would restore movement to warfare. At the same time, the General Staff revived the idea of the mechanized force and finally adopted it in 1940 with the creation of the Armored Force.

The dream then seemed to have been realized in 1939 and 1940, as the spectacular initial successes of Germany’s panzer forces appeared to prove that highly armored and mobile forces based on combined arms could restore movement and maneuver to warfare. But the development of antitank weapons soon erased the momentary offensive advantage of tanks. By 1943, even in the vast plains of Russia, warfare had again become a slugging match, and the armored division that was supposed to open up the battlefield was largely relegated to the role of exploiting breakthroughs created by the infantry. The American army that fought World War II was clearly a citizen army whose leadership was largely trained within the framework of the institutions created by the National Defense Act of 1920. The way it fought that war may have been less decisive and more costly in terms of lives and treasures than it should have been. But that army won the conflict and thereby validated the citizen army as the American way of war.