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## **America's Anti-Militarist Tradition**

**by Sheldon Richman**

The right wing went apoplectic at the skepticism that greeted Gen. David Petraeus's recent testimony about the alleged success of the military escalation in Iraq. It was as though a member of the military was incapable of engaging in spin to support his commander in chief's war policy. President Bush summed up this attitude revealingly when he said it was one thing to attack him, but quite another to question General Petraeus. War, Clausewitz noted, is politics by other means. That makes high-ranking generals a species of politician. Not a few have harbored presidential thoughts, and some have made it. It is said that Petraeus would like to be another. These are the people the pro-war conservatives are willing to trust implicitly? (Anti-war members of the armed forces, on the other hand, are, in Rush Limbaugh's words, "phony soldiers.")

It is unappreciated today that an earlier American culture was anti-militarist. In his classic study *The Civilian and the Military: A History of the American Antimilitarist Tradition* (1956), historian Arthur A. Ekirch Jr. wrote, "The tradition of antimilitarism has been an important factor in the shaping of some two hundred years of American history." This tradition, Ekirch notes, stretched back to England, where until the seventeenth century the militia, not a standing army, provided defense and was unsuited to aggressive war.

This attitude was carried to the New World, where "subordination of military to civil power became the cardinal principle it was in England."

Anti-militarism colored much political thinking as the new country took shape. The Pennsylvania constitution declared a peacetime standing army a "danger to liberty [and] ought not to be kept up." All state constitutions contained language subordinating military to civil authority. The Declaration of Independence criticized the standing army and military independence. The Articles of Confederation, America's first constitution, withheld from Congress the power to create a peacetime army (although attempts to expressly forbid its creation were unsuccessful in the rush to submit the Articles to the states for approval).

The Revolutionary War itself did not change the American attitude in a pro-military direction; Ekirch reported that states had trouble getting the required number of

militiamen. When conscription was resorted to, it was not well received. Those who did don the uniform hardly exhibited the martial spirit.

After the Revolution, the conservative aristocracy that had emerged during the Colonial period wanted a strong central state with a powerful army. But the radical liberals of the day wanted a decentralized power structure and a militia. A standing army was anathema — its potential for domestic oppression was too well known. “The idea of any sort of a regular army in peacetime at once met with strong opposition in Congress,” Ekirch wrote. James Monroe and Richard Henry Lee warned of the danger to liberty, and Benjamin Franklin worried that a soldier’s training made him accepting of war.

At the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the suspicion of the military led to the separation of the power of the commander in chief from the power to declare and finance war. (This has proven to be a weak protection against executive warmaking.) It was said of Convention delegate George Mason, “He was for clogging rather than facilitating war; but for facilitating peace.”

Although James Madison was a leader of the centralists, he warned, “A standing military force, with an overgrown Executive, will not long be safe companions to liberty.”

The anti-militarists won only partial victories in the Convention, among them subordination of the military to the civilian authority. During the debates over the proposed Constitution, some of the writers known as Anti-Federalists railed against the standing army. “Centinel” proclaimed it “that grand engine of oppression.”

The upshot is that the conservative fawning over the military displays an attitude that would have infuriated those first generations of Americans who actually built this country.

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