



Bullet'n Backstory

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Commemorating the 250th Birthday of the U.S. Army

To Arm or Not to Arm: The Early National Period (1783-1800)

The Treaty of Paris (1783) brought a formal conclusion to the American Revolutionary War. The immediate need for a standing army ended, leading the Continental Congress to slowly draw down. Plans for the reduction of the Army, as well as post war plans for national defense, came from a committee chaired by Alexander Hamilton. At the request of this committee, George Washington met with several of his officers to discuss options for a peacetime force. Washington submitted their collective views to Congress in an official Army report called "Sentiments on a Peace Establishment."

The Army plan focused on four elements: a small, 2600-man standing Army - separated into four infantry regiments and one artillery regiment - to be used for defense in the western frontier and on the borders of Canada and Spanish Florida; trained militia, to be used on a temporary basis at the start of a conflict, pending the expansion of the regular Army; construction of a series of arsenals, to store arms in support of future readiness; and establishment of a military academy, to provide training for officers. In October 1783, Congress rejected Washington's plan.

Members of Congress offered a counterproposal in April 1784, which called for three infantry battalions and one artillery battalion, totaling just 900 men. Disputes between individual states led Congress to reject this proposal as well. It was not until June 1784 that a workable solution was reached. Congress discharged all soldiers, with the exception of a few infantry at Fort Pitt (25 men) and the artillery battery at West Point (55 men). Then Congress instituted a new plan calling for the Secretary of War to form one regiment, with eight infantry and two artillery companies, with 700 men raised by four states. Pennsylvania was responsible for providing 260 men and a senior officer, who would hold the rank of lieutenant colonel. New York and Connecticut would each raise 165 men with majors to lead them. New Jersey would provide 110 soldiers.

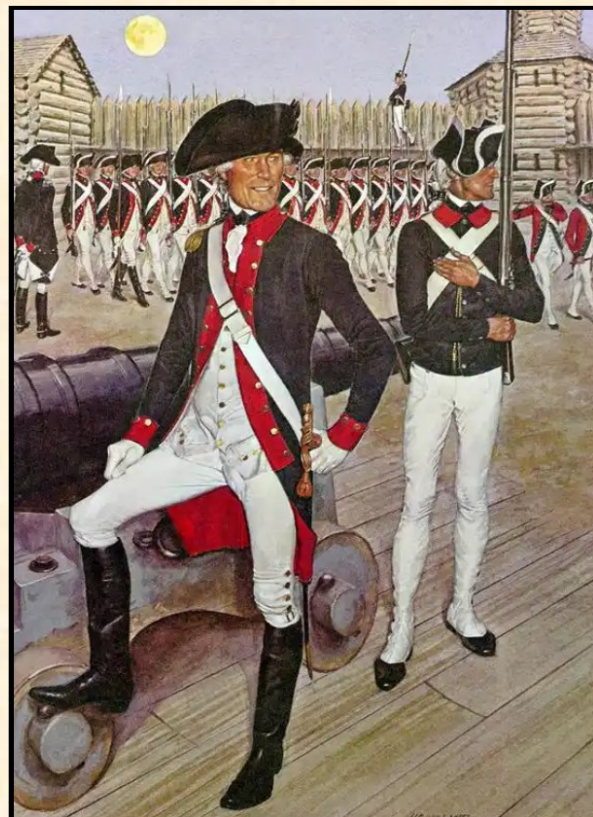
The resulting force under the new system was the 1st American Regiment, which stood up on Aug. 12, 1784. Meanwhile, the battery at West Point became the 2nd Continental Artillery Regiment, with Brev. Maj. Jon Doughty retaining command. For command of the 1st American Regiment, Pennsylvania chose Lt. Col. Josiah Harmar. He would serve as the senior officer of the U.S. Army until 1791. Harmar immediately instituted a rigorous Prussian-style training regimen. By early September, Harmar reported his methods were starting to bear fruit. Soon afterward, the regiment was sent to Fort Pitt, where they would be in charge of making the Northwest safe for settlement. Upon arriving at Fort Pitt, Harmar was unimpressed by the state of the remaining soldiers and the living conditions there. In response, he moved the regiment to Fort McIntosh near Beaver, Pennsylvania.

At Fort McIntosh, Harmar reportedly indulged greatly in food and overindulged in alcohol. Yet, he worked to maintain good relations with local Native American tribes. In January 1785, he negotiated the Treaty of Fort McIntosh, which set aside a large northwestern portion of the Ohio country as a reservation for members of the Wyandotte, Delaware, Chippewa and Ottawa nations, though others - most notably the Shawnee - did not accept its terms. Following the Treaty of Fort McIntosh, Harmar ordered the construction of a new fort near present-day Marietta, Ohio. This became Fort Harmar. Unrest over the treaty led to the eruption in 1785 of the Northwest Indian War. In 1786, the Secretary of War Henry Knox ordered Harmar to Vincennes, Indiana, to put down unrest. The village was already occupied by a unit of Kentucky militia, but they had turned to rioting and debauchery. Harmar marched on Vincennes, at which point the Kentucky men fled. Harmar left 100 men there under the command of Maj. Jean François Hamtramck with instructions to build a new fort, which Harmar would name Fort Knox, after the Secretary of War.

On Sept. 29, 1789, the Army was reconstituted under the provisions of the U.S. Constitution. Accordingly, the 1st American Regiment was renamed the Regiment of Infantry. In October 1790, Harmar, now a Brigadier General, led a force of 320 regulars and 1,000 militia against resisting Native tribes in Ohio. A series of significant Native victories, collectively known as Harmar's Defeat, resulted in nearly 368 American casualties, at that time the worst loss by American troops to Native forces in history. Harmar was subsequently court-martialed for negligence and - despite being exonerated - was removed from his senior position. This change prompted Congress to again reorganize the force into the U.S. Army, with two co-equal infantry regiments commanded by Maj. Gen. Arthur St. Clair: the 1st Infantry Regiment under Harmar, and the 1st American Regiment under Hamtramck.



George Washington
Rembrandt Peale (1850)



Uniform of the First American Regiment

This Month in Military History

Feb. 1, 1904: Secretary of War Elihu Root resigns from the cabinet of President Theodore Roosevelt. He is succeeded by William Howard Taft, who will lead the Department of War until he runs for president in 1908.

Feb. 4, 1194: England pays 100,000 pounds of silver to Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI to secure the release of King Richard I "Lionheart", who has been the emperor's prisoner since December 1192.

Feb. 7, 1783: After three years and seven months, France and Spain end the siege of British-held Gibraltar they had maintained in support of the American War for Independence.

Feb. 10, 1676: As an element of King Philip's War (1675-1676), a force of 1,500 warriors from the Wampanoag, Nipmuc, and Narragansett tribes pillages the town of Lancaster, Massachusetts, killing dozens of settlers.

Feb. 13, 1258: Mongols under Hulegu Khan capture the Abbasid capital of Baghdad, killing at least 200,000 of its one million residents, ending both the Abbasid Dynasty and the Islamic Golden Age.

Feb. 16, 1646: A force of 10,000 Parliamentarians decisively defeat 5,000 Royalists at the Battle of Torrington (Devon), ending the last significant military support for Charles I in the English Civil War.

Feb 19, 1807: Former Vice President Aaron Burr is arrested for treason in Alabama, in response to a warrant issued by President Thomas Jefferson. His trial begins on August 3 and ends with acquittal on September 1 when Chief Justice John Marshall ruled there was no evidence.

Feb. 22, 1797: France lands an invasion force of 1,400 soldiers under Irish American Col. William Tate at Goodwick Sands, near Fishguard, in Wales. As part of the conflict between Revolutionary France and the reigning monarchies of Europe, France hoped to force England to a settlement. Tate would surrender two days later. This is the last time mainland Britain was invaded by foreign troops.

Feb. 25, 1570: Pope Pius V excommunicates Queen Elizabeth I for her treatment of Catholics in England, prompting numerous failed Catholic plots aimed at overthrowing Elizabeth in favor of Mary, Queen of Scots.

Feb. 28, 1915: As part of the First Battle of Champagne, the French Fourth Army temporarily pushes the German 3rd Army back, gaining a few hundred yards of territory. All told, in February, the French suffer at least 100,000 casualties, compared to 46,000 on the German side.



The Treaty of Greenville - unknown (ca.1795)

St. Clair's defeat at the Battle of the Wabash (November 1791) changed the minds of many in Congress. U.S. officials now saw the need for a well trained standing army. In June 1792, the U.S. Army was redesignated the Legion of the United States, under the command of Maj. Gen. Anthony Wayne. Between June and November, the Legion assembled at Fort Lafayette, Pennsylvania, from which they set out in December for a training camp near Fort McIntosh, called Legionville. In September 1793, the Legion moved to a camp near Fort Washington, Ohio. With the help of units of the Kentucky militia, the Legion moved against the Native forces of the Northwest Confederacy. Under Wayne, the Legion achieved victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers (August 1794) and forced the signing of the Treaty of Greenville (1795), thus bringing an end to the Northwest Indian War after 10 long years. He also built Fort Recovery, on the site of St. Clair's biggest defeat, and established Fort Miami, Fort Defiance, and Fort Wayne. In October 1796, the Legion was again designated the U.S. Army. Wayne died two months later and was replaced as Commander-in-Chief of the Army by his chief rival, Brig. Gen. James Wilkinson, former commandant at Fort Washington.

In 1793, Congress had halted the repayment of loans France had provided to support the American Revolution. Congress followed then signed the Jay Treaty in 1794, strengthening diplomatic ties between the United States and Britain. France felt betrayed by these acts and retaliated by seizing American ships and encouraging privateers to attack American merchant vessels. This prompted Congress to prepare for war. In 1798, Congress created the United States Navy, to protect American merchants from attack. Hedging against the possibility of a land war, President John Adams also authorized the creation of a Provisional Army of 10,000 men. The next two years found the United States skirmishing with French ships in undeclared conflict called the Quasi-War. France got the worst of the naval hostilities and privateer activity was greatly reduced. In September 1800, the two nations signed the Treaty of Mortefontaine, with France acknowledging the neutrality of American ships. As for the Provisional Army, no recruiting was done before the authorization expired in 1800, at which point its empty units were formally disbanded.

JMC Historical Document Collection

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