

*Remember officers and Soldiers, that you are Freemen, fighting for the blessings of Liberty—that slavery will be your portion, and that of your posterity, if you do not acquit yourselves like men.*

George Washington, General Orders, New York,  
August 23, 1776

*In a Word, the next will be a trying Campaign and as All that is dear and valuable may depend upon the issue of it, I would advise that nothing should be omitted that shall seem necessary to our success. Let us have a respectable Army, and such as will be competent to every Exigency.*

George Washington, to the President of the Continental  
Congress, Headquarters at Keiths, Pennsylvania,  
December 16, 1776

*We therefore still kept upon the parade in groups, venting our spleen at our country and government, then at our officers, and then at ourselves for our imbecility in staying there and starving in detail for an ungrateful people who did not care what became of us, so they could enjoy themselves while we were keeping a cruel enemy from them.*

Private Joseph Plumb Martin of the Continental Army,  
reflecting back on 1780

# Of Lexington and Concord, and the Myths of the War, 1763–1775

## Lexington and Concord

At dawn on April 19, 1775, a select force of 700 British regulars under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith approached the outer edges of Lexington, Massachusetts. The column had set out from Boston the night before under instructions from Thomas Gage, the commander in chief of British military forces in North America as well as the new royal governor of the Bay Colony. Gage had ordered the column to capture and destroy patriot military stores at Concord, another six miles beyond Lexington. The redcoat operation was to have been secret, but many officers in Boston talked unguardedly about the details. Patriot alarm riders had alerted the countryside. As Smith's advance units under Major John Pitcairn marched into Lexington, they saw some 70 minutemen assembling on the Green. Captain John Parker, the minuteman leader, was no fool. Completely outnumbered, his intention that fateful morning was not to provoke a fight with the British regulars but to demonstrate whig resolve—to state through the presence of his small

*"A Respectable Army": The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763–1789*, Third Edition.  
James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender.  
© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

militia force that troops of the King's standing army had no legal right in time of peace to trample on the property of freeborn English subjects.

Acting thus as an army of observation, Parker and his troops intended to leave the field once they had made their symbolic martial protest. Witnesses agreed that a British officer rode forward and ordered the minutemen to disperse. Then, as the defiant patriots began to move aside, a shot rang out. No one knows who fired first, but before the smoke cleared and Pitcairn had restored order, eight colonists lay dead or dying with another 10 wounded. Some had been shot or bayoneted to death in their backs. That the redcoats had lost control of themselves chagrined Pitcairn, but he could not turn back the clock. Perhaps he comprehended the grave reality that a civil war that would have profound short- and long-term consequences throughout the western world had just begun.

Within minutes, the redcoats moved on toward Concord, their intended target. There they started to burn or toss into the village pond whatever military stores the patriots had failed to remove. Meanwhile, news of the bloodshed at Lexington swept far and fast. Militiamen began moving toward Concord. Half a mile from town, across the North Bridge, one group of armed freeholders, seeing the rising smoke and fearing that Concord was being put to the torch, pressed forward. The time was 8:30 A.M. Fighting flared between the advancing militia and a British light infantry company guarding the bridge. The outnumbered regulars soon retreated, leaving behind three dead comrades; another eight in their unit had received wounds. Blood now had been spilled on both sides.

Lieutenant Colonel Smith, a portly gentleman not known for quick decisions, slowly realized that his units were in a precarious position. Partisan colonials were gathering on all sides. After some vacillation, Smith ordered his troops to pull out. Citizen-soldiers raked the retreating royal column from behind trees, stone fences, and any other available cover. "We were fired on from all sides," explained a dispirited British lieutenant. He and his comrades could not counter the sniping because the patriots "were so concealed there was hardly any seeing them." Such

action went on all the way back to Lexington, with American “numbers increasing from all parts, while ours was reducing by deaths, wounds, and fatigue; and we were totally surrounded with such an incessant fire as it’s impossible to conceive.”

At Lexington, Smith’s beleaguered redcoats linked up with a relief column. General Gage, suspecting the worst, had sent out Hugh, Lord Percy, with another 1,100 regulars. Even with these reinforcements and flanking parties challenging the Minutemen, the British continued to suffer heavily as they retreated from Lexington to Charlestown and Bunker Hill, which they reached at sundown. Of the 1,800 British regulars engaged in combat that day, 273 were killed, wounded, or missing. Counting the Lexington slain, the provincials had lost 95. What had begun as a sortie to destroy supplies had become a full-scale military confrontation, and the British regulars had fared poorly in comparison to the armed American amateurs who stood up in defense of family and property.

The battles of Lexington and Concord set in motion a civil war that would last for eight years, until 1783. Along with other events that soon followed, the martial clash on April 19, 1775, also has served to give credence to an enduring historical mythology about the Revolutionary era. Down to our own time, this mythology has dominated the conceptions that Americans hold about their national origins and their nation as an agency of peace in a sordid, warlike world.

Drawing lifeblood from the battles of Lexington and Concord, the dominant strands in the mythology about the War for Independence may be stated as follows: 1) that provincial Americans were reluctantly forced into war by their overbearing, if not tyrannical parent nation, Great Britain; 2) that the determined colonists willingly displayed public virtue and stouthearted commitment, rushing into combat as citizen-soldiers and steadfastly bearing arms through eight long years of military conflict; and 3) that, united as one family in the cause, they overcame the enemy after hundreds of battles, large and small, thereby assuring through their virtuous behavior that a republican political order would flourish and endure in post-Revolutionary America.

As with any national mythology, some truth (perhaps better stated as accurate observation) may be found in each of these strands. Otherwise, the mythology would have long since been dismissed as literary or patriotic conceit, worthy of study because of metaphorical form and symbolic effect but not because of factual substance. Just enough plausibility exists in these strands to make them believable—up to a limited point. Then they begin to fray and unravel.

One purpose of this volume is to separate popular mythology, aspects of which professional historians have too often enshrined in their writings, from the new historical reality that continues to come to light about the era of the American Revolution, of which the War for Independence was an integral part. Another purpose is to present a synthesis of the fragments of this new reality. As such, this study investigates how the experience of the war affected the establishment of republican values and institutions in Revolutionary America. Many historians have approached the war as an exclusive “guns-and-battles” phenomenon, not linking the conflict in any way to the larger currents of nation-making. The actual experience of the war, however, with all its hope, idealism, conflict, and dissension, was central to the process of constructing a specific form of well-ordered republicanism, as ultimately expressed in the Constitution of 1787. This examination of the historical evidence proposes that the military origins of American republic in the years 1763–89 should not only be evaluated but also given their rightful place in more completely constructing the history of the American Revolution.

The story must begin with Lexington and Concord because the salient features of the opening clash lent persuasive form to the deeply entrenched mythology. These qualities may be summarized by pointing out that the British army ostensibly invaded a peaceful countryside, thereby provoking the initial provincial response. The British force consisted of well-trained and disciplined *regulars*, representing a textbook *standing army* acting without provocation in time of peace. In turn, swarms of freedom-loving citizens beat back the regulars by using irregular tactics. *Citizen-soldiers* organized as militia found themselves in

the position of fighting defensively to protect their liberties and property. Thus the beginning of the war fit neatly into the radical whig ideological mood of the era. For the colonists, the presence of Britain's standing army symbolized the abuse of power. The citizen-soldiers of Massachusetts personified virtuous protectors of liberty.

What commentators, among them some historians, have not appreciated is that the Lexington and Concord paradigm came apart quite early. By fitting this model into the whole of the Revolutionary War, they have skewed their interpretations about the nature of the conflict that followed, including such central issues as the depth and tenacity of patriot commitment, the actual nature of the American military effort, the matter of who actually accepted the burdens of combat, and the effect of the military confrontation in establishing a sense of national legitimacy, nationhood, and republicanism. To move forward from mythology, this study must begin with the ideological roots of the American rebellion that did reflect the experience of Lexington and Concord.

## **Of Standing Armies (Power) and Militia (Liberty)**

An understanding of the ideological framework that helped structure the world view of eighteenth-century American colonists is of prime importance in reconciling treasured myth with historical reality. A key underlying assumption was that of an ongoing struggle between power and liberty, based on the view that human beings naturally lusted after power and would resort to any form of corruption to satisfy their petty, self-serving objectives. Historian Bernard Bailyn, in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, has pointed out that Americans, as inheritors of England's radical whig opposition tradition, believed that power "meant the dominion of some men over others, the human control of human life: ultimately force, compulsion." Power, indeed, was constantly juxtaposed with liberty, which was "its natural prey, its necessary victim." While power "was

brutal, ceaselessly active, and heedless,” liberty “was delicate, passive, and sensitive,” in the history of human civilizations more often the victim of power rather than the victor.<sup>1</sup>

According to whig ideology, property-holding citizens organized as militia would naturally confront those who resorted to military force as a means of threatening liberty. The significant personage in the struggle between power and liberty, then, was the citizen-soldier, the individual who served as a minuteman at Lexington and Concord. From the mid-seventeenth century on, whig opposition writers in England had extolled the citizen-soldier. In particular, they were reacting to the Puritan Oliver Cromwell’s “New Model” army. According to these writers, Cromwell’s troops had shown little concern for popular rights after they had defeated King Charles I during the English Civil War of the 1640s. The New Model army became an instrument of repression. The apparent reason was that Cromwell’s soldiers had hardened into regulars, men whose loyalty in time of flux devolved onto their tyrannical Puritan leader—all at the expense of liberty.

Commentary in condemnation of standing armies and in praise of the citizen-soldier may be traced to early sixteenth-century Florence and the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli. Familiarity with Machiavelli’s thought in combination with the menacing reality of Cromwell’s army led Englishman James Harrington to write a broadly influential opposition tract, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, published in 1656. Machiavelli had warned in his classic work, *The Prince* (1513), “that no state is safe unless it has its own arms. ... Your own arms are those composed of your subjects or citizens or dependents, all others are either mercenaries or auxiliaries.” Harrington, in turn, defined the independent citizen as the individual property owner, such as a freehold farmer. The property-holding citizen had a clear economic stake in the preservation of society, and every property holder had to accept a fundamental duty of citizenship, to keep and bear arms for the preservation of public liberty and personal property.

To Harrington and other seventeenth-century opposition commentators who followed, “the ... ideas of propertied independence

and the militia” were inextricably tied together, as political scientist J. G. A. Pocock has observed. Since “independent proprietors,” those with a demonstrable stake in society, should naturally provide for “the public defense,” they would never become a “threat to the public liberty or the public purse.” If they did, they would be attacking the very polity in which their property gave them a clear stake, which would have been contradictory behavior.<sup>2</sup>

Long-term political and social stability thus depended on those who had property and, therefore, were citizens. For citizens to protect liberty, argued Harrington and others, they had to be ever vigilant against those potential tyrants like Cromwell who were hungry for power. They had to display public virtue, the essential quality of good citizenship. In *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, historian Gordon S. Wood has described such behavior as “the willingness of the people to surrender all, even their lives, for the good of the state.” Public virtue “was primarily the consequence of men’s individual private virtues.”<sup>3</sup> Without citizen virtue, nations would never be safe from the covetousness of the few who, for the sake of power, would enslave the many. “In free countries, as People work for themselves, so they fight for themselves,” explained radical whig pamphleteer Thomas Gordon in *Cato’s Letters* (1721). Every virtuous freeholder would willingly sacrifice his personal interests, even to the point of death, to defend property and liberties; for if these were lost, “he loses all the Blessings of Life.”<sup>4</sup>

England’s opposition writers worried endlessly about propertied citizens who would not meet the demands of public virtue and vigilance. Those frantic for power could always corrupt the system. They could bribe freeholders into passivity with fancy titles, sinecures, and even more grants of property. In addition, excessive prosperity and luxurious living might simply lull propertied citizens to sleep. Such an example could be found in Robert Molesworth’s widely read *An Account of Denmark* (1694). He told the story of a standing army’s destruction of a constitutional order because pleasure-seeking aristocrats refused to act as a check on that force’s rapacity. The corrupting hand of personal greed and the desire for luxury had replaced public virtue as the highest



value among citizens in Denmark, as had happened in the ancient republics of Athens, Carthage, and Rome. Invariably, the outcome was disastrous for liberty, resulting directly in political tyranny.

The most virulent tool of impending tyranny, claimed the radical whigs, was a standing army. In this view, standing armies were organizations *separate* from the citizenry and uncommitted to the service of society. Unlike the citizen militia, they consisted of trained regulars, soldiers for hire (mercenaries) who had no propertied stake in society. Attacking property and liberty was something that only poverty stricken ne'er-do-wells would consider doing. Such rootless persons had nothing to lose and much to gain in the use of force and the destruction of the liberties of propertied citizens.

A standing army in any polity, the whig writers insisted, was an obvious indicator as well as agent of corruption. The presence of military hirelings suggested that property holders, as they wallowed in luxury, had blinded themselves to their obligations of citizenship by handing matters of community defense to hired substitutes. Those who grasped for power could use the many offices, places, and contracts needed to maintain a standing army as a resource to reward self-serving, propertied citizens willing to condone the actions of potential tyrants.

Like a spreading cancer, a standing army could destroy society from the inside. Its maintenance would demand heavier and heavier levels of taxation, eventually threatening the right to property itself as the foundation of independent citizenship. In time, citizens would be facing *political slavery*, the worst of all possible fates according to the opposition writers. Even if a standing army did not cause rot from within, it could always become a ruthless force in the hands of an aspiring tyrant to be turned against the people, as the whig writers viewed the case with Oliver Cromwell.

The existence of a standing army thus connoted to whig ideologues that luxury, corruption, power, and tyranny were to various degrees threatening property, liberty, and life itself. An active militia, by comparison, indicated that citizens were taking their obligations seriously and behaving virtuously. How well the

Lexington and Concord confrontations fit this construct is especially interesting. Brute military power on the part of Gage's regulars had not overcome the vigilant militia of the Massachusetts citizenry. Liberty, even if all but snuffed out by power-hungry imperial leaders in Britain (as provincial leaders so often proclaimed before and after 1775), still had a fighting chance in America—and had prevailed on April 19, 1775.

## **Ideological Transmission**

Over the years, historians have investigated the ways in which the opposition whig writers of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England influenced the ideological formulations and outcomes of the American Revolution. In his *Ideological Origins*, Bailyn considered the content of colonial political pamphlets, and he concluded that England's radical whigs dramatically influenced the ideological world view of Revolutionary Americans. The opposition writers, Bailyn argued, transmitted to the colonists "a world regenerative creed" that underscored the necessity of defending liberty at all costs rather than succumbing to the conspiring forces of tyranny in a darkened world.<sup>5</sup> Provincial Americans (or perhaps more accurately, those favored few who were well educated and had access to opposition pamphlets) thus absorbed the tenets of English radical whiggism. Provincial leaders, who increasingly found themselves in the position of opposition as they challenged Britain's imperial policies, readily identified with the viewpoints of those who worried about the abuse of power by potential tyrants.

A major concern of patriot leaders related to virtuous citizenship and involved balance in government. A *balanced* government was one in which the three acknowledged social estates—the monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—mixed and blended their particular interests as represented by the King and by the House of Lords and the House of Commons in Parliament. If any one of the three gained too much power in relation to the other two, that aggrandizing estate could threaten the political liberties of the

others. Whig opposition writers interpreted much of seventeenth-century English history as a struggle to contain the absolutist cravings of the Stuart kings. Charles I paid with his head in 1649. James II had to flee the realm during the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688–89, and Parliament finally emerged as a political body capable of controlling willful monarchs.

Such alleged abuses of power in England did not stop with the ousting of the Stuart kings. As the eighteenth century unfolded, radical whigs fixated on the King’s chief advisers, or the “fourth hand” in government. Sir Robert Walpole, cabinet leader between 1721 and 1742, came to personify the newfound villains. The task was now to counteract these administrators, who reputedly used electoral bribery, patronage, and other forms of political influence to manipulate Parliament. The King’s ministers thus replaced the Stuart absolutists as the chief conspirators against liberty. Certainly after 1763, with reinvigorated imperial control directed toward the colonies, such an ideological perspective helped convince Americans that the hand of oppression was descending on them.

In England, as Bailyn and others have pointed out, the radical whig pamphleteers had little influence on governmental policies. Despite their persistent warnings, Parliament maintained and supported a peacetime standing army. This body did so within the context of language contained in the Bill of Rights, the grand document of the Glorious Revolution. The Bill of Rights mandated that any regular military establishment must be clearly subordinate to civil authority. Specifically it stated: “That the raising or keeping of a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace, unless it be with the consent of Parliament, is against the law.” Likewise, all citizens were to have the right to bear arms in defense of the state.

Ideologues who cheered the demise of James II and the promulgation of the Bill of Rights hoped that virtuous citizens formed into militia would be central to national defense. Reality, however, was different. Militia units did exist, yet Parliament relied most heavily on a trained standing army (along with superior naval forces). Parliament exercised civil control through yearly

appropriations and the annual Mutiny Act, first adopted in 1689, that legitimized the standing military establishment and prescribed its code of discipline. Propertied citizens generally did not fret about the implications of a standing army in their midst, and the establishment remained the backbone of imperial defense, although with sharply reduced troop strength when not at war.

One important reason that British subjects did not object to a standing military, even with curtailed numbers in peacetime, was that the empire was persistently at war between 1689 and 1763, contending mostly with France and Spain over control of territories in Europe and America. At the same time, a conscious effort was underway to limit the destructiveness of war, a pattern historian Walter Millis (*Arms and Men*) has attributed to the rising spirit of “eighteenth-century rationalism.” Since warfare was an extension of diplomatic efforts to maintain a balance of power among nations, Millis argued that the new notion was to separate productive civilians from the impact of organized brutality, to make war “the king’s rather than the community’s business.”<sup>6</sup> If Millis is correct, then trying to make warfare more rational in the Age of Reason effectively reduced the need for propertied citizens to become involved in military conflicts.

The desire to separate war and its destructiveness from society ties into another major reason for Britain’s primary reliance on standing forces. The skills and training required for engaging in combat were turning soldiers into highly specialized laborers. Whether the desire for separation spurred specialization, or vice versa, will likely never be determined. The result, however, as Millis has asserted, was that armies increasingly came to be “composed of a class apart: the professional, long-service soldiers and seamen who could be hired, cajoled, or pressed into doing the nation’s fighting, with a minimum of interference in the civilian’s pursuit of profit or pleasure.”<sup>7</sup>

Although Millis treats the functional specialization and separation of soldiers and war making from society as an important characteristic of the Enlightenment, that very specialization and separation worried the radical whigs. Clinging to their conception of the corrupting influence of standing forces, they balked at the

social makeup of Britain's soldiery. The rank and file rarely contained freeholding citizens. Common soldiers came from the poorer elements, described graphically by Millis as "the sweepings of jails, ginmills, and poorhouses, oafs from the farm beguiled into 'taking the king's shilling,' adventurers and unfortunates who might find a home" in the ranks.<sup>8</sup> Millis, however, overstated matters. More recently, historian Sylvia R. Frey, based on her sampling of British soldiers during the War for Independence, found that "the majority of British conscripts and German mercenaries did not come from the permanent substratum of the poor, but were members of the working classes who were temporarily unemployed or permanently displaced, and thus represented the less productive, but by no means useless, elements of society."<sup>9</sup>

However low the social origins of the soldiery, military life in peace and war was harsh. Regular forces in Europe, according to historian John Keegan, were embedded in "a military slave system" and "kept in obedience by harsh discipline and an almost complete denial of civil rights to its members."<sup>10</sup> Some terms of service were for life, and discipline was severe (insolence toward officers and desertion often resulted in death sentences or penalties of 1,000 lashes). Still, a soldier's existence was an alternative to filching in the streets, rotting in prison, or starving or freezing to death for want of food and clothing. Service in the standing military establishment thus became a means of helping the British care for their poor population, whether temporarily or permanently lacking work, in an era when the modern social service state did not yet exist.

Getting individuals from the poorer classes into service and, hence, sweeping the streets, represented one part of the social equation; the other related to the officer corps, drawn mostly from the ranks of the nobility and gentry. Training in, and the practice of, the military art had long since become a legitimate calling for sons who were not the firstborn and, therefore, would not share directly in the inheritance of landed estates and aristocratic titles. As an alternative, these younger sons of favored families could purchase commissions and move up the officer-grade ranks to lieutenant colonel, so long as they had the financial means.

The price of commissions varied but frequently lay beyond the resources of the middle classes. Often, aspiring officers needed influential patrons in government who could help them (often for a fee) find commissions to purchase. Demonstration of military competence, regardless of social background, often played little role in the promotion of company- and field-grade officers. Service in the officer corps was a respectable source of status and potential advancement for the elite sons of Britain.

In its organization, then, England's standing army provided employment for the sons of the well-to-do while preparing those with few or no advantages to serve as cannon fodder. Rigorous training and discipline taught the rank and file loyalty, if not blind obedience and unflinching courage in the face of enemy fire. Furthermore, officers assumed that harsh discipline was necessary to control down-and-outers in the ranks. The rigid disciplinary code governing military life was not for the ulterior purpose of producing mindless automatons who could be turned against the citizenry by some potential tyrant crazed for power. The likelihood of such a threat to civil society was extremely remote, given that the army's officers had so clear a propertied stake in society.

Although radical whig pamphleteers persisted in issuing warnings about luxury, corruption, and irresponsible citizenship, Britain's eighteenth-century standing military forces became more firmly entrenched as time passed. During the Seven Years' War (1756–63, later known in its American phase as the French and Indian War), the military establishment demonstrated its effectiveness by defeating Spanish and French armies. By the Peace of Paris of 1763, France renounced all claims to Canada, thereby removing what every good English subject viewed as the "French menace" from the North American continent. To regain Cuba, Spain had to give up its claim to East and West Florida. In 1763, the British military establishment, with its impressive string of recent victories, could fairly claim to be among the mightiest in the world.

Only in the British North American provinces, it seems, were people paying serious attention to the anti-standing-army concerns of the radical whig writers. There the fear of a ministerial

conspiracy against liberty would soon fuse with the anti-standing-army ideological strain and help produce conditions pointing toward open rebellion by the American settlers.

## **The Provincial Militia Tradition**

During the decade before the triumphant high tide of the first British empire in 1763, British leaders had contemplated cracking down on American colonists and ending the so-called era of salutary neglect. Between 1700 and 1760 the legislative assertiveness of provincial assemblies and an attrition in the prerogatives of royal governors had increased. Such trends suggested to the King's advisers that the colonists had lost sight of their subordinate status in the empire. Even before the Peace of Paris, the ministry of John Stuart, Lord Bute (youthful George III's mentor and confidant), had made the decision to maintain regular forces in North America. Thus, amid all the victory celebrations came the startling announcement from London that there would be a peacetime lodgment of 8,000 to 10,000 royal troops. An astounded Philadelphia whig wrote: "While we were surrounded by the French, we had no army to defend us: but now they are removed, and [with] the English in quiet possession of the northern Continent ... we are burdened with a standing army and subjected to the insufferable insults from any petty officer." The decision was enough to make conspiracy-minded provincials suspicious of the ministry's intentions, especially with the French menace eliminated.

Actually, the redcoats were to form a frontier constabulary to stand between aggrandizing white settlers and incensed Indians being pushed off tribal lands. The regulars were to keep the peace and to prevent uprisings like Pontiac's Rebellion of 1763–64. This clash was bloody and financially costly, precipitated partly because of Native American concerns about holding onto their territory without traditional French support. Also, as Fred Anderson has shown (*Crucible of War, 1754–66*), new British trade policies would have curtailed tribal access to prized European goods. Don

Higginbotham (*The War of American Independence, 1763–1789*) has offered a balanced conclusion on ministry intentions as of 1763: “While defense against the Indians or a resurgence of Bourbon ambitions figured implicitly in the decision to keep an army in North America, the chief function of the redcoats was actually to prevent war, not to wage it.”<sup>11</sup> Most historians agree: the royal army was not coming in through the back door to deploy against recalcitrant colonials who might resist imperial policies.

British leaders were not plotting political slavery for the Americans. Their concerns after 1763 focused on achieving efficiency and economy in the administration of the vastly expanded postwar empire. During the Seven Years’ War the English national debt had jumped from £75 million to about £137 million; and no imperial leader wanted to see that figure, staggering for its time, rise any higher. Keeping white settlers separated from Native Americans would help avoid expensive and prolonged local Indian wars. Over the long term, the ministry reasoned, the presence of the troops would save money, even though someone would have to feed, house, and pay for them. Maintaining frontier harmony, furthermore, could not be entrusted to provincial militia because many units were virtually moribund. Also, colonial militia were as likely as anyone to spark a general conflagration, based on their traditional support of white land claimants. Regular troops were the only alternative, the ministry concluded, even if that necessitated a standing army present in North America during peacetime.

Despite the nonfunctional state of most provincial militia units, Americans took great pride in their system of armed defense built on the concept of the virtuous citizen-soldier. As early as 1632, points out historian John Shy, the assembly of Virginia had ordered every fit male to carry a weapon to church so that “he might exercise with it after the service.”<sup>12</sup> During the next 130 years the militia system kept adapting to problems of the moment. Although early militia, especially those in New England, had been essential in defense against hostile Native Americans, militia units during the 1730s and 1740s in the South played a large part in guarding the white populace against individual slave



depredations and group uprisings. Over time the militia became the exclusive province of free, white, adult, propertied males, usually between the ages of 16 and 60. Indians, slaves, free blacks, indentured servants, apprentices, and indigents came to be excluded from militia service. A primary function of the militia thus turned out to be protecting the propertied and the privileged in colonial society from the unpropertied and unprivileged.

Although militiamen developed a record of sorts in tracking down recalcitrant slaves and devastating small bands of Native Americans, citizen-soldiers did not earn much of a record in full-scale combat. During the imperial wars of 1689–1763, few encounters brought the militia glory. Candidates for front-line combat, as opposed to home defense, came from the poor and indigent classes, those who ironically had been excluded from militia service. Virginia, for example, in supporting British regiments during the Seven Years' War, chose not to move its militia out of the province; rather, the planter-elite assembly passed legislation that placed the burden of service on "such able bodied men, as do not follow or exercise any lawful calling or employment, or have not, some other lawful and sufficient maintenance."

Persons from the poor and indigent classes became the prime candidates for long-term duty and front-line combat. Although no one called them such, in effect they were colonial regulars—substitutes for more favored, property-holding militiamen. What is so striking is that the pattern of service obligation was coming to resemble that of eighteenth-century England. In both societies the horror of open-field combat had been set aside as an appropriate calling for the "poorer sort" of persons (with upper-class leadership), while the middle classes filled militia ranks.

The middle-class character of the militia has led some historians to view the institution as another seedbed of future democratic flowerings. Since militiamen were invariably persons of some substance, property holding must have been widespread. What has been forgotten is that militia laws by the early eighteenth century rather systematically excluded the indigents and the unprivileged (a mushrooming proportion of the population by the 1750s) from service. Furthermore, the common practice of

having militiamen elect their own officers has abetted impressions about the institution's egalitarian character.

Available evidence, however, suggests that the majority of the ranking officers were persons of at least modest wealth and distinction, when compared to their neighbors. As befitted the deferential character of late colonial society, the rank and file accepted the leadership of their socioeconomic "betters" in the officer-grade ranks. Favoritism toward the well-to-do did not change one basic point, however. Whether or not the militia system was a source of incipient democracy, the lack of solid training and combat experience on the part of popularly elected officers and rank-and-file freemen was one reason for the militia's uneven combat record.

The presence or absence of democratic characteristics may be a misplaced consideration. Richard H. Kohn has argued in *Eagle and Sword* that "the militia was not a system at all. ... In reality," he has contended, "it was a concept of defense: the idea of universal obligation for defensive war, a people in arms to ward off an invader."<sup>13</sup> The function of the militiaman was to protect hearth and home, not to engage in regular, sustained warfare. In *Citizens in Arms*, historian Lawrence D. Cress has pointed out that "pervasive localism" characterized the range of concerns of most colonists. If need be, they would assemble and fight as militia to protect their immediate interests. Those deemed most expendable in society—the down-and-outers—became the designated candidates to be sent off to engage in full-scale combat at some far-distant geographic point. That was the reality of provincial troop participation in the French and Indian War, if not in earlier colonial wars as well.<sup>14</sup>

The failure to make this critical distinction served to confuse regular army officers about American fighting prowess. General James Wolfe, whose brilliant tactics resulted in the fall of Quebec during September 1759, described provincial soldiers as "the dirtiest, most contemptible, cowardly dogs you can conceive. There is no depending on them in combat." To another British officer, they were "nastier than anything I could conceive." Regular army officers repeatedly characterized American soldiers as lazy and

shiftless, hardly even fit for latrine duty. As John Shy has reminded us, however, these provincial soldiers were not militia, but rather outcasts from middle-class society, unfortunates who had been lured or legally pressed into service through promises of bounty payments and decent food and clothing. New England supplied the vast bulk of provincial troops engaged in conquering Canada. “It was the Yankee,” concludes Shy, “who came to be regarded as a poor species of fighting man. This helps explain the notion of the British government in 1774 that Massachusetts might be coerced without too much trouble.”<sup>15</sup>

General Gage, another veteran of the French and Indian War, wrote shortly after Bunker Hill in 1775: “In all their Wars against the French, they never Showed so much Conduct, Attention, and Perseverance as they do now.” As with other army officers and the British ministry, Gage did not distinguish between short-term militia and longer-term expeditionary service and those who made up the respective ranks. At Lexington and Concord, Gage’s regulars did not fight against unfortunates who had been dragooned into service and whose primary goal, with little or no property to protect, was to stay alive. They had run into propertied freeholders operating locally, actually defending hearth and home. That was the unique strength of the militia system. Whether this same system could be effective in sustained, broad-scale warfare was problematic at best.

Several salient points stand out about the provincial militia tradition. The ideal was universal military obligation, training, and service, which implied knowledge of, and the right to bear, arms in defense of liberty and property. In actuality, the military component of the concept of citizenship in late colonial America extended only as far as the outer limits of property holding. Major combat and elaborate offensive operations, such as those conducted during the Seven Years’ War, had drawn most heavily on the unprivileged and downtrodden who had been converted into quasi-regulars in arms (for the duration of the war instead of for life). Stated differently, military practice in the late colonial period was being Anglicized or Europeanized, as were so many other facets of provincial life.

The merging of British and American practices represented an important trend, given the high regard accorded anti-standing-army ideology in America. Despite reality, provincial patriot leaders clung tenaciously to the precepts of the militia tradition after 1763. Ignoring long-term provincial regiments, they spoke as if militia were the sole units of colonial defense while constantly juxtaposing the virtuous citizen-soldier with the standing-army regular of the parent nation. In the spirit of the opposition whig writers, they proclaimed the superiority of armed militiamen as martial agents, never conceding the point that well-trained regulars might be more than a match for vigilant citizen-amateurs. Like the British generals, they had overrated themselves and underrated their opponents. Unlike the British, Lexington and Concord seemed to prove the provincial leaders right. However, their rebellion was going to be much longer and more enervating than they could have imagined back in April 1775. By late 1776, patriot leaders would be consciously reverting to the French and Indian War pattern of seeking out the unpropertied in their midst for long-term military service in the quest to defend liberty and implant republicanism in America for the propertied members of society.

## **The Tyranny of Standing Armies**

In 1774, one distressed American writer gave ample summary to a whole lexicon of provincial perceptions about why the specter of tyranny seemed so real. He stated that it was “the MONSTER or a standing ARMY” in America that symbolized what was wrong. The army’s presence was but an element in “a plan ... systematically laid, and pursued by the British ministry, near twelve years, for enslaving America.” This was the army the Crown had lodged as a frontier constabulary in 1763. This force, in conjunction with royal naval vessels patrolling for smugglers in American waters, was like a thorn in colonial flesh, precipitating a rapid decline in imperial relations. The question of who should pay for these troops without adding to Great Britain’s soaring national

debt was one of the major reasons for the implementation of the Stamp Act of 1765 and Townshend duties of 1767. In response to these taxation schemes, Americans had declared they would resist taxes not specifically levied by their local assemblies. To do otherwise would be to succumb to taxation by a legislative body in which the colonists lacked direct representation.

Another vexation centered on housing for British regulars. Parliament adopted a new Quartering Act in 1765. Troops were to be billeted in public and uninhabited private facilities when barracks were not available. The Act was silent on the subject of using private inhabited homes, although everyone agreed that this practice was illegal. The major point of contention was that of indirect taxation. The colonists were to absorb the costs of quartering the troops, based on provincial taxes and appropriations made by their assemblies. American leaders loudly objected on the grounds that this plan represented a forced form of taxation, as mandated by King and Parliament.

The dispute took a particularly nasty turn in New York, a colony in which many troops were stationed because of its central geographical location. In defiance of Parliament, the New York assembly passed its own Quartering Act, prescribing the province's financial liabilities and limiting them to a year. In turn, Parliament, sensing yet another slap at its legislative sovereignty, suspended the New York assembly until that body would conform to the 1765 Act. The legal wrangle continued until 1769 when Parliament finally backed down and amended its original law to allow individual provinces to legislate for themselves in providing billets for the regular army. The dispute generated a legacy of bad feelings on both sides, all of which strengthened the escalating provincial sense of alienation from the parent government.

One of the most dramatic events involving the King's standing military forces occurred in Boston on March 5, 1770. This incident quickly gained the title "Boston Massacre" and involved a squad of regulars firing on the working populace of that port city. The roots of the massacre may be traced to the unusual turbulence characterizing Massachusetts political life during the 1760s. Heated resistance to imperial legislation, such as the Stamp Act,

and local crowds—the British thought of them as mobs—blocked royal officials from implementing Parliament’s plans. During August 1765, a long night of crowd turbulence forced the local Stamp Act distributor to resign that post. Crowd violence continued in the days ahead, sometimes directed against royal officers assigned the responsibility of executing imperial legislation, sometimes against local customs officers charged with collecting trade duties, and sometimes against press gangs off British naval vessels out searching for “forced” crew members.

By the late 1760s, the Bostonians had earned quite a reputation among imperial leaders in England as a disrespectful and lawless people. This city seemed to serve as a festering source of turbulence which, in turn, influenced anti-imperial behavior in many other American communities as well. Francis Bernard, the beleaguered Massachusetts royal governor, summarized these perceptions when he wrote home to England that since 1765 Boston had been “under the uninterrupted dominion of a faction supported by a trained mob.” He believed that only the presence of regular troops could “rescue the government” and restore stability. Fear of local reprisals, however, kept him from specifically calling for standing military intervention.

Bernard’s desire became reality in 1768. The new Secretary for American Affairs, the Earl of Hillsborough, also subscribed to the dictum that provincial political stability depended on bringing the Boston “rabble” under control. In the late spring, General Gage, then in New York, received orders from Hillsborough to send four regiments to the Bay Colony port. Much to the enraged but controlled dismay of the local patriots, the regulars began disembarking on October 1, 1768. For those colonists who believed in conspiratorial plots, the Crown had finally revealed the real intent of the British frontier constabulary. The purpose was the suppression of American rights. Between 1763 and 1768, provincial writers offered little commentary about the peacetime lodgment of British regulars in America. Since the troops were out of sight for most eastern settlers, except in the area of New York City, they were also largely out of mind. As of October 1, however, the regulars were intimidatingly present in the major port city of New

England. There red coats and muskets infused anti-standing-army ideology with vibrant meaning. A local minister, Andrew Eliot, caught the tenor of the moment when he exclaimed: “Good God! What can be worse to a people who have tasted the sweets of liberty! Things have come to an unhappy crisis; ... all confidence is now at an end; and the moment there is any bloodshed all affection will cease.”

Eliot wrote as if the letting of blood was inevitable. He presumed that well-trained, highly disciplined troops represented brute power, waiting to be unleashed on innocent civilians who wanted nothing more than to preserve political liberty. The populace, however, was not that innocent, nor were the troops that brutal. Local whig leaders, however, disdained such objective thought. They kept a “Journal of the Times” that made the most of isolated but nasty confrontations between hard-nosed, off-duty soldiers and taunting civilians. Although some of the wealthier merchants seemed pleased with the hard money the soldiery was infusing into the local economy, the vast majority of Bostonians had nothing good to say about the redcoats, despite a pattern of relatively decent troop behavior under trying circumstances. Rather, they agreed with the local whig who described these “new guardians of liberty” as puppet-like automatons who would gladly “scatter with the [French] pox some of their loose money.”

When the troops were not out whoring, charged local patriots, they were getting drunk and looking for a brawl. For Bostonians, the swaggering, mindless redcoats seemed to violate every canon of the Bill of Rights of 1689, even though the troops operated under strict regulations never to use their weapons unless ordered to do so after a civil magistrate had first read the Riot Bill. (In English law the only time that officers could order up volleys without a prior reading of the Riot Bill was when the populace had been declared by the King and Parliament to be in a state of open rebellion.)

That bloodshed came when it did surprised and shocked many inhabitants. By early 1770 the ministry had shown how divided it was in its thinking about keeping regulars in Boston during peacetime, since two regiments had been withdrawn in 1769.

From the day of the arrival of the first troops, however, troop baiting had emerged as a popular local sport. A major reason for annoying the soldiers was the direct competition for jobs between civilian day laborers and off-duty redcoats. In Boston the struggling poor represented rapidly growing numbers of people who lived near or below the poverty line.

Economic competition and boycotts of British-made goods lay behind many isolated clashes, all of which came to a head on the chilly evening of March 5, 1770, when small bands of apprentices, day laborers, and merchant seamen began to congregate in discrete parties. At first they just milled about; then they began to move, seemingly without overall guidance, toward the Customs House on King Street. There they harassed a lone soldier on guard duty, until a squad under Captain Thomas Preston came to his rescue. The angry bands pressed in on the soldiers, pelting them with snowballs, garbage, and excrement. A redcoat apparently panicked and, before Preston could stop him, fired into the crowd. Other soldiers joined in the shooting. Preston finally got his men under control, but several civilians lay in the street wounded, dead, or dying. All told, five local persons lost their lives as a result of this incident. The slain Bostonians quickly came to be identified as the first martyrs in the deepening struggle of liberty against tyranny.

Short-run effects of the massacre may not have been as important as long-term developments. First, the Crown pulled the redcoats out of Boston. Then Captain Preston and his squad faced trials. Through two hearings, one for Preston and one for his subordinates, the prosecution tried to prove that the troops had fired with premeditated and intentional malice, despite mitigating circumstances. Even in Boston's inflamed atmosphere, such arguments lacked legal merit. Local jurors acquitted Preston and all but two of his men, who paid the modest but painful penalty of having their thumbs branded.

In the long run, the most consequential effect related to magnified perceptions of ministerial tyranny with links to anti-standing-army ideology. March 5 became an annual holiday in Boston, a time for remembering the martyred victims of Britain's



devilish political plotting. Each year until the mid-1780s, when Bostonians opted for July 4 as a more fitting holiday, citizens gathered in large numbers on March 5 to remember the slain and to hear a massacre oration. The main speakers, in turn, did not hesitate to conjure all the negative images of standing armies bent on crushing innocent peoples.

No oration was more vivid in its choice of imagery than the one delivered in 1772 by Dr. Joseph Warren, who later died at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Warren implored the throng never to forget “the fatal fifth of March, 1770. ... Language is too feeble to paint the emotions of our souls, when our streets were stained with the blood of our brethren; when our ears were wounded by the groans of the dying, and our eyes were tormented with the sight of the mangled bodies of the dead.” Warren also warned the populace to be on guard against future depredations. His “imagination presented” the imminent likelihood of “our houses wrapped in flames, our children subjected to the barbarous caprice of a raging soldiery; our beauteous virgins exposed to all the insolence of unbridled passion.” The cause of liberty demanded citizen vigilance. Warren and other popular leaders hoped that such oratory and memorializing of the dead would ensure higher levels of popular commitment to the cause of liberty, should the most extreme form of resistance—rebellion and civil war—become necessary against what they viewed as a plotting, willful home government.

An incident such as the Boston Massacre encapsulates how fears of Britain’s standing army unfolded after 1768 and helped accelerate the breakdown of communications in the empire. After this crisis, a period of calm ensued but then ended with Parliament’s decision in May 1773 to oblige Americans to buy East India Company tea and thereby pay the trade duty on that product. Events now pointed toward Lexington and Concord. The Boston Tea Party of December 1773 resulted in Parliament’s Coercive Acts, passed during the spring of 1774. Included was legislation that modified the charter basis of Massachusetts government and gave Thomas Gage, the commander of British forces in North America, the assignment to manage the Bay

Colony with virtual dictatorial authority. The Coercive Acts had plenty of provisions to upset nearly everyone in the 13 colonies, which spurred the calling of the first Continental Congress in September 1774. The first Congress, in turn, adopted a comprehensive boycott plan to stop purchasing and consuming all British goods, which local committees of observation and inspection, sometimes with militia support, would put into effect across the landscape.

George III and his ministers responded to the work of the first Continental Congress with disdain and inflexibility. Regarding the Americans as ill prepared for a major military confrontation and viewing them as having been stirred up by designing, power-hungry local leaders, the policymakers decided to isolate and humiliate Massachusetts. In February 1775, the King declared that province to be in a state of rebellion. Lord Dartmouth, who had replaced Hillsborough as the American Secretary, accepted the task of ordering Gage to use the 4,000 troops recently made available to him. “The first essential step to be taken toward reestablishing Government, would be to arrest and imprison the principal Actors and Abettors in the [Massachusetts] Provincial Congress,” stated Dartmouth. He could not imagine why Gage was hesitating to act more decisively in combating those who kept resisting royal authority. “Any efforts of the people, unprepared to encounter with a regular Force, cannot be very formidable,” he concluded.

Obviously, Dartmouth was wrong. The old assumption about the lack of American martial prowess, so firmly planted during the French and Indian War and even before, lay embedded in the Secretary’s orders. Like so many other ideas that passed for reality, such stereotyped thinking was inaccurate, as events soon showed. Receiving Dartmouth’s instructions in mid-April, Gage understood that he had to do something or be called home in disgrace. Since he knew that capturing elusive patriot leaders was unlikely, his alternative target became the military stores at Concord. Gage hoped that the foray into the interior would awe the Americans into submission—and do so without bloodshed. He could not have been more wrong on both counts.

In the end, both sides blundered into a civil war that began in April 1775. Both served as protagonists. Home government officials wanted more efficient and responsive provinces. The colonists, fearing the loss of liberties, desired more freedom of action in economic, social, and political matters. As Britain attempted to tighten the imperial reins, perceptions of a tyrannical conspiracy emanated from the 13 colonies. The presence and use of a standing army in North America during peacetime abetted the final communications breakdown. Ultimately, rebellion and war could not be avoided.

To conclude that Great Britain provoked the War for Independence because of tyrannical designs would be a mistake. Doing so serves to confuse the provincial world view with the actuality of historical circumstances in the years between 1763 and 1775. This statement does not deny the point that how provincials perceived reality was more important in moving them toward rebellion than reality itself. Citizens in and around Boston in April 1775 believed that they were being entrapped by a systematic imperial plan to subject them to political slavery. For them, the King's standing army marching toward Lexington and Concord was visible proof of the validity of their perceptions.

With the advantage of historical hindsight, a more rational conclusion is that both sides drifted toward a state of civil war because they had lost their ability to comprehend each other's intentions. With communications all but broken, the chance of reversing the course of recent history after the bloodshed of Lexington and Concord was very slim. The time had come for a republican war with the avowed purpose of preserving liberty in a darkened world. The most pressing question was whether American patriots could demonstrate enough virtue to sustain the cause of liberty and succeed in the momentous martial challenge now confronting them.

On their part, the British were equally convinced a conspiracy was afoot in the colonies. Until the bitter experience of war proved otherwise, Lord North's ministry sincerely believed that the majority of Americans were loyal to the King, and that all the trouble stemmed from a minority of republican fanatics who

had deluded or cowed their neighbors. As Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy (*The Men Who Lost America*) has observed, it was an article of faith in the cabinet that militant American whigs, who were willing to use violence to enforce their views, were the real tyrants.<sup>16</sup> Massachusetts radicals, wrote loyalist Peter Oliver, the exiled chief justice of the provincial Superior Court, “began to strike hard against every Man who wished well to the Authority of the british Government.” Who were the oppressors? The gulf of perceptions between the parent nation and the provincials could not have been wider.

## Notes

- 1 Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 56–58. An expanded edition of this volume appeared in 1992.
- 2 Pocock, “Machiavelli, Harrington, and English Political Ideologies in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 22 (1965), 566. See also Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1975), 333–505.
- 3 Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1969), 69.
- 4 Gordon, *Cato’s Letters*, no. 65 (February 10, 1721).
- 5 Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 138. See also Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, MA, 1959), *passim*; John Phillip Reid, *In Defiance of the Law: The Standing-Army Controversy, the Two Constitutions, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1981), *passim*; and various works discussed in Robert E. Shalhope, “Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 29 (1972), 49–80.
- 6 Millis, *Arms and Men: A Study in American Military History* (New York, 1956), 13.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 14. See also Michael Roberts, *The Military Revolution, 1560–1660* (Belfast, UK, 1956), which dates the revolution in military practice to an earlier period in time.

*Lexington, Concord, and the Myths of the War, 1763–1775*

- 8 Millis, *Arms and Men*, 15.
- 9 Sylvia R. Frey, "The Common British Soldier in the Late Eighteenth Century: A Profile," *Societas: A Review of Social History*, 5 (1975), 126. See also Frey, *The British Soldier in America: A Social History of Military Life in the Revolutionary Period* (Austin, TX, 1981), 3–21; and Don N. Hagist, *British Soldiers, American War: Voices of the American Revolution* (Yardley, PA, 2012), *passim*.
- 10 Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York, 1993), 343.
- 11 Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York, 2000), 470–71; Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763–1789* (New York, 1971), 33.
- 12 Shy, "A New Look at the Colonial Militia," in *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York, 1976), 24; John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier* (New York, 2005), 1–52.
- 13 Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783–1802* (New York, 1975), 7.
- 14 Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982), 5–8. For evidence that provincial Americans drew on the poorer classes for troops to fight in the colonial wars, see Harold E. Selesky, *War and Society in Colonial Connecticut* (New Haven, CT, 1990), 144–94; James Titus, *The Old Dominion at War: Society, Politics, and Warfare in Late Colonial Virginia* (Columbia, SC, 1991), 41–45, 59–61, 78–100; and Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), *passim*. For a different perspective, see Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1984), 26–62, 230–39.
- 15 Shy, "A New Look at Colonial Militia," 32.
- 16 O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven, CT, 2013), 53.