

Address by Secretary of War Elihu Root to the 5th Annual Conference of the Interstate National Guard Association in Columbus, Ohio on 4 May 1903

Mr. President and Gentlemen of the National Guard Association: I am very glad of the opportunity offered to me by your kind and courteous invitation, to say a few things to the officers of the National Guard collected from all parts of the country in this convention-- nothing particularly new or original, but things which I have from time to time said to individuals.

I am not going to undertake to teach you your business, for I do not know much about it. I am going to speak to you, however, in full recognition of the fact that we are engaged in the same undertaking; that what my duty imposes upon me as Secretary of War, is the very thing which you are making sacrifices of time and effort and money to accomplish, and that is the placing of our country in a position where it is able "to enforce the laws, suppress insurrection and repel invasion."

Some of my friends, both in the National Guard and in the regular army, have given evidence of expectation that there would immediately upon the passage of the Militia Bill, to which your president has referred, be published a code of rules and regulations, and a series of decisions upon the numerous questions which arise under that law-- as questions always must arise under every law. I think nothing could have been more unfortunate than an attempt to formulate a system of rules and make a series of decisions under that law in advance of patient and careful inquiry and conference.

It is a very broad and general statute; designedly framed in very general terms, because it is to be applied to a great variety of conditions, conditions in large cities and conditions in rural communities; conditions in many different states, in widely separated parts of the country, and applied to National Guard in different stages of development, and in communities, some of them very rich, and able to do a great deal, and some of them comparatively poor, and able to do but little. In determining the questions that arise -- as they arise -- this law must be adjusted to these varying conditions with just as much liberality and as sincere an effort to get at the rights of things and to get at what is reasonable and fair and will, promote the purposes of the law, as is possible.

In endeavoring to apply such a law, the important thing is to get at its controlling purpose, and to make every decision and reach every determination under it in such a way as to conform to that purpose and promote it, instead of frustrating it.

In determining what is the leading idea, the controlling purpose of this law, it is necessary to go into the condition which the law met-- into the history of the militia of the United states. It is familiar to us all. only that the original idea of the founders of the Republic was that the entire body-- the male population of the country should constitute the militia; that we should rely very little upon a standing army, but that the able bodied male citizens of the United states between the ages of eighteen and forty-five-- each one of them--should be a member of the militia; each one of them should keep in his own home the gun and the powder horn and the bullets and the various accoutrements necessary to enable him to go out and defend his country when he was called.

We all know, too, that the expectation failed to be realized in practice. We know that almost immediately after the passage of the original militia bill, in 1792, the presidents of the United States, down, seriatim, commenced to ask congress for further and more legislation regarding the militia; that Washington asked for it; Jefferson asked for it; Madison asked for it; and almost every administration has sought to strengthen it.

The original militia system, based upon that idea, never worked, and as time passed on and the conditions of life became more complicated, it became less and less possible of being operative, until it

was absolutely a dead letter, absolutely obsolete; so that we presented the extraordinary spectacle of a great country; a great people, who relied upon a citizen soldiery for its defense, whose principles were opposed to the maintenance of any considerable standing army, and yet which had no law under which any preparation for defense whatever was made.

That was the situation which existed, so far as the national preparation for defense went, down to the last session of the last congress.

In the meantime there had grown up in the states themselves bodies of state troops, troops for the immediate and constant uses of the state. and those troops, although called "The National Guard," were practically the army of Pennsylvania, of New York, of Ohio, of Georgia, of the different states by which they were maintained, and under the command of whose governors they acted -- a separate and independent system, linked to the national government only by the fact that quite late in their history -- but a short time ago -- an appropriation was made by congress with their representation in congress, without any reference to whether they had a large or small National Guard.

These bodies of troops were not organized as a rule with reference to the service of the United States; they were organized as a rule with reference to continuing state troops, and not to becoming national troops under any circumstances.

Under those conditions this bill was passed. It was passed after many, a great many, efforts, to secure some militia legislation. And its fundamental idea is not to attempt to revive the old militia idea and ignore the results of individual enterprise and state enterprise in the creation of our disciplined, organized and armed bodies of soldiers, but to recognize the existing fact, to recognize the fact that there are but two ways of raising a body of soldiers -- one is by selection and the other is by volunteer effort, by voluntary service, and the fact that in the national guards of the state you will find the men who are willing to give the volunteer service (Applause). To recognize the fact that these bodies of troops in the states afford the true basis for the militia system of the country; to recognize the fact that whenever we come to fight a war it will be fought, not by the old militia of 1792, but it will be fought by a volunteer army, as the Civil War was fought, as the War with Spain was fought, the little handful of soldiers of the regular army, the great body of volunteers; to recognize the fact that these National Guard organizations are the great school of the volunteer to which the country must look, in order that its young men, when they go out to fight the battles of their country; shall find officers competent to lead them, to organize them, to transport them, to equip them, to keep them in health, and lead against the enemy.

That is the fundamental idea of this bill. To adopt as the basis of the popular militia system the National Guard organizations; to recognize the fact that those organizations are the great school of the volunteer soldier, and to take upon the shoulders of the United states the fair share of the burdens of maintaining these organizations, which are proportionate to the advantages the nation will get from them (Applause). Not to substitute payment from the national treasury for payment from the state treasury, but to add to what the states are doing in order to secure the services of the National Guard for state purposes; to add to them what the government of the United states can well afford to do, in return for the advantages that the United states will get from the National Guard as the school of the volunteer soldier, and to add it so that it may not take the place of state action, but may add to the efficiency, the strength, the dignity, the importance of the National Guard. (Loud applause and cheers.)

There you find the key of the construction of this act, and you will find also the guide for the way in which you and I, for which National Guardsmen, and soldiers of the regular army, and citizens alike, ought to act under this law. The law is to be construed for the purpose of aiding, of strengthening, of promoting the National Guard, and not for the purpose of hampering, or injuring, or interfering with it; the law is to be construed with reference to its controlling purpose -- the intent of the legislation.

Take the question which has frequently been asked and which has got to be settled by a regulation, when all the information about it has been acquired. That is as to the minimum number of organizations. That must be settled in such a way that it will secure the greatest possible efficiency in National Guard organizations, consistent with maintaining those organizations. Minimum number should not be fixed so that it will kill the organizations in the rural community where you can't get a large number together, but it should be fixed so as to bring that rural community up just as far as it can be brought, to the standard of the greatest efficiency in discipline and strength. I am trying to find out where that standard is. It would be a great misfortune to decide it without getting all the information, all the light upon it possible.

Take another illustration. The question as to the requirement for five day's training during the year preceding the distribution under section 1661, as amended.

Query: What kind of training, exercise, is required? How far the excuse of the governor is to be allowed to go in relieving the National Guard associations from that five days' training, which is a prerequisite to the distribution of federal money?

That has got to be treated in accordance with the purpose of the act. It may well be that a different rule will be applied this first year from the rule that will be applied hereafter; that is we are not to treat the National Guard of a state the same during the year which preceded the passage of the act that you do the next year when the state has fair notice of the act. The purpose of that provision is perfectly distinct. It is that the millions of dollars which the National government is going to expend shall not be made the substitute for state action; that the national government shall not step in and take the burden of the National Guard off the state and carry it all itself, but that the state shall do its share; it shall have a National Guard, it shall have a National Guard which meets for the purpose of training and discipline. **It shall be a real; genuine institution, and not a paper institution,** and that is to be the condition of receiving this aid of the general government, that the general government is not doing anything for nothing. It is for the first time in its history giving an equivalent for what it expects to get from you, but it gives the equivalent only when the conditions are such that it can fairly expect to get something from you, and so a reasonable construction must be given to it.

I want to say a word or two about the action which ought to follow under this bill. The way in which the bill undertakes to help the National Guard is.:

First: By **furnishing arms, equipments, the accoutrements,** the supplies which you have been in the habit of drawing against your quota in the annual million dollar appropriation, furnishing them without charging them up against that appropriation.

Second. By **authorizing the secretary of war to pay over in cash** the allotment under that appropriation, for the purpose of state encampment and field exercises.

Third. By **authorizing the secretary of war to make arrangements with the governor of any state,** under which the National Guard, or any part of it, **may participate in field exercise maneuvers,** practice marches with the troops of the regular army, and in that case pay the expenses just as if the National Guard troops taking part were troops of the regular army -- that is, pay the transportation out of the appropriation of congress for the transportation of the army; pay subsistence out of the appropriation of congress for the subsistence of the army; pay for the tentage, for the quarters; and pay the men regular army rates out of the appropriation for the pay of the army -- quite a distinct thing, you will observe, from this other provision which gives you your quota in cash for the purpose of state encampment.

Then, in the fourth place, by much **enlarging the provisions under which the officers of the regular army,** both in the active and the retired lists, **may be utilized for purposes of instruction and inspection** in the National Guard of the different states.

There is a consistent purpose running through that act, and through those methods of assistance. I do not think I can state it better than by saying that its fundamental idea is the idea of unity.

Whenever we come to a war -- and come to it we know we shall; when, we do not know; but that we shall come to it we do know -- whenever we come to it there will be but one army of the United States (Loud applause and cheers and cries of "Hear! Hear!"); there will not be a regular army; and a militia army, and a volunteer army; there will be but one army of the United states, carrying but one flag, answering to but one command, the command of the constitutional Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States (Loud applause); with but one purpose to subserve. The victories which it wins will shed glory upon regular and militia and volunteer alike, and the disasters that would come from its failure will involve the homes, the fortunes and the honor of all alike (Applause).

The fundamental idea of this bill is recognizing the activity of the National Guard; utilizing that as the constitutional militia of the country; utilizing it as the great school of the volunteer soldier, making it a part of the military establishment of the United states; to lay down the lines of activity so that the regular army and the National Guard shall work together, and grow ever closer and closer together, knit in bonds of sympathy and brotherhood, preparing for the great struggle in our common calls. (Long continued applause.)

No such fatal weakness exists in military affairs as jealousy and dissension among the officers and soldiers of an army (Applause). It has too often happened that there has been jealousy and misunderstanding between officers and men of the regular army and the National Guard. There has been right and wrong on both sides. Now and then we find officers of the National Guard who are suspicious and jealous; now and then we find officers of the regular army who are snobbish and supercilious. My impression is that if you trace the two cases back, they will come together back in the past, and one is the cause of the other. But they are the exception; the rule is otherwise; and there is but one way that I know of to dispose of those exception, and that is in the method of honest, sincere work; side by side in the same cause. (Cries of "Hear! Hear!" cheers and applause.)

I venture to say -- and I say it upon knowledge derived from conversations with many officers, both of the regular army and of the National Guard, who were together at Fort Riley last fall, that not one officer, either of the regular army or the National Guard, came away from the maneuvers at that post last September without increased respect and liking each for the other.

The idea of the provisions of this bill is to carry out the kind of joint education which will congenially do what was done at Fort Riley.

There are certain qualities and attainments which a man gets who is out in the free, rough and tumble life of the world, that no man who has devoted himself to one particular occupation can get. There are elements of strength and usefulness brought to this combination by officers of the regular army, which you gentle men need, and there are elements of strength and usefulness brought to it by you which the officers of the regular army need (Cries of "Hear! Hear! Hear!" cheers and applause); combined it makes a combination with which we can meet the world. (Loud and long continued applause and cheers.)

With our eighty millions of people there never will be the slightest difficulty in our raising an army of any size which it is possible to put into the field. Our trouble never will be in raising soldiers; our trouble will always be the limit of possibility in transporting, clothing, arming, feeding, and caring for our soldiers, and that requires organization. Everyone realizes where we strike the limit of effective action, is that line upon which you can go infinitely farther with organization than you can by the might of nature. Careful pre-arrangement and careful coordination of action of numerous different agencies will carry on the capacity for transporting, for arming, supplying, feeding and caring for soldiers infinitely beyond the point of first impression.

Looking forward to the possibilities of the future, looking forward to the war that is coming with somebody or other some time, I regard the regular army as but an organizing committee, a committee of organization for the accomplishment of certain things which cannot be done for that army except by the action of some people devoting their entire time; and I look upon the National Guard as a committee for the accomplishment of certain other things that cannot be done for that army except by organization. You have got to have your quartermaster work, your commissary work, your financial work, done by the national government, and you have got to have it done by national organization -- to one source you must go for your arms, your clothing, your food, your controlling transportation, and you have got to have national organization for that.

But when you come to the creation of military spirit among the youth of the country, to the education and training of that military spirit, there you step in, and that is your function of preparation, for that cannot be done at the center -- that must be all over this country.

On the part of the men who are leaders of opinion in their localities, who are in charge of the troops, gathered in the several states, enlisting the pride of their states, the two working together I have the utmost confidence will enable America to put into the field whenever the time, the exigency comes, an army against which the whole round earth cannot contend. (Loud and long continued applause.)

We are beginning a new departure. The highest duty rests upon everyone who loves his country, and is concerned in its military -- in the regular army and in the National Guard -- to address himself to the application of this new law in a spirit of kindness and sympathy, of kindly concession and consideration, so that these results which it is designed, and I believe is destined to accomplish, may succeed. With the right spirit they can; without it is, of course, impossible, and I am confident that the whole question rests with the officers and men of the two great organizations, the regular army and the National Guard; and I am sure that if we hold fast to the provisions of the constitution, keeping them clearly in mind -- the provisions of the constitution now first accepted by congress in this bill -- we cannot go astray.

You will remember that the eighth section of the first article provides that congress shall have power "to raise and support armies;" "to provide for calling forth the militia to execute the laws of the union, suppress insurrections and repel invasions; to provide for organizing, arming and disciplining the militia, and for governing such part of them as may be employed in the service of the United states, reserving to the states, respectively, the appointment of the officers and the authority of training the militia according to the discipline prescribed by congress."

That is what the bill provides. It may be that the general provision which congress has made in the execution of this constitutional power for organizing; arming and disciplining the militia may be to some of you irksome. They may interfere here and there with some of the arrangements which you have made in your own states, and which you prefer. But so many are the sacrifices which you have made and are making to secure an adequate military force, that surely you can make a little further sacrifice of your own preferences, of your own wishes, of your own convenience, in order that we may have one system, in order that when the time of trial comes, every officer and every soldier may be moving along the same lines, according to the same discipline, the same system, with the same arms, and accomplishing by united and never-discordant effort, the result sought (Applause).

And, I, in conclusion, wish to call your attention to the provision of the constitution, in the tenth section of the first article which is that "no state shall, without the consent of congress..... keep troops or ships of war in time of peace," and I congratulate the National Guard upon being now, probably for the first time, unquestionably a constitutional force. (Loud and long continued applause.)