

Research: The Birth of the National Guard: Jefferson's Last Stand

Category 20th Century American Democracy

Below is an abstract and a copy of the proposed appendices to a research paper in progress at George Mason University under the direction of Dr. Fred, Beuttler, Assistant Historian for the US House of Representatives.

ABSTRACT:

The militia in the United States of America is a unique reflection of the United States itself. Beginning with the first colonial muster in 1636 and involvement in every major US engagement, the militia and after 1903, the National Guard has been there. The militia ideal is Jeffersonian Democracy at its best. In many ways the militia was diametrically opposed to the notions supporting a professional, standing army just as Jefferson opposed Hamilton's need for a truly federal government. The conflict between professional army and citizen militia mirrored the conflict of federal versus anti-federal. Leading up to the Spanish-American War in 1898, the militia developed a more comprehensive personality and consolidated national vision for itself. Choosing to embody the Jeffersonian ideals found in the citizen-soldiery, the militia was faced with the need for federal support and partnership with the professional army. In the 1880s, the militia began to see the need for reform and more professional education, training, equipment and more federal financial support to achieve that reform.

The National Guard Association formed to address their growing national concerns. In the post-Civil War environment, the movement initially fractured, but by 1903, the Interstate National Guard Association established itself as the most politically cohesive group and led the reconciliation effort which would form the modern-day National Guard Association of the United States. Here the National Guard needed increased federal support to achieve military relevance beyond what the individual states could provide. The Army wanted a recruiting pool from which to fill their ranks in the event of another war. Neither organization wanted to repeat the mobilization failures which occurred prior to the War with Spain.

The Army, directed by Secretary of War Elihu Root accepted an increasing role of the National Guard and funding in exchange for increased oversight and regulation – a classic Jefferson versus Hamilton exchange. The result was a more Dewian compromise where the National Guard maintained a significant measure of its own initiative and agency, they reluctantly accepted federal oversight and standardization and the Army gained a measure of influence over a state-based militia force.

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1903 Address by Secretary of War

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