

History Matters: America's Standing Army

The Founding Fathers debated the idea of a standing army during the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Many delegates, shaped by their experiences under British rule, worried that a permanent military could threaten liberty. The British army had enforced unpopular laws and suppressed colonial resistance, so the new Constitution gave Congress the power to raise armies but limited funding to two years at a time—preventing a permanent military without ongoing approval.

Leaders like Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and George Mason feared that a large peacetime army could become too powerful and disconnected from ordinary citizens. They preferred **state militias**—local citizen-soldiers who could be called up in emergencies. Militias, they argued, were tied to their communities and less likely to be used for oppression. They also worried that a permanent army might provoke foreign nations, inviting war instead of preventing it.

Underlying these fears was the belief that history showed how permanent armies often led to tyranny. Many of the Founders read Enlightenment Thinkers like John Locke and Montesquieu, who warned that rulers with large standing armies could use them to crush dissent, silence political opponents, or overthrow democratic institutions. European history seemed to confirm this: kings used professional armies to enforce absolute power and intimidate their own citizens. The Founders wanted to avoid creating a government that could someday turn its weapons on the people it was meant to protect.

Over time, however, the realities of defending a growing nation changed this view. By the 20th century, the U.S. maintained a permanent standing army to ensure readiness in a world facing global wars, terrorism, cyberattacks, and humanitarian crises. A strong military also deters adversaries and supports allies, making it central to national security and international stability.

Constructive Roles of the Standing Army

- **Disaster Relief:** After events like Hurricane Katrina (2005), the army and National Guard provided rescue operations, medical aid, and rebuilding efforts.
 - **Global Security:** U.S. forces participate in NATO missions, peacekeeping operations, and disaster relief overseas, helping maintain international stability.
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Controversial Domestic Uses of the Military

- **Civil Rights Era:** During the Civil Rights Movement, federal troops were sometimes deployed to enforce desegregation orders, such as in Little Rock, Arkansas (1957). While it protected Black students' rights, it also deepened fears of military power being used in political disputes.
 - **Labor Strikes:** In the late 1800s and early 1900s, troops were sent to break up railroad and mining strikes, often siding with business owners. This led to violence, deaths, and public anger over soldiers being used against workers fighting for better wages and conditions.
 - **Civil Unrest:** Deployments during the 1968 Democratic National Convention protests, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and the 2020 protests raised concerns about the line between maintaining order and suppressing free speech. Critics argued that using soldiers instead of police risked militarizing civilian life and threatening constitutional rights.
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A Continuing Balancing Act

America's standing army has shifted from a source of deep suspicion to a pillar of defense and diplomacy. It has protected the nation, offered humanitarian aid, and upheld global commitments—but has also faced fierce debate when used against American citizens. These controversies highlight an ongoing challenge: how to protect security and order without violating the very freedoms the military is meant to defend.