

EPILOGUE

THE AMERICAN ARMY

1775–1917

The evolution of the U.S. Army, from its humble origins in the colonial militia through its official creation during the Revolution and the massive bloodletting of the Civil War to the first tentative steps on the path to empire, was slow and uncertain. Throughout this long evolution, American citizens wavered between the ideals of a “nation in arms,” of a citizen militia, and the stability of a well-trained, professional standing army. Safe behind its ocean barriers and supported by the intellectual ideals of its enlightenment-trained founders, America resisted the creation of a large standing military force as both unnecessary and dangerous to its liberty.

Yet, at the same time, few could doubt that a standing army often came in handy. How else was the frail new nation, huddled along the eastern seaboard of a massive continent, to cope with the continuing mission of Indian-fighting and frontier-policing for most of its formative years? At the same time, only an obtuse observer of the world stage could believe that the dynamic empires of Europe would not at some point in time turn their attentions again to the new republic. It was thus essential for a prudent nation to maintain a small, solid core of professional soldiers for an expansible force to preserve the security of the nation in any future conflict.

Building on the colonial tradition of defending the expanding settlements from Indians, the American Army could not ignore its vital role as a force in being even if it conflicted with the philosophy of the founding fathers. Necessity required such a force; but inclination continued to keep it small, except during the years of crisis of the Revolution (1775–1783) and the Civil War (1861–1865). Even in those instances, and especially in the latter case, much of the fighting was done

by volunteer formations that were disbanded at the end of the war; the Regular Army grew only slightly during America's first century, even during the horror of the Civil War.

A powerful, continuous dichotomy existed between the forces that wanted to rely primarily on a militia and those who saw the necessity for a strong standing army. Most of the American people maintained—and despite the evidence of their own experience continue to maintain—that as members of a democracy they were basically peaceful in nature. Americans imaged themselves as an unmilitary people, content to go about their business of trade or farming with little notice given to the outside world and committed to the principles of peace. Though much taken with their self-image, Americans were in many ways very warlike. As a nation they constantly fought against Native American tribes and soon moved like a torrent into the west, sweeping away the indigenous people and conquering the Mexican lands between the coasts.

This expansionism, whatever the rationale or justification, was essentially a warlike act by a dynamic, restless, and violent people. Granted, most of the “conquest” was accomplished as much by waves of immigrants as by arms. There was only a small standing army to serve as initial scouts, military spearhead, and police force; but that small army was a critical factor in the expansion. Not content with merely conquering the continent, in the space of a few years America expanded outward into the Caribbean region and across the Pacific to Hawaii and the Philippines. At the same time Americans seemed content to follow George Washington's words of advice to “steer clear of permanent alliances” and stand “against the insidious wiles of foreign influence.” Thus Americans convinced themselves that as a people apart they would not need a large standing Army despite their many aggressive tendencies. The oceans and a small Navy would protect them from others while they consolidated their hold on the middle portion of the continent.

Yet both ideals, opposing a large standing army and staying out of foreign quarrels, were to be difficult to sustain in the twentieth century and beyond. Unbeknownst to Americans, the country was on the verge of an almost unrelenting series of wars and conflicts on the world stage that would demand new ideas and a new Army at each turn. The Army and its institutions would be forced to change, react, and change again in ways as yet unforeseen. If the previous centuries were any indication, the Army and the American people would remain flexible enough to change and grow accordingly to respond to each new challenge ahead.

An essential part of the Army's ability to change and adapt was the slow, but far from steady, growth of professionalism within the Army: a sense that serving in the Army was a unique calling with special standards. The essence of a profession, as opposed to merely a vocation, is that a profession establishes standards of performance of a complex set of duties and responsibilities, often binds its practitioners to those standards with some form of oath or charge, and then internally creates a system of discipline to enforce those standards. Thus members of a profession, with their own unique bodies of wisdom, training, and beliefs, tend to believe that they stand apart from the rest of society. Historically the ministry, medicine, law, teaching, and the military have been viewed in western societies as professions; although over the years

the term professional has been more and more widely used for a variety of trades and jobs.

If the U.S. Army is a profession, and it seems to fit the definition, how then did the Army become that way? How did soldiers and officers begin to see themselves as professionals rather than just citizens temporarily serving in the military? What unique standards or duties did the Army adopt as part of this trend, and how did it enforce those standards? These are critical questions, especially given America's current reliance on a professional military to perform myriad duties throughout the world. It can certainly be said that the seeds for today's professional Army were sowed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The growth of professionalism in the U.S. Army probably occurred more quickly in the officer corps than in the enlisted ranks. In part this was due to the American military's European heritage: the officers often were members of the upper classes who brought their distinct sense of identity and apartness with them. This "class consciousness" of the officer corps changed, albeit slowly, over time due to the inherently democratic instincts of Americans who looked with deep suspicion on any manifestation of a "superior" class based on inherited wealth or social position. The officer corps, recruited increasingly from the middle class with the path open to all through the portals of the Military Academy at West Point, became based on merit rather than social class.

Nevertheless, officers retained a sense of belonging to a unique "calling" with the unifying precepts of duty, honor, and country forming the standards that bound them to their profession and to each other. This sense of uniqueness spread throughout the Army as non-commissioned officers and soldiers began to identify more and more with their comrades in the Army rather than with civilians. Their service alone set them apart from most Americans. Uniforms, ceremonies, drill, rank, discipline, and other elements reinforced this sense of being different. This sense of apartness and uniqueness was probably a good thing. Without such a distinct corporate identity, the Army may not have been able to sustain itself during the years of isolation and trial on America's frontiers.

Along with a sense of apartness, it was equally essential for the Army to establish standards of training and duty performance that would formally teach new members exactly what was expected of them. Initially, this would involve training all recruits in their units rather than any in standardized schools. Only officers were exposed to some measure of standardized training (here again, West Point led the way); but after the initial schooling that led to a commission, officers also were expected to learn on the job. Only after the Civil War did the Army begin to establish schools of application for the combat arms, and only after the start of the twentieth century did it create the Army War College for education in strategic thinking and higher levels of the management of war policy.

As the American Army faced test after test along the frontier, it increasingly developed standards not just of duty performance (what soldiers or officers need to do as the technical components of their craft) but also of conduct: how soldiers, officers, and noncommissioned officers are to behave toward each other. From a relative isolation from American society grew a sense of being a self-sufficient social entity as

well as a unique vocation with arduous tasks not borne or perhaps even understood by the rest of society. From this apartness grew customs, traditions, and behaviors every bit as important in forming a sense of professionalism as any listing of tasks or training in necessary technical skills. As the Army grew such a sense of corporate identity, it developed the belief that only other members of the society understood the special pressures of the military and only other members could discipline wayward soldiers or officers.

By the early days of the twentieth century, the U.S. Army can be said to have evolved into an organization with all the aspects of a profession: a unique set of skills, formal initiation and indoctrination, training, rituals, standards of conduct, and the means to enforce that conduct. Though small, especially by European standards, the U.S. Army on the eve of "The Great War" was a tried and tested organization with a strong sense of professional identity and deep roots and traditions based on years of service to the nation. Building upon the past and only reluctantly drawn into the future, the U.S. Army stood on the threshold of world conflict, not entirely understanding the challenges ahead but nonetheless fully committed to respond to the needs of the nation wherever those needs led.