
An End to War — A Start to Militarism (circa November 15, 1898)

Now that the [Spanish-American] war has been practically terminated, a multiplicity of new questions are budding on the “thorny stem of time.”¹ Among these the central, commanding proposition is, “What shall be done with the army?” and upon the answer depends the character and to a large extent the perpetuity of the Republic.

Stripped of all verbiage designed to confuse the mind and obscure the issue, the question is, “Shall the United States of America succumb to the rule of militarism which dominates the old world?”

Back of this interrogatory, in shadowy outline, looms the “man on horseback” awaiting the answer, not of the American people, but of the select few to whom, under our benign representative system, they have surrendered their sovereign prerogatives.

Militarism is defined by Webster as “reliance on military force in administering government.” For years, especially since great labor strikes have alarmed capitalists and incidentally disturbed the country, the way has been quietly, gradually cleared for the introduction of legislation into Congress providing for a substantial and permanent increase in the standing army. Every conceivable reason, except the right one, was put forth in justification of the demand. General Miles caught the spirit long before the war with Spain or any other country was ever dreamed of. He boldly made the recommendation and in support of the proposition ventured nearer than any other in disclosing its true purpose by putting it upon the ground that the country should be “prepared against internal dissension.”

The matter was taken up by the press and large and influential papers were moved to give hearty endorsement to the project. But, somehow, it would not take with the people. They were uniformly and emphatically against it. They were instinctively opposed to a large standing army. They felt that it was in conflict with the spirit of democratic institutions and in violence of American doctrine and traditions. The spirit that prompted Washington in his “Farewell” to warn his countrymen against “overgrown military establishments, which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to

republican liberty," still burned and glowed in their breasts. They knew that a large standing army is inimical to liberty; and that they can not dwell together is a fact attested by all history.

At this conjuncture the Cuban question began to agitate the country, culminating in the declaration of war. Legislation by Congress to organize and equip an army followed in rapid order. In the excitement incident to the wave of patriotic sentiment which swept over the country, all objection to increase of the army disappeared, but now that the war is ended, the question of a standing army, its size, distribution, pay, and the general policy of the government relative thereto, again appeals to the calm and thoughtful consideration of the American people.

Speaking for myself, I am of the opinion that the army should as speedily as possible be reduced to its former peace footing. That there is any probability of this being done, I do not believe. The opening came, the army expanded under the necessities of war, and it will never be reduced to its former limits and limitations. The commercial spirit, born of the capitalist system, requires a large standing army to maintain its regime and enforce its edicts, and as Congress is subservient to its will, the army will remain a fixed and permanent, if not the central and controlling factor, in our government. There are many and cogent reasons for opposition to a large standing army in the United States. These are mainly geographical and historical.

In a historical sense the main point of difference between a despotism and a democracy is the standing army. Where there is a despotism there is a standing army, and where there is a standing army there is a despotism. Henry Labouchère,² the famous editor of the London *Truth*, in discussing the effect of a standing army in the United States, said in a recent issue of his paper:

This army would soon crush out democracy at home and in the end some popular General would feel it his duty to save society by making himself such a President as the constitution never contemplated.

He is right. The democratic spirit would soon decline and wither in an atmosphere charged with militarism, and if any trace of it survived, it would be speedily stamped out.

A century of national progress has been achieved with but the nucleus of a regular army, and in all the exigencies which have arisen. The

volunteer army, the citizen-soldiery have been found equal to every demand of the country.

Most conclusively were the readiness and efficiency of the volunteer host demonstrated in the war just closed. Why, then, should there be any departure from our national policy at this time, and a standing army maintained in time of peace? The answer readily suggests itself. They who favor a strong military arm are not much concerned about a foreign foe. They know that the people can always be relied upon to defend the country against aggressions from the outside. The secret of their anxiety is that they do not trust the people — their own countrymen.

The fearful poverty to which tens of thousands of workingmen have been ground in the merciless mill of capitalistic competition has created discontent and anger which portend resistance on an everlasting scale, and it is to force and keep in subjection these victims of capitalistic conquest that the standing army is demanded.

Judicial decrees, issued at the behest of the “power behind the throne” and subversive of every vestige of liberty, will command obedience when served with the gleam of bayonet upon them. Every federal judge will be a tsar, and, ex-officio, commander of the forces in his jurisdiction.

The standing army is a ceaseless and stupendous burden upon the people. It gnaws at their vitals in all the circling hours of the day and night. It produces nothing. It simply devours. Viewed in its most favorable light, it is a necessary evil, and should be reduced to the minimum.

Will a large standing army add to our moral strength at home or abroad? On the contrary, it will serve as a demoralizing factor. We are strong and we are respected in proportion as we trust the people, and cultivate fraternal relations among them. We become weak and invite contempt in proportion as we seek to dominate them by brute force.

I maintain, therefore, that an increased regular army would weaken, not strengthen, the nation, and that it would provoke, rather than allay, hostilities with other countries.

The immediate reduction of the army to its former footing would, in the moral effect it would have, add immeasurably to the strength of the country at home, and its security against other nations.

Washington laid great stress on “our detached and distant situation” and the fact that it “enables us to pursue a different course” from that followed by European countries.

Let it be borne in mind that the march of progress cannot be arrested by armed force. All the armies of the world cannot restrain the silent, invisible evolutionary forces which are in operation, and these are tending steadily away from war and toward peace. Slowly but steadily we are emerging from the savagery of war. Its horrors are still glorified in the name of civilization, but the clarion words of Douglass Jerrold, "War is murder in uniform," are not entirely drowned in the huzzahs inspired by the death and desolation wrought upon the vanquished foe.

Not all our people participated in thanksgiving to the Almighty, in obedience to the President's proclamation, for having enabled our soldiers to overwhelm and crush and mangle the soldiers of Spain, and make widows of their wives and orphans of their children.³

Every consideration of civilization, every interest of humanity, commands us to cultivate the arts of peace and to discourage the horrors of war, and thus fulfill our national destiny by furnishing a model for the emulation of other nations of the earth.

What has here been said has, of course, reference only to our own country. The disposition of the countries which came into our possession in consequence of the war is another question. Spanish authority has been driven out of these countries, and that was the sole issue of the war. A reasonable protectorate should be exercised by the government over the islands she has conquered until their domestic affairs are organized, and for this purpose an army sufficient for garrison service should be maintained, which can be gradually withdrawn as this object is accomplished.⁴ Then let the inhabitants govern themselves as they see fit, and in due course of time they will work out their own destiny.

Of course, there are those who see, or imagine they see, great complications in the near future, and, therefore, insist that our country should be armed to the teeth, ready for war with other great nations at the word of command. They are not close students of the course of events. There is a movement, silent and spontaneous as the dawn, which they omit from their calculations.

Socialism, quickened into life in the womb of capitalism, is spreading over the civilized world. Its growth during the past few years has been phenomenal. The late elections in Germany, France, and other European countries were a revelation. In a few years more, probably sooner, socialism will have wrested these countries from the grasp of capitalism, and their armies will disappear as if by magic and war will be no more.

Socialism is precisely the same the wide world over. In its march, hate ceases and love begins.

The German soldiers and the French soldiers who riddled each other with balls in 1870, since touched by the magic of socialism, now stand beneath the same emancipating banner and mingle their voices in the inspiring strains of “La Marseillaise.”

War, all war, is the result of the conquest of capitalism. Cuba was exploited and all the cruel atrocities she suffered were inflicted by capitalism — the ruling class, the world over, here as elsewhere. With the end of capitalism war will cease. Then it will be in order to “beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks,”⁵ and the nations of the earth will dwell together in peace forevermore.

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¹ From “The Present Crisis,” by James Russell Lowell (1819-1891).

² Henry Lebouchère (1831-1912) was a British Liberal Party politician, writer, publisher, and theater owner.

³ President William McKinley gave thanks to God for bringing about a speedy end to the Spanish-American War in his Thanksgiving message of October 28, 1898.

⁴ The United States forced Spain out of Cuba and took possession of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippine Islands as a result of the Spanish-American War.

⁵ Allusion to *Isaiah*, chapter 2, verse 4.