



THE CHIEF'S CORNER

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“THIS WE’LL DEFEND”

THE BIRTH OF THE U.S. ARMY



After the engagements at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in April 1775, the New England colonies formed an Army of Observation to besiege British forces occupying Boston. Within a month of those encounters between British regulars and American militias, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress considered the situation in Boston and crafted an appeal to the Continental Congress, then meeting in Philadelphia. In this appeal, read in Congress on 2 June, the Massachusetts leaders noted that events had compelled them “to raise an Army . . . to defend us and all America from . . . our implacable enemies.” Their European heritage made them wary of standing armies, however, and they confessed that they “tremble at having an army (although consisting of our countrymen) established here without a civil power to provide for and countrol them.” In this spirit, Massachusetts recommended that, as Congress considered “the regulation and general direction” of the army, “that the operations may more effectually answer the purposes designed.” Two weeks after it received this appeal, the Continental Congress issued a call for ten companies of riflemen from the colonies of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia to march to Boston and join the Army of Observation. The next day, Congress selected a Virginia militia colonel and colonial legislator, George Washington, to command the army. In the two weeks between the call for troops and Washington’s assumption

of command in Cambridge on 2 July, the Massachusetts army fought British regulars to a bloody standstill at Bunker Hill, north of Boston. Although the colonial troops surrendered the field at the end of the day, the British sustained greater than 60 percent casualties, and the battle put both sides on notice that the conflict would not conclude peacefully. Washington set about turning the Army of Observation into the Continental Army, a force modeled on European imperial armies, organized and operating in accordance with the tenets of the military science of the day. This American army was the first national institution, and it came into being more than a year before the colonies declared their independence from Great Britain. The cause for which they fought transformed quickly from defense of rights as British subjects to the idea of being a free people.

The United States Army’s origin story is truly revolutionary in the sense of the vision, values, and ideals that underpinned it. George Washington hinted at these values in a letter to his opposite number in Boston, Lt. Gen. Thomas Gage. Washington had written to Gage to protest the treatment of American officers taken prisoner by British forces. Gage replied with a denial of the status of those officers under the rules of war, because he acknowledged “no Rank that is not derived from the King”—which to him meant that the Americans were not officers of an equal, opposing military force, but instead were treasonous brigands. Washington replied indignantly, but passionately. “You affect, Sir, to despise all Rank not derived from the same Source as your own,” he wrote. “I cannot conceive any more honourable, than that which flows from the uncorrupted Choice of a brave and free People—The purest Source & original Fountain of all Power.” This American army would serve not a monarch or an empire, but an idea—freedom and natural rights, expressed through a republican government of the people. This idea took form first in the Declaration of Independence and later in the United States Constitution.

In 1778, amid the Revolutionary War’s darkest days, the fledgling United States Congress established a War Office to manage the affairs of the Continental Army. Congress developed a heraldic seal to represent the office and express Washington’s vision in tangible form. At the top of the seal, a rattlesnake hisses,

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Kosovo in the 1990s enabled streamlined reviews for publication without undermining national security. Although the scale of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) presents greater complexity, these models provide a roadmap. CMH has the official archive of GWOT records. Delegating CMH specified authority to review and declassify Army war records would bridge the gap, restoring balance between immediate operational needs and the long-term imperative to provide accessible military history for decision makers, historians, and the American public.



Notes

1. George Greanias, “Goldwater Ripples: How Defense Reform Made the Fighting Force More Diplomatic,” *War on the Rocks*, 5 Sep 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/09/goldwater-ripples-how-defense-reform-made-the-fighting-force-more-diplomatic>.
2. Chairman Joint Chs Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 5320.01D, 27 Apr 2023, Guidance for the Joint History Program, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Library/Instructions/CJCSI%205320.01D.pdf>.
3. ProPublica, “Lost to History: Missing War Records Complicate Benefit Claims by Iraq, Afghanistan Veterans,” 9 Nov 2012, <https://www.propublica.org/article/lost-to-history-missing-war-records-complicate-benefit-claims-by-veterans>.
4. Memo, Dept. Army, 1 Jul 2013, sub: Collection of U.S. Army Records From Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation New Dawn, CMH Files, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, DC.
5. “Original Classification,” Code of Federal Regulations, 22 C.F.R. § 9.4. (2024).

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“This We’ll Defend.” The rattlesnake, which predates the eagle as a national symbol, had appeared on regimental colors, local flags, and even currency, often bearing slogans such as “don’t tread on me,” “peaceful unless provoked,” and “no one will provoke me with impunity.” The seal contains several other powerful symbols, rooted deeply in the nation’s origins, which held profound meaning for the country’s first soldiers. The Phrygian cap, worn by “foreigners” in ancient Greece and freed slaves in ancient Rome, symbolized liberty and a link to ancient republics, which resonated deeply with American revolutionaries who saw their struggle as a defense of natural rights. The cuirass, the panoply of arms, the cannon and cannon balls at the ready, the mortar and bombs also at the ready, the spontoon, drum, sword, and the musket with fixed bayonet represent the nation’s aggregate might in repose—ready for war, but not actively waging war—beneath the symbol of the rattlesnake. Elements of the original War Office seal eventually were used in the seal of the Department of the Army, formed out of the War Department by the National Security Act of 1947.

As we celebrate the U.S. Army’s 250th birthday and commemorate the American Revolution, it is worthwhile to reconsider the “This” that our Army defends. “This” is our republican system of government, springing from the will of a free people. “This” is civilian control of our military, in the service of defending that system and our rights. “This” is our pride in our revolutionary origins and our military members who serve as free citizens in our total force: the Regular Army, National Guard, and Reserves. “This” is our steadfast loyalty and support of our allies and partners, many of whom have shed their own blood and spent their own treasure to support us time and again. As we consider the Army’s seal, let us acknowledge and celebrate our origin story and all of these ideals.

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Notes

1. Ltr, Massachusetts Provincial Congress to Continental Congress, 16 May 1775, *The American Founding: Journals of the Continental Congress*, <https://americanfounding.org/entries/second-continental-congress-june-2-1775/>.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ltr, Lt. Gen. Thomas Gage to George Washington, 13 Aug 1775, National Archives Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-01-02-0203>.
5. Ltr, Washington to Gage, 19 Aug 1775, National Archives Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-01-02-0227>.