

Militia during the War of 1812

When the United States entered its second war with Great Britain in June of 1812, it was hardly prepared militarily. Many Americans would have argued it was unnecessary because the United States would do what it had done in the Revolution—turn to citizen-soldiers—its militia. The fact that the U.S. Navy was almost non-existent outside of the gunboats Jefferson had built for coastal defense and the authorized strength of the army was 10,000 (fewer than 7,000 actual) reflected a basic American reluctance to have large military forces of any kind. That Republicans dominated the institutions of national power and held most dearly to these principles was obvious in the underprepared military state in 1812. Republicans, like most Americans, believed the militia more than adequate to meet the nation's military needs. Peter B. Porter captured the sentiment of Americans regarding the militia—regular army soldiers were the sword and the militia was the shield of the nation.¹ Thus, when war came in June of 1812, Congress and President Madison planned to utilize the nation's shield to achieve national war aims—namely to halt British assaults wherever they may occur and to invade Canada to liberate it from British tyranny.

The Madison administration intended to raise a total force of more than 36,000 men in 1812. Despite the praise showered on militia forces by Republicans, most of those responsible for coordinating the war effort hoped that the army would consist of regulars and volunteers rather than militia forces. The preference for volunteers was simple. First, army volunteers could serve longer than militiamen. Militiamen were, in reality, well-known for simply walking away when their terms of service ended or for deserting to harvest their crops regardless of what was happening in war. This was true in the War of 1812, too, as approximately thirteen percent of soldiers deserted the army.² Second, the use of volunteers avoided the inevitable arguments over authority produced by the system of federalism. Some governors invoked states rights' when called upon to provide Madison, as commander-in-chief, with militia forces. The other immediate problem was who paid militiamen; state leaders naturally argued that it should be the federal government if the state had to give up control of its soldiers. When the war broke out some governors challenged the basis upon which state militias could be nationalized. Governors of multiple New England states opposed nationalization of their militias in 1812 following the argument of Connecticut Governor John Cotton Smith, who reasoned that the presence of the British Royal Navy did not constitute an invasion nor should it imply one was coming. Thus, President Madison had no authority to command his state's militiamen, certainly not to deploy them outside the state. Regardless of who was right on the issue militia forces, the bulk of the soldiers, 458,000 out of the 528,000 who fought in the War of 1812, were militiamen. As Donald Hickey points out, only six regiments of volunteers came forward during the whole war.³

War Hawks, especially from frontier states like Kentucky, happily offered its militia for service in the Old Northwest Territory. House Speaker Henry Clay immediately asserted both

¹ John K. Mahon, *History Of The Militia And The National Guard*, The Potowmack Institute, <http://www.potowmack.org/mahonch5.html#text25>.

² Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 222.

³ Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 77.

the superiority of militiamen as soldiers and his approval of Kentucky's militia leading the invasion of Canada when he proclaimed that the "militia of Kentucky are alone competent to place Montreal and Upper Canada at our feet." Not to be outdone, former President Thomas Jefferson quipped that the conquest of Canada would be a "mere matter of marching."⁴ Even ignoring the bravado contained in Clay's assertions about the Kentucky militia, the fact that they were willing to cross national borders as part of an invasion force made it unusual in comparison to most militiamen. Others were not so confident or as adulatory of the militia when war came.

Some Federalists members of Congress rejected the use of militias for purposes of defense and war because these soldiers were often the dregs of society. To a certain extent, such arguments are not far from the mark, and they did reflect a reality about who fights in a war. Soldiers are often-times motivated by reasons other than patriotism. That economic incentive drew men to serving in the armed forces would be difficult to make at the beginning of the War of 1812. Congress wanted volunteers, so it offered bonuses and other incentives to entice men to join up. Strapped financially, the only real thing the government had to offer soldiers was land. The cash bounty at the start of the war was \$31 and 160 acres of land; pay was \$5 a month for a private. Excluding the land bounty, compensation was pitiful considering that a common laborer could make \$10-12 per month. By 1814 Congress was offering cash bounties of \$124 and 320 acres of land.

It is more likely that the real problem with militiamen was their lack of discipline, poor training, and unreliability under combat conditions. The system of federalism left states to equip and train militia forces, and many states did not follow through with that mandate. On the western frontier or along the northern border in New England preparation of militiamen was much better, and militias from these regions generally performed better than those from states less threatened by Indians or fluid borders. Even under the best of circumstances deploying militiamen effectively was a challenge. At the start of the war when General William Hull prepared to invade Upper Canada and secure Detroit; it took him months to stage his men to leave Ohio for Michigan country. In consequence, supplies ran low, disease started to spread, and morale declined. When his men reached the border with Canada, 200 Ohio militiamen refused to go any further, an example repeated many times over in the War of 1812. One of the problems inherent in using militia forces illustrated itself early in the war: militiamen were best at defending their home regions rather than conducting offensive operations, or in this case, invading the territory of another sovereign state.

Arguably the most embarrassing performance by militia forces in the entire war came at the Battle of Bladensburg in August of 1814. In fairness, the U.S. had not done much to establish defensive forces anywhere in the area surrounding Washington, D.C., prior to June of 1814. It was only 1 July 1814 when Madison, urged on by Secretary of War John Armstrong, created a tenth military district for the capitol and placed it under the command of General William Winder. Winder had only 500 regulars for use and the militia came on board only slowly though their numbers grew rapidly once the danger posed by British forces in the Chesapeake became apparent. British forces led by Major General Robert Ross landed at Benedict, Maryland on 19 August. By 22 August, Ross' 4,500 men were sixteen miles from the

⁴ Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 73.

capitol and headed for Bladensburg, Maryland. Winder deployed his forces, about 7,000 men in total, in three lines to make a stand. Secretary of State James Monroe redeployed the force just before Ross engaged the American defenders. The American lines were too far apart and unable to support one another; the militiamen retreated after the British outflanked the first line. At the worst moment possible, Winder pulled the second line back right as British attackers reached it; the battle became a rout called the “Bladensburg races.” When the regulars broke after the militia defending their flank fled, the path was clear for Ross to attack Washington, D.C. Such incidents occurred throughout the war and are the most commonly highlighted examples of condemnation for the militia.

It would be unfair to base the assessment of militia forces on such a few well-known examples. Militiamen performed well in other battles, especially if they had combat experience. The militia turned back British invaders at North Point in Maryland and killed General Robert Ross just before the assault on Fort McHenry and Baltimore. Andrew Jackson’s militia, working with regulars and volunteers annihilated British invaders at New Orleans to give the United States a lopsided and clear victory, even if it was after the peace treaty had been signed.

In hindsight it is easy to condemn the militia and be thankful that the United States has the professional armed forces it does today. Yet, that would not be true if not for the experiences and lessons learned in the War of 1812. Frankly stated, the U.S. had to rely on state militias because it did not have enough regular soldiers, nor did it have the time to train them. The professional army, if it could be called that, could not even defend the frontier against Native Americans, yet alone one of the most formidable militaries in the world. The problems frequently cited as negatives of relying on militiamen are also unfair to some extent. Pulling citizens away from their normal lives disrupted entire communities, and those disturbances filtered through to magnify the other problems that the war exposed in American society. In the end, the militia, comprising the vast majority of land-based forces in the War of 1812, performed well enough to defend America from military conquests and preserve the nation’s independence.

Eugene Van Sickle
Assistant Professor of American History
University of North Georgia

FURTHER READING:

Budiansky, Stephen. *Perilous Fight: America’s Intrepid War with Britain on the High Seas, 1812-1815*. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

Hickey, Donald R. *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

Skeen, C. Edward. *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999.

Stagg, J.C.A. *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Taylor, Alan. *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.