

Social history of soldiers and veterans in the United States

The **social history of soldiers and veterans in United States history** covers the role of Army soldiers and veterans in the United States from colonial foundations to the present, with emphasis on the social, cultural, economic and political roles apart from strictly military functions. It also covers the militia and the National Guard.

Colonial militia

The colonial militia were primarily justified in terms of nearby threats by hostile Indians or foreign powers. The fear of slave revolts grew ominous in the Southern United States. In political crises, militia were sometimes used for a coup d'état, as in Boston in 1689. If they disagreed with their government's policy, they might refuse a summons as happened in Boston in 1747. The first large-scale use to deal with a natural disaster came with the devastating fire in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in 1802.



Baron von Steuben drilling the Continental Army at Valley Forge, in 1777–1778.



New England

The militia played a crucial role in the New England Colonies, especially in Massachusetts and Connecticut. They served as the primary line of defense and community organization. The Massachusetts Bay Colony established its militia system in the early 1630s, modeled after the traditional English militia system. Service in the militia was compulsory for nearly all able-bodied white men between 16 and 60 living in the town. They were required to join the local militia, and provide their own weapons and uniforms. A hierarchical command structure was established, with a Sergeant Major General overseeing the entire colony's militia, but in practice the local town officials controlled its militia. The men elected their own officers, typically choosing leading citizens with minimal military experience. Drills were infrequent, usually amounting to a few days a year. When they were needed to defend the town, a subset of paid volunteers was used for a specific mission for a specified number of months. When The entire body of militia was called out, a man could avoid duty by paying a fine or providing a substitute. For the most part, militias on active duty contained officers from the local elite, and privates from the poorest sector who needed the pay. Few or none had prior military experience or advanced training.^{[1][2]}

Wars and raids were frequent in the colonial era, involving the nearby outposts of the French or Spanish empires, or hostile Indian tribes. The French often used Indian allies to raid outlying towns in New England. The militia was responsible for defending against attacks by the French and their Native Americans allies, as well as by independent Indian tribes. The militia often used their own Indian allies. The militia and their allies played the central role in the destruction of the Pequot Indians in the Pequot War of 1636–1638, as well as victory in the hard-fought King Philip's War of 1675–1676.^[3]

In the 18th century the British Army fought the French Army in a series of major European wars, especially the French and Indian War of 1754–1763. Important battles took place in North America that ended in expelling the French from North America. American militia played ancillary roles, but were often ridiculed by British officers as hopelessly undisciplined amateurs who lacked respect for authority.^{[4][5]}

1689 Boston revolt

In the late 1680s Governor Edmund Andros, representing King James II and the Catholic faction in power in London, consolidated the northern colonies into the Dominion of New England. He thus stripped away much of the power of colonial governments in New England, New York, and the two Jersey colonies. The elites were angry at their loss of control. When rumor arrived in April 1689 of the king's overthrow, local forces in Boston used the militia to overthrow Andros and his regular army troops. No shots were fired; no one was killed or injured. Bostonians long celebrated their use of the militia to overthrow unlawful attempts to challenge their historic right of self-government.^[6]

1747 Boston's militia refusal

In November 1747, Admiral Charles Knowles of the Royal Navy made port in Boston on the way to action against France in the Caribbean during the War of the Austrian Succession. His crews were shorthanded and he sent in a press gang to seize likely sailors regardless of their status. A mob of 300 sailors assembled to block the press gang; it escalated into a three-day riot. Governor William Shirley called for calm, but he represented British authority and he was chased by the mob to the safety of Castle William. The governor called out the militia, but only 20 men responded: Boston's militiamen were refusing to obey the order of the king's governor to help impress sailors for the king's fleet in wartime. Admiral Knowles prepared to bombard the city. Shirley managed to convince him to release some of the impressed men and the mob dispersed. Knowles finally sailed off, ending the most serious challenge against imperial authority in the American colonies to take place before the Stamp Act crisis.^{[7][8][9]}

1775: Lexington and Concord

As threats evolved, so did the militia system. In the 1770s, some towns created elite "minutemen" companies that trained more intensely and could respond rapidly to British threats.^[10] The minutemen played a crucial role in the early stages of the American Revolution, particularly at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775. British spies had reported that two top Patriots were in Lexington and that large stores of munitions were in Concord. The British decided to send a midnight march by 900 elite troops to neutralize the threat. The Massachusetts Provincial Congress had ordered all towns to activate and train their militias, and prepare for action. Around Boston the Minutemen had built a large network of informants focused on quick reaction. Patriot spies somehow learned of the plan and before midnight on April 18 Paul Revere and 40 others were spreading the alarm. At least 80 militia companies were involved with about 4000 soldiers. Dozens of towns rang church bells and mobilized for battle. The British did not find leaders at Lexington or munition at Concord. At noon they started

back encountering time and again ambushes from about a thousand militia riflemen firing from about 100 yards. At last a relief column rescued them but not before a third became casualties, including nearly half the officers.^[11]

Middle colonies

Leisler's Rebellion in New York City 1689-1691

In Britain, religious tensions flared between King James II, a Catholic, and the anti-Catholics who led the Glorious Revolution and installed William and Mary. When rumors reached New York in 1689, the anti-Catholic Yankees on Long Island were energized, and at one point sent their militia units on a march to the city to oust the pro-Catholic element. They turned back, however, and there were no episodes of rival militias fighting for political power. Soon a prominent businessman Jacob Leisler used the militia unit he controlled to seize power, and proclaim himself lieutenant governor awaiting the new governor to be appointed by the new monarchs. He ruled for two years. London finally sent in a new governor whom Leisler refused to recognize. Tensions mounted, with Leisler's militia confronting the king's forces. There was no fighting. Leisler finally gave in. He was arrested, found guilty of treason, and punished by the most gruesome method known: he was Hanged, drawn and quartered.^[12]

Southern Colonies

Powhatan wars in Virginia

After a large-scale Indian attack in Virginia in 1644 that killed hundreds of settlers, the militia launched a three-pronged campaign that dealt a decisive defeat to the Powhatan Indian confederation. The original Indian population collapsed by 90+ percent through warfare and disease.^{[13][14]}

Bacon's Rebellion, 1676–1677

Bacon's Rebellion was an armed rebellion by Virginia settlers in their militia units that took place from 1676 to 1677. It was led by Nathaniel Bacon against Governor William Berkeley, after Berkeley refused Bacon's request to drive Indians out of Virginia.^[15] Thousands of Virginians from races and all classes (including those in indentured servitude) rose up in arms against Berkeley, chasing him from Jamestown and ultimately torching the settlement. The rebellion was first suppressed by a few armed merchant ships from London whose captains sided with Berkeley.^[16] Bacon died of disease in October 1676, and John Ingram took control of the rebel militias. More forces arrived from England and Governor Berkeley won out. He hanged 23 rebels. The next governor began reforms.^[17]

Fear of slave rebellion

In the South, large-scale plantation agriculture dominated the coastal regions of Virginia and South Carolina, with heavy majorities of enslaved people. Fear of slave rebellion became a major factor strengthening the militia. Only a few relatively small revolts actually broke out. Inland the economy was based on small white-owned farms, with a risk of conflict with Native Americans. The entire South had few cities, apart from Baltimore and Charleston.^[18]

Stono slave rebellion, 1739

On September 9, 1739, an enslaved man named Jemmy gathered 22 enslaved Africans near the Stono River, 20 miles (30 km) southwest of Charleston. South Carolina. They marched down the roadway with a banner that read "Liberty!", and chanted the same word. They raided a store at the Stono River Bridge, killing two storekeepers and seizing weapons and ammunition. Raising a flag, the marchers proceeded south toward Spanish Florida, an unsettled area that was a refuge for individual escapees. On the way, they gathered more recruits, sometimes reluctant ones, for a total of 81. They burned six plantations and killed 23 to 28 whites along the way. The alarm was raised and the local militia rushed to confront the rebels. About a hundred well-armed mounted men caught them at the Edisto River. In the ensuing battle, 23 whites and 47 slaves were killed. The following week several additional militia units arrived on the scene. Small groups and individuals who had escaped were tracked down and shot. The government executed most of the rebels who surrendered, and sold the rest in the West Indies. White colonists up and down the South never forgot the episode, and kept the militia in good order to suppress any kind of repetition. For the next century and more even the smallest rumor or suspicious fire would incite a quick investigation of a supposed conspiracy, but few actual plots were discovered.^{[19][20]}

French and Indian War

Young George Washington played a major role in the Virginia militia against Indians and against the French.^{[21][22]}

American Revolution

Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a captain in the elite Prussian army rebuilt his career in America, serving as a general who became the chief training officer for the Continental Army. At Valley Forge in the harsh winter of 1777-1778, he taught the officers who in turn taught their men the latest drills and tactics as developed in Berlin.^[23]

The social structure of the American Army in the Revolutionary and Early Republic eras was stratified, although not as sharply as in Europe. Historian G. Kurt Piehler observes that in 1783 the formation of the first organization for veterans, the Society of the Cincinnati, highlighted the stark social divide that existed within the military. This exclusive organization was hereditary and elitist, open only to officers and their eldest male descendants. It deliberately excluded enlisted soldiers from membership and appeared to critics as an effort to impose on the new nation the worst features of the rigid European class system. The Society of the Cincinnati reflected the broader class distinctions prevalent in the Continental Army. While the officer corps was largely drawn from the landowning gentry, the enlisted ranks were predominantly composed of less privileged groups, including the landless poor, indentured servants and African American slaves.^[24]

Life and death

Soldiers from all social classes were disappointed at the weak support they received from civilians on the homefront. Historian John Shy notes that after 1776, Patriots espoused the ideals of shared sacrifice for the new republic, but in practice, most shied away from the rigors and dangers of military service. This reluctance created a stark contrast between rhetoric and reality. The Continental Army, bearing the brunt of the war effort, found itself in a precarious position. Its soldiers grew increasingly frustrated with the neglect from both the

civilian population and political leadership. Paradoxically, despite the colonies' abundant agricultural resources and sizable population, the Continental Army struggled constantly with manpower shortages and logistical failures. They endured inadequate reinforcements, unreliable pay, and poor food and clothing. The winter at Valley Forge verged on disaster. The disconnect between the new nation's potential and the Army's actual support became a source of ongoing tension throughout the war.^[25]



1st Maryland Regiment holding the line at the Battle of Guilford Court House, 1781

Shy estimates that 150,000 to 200,000 Americans served in the Revolution, about one in every ten men who were white and not loyal to the King. About 25,000 died and perhaps 25,000 came home crippled. After the first wave of enthusiasm, enlisted men were drawn largely from the poorer classes.^[26] John Ruddiman argues that universal service in the peacetime militia meant that all young white men knew that everyone could see them in adult company with men of all levels of local society. It validated their manliness and their maturity. Volunteering for the Continental Army, however, was a different experience because it recruited from lower ranks of society. The recruits were surrounded by strangers of about the same age, who on the whole were younger, poorer, and more marginal than most adults. Drilling was far more intense and frequent, and it was not for show but for survival. As veterans their post-war status tended to reflect how they started with less and never caught up, despite their aspirations to "Becoming Men of Some Consequence."^{[27][28]}

Black soldiers

African Americans, both as slaves and freemen, served on both sides. About 9,000 black soldiers served on the American side, counting the Continental Army and Navy, state militia units, as well as privateers, wagoneers in the Army, servants, officers and spies.^[29] Ray Raphael notes that while thousands did join the Loyalist cause, "A far larger number, free as well as slave, tried to further their interests by siding with the patriots."^[30]

Black soldiers served in Northern militias from the outset, but this was forbidden in the South, where slave-owners feared arming slaves. Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation in November 1775, promising freedom to runaway slaves who fought for the British. From 800 to 2,000 slaves took up the invitation. The only notable battle in which Dunmore's regiment participated was the Battle of Great Bridge in Virginia in December 1775, which was a decisive British loss.^[31] Dunmore's strategy was ultimately unsuccessful as the Black troops were decimated by smallpox.^[32]

Many of the Black Loyalists performed military service in the British Army, particularly as part of the only Black regiment of the war, the Black Pioneers, and others served non-military roles.^[33] After the war many Black Loyalist migrated to Nova Scotia and later to Sierra Leone; others went to Britain.^[34]

In response to Dunmore's proclamation, Washington lifted the ban on black enlistment in the Continental Army in January 1776. All-black units were formed in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. They included slaves promised freedom for serving as replacements when their masters were drafted.^{[35][36]}

Prisoners of war

New York City, Philadelphia in 1777, and Charleston, South Carolina, were the major cities the British used to hold American prisoners of war. Facilities were harsh. Edwin Burrows estimates that the British captured over 30,000 Americans, and that about 17,500 died in captivity, compared to 6,800 who died in battle.^[37] During the war, at least 16 hulks, including the infamous HMS Jersey, were used in the waters of Wallabout Bay off the shores of Brooklyn, New York, as a place of incarceration. The prisoners were harassed and abused by guards who, with little success, offered release to those who agreed to serve in the British Navy. Over 10,000 American prisoners died there.^{[38][39][40]}

Patriot vs Loyalist militias

During the Revolutionary War, militia units supporting independence (Patriots or Whigs) sometimes fought against militia units loyal to the Crown (Loyalists or Tories). Conflict was particularly intense in North Carolina after 1781, when the main British and Continental armies left the state. The resulting "Tory War" was a vicious struggle between local militia factions.^[41]

In New York City and western Long Island, with 50,000 Loyalist refugees, the British set up new militia units with 16,000 men. They did not fight the Patriot forces.^[42]

Protests by unpaid soldiers

The combat phase of the Revolution ended in 1781 with an American victory but the peacemaking process took another two years. Meanwhile, Congress and the states were practically insolvent and were far behind in paying the troops of the Continental Army. The growing anger resulted in two attempted mutinies. Washington himself quelled the one threatened by senior officers in the Newburgh Conspiracy in March 1783. In June 1783 some 300 enlisted men, without their officers, marched on Congress in Philadelphia demanding back pay. Promises were made and there was no violence. However Congress quickly left Philadelphia and reopened in the small college town of Princeton, New Jersey. Robert Morris, in charge of finances, faced a complex of issues, according to Kenneth R. Bowling, the solution finally arrived at took into account the various laws and processes of the states, Congress, and different Army divisions. Besides overdue wages and bounties, both the national government and the individual states had to factor in tax-exempt land titles, clothing stipends, and additional provisions when making calculations. Every soldier required individual assessment due to the significant discrepancies in their accounts. Morris understood that reaching a resolution would take years, and he firmly maintained his stance, emphasizing that the longer the Army remained, the less probable it would be that they would return home peacefully.^[43]

Veterans revolt: Shays's Rebellion 1786-1787

A massive regional insurrection took place in Western Massachusetts as embittered farmers and small town businessmen were badly indebted by statewide taxation, banking, and economic policies imposed from Boston.^[44] Their repeated demands for relief were ignored by the state legislature. Local leaders called themselves "Regulators," mobilized the militias, and systematically shut down the entire court system in the western half of the state. The Boston elite counter-mobilized. The national government was too weak to help in any way, so the governor's allies called out the militia units from eastern Massachusetts, and Boston bankers funded a new private militia. They marched west to a showdown. On both sides, nearly all of the officers and most of the men were veterans of the Revolutionary War. The Regulators had typically been in the militia rather than the Continental army. The Regulator leadership by Daniel Shays and Luke Day proved very poor, with a

lack of planning and confused decisions in combat. By contrast, leadership challenges were well handled by the government troops. In the decisive confrontation in January 1787, three separate insurgent militia groups of about 1200 men each were badly coordinated in an attack on the state arsenal in Springfield. At the first counterattack, the men broke and ran. State forces quickly forced the insurgents to surrender or go into exile. Most were pardoned and some economic reforms were made. The episode was used by national leaders to call for a new constitution for a national government that could be capable of handling future large scale insurgency.^{[45][46][47]}

Veterans' response to the new Constitution in 1788

In the New York and Pennsylvania conventions that ratified the proposed new Constitution in 1788, delegates who had served in the militia tended to be Anti-Federalists and opposed ratification, while delegates who served in the Continental Army favored the new constitution. Historian Edwin G Burrows argues this represents a cleavage between the “localist” elites and the “cosmopolitan” elites in the same community. Anti-Federalists were hostile to having their local defense forces shifted elsewhere even temporarily. Federalists on the other hand saw the way to unite the new nation was to have men from every state mingling together in the national army.^[48]

Veterans form controversial Society of the Cincinnati

The first (and only) major veterans organization was the Society of the Cincinnati, formed in 1783. It was open to officers of the Continental Army and their eldest son, but not to militia officers. It became highly controversial, sparking allegations that it was a hereditary elite group that would create a new aristocracy to overwhelm republicanism. Its president was George Washington, but he tried and failed to remove the objectional features. He became inactive and the Society became an inconspicuous social club; it still exists.^[49]

New Nation 1790-1860

After 1815 the main combat roles included coastal defense, which was never seriously challenged, and control of the Indian populations. The Army helped with the removal of Eastern tribes to reservations west of the Mississippi River, especially Oklahoma. The resistance in the Black Hawk War of 1832 was handled by the Illinois militia. The Cayuse War after 1847 was handled by the Oregon militia. There were three major Indian wars in Florida, 1816 to 1848, which finally ended with the defeat of the Seminoles and their removal to reservations in Oklahoma. The Seminoles had the advantage of understanding of the swamps, and made malaria a weapon. The Army suffered 1,465 deaths in Florida, mostly from malaria.^[50] In the Western territories, the chief military role was to keep the main travel routes open; keep the Indians on reservations where they were supposed to become “civilized” by becoming farmers; and prevent the tribes from raiding settlements or fighting each other. There were over 200 armed clashes with Indians from 1848 to 1861, but they were sporadic. The typical soldier on the frontier had perhaps one battle with Indians every five years.^{[51] [52]}

Whiskey Rebellion 1791–1794

Funding the new government was a high priority for Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, a veteran who had been Washington's top aide in the Revolution. To win support in the states, the federal government assumed the debts of each state as well as the debts of the Continental Congress. To pay the debts the government

imposed tariffs on imports, and a tax on whiskey. The western farmers were outraged—they turned their grain into whiskey because it was much easier to transport and sell than the grain. They took up arms, but did not use the militia system. They expelled tax collectors and defied the national government. Washington and Hamilton took action in 1794, but they had only a small weak national army. Instead of using it they asked governors for the use of state militia. Washington personally marched west heading 13,000 militiamen provided by Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, and New Jersey. The rebellion immediately collapsed. There was no combat, the militias returned home, and the taxes were collected.^[53]

War of 1812

In this side-show to the great Napoleonic Wars in Europe, the U.S. Army started with 6,500 men and grew to 50,000. The British started with 5,000 troops in Canada and ended with 26,000. The U.S. depended mostly on the state militias, where 398,000 served for less than six months and another 60,000 for somewhat longer terms.^[54] The militiamen carried their own long rifles while the British typically carried less accurate muskets. Congress and the governing Democratic-Republican Party was hostile to a standing army but put its trust in the state militia for ideological reasons unrelated to the needs of fighting a major war. Consequently Leadership was inconsistent in the professional officer corps—some proved themselves to be outstanding, but many others were inept, owing their positions to political favours. The officer corps was amateurish—only the youngest of them had graduated from West Point and the creation of a professional corps would take another two decades.^[55]

Washington depended on the state militias to fight the war, but New England governors (except Vermont) refused to send them.^[56] The militias were poorly trained, poorly armed, and badly led by local politicians.^[57] The British Army soundly defeated the Maryland and Virginia militias at the Battle of Bladensburg in 1814 and President James Madison commented "I could never have believed so great a difference existed between regular troops and a militia force, if I had not witnessed the scenes of this day".^[58]

The British Royal Navy captured numerous American warships, and held 14,000 sailors and marines captive. Conditions were much more humane than in the 1770s.^[59]

Local public and private militias

The traditional militia system largely died out after 1815. It survived in the Black Belt districts of the Deep South. There the slave population outnumbered the white population often by margins of 2-1 or 3-1 or higher. Whites feared slave revolts, though only one of any size broke out. The Nat Turner's Rebellion in Virginia in 1831 killed about 60 whites. It was suppressed by the militia in two days.^[60] In some frontier areas, where the regular Army was in charge of Indian affairs, local militia drills took place, just in case.^[61] In most places across the nation the traditional militia became a social club with jovial meetings and no real military drilling. A new phenomenon emerged: private military clubs, usually based on ethnic, religious or cultural camaraderie. Members bought their own elaborate uniforms and weapons, prided themselves in drill formations, and played a role in local politics.^[62] The Mormons, a fast-growing religious body with many enemies, organized its men into private militia companies for self defense. The most famous included the Nauvoo Legion in Illinois in 1841–1844 and the Utah Territorial Militia in 1847–1887.^{[63][64]}

Mexican–American War 1846–1848

There were striking resemblances between the Mexican War and the Civil War from the soldiers' perspective. The men who volunteered in 1861 were similar to the men of 1846 in terms of how recruitment worked, their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and their organization into friendly social relationships like the old militias, rather than the rigidity of the peacetime army. One major difference was that the 1846 cohort rarely saw defeat or capture, while that was far more common in the 1860s.^[65] A total of 101,000 American soldiers were mobilized, including 27,000 regulars and 74,000 volunteers; the typical volunteer served for 10 months. Deaths in battle totaled 1,549; another 11,000 died from disease and accident. Mexican losses were much higher but accurate data is lacking. The Civil War death rates were much higher.^[66]

As regimental commanders, volunteer colonels were vital to American military efforts, raising units of volunteer soldiers who agreed to serve outside US boundaries. They came from western states, especially Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Mississippi. Of the 63 volunteer colonels on active duty in 1846, 14 belonged to the Whig Party, indicating that Whigs were not monolithic in their opposition to the war. The colonels accumulated a mixed wartime record of leadership, and their backgrounds varied greatly. Some had no military experience prior to 1846, but others had graduated from West Point, served in the regular army, seen combat in war or on the frontier, or held rank in a state militia. The colonels also varied widely in holding political office before and after the war. Several of them were experienced politicians before 1846 who also held important offices after the war, showing that most colonels were recognized figures in their home states.^[67]

According to historian Kevin Dougherty, many of the senior commanders on both sides of the American Civil War, including Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant, gained their most useful military experience in this war. Most helpful to Grant was the insight he gained about the rival Confederate generals he faced, explaining "The Mexican War made the officers of the old regular armies more or less acquainted, and when we knew the name of the general opposing we knew enough about him to make our plans accordingly. What determined my attack on Fort Donelson was as much the knowledge I had gained of its commanders in Mexico as anything else."^[68] Lee was impressed by the quick payoff of intelligent reconnaissance and the power of a swift-striking flanking movement. Throughout the Civil War, Lee insisted on thorough reconnaissance. Lee's flanking movement at Chancellorsville echoed Winfield Scott's at Cerro Gordo. George B. McClellan learned the value of sieges, such as the one Scott imposed on Vera Cruz. Stonewall Jackson applied his observations of swift-striking flanking movements in his Shenandoah Valley campaign, and at Chancellorsville. Samuel Francis Du Pont learned how to blockade Mexican ports, which he applied in his blockade of Confederate ports. Joseph Hooker used his experience in military management to reorganize the Union armies before Chancellorsville in 1863.^[69]

Civil War, 1861–1865

In total, the Union Army had 2,200,000 soldiers, or 11% of the population of 26 million. Turnover was high; there were 698,000 at their wartime peak. The Confederacy had 750,000 to 1,000,000 soldiers, or 9% to 12% of the population of 8.1 million. Their peak was 360,000.^{[70][71]}

Volunteers and conscription

The vast majority of Union troops were volunteers; of the 2,200,000 Union soldiers, about 2% were draftees, and another 6% were substitutes provided by draftees. The draft ("conscription") was started in 1863 primarily as a device to encourage volunteers who were usually paid generous signing bonuses by their locality, while draftees were not. A man who was drafted could go war, or provide a substitute (like a younger brother), or pay

\$300 to the government,^{[72][73]} Towns had a quota to fill for the draft law, and gave very generous bonuses for volunteers—as much as \$400 when \$1 a day was the typical wage in the civilian economy. Some took the bonus but then deserted and then went elsewhere to claim another bonus by enlisting again. Other deserters went to Canada, or kept hidden with help from family and friends. Using incomplete records, the Army guessed there were 200,000 men who deserted one or more times 1863 to 1865. About 15,000 went to Canada, 5,000 to the western territories, and perhaps 1,000 to Europe. The vast majority were somewhere in the North, of whom 80,000 had been recaptured. After the war ended, there was no punishment and most returned to a normal life.^[74]



Soldiers of the New York 7th Regiment, circa 1861

Death and survival

In the Civil War, as was typical of the 19th century, far more soldiers died of disease than in battle, and even larger numbers were temporarily incapacitated by wounds, disease and accidents.^[75] Conditions were very poor in the Confederacy, where doctors, hospitals and medical supplies were in short supply.^{[76][77][78]}

Doctors did not know about germs and the hygiene was poor. The risk was highest at the beginning of the war when men who had seldom been far from home were brought together for training alongside thousands of strangers who carried unfamiliar



Union Army surgical kit from 1864, designed for quick amputations.

germs. Men from rural areas were twice as likely to die from infectious diseases as soldiers from urban areas.^[79] New recruits first encountered epidemics of the childhood diseases of chicken pox, mumps, whooping cough, and, especially, measles. Later the fatal disease environment included diarrhea, dysentery, typhoid fever, and malaria. Disease vectors were often unknown. Bullet wounds often led to gangrene, usually necessitating an amputation before it became fatal. The surgeons used chloroform if available, whiskey otherwise.^[80] Harsh weather, bad water, inadequate shelter in winter quarters, poor sanitation within the camps, and dirty camp hospitals took their toll.^[81] This was a common scenario in wars from time immemorial, and conditions faced by the Confederate army were even worse since the blockade sharply reduced medical supplies.

The Union responded by building 204 army hospitals with 137,000 beds, with doctors, nurses and staff as needed, as well as hospital ships and trains located close to the battlefields. Mortality was only 8 percent.^[82] What was different in the Union was the emergence of skilled, well-funded medical organizers who took proactive action, especially in the much enlarged United States Army Medical Department,^[83] and the United

States Sanitary Commission, a new private agency.^[84] Numerous other new agencies also targeted the medical and morale needs of soldiers, including the United States Christian Commission as well as smaller private agencies such as the Women's Central Association of Relief for Sick and Wounded in the Army (WCAR) founded in 1861 by Henry Whitney Bellows, and Dorothea Dix. Systematic funding appeals raised public consciousness, as well as millions of dollars. Many thousands of volunteers worked in the hospitals and rest homes, most famously poet Walt Whitman.^[85]

Conditions were much worse in the Confederacy, with far fewer hospitals, physicians and medicines, compounded by poor nutrition (especially a shortage of vitamins) and shortage of blankets, raincoats and shoes, increased the likelihood of disease.^{[86][87]} A typical Confederate soldier was three times more likely to die in the war than his Unionist counterpart.^[88]

African American soldiers

African Americans, including former enslaved individuals, served in the American Civil War. The 186,097 black men who joined the Union Army included 7,122 officers and 178,975 enlisted soldiers.^[89] Approximately 20,000 black sailors served in the Union Navy and formed a large percentage of many ships' crews.

Later in the war, many regiments were recruited and organized as the United States Colored Troops, which reinforced the Northern forces substantially during the conflict's last two years. Both Northern Free Negro and Southern runaway slaves joined the fight. Throughout the course of the war, black soldiers served in forty major battles and hundreds of more minor skirmishes; sixteen African Americans received the Medal of Honor.^[2]

For the Confederacy, both free and enslaved black Americans were used for manual labor, but the issue of whether to arm them, and under what terms, became a major source of debate. In the last month of the war; in March 1865, a small program attempted to recruit, train, and arm blacks, but no significant numbers were ever raised or recruited, and those that were never saw combat.^[90]

Indian Frontier: 1840-1890

Frontier forts

The Army set up over two hundred small posts and forts in the vast region west of the Mississippi River. See List of forts in the United States. After 1865, national policy called for all Indians either to assimilate into the American population as citizens, or to live peacefully on reservations. Raids and wars between tribes were not allowed, and armed Indian bands off a reservation were the responsibility of the Army to round up and return.^[91] The forts typically held a company of infantry or cavalry. Mostly they were there to guard transportation routes and railroads, and to protect travellers. Daily life was characterized by hardship, monotony, and occasional bursts of danger. The difficult conditions at small remote forts led to poor morale and high desertion rates by enlisted men who joined primarily to escape personal problems back East.^{[92][93][94]}

Career soldiers, on the other hand, developed a strong sense of camaraderie as the isolation created a unique military culture separate from civilian society. Most of the officers had combat commands during the Civil War, that guaranteed a high degree of pride and honor, even though postwar promotions were very slow.

Furthermore In the 1870s the Army's visionary leaders William Tecumseh Sherman and Emory Upton planned for systematic professionalization, which was finally implemented by President Theodore Roosevelt and his Secretary of War Elihu Root in the first decade of the 20th century.^{[95][96][97]}

According to historian Gregory Michno, Army records show that bloody confrontations in the West were most common in Arizona (with Apaches) and Texas (with Comanches). There were at least 21,000 casualties, of which 31% were soldiers and civilians and 69% were Indians. He was unable to estimate the casualties that resulted when two tribes fought each other.^[98]

Buffalo Soldiers: African Americans on the frontier

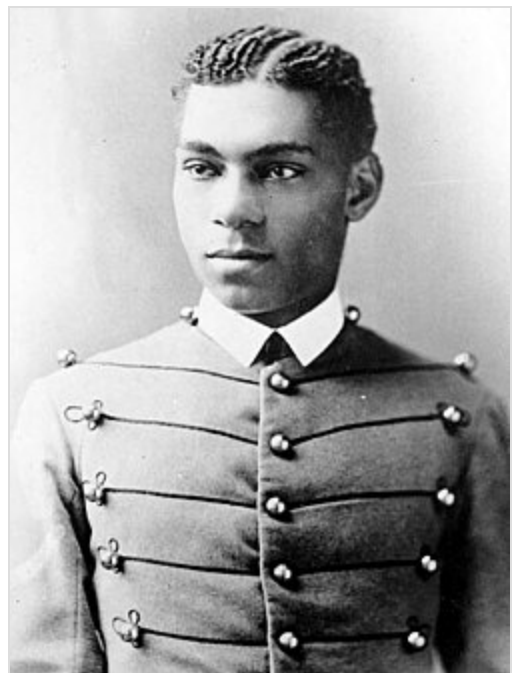
Buffalo Soldiers were Army regiments composed exclusively of African American soldiers, with mostly white officers. They serve at forts on the Western frontier to build roads and to protect and maintain transcontinental travel to California and Oregon. Occasionally they dealt with Indians assigned to reservations, especially in the conflicts known as the American Indian Wars. Congress in 1866 passed legislation to incorporate Blacks in the regular peacetime army; in 1866 the 10th Cavalry Regiment was formed from Black veterans of the Civil War.^[99] The nickname "Buffalo Soldiers" was coined by the tribes which fought against them and the term eventually became synonymous with all four of the African American regiments. From 1870 to 1898, the total strength of the US Army averaged 25,000 men, with blacks accounting for ten percent. The Army had about 2,700 military engagements with tribes 1866–1898. The Buffalo Soldiers were involved in 141 of these, or about 5%.^[100]

Veterans organize for pensions and national reunification

The Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) was a fraternal organization composed of veterans of the Union Army, Union Navy and the Marines who served in the American Civil War. It was founded in 1866 in the Midwest and reached 30,000 members by 1878. By focusing on the goal of federal pensions it expanded to a peak of 410,000 members in 1890. the great majority of whom voted Republican. Thousands of posts across the North and West carried the message that the veterans had saved the Union and America should be forever grateful by celebrating the achievement and honoring the heroes with commemorations and monuments. And with cash pensions.^[101] In 1896, pensions accounted for 40% of all federal spending, and solved the problem of



Veterans of the 7th Minnesota Infantry Regiment who fought in the Dakota War of 1862



Henry O. Flipper in 1877 became the first black commissioned officer to lead the Buffalo Soldiers.

how to deal with the cash surpluses generated by high tariffs. The Bureau of Pensions provided monthly funds that averaged \$12 to 750,000 veterans, and 222,000 dependents, especially widows. The money reached 63% of all surviving Union veterans.^{[102][103]}

According to Stuart McConnell, the GAR, "was the most powerful single-issue political lobby of the late nineteenth century, securing massive pensions for veterans and helping to elect five postwar presidents from its own membership [Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Harrison and McKinley]. To its members, it was also a secret fraternal order, a source of local charity, a provider of entertainment in small municipalities, and a patriotic organization."^[104]

Linking men through their experience of the war, the GAR became among the first organized advocacy groups in American politics, supporting voting rights for black veterans, promoting patriotic education, making Memorial Day a national holiday, lobbying Congress to establish regular veterans' pensions, and supporting Republican candidates on the pension issue. In the 1880s Grover Cleveland, the only postwar Democrat to reach the White House, became famous for his sarcastic vetoes of pension bills for individual veterans passed by Congress, arguing that many were fraudulent attempts to cheat the government.^[105]



The 50th reunion of Allentown's First Defenders, a Union army unit during the Civil War, 1911

Confederate veterans could have their memorials and comradeship, but not a penny of federal pensions. As a result the ex-Confederate states set up their own pension systems. With their base in an impoverished region, they could provide only a small fraction of the money accorded Union pensioners.^[106]

The GAR practised friendly cooperation with Confederate veterans' organizations, especially the United Confederate Veterans. They each played a major role in promoting a deep reunification of the nation. Southern educator Jabez L. M. Curry told the 1896 national convention of the United Confederate Veterans that their organization was not formed, "in malice or in mischief, in disaffection, or in rebellion, nor to keep alive sectional hates, nor to awaken revenge for defeat, nor to kindle disloyalty to the Union." Rather their "recognition of the glorious deeds of our comrades is perfectly consistent with loyalty to the flag and devotion to the Constitution and the resulting Union." The convention agreed with him and formally resolved the Confederate veteran has: "returned to the Union as an equal, and he remains in the Union as a friend. With no humble apologies, no unmanly servility, no petty spite, no sullen treachery, he is a cheerful, frank citizen of the United States, accepting the present, trusting the future, and proud of the past."^[107]

Spain, Cuba and the Philippines: 1898-1901

The war with Spain emerged from a wave of humanitarian concern for the atrocities that Spain was using to suppress the Cuban demands for independence. Support for war was widespread, with the business community the only major antiwar factor. The war was quickly won by the US Navy, using the fleets it modernized in the 1890s. Two victories smashed the Spanish fleets and ended Spain's ability to control its empire. They were the Battle of Manila Bay in May in the Philippines and the Battle of Santiago de Cuba, in July in Cuba. The US did prepare for a ground war, but instead of using the regular Army—still scattered about in frontier forts—it depended on new volunteers quickly trained and assembled in Florida. The fighting was over in a matter of

weeks. The ground aspect comprised only a few small-scale battles in eastern Cuba which forced the Spanish fleet to leave Santiago harbor. The most famous was the Battle of San Juan Hill, where Theodore Roosevelt was prominent.^[108]

Medical disaster

The Spanish–American War of 1898 was a medical disaster for American forces. In the entire war from May 1 to September 20, 1898, 345 died from combat and 2,565 died from disease.^[109] Disease was rampant, with 25,000 soldiers hospitalized, of whom 21,000 contracted typhoid fever and 1,590 died from it. The epidemic impacted every regiment, with camps in the states proving deadlier than the Cuban battlefields. The Army's long experience in tiny isolated western forts led to a lack of awareness of the urgent need for sewage control in large camps. Other factors included insufficient medical supplies and equipment, and hastily organized volunteer regiments with inexperienced civilian doctors. Public opinion was outraged, and resulted in major reforms in military healthcare led by Walter Reed.^{[110][111][112]}

Guerilla warfare in the Philippines

Unexpectedly the conflict in Philippines was on a much larger scale over four years. It was not the Spanish but Filipino allies of the U.S. who as soon as Spain lost demanded that the Americans depart the Philippines. McKinley rejected that demand and sent in wave after wave of troops all the way across the Pacific. Altogether, about 126,000 soldiers, most of them new volunteers, rotated through in the Philippines between 1898 and 1902. About 4,000 died—1,000 from battles, and 3,000 more from disease and accidents. An additional 3,000 were seriously wounded.^[113]

Before 1898 Washington had no interest in the Philippines, a remote Spanish colony. In one of the first actions of the war, the fleet under Admiral George Dewey rushed to the Battle of Manila Bay and sank the Spanish fleet. Dewey remained offshore. He also brought in Filipino rebels led by Emilio Aguinaldo, who had been in exile. A debate exploded on whether to leave or to take full control of the Philippines. Across the U.S. a fresh political voice emerged calling for a major American role in the Pacific. Theodore Roosevelt was a key spokesman. The vision was to start with a base in Hawaii, an independent republic that eagerly joined the U.S. in 1898. There was much talk about Manila as the key base for supposedly enormous trade with China. As he negotiated peace terms with Spain, McKinley realized that once Spain departed the Philippines would be seized by Japan or Germany, and a new brutal regime would replace the Spanish. America would be facilitating the same sort of colonial oppression that existed in Cuba and caused the U.S. to demand Spain leave Cuba in the first place. To quit would violate the humanitarian mission for which the U.S. had declared war in the first place. By remaining the U.S. could help the Filipino people in "benevolent" fashion, and pay for it by modernizing its economy and trading more with China. Aguinaldo protested—he insisted that the U.S. Navy brought him and his 14 aides to the Philippines so he could raise a ground army against the Spanish. Washington never made any promises, primarily because Aguinaldo's small, poorly armed force would be helpless against a modern army. So McKinley decided to stay. He sent in American troops that took control of Manila as the Spanish departed.^{[114][115]} The decision to stay was denounced by leading Democrats in the 1900 presidential election, but McKinley won in a landslide on the basis of restoring prosperity, and winning a popular war against Spain.^[116]

As the Army started spreading out over the main islands with their 7 to 9 million people, Aguinaldo revolted. He announced he had formed a new government, and it declared war on the United States as an unwanted invader. In a series of small setpiece battles his weak army failed again and again against much better armed and led U.S. Army. Aguinaldo fell back to remote districts and launched a guerilla war based on surprise attacks by small units dressed as civilians. They raided American supply lines, and executed Filipino traitors who helped the American forces.^{[117][118]}

American forces were composed primarily of state National Guard units that were untrained in guerrilla warfare, unaccustomed to the disease-ridden tropical environment, and unfamiliar with the language and customs of the islands. They wanted to go home and be civilians again. The Spanish had used native soldiers—known as "Macabebes"—and a short experiment demonstrated they could do well in fighting guerrillas who blended in with the populace. The decision was made to enlist 5,000 as the "Philippine Scouts", an official U.S. Army unit, with American officers. According to Clayton D. Laurie:^[119]

Filipino troops were cheaper, and their enlistment would encourage them to gain confidence, education, money, training, and courage that would inspire other Filipinos to cooperate with American authorities against the rebels. This would aid nation-building. Native soldiers would facilitate the redistribution of American troops from dangerous, scattered, and costly rural outposts, to the security of populous urban areas. Rural pacification will be better affected by cheaper indigenous units with aid from American forces when necessary.

Aguinaldo responded by raiding the home town of the Macabebes, locking 300 civilians into a church, then burning it down on April 27, 1899.^[120] To track the guerillas the Army used the "water cure", torturing informants until they talked. Back in the U.S., opposition to the war grew, as did bitter debates on the morality and legality of the technique.^[121]

1900 to 1939

Progressive Era reforms

Elihu Root was Secretary of War 1899-1904. Working closely with President Theodore Roosevelt, and other Progressive Era politicians, Root became the leading modernizer in the history of the War Department. The result was the transformation of the Army from a motley collection of small frontier outposts and coastal defense units into a modern, professionally organized, military machine comparable to the best in Europe. He restructured the National Guard into an effective reserve, and created the U.S. Army War College for the advanced study of military doctrine. He enlarged West Point. He changed the procedures for promotions and organized schools for the special branches of the service. He also devised the principle of rotating officers from staff to line. The most important innovation was to establish in 1903 the General Staff to ensure professional oversight of Army operations.^{[122][123]}

World War I

In 1914 the small standing Army included 122,000 men and 5800 officers. In addition there were 182,000 soldiers in the National Guard, albeit with limited training and outdated equipment. To fight a major war the U.S. had to sign up, train and transport to France at least 2 million soldiers. The Selective Service Act of 1917 required all men aged 21–30 to register in person at a local draft board. It examined each one and selected those who would be drafted. In all 13.4 million registered. The limits were later widened to 18 through 45. Two thirds of the soldiers were drafted. Secondly, the National Guard units were federalized and moved into new Army divisions. Third, volunteer enlistments were encouraged. In addition the military employed many civilians in the states, especially for building training camps and barracks. Factories quickly expanded into munition production. Women were encouraged to enter the labor force to fill the job vacancies thus created. For the entire war, there were 4,057,000 soldiers, 599,000 sailors and 79,000 Marines, or 4,734,000 in total. Of these, 51,000 died from combat and 56,000 died from disease.^{[124][125][126]}



Young men registering for conscription during World War I, New York City, June 5, 1917

The Army set up a network of hospitals in France, serviced by the men of the medical department and the women of the United States Army Nurse Corps. Over 20,000 women were in the Nurse Corps; half served in France. Some worked a few miles behind the front lines and experienced artillery and gas attacks. They provided care to over 200,000 wounded men plus many others who had an infectious disease.^{[127][128]} Facilities included American Base Hospital No. 1, No. 5, No. 17, No. 20, No. 36, No. 57, No. 116, and No. 238.^[129] The "Spanish flu" influenza pandemic appeared in the U.S. and spread to the AEF in France. In late 1918 and early 1919 influenza sickened 20% to 40% of soldiers and sailors. About 50,000 died after their influenza led to pneumonia.^[130]

One of four men aged 18 to 31 was in the Army, typically draftees from the poorer sectors of urban society. 37% were unable to read or write. 39% were immigrants or sons of immigrants, and 10% were African American, chiefly from the rural South. About 400 civilian women were hired by the Army Signal Corps as telephone operators in France. These "Hello Girls" spoke English and French.^[131]

American Legion and conservatism

According to historian William Pencak:

Veterans and their role in American society were extremely controversial in the twenties and thirties, both because of actual issues such as the Bonus or veterans' support for defense expenditures, but also because critics saw in the American Legion a mirror of the powerful fascist movements in Europe, such as the Nazis in Germany and Fascists in Italy. The comparison reflected fear more than rationality: the Legion had no need or desire to overthrow the government. It was able to achieve nearly all its goals through traditional political channels and strongly supported constitutional authority. Its members did not wear military uniforms (only the familiar caps), elected its officers through democratic means—although as in all associations, an active elite ran the show—and had black, Catholic, and Jewish members. It boasted of Jewish national chaplains and

Catholic national commanders. . . .The Legion's anti-radical program was typical of conservatives throughout American history, who . . . rarely concerned themselves with the rights of union organizers or socialist “agitators” despite the formal constitutional protections.^[132]

Veterans Bonus issue, 1919-1936

The World War Adjusted Compensation Act, or *Bonus Act*, was a law passed in 1924, that granted a life insurance policy to veterans of military service in the World War. It was based on aggressive political lobbying by new veterans organizations, especially the American Legion. The actual payout was promised for 1945, but veterans would get a certificate immediately and they could borrow against it from banks. When the Great Depression began in 1929, demands for immediate payment escalated. Thousands of veterans marched on Washington in the 1932 Bonus March but their peaceful demonstrations were brutally crushed by President Herbert Hoover and the U.S. Army.^[133] President Franklin Roosevelt was friendlier but opposed immediate payment as demanded by Congressman Wright Patman. Congress passed it over Roosevelt's veto in 1936, and \$1.5 billion was given out immediately, about 2% of GNP. It helped boost the overall economy.^[134]

A major effort in 1944 was made to avoid a similar issue with World War II veterans, resulting in the famous G.I. Bill.^{[135][136]}



Adjusted Service Certificate, given to veterans in 1924 with payoff scheduled for 1945. 

World War II

In response to the war's demands for full mobilization against both Germany and Japan, the Army implemented several reforms. The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940—in peacetime—allowed for the conscription of millions of American men. It dramatically increased the size of the Army from 190,000 active-duty personnel in 1940 to over 8 million by 1945. Many massive training programs were set up. New units were formed, most notably the Army Air Forces, which emphasized the importance of air power independent of infantry support.^[137]

The Army also adopted more modern organizational structures and tactics, reflecting lessons learned from earlier conflicts. Innovations in strategy, logistics, and technology were prioritized to improve combat effectiveness. The integration of women into the military through organizations like the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) and the WACs (Women's Army Corps) marked a significant shift in personnel policy, although racial segregation remained a prominent issue within the forces.^[138]

Help for families

The federal government set up new programs to financially help the families of soldiers. The Emergency Maternity and Infant Care (EMIC) program was a federally funded U.S. government initiative (1943–1949) that provided free maternity and pediatric healthcare to 1.2 million wives (and their new babies) of enlisted military personnel in the four lowest pay grades.^[139] The government also provided monthly cash allowances to wives and children whose husbands were in the armed forces.^[140]

G.I. Bill

The famous G.I. Bill^[141] was largely designed and passed through Congress in 1944 in a bipartisan effort led by the American Legion. It provided immediate financial rewards for practically all World War II veterans, thereby avoiding the highly disputed postponed life insurance policy payout for World War I veterans that had caused political turmoil in the 1920s and 1930s.^[142] Benefits included low-cost mortgages, low-interest loans to start a business or farm, one year of unemployment compensation, and dedicated payments of tuition and living expenses to attend high school, college, or vocational school. These benefits were available to all veterans who had been on active duty during the war years for at least 90 days and had not been dishonorably discharged.^[143] The G.I. Bill promoting much more education, as well as a fast route to home ownership and launching new business, thus helping to make modern America.^[144] Similar legislation was provided for veterans of the next wars as well.

Korea and Vietnam

Joseph Darda argues that a broad cross section of young white men in the 1970s changed the American self perception of military service. Conservatives and liberals, hawks and doves, vets and nonvets—they all redefined the national memory of the Vietnam War (1965–1973) into a celebration of the "deserving" veteran. Conservatives could honor vets as embodiments of American courage in action. Liberals could treat them as heroes whose voices must be heard. The popular impact came through national attention generated by POW/MIA movement and veterans' mental health crises to Rambo films with Sylvester Stallone

See also

- Colonial American military history
 - Provincial troops in the French and Indian Wars
- History of the United States Army
 - Conscription in the United States
 - American Expeditionary Forces of 1917
 - United States Army during World War II
 - National Guard (United States)
 - List of incidents of civil unrest in the United States
- Military history of African Americans
 - African Americans in the American Civil War

- Foreign enlistment in the American Civil War
 - German Americans in the American Civil War
 - Hispanics in the American Civil War
 - Irish Americans in the American Civil War
 - Italian Americans in the Civil War
 - Native Americans in the American Civil War
- Greatest Generation the cohort born 1901 to 1927, including most of the soldiers of World War II
 - American women in World War II In the military
 - Hispanic Americans in World War II
 - Japanese-American service in World War II
 - Native Americans and World War II
- List of veterans organizations
 - Veterans studies, academic research in US
 - Veteran's pension
 - Veterans Day, national holiday on November 11
 - Grand Army of the Republic, Union veterans of Civil War
 - AMVETS, liberal 20c society
 - Veterans of Foreign Wars, conservative 20c society
 - American Legion, conservative 20c society
 - Disabled American Veterans
 - World War Adjusted Compensation Act, 1924 law providing benefits to World War I veterans
 - Bonus Army, WWI veterans demand benefits in 1932
 - Demobilization of United States Armed Forces after World War II
 - G.I. Bill, of 1944. major benefit program

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