



REGULAR VS. VOLUNTEER SOLDIERS: U.S. VIEWPOINTS

Before the U.S.-Mexican War

At the time of the U.S.-Mexican War, U.S. citizens mistrusted a regular standing army. Memories of giving up their homes and serving soldiers under the British Quartering Acts still lingered. Most citizens believed in republicanism – that the best possible army consisted of native-born citizens who would, in times of war, take up arms for their country as their civic and patriotic duty.

Republicanism was supported by President James K. Polk who declared in his 1845 State of the Union address:

Standing armies . . . are contrary to the genius of our free institutions, would impose heavy burdens on the people and be dangerous to public liberty. Our reliance for protection and defense on the land must be mainly on our citizen soldiers, who will be ever ready, as they ever have been ready in times past, to rush with alacrity, at the call of their country, to her defense.

Why did most U.S. citizens mistrust a regular army?

During the War

The Battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, the first battles of the U.S.-Mexican War, were fought by regular soldiers. These victories on the Rio Grande elevated the status of the standing army.

The standing army was not large enough to continue the war in Mexico, and a call for volunteers was issued a week after the Battle of Palo Alto. The request was for 50,000 volunteers to serve for twelve months or the duration of the war. Recruitment by state authorities was just getting under way when news of the victories on the Rio Grande made newspaper headlines.

In the U.S. army, tensions quickly rose as citizen soldiers arrived to fight alongside the regular troops. Regulars saw volunteers as wasteful, useless, unprepared, and untrustworthy. According to General Scott:

Regulars, in 15 minutes, . . . will have tents pitched, arms & ammunition well secured; fires made, kettles boiling [for] wholesome cooking; all men dried, & at their supper, merry as crickets, Volunteers eat their meat raw; lose or waste their clothing; lie down wet; leave arms & ammunition exposed to rain . . . the hospitals filled with the sick [volunteers]!

On the other hand, volunteer soldiers thought that regulars merely followed orders and were unable to think for themselves. As Major Luther Gidding, 2nd Ohio Infantry, stated “[a volunteer] is not and never intends to be a mere moving and musket-holding machine.”

Which do you think is better: a regular or volunteer soldier? Why?

After the War

Shortly after the beginning of the War, Polk supported legislation calling for an increase in the standing army. Although the Battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma increased the status of and respect for the professional army, the citizen soldier, the patriot who worked in the fields and took up arms to defend his country, was still a popular image with the U.S. public.

The Conscription Act of 1863 was the first formal draft in the United States. Drafts were also issued during World Wars I and II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Conscription formally ended in 1973 and since then the United States has relied on an all-volunteer force. However, unlike 19th century volunteers, this volunteer army is well-trained and prepared for combat situations.

Do you think the U.S. should reinstate the draft? Why or why not?
