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Resisting the Professional Military During the American Revolution

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In recent times, many American National Guard troops have resisted foreign deployment, including ten thousand who have deserted from the Iraq War or committed suicide. Deserter Camilo Mejia tied resistance to foreign war being “outside our normal duties, which [are] to provide disaster relief at the state level.” Some have filed lawsuits invoking the Nuremberg Principles, international law, and the principle that disobedience is not reprehensible, criminal wars are. There was similar resistance to Kosovo, the Persian Gulf War, and Afghanistan. Starting in January 1985, the governors of California, Massachusetts, Ohio, Vermont, Washington, and Maine attempted to exercise their authority to prevent National Guard troops from deploying to Honduras. Earlier, it was the public outcry resulting from the Vietnam War and the deployment there of non-professional, high-school-age youth that helped bring the abolition of the draft. Even with the voluntary military, resistance continues with many youth refusing recruitment despite promises of economic success, job training, educational benefits, health care, travel, and adventure. Voters turn out presidents and politicians for supporting the military.

Resistance to foreign deployment is as ancient as foreign deployment itself. The challenge in studying it during the American Revolutionary period is to overcome the tradition of writing from the perspective of prominent figures such as George Washington. His views and those of other elites were not necessarily those of the rank and file. Even worse, as one scholar has noted, most studies dealing with the militia are nothing but “*ad hominem* and from authority” attacks issued by those beholden to the career military.

When history is written from the basic sources, a different story emerges. The basic source here is the militia experience of two Fairfield County South Carolina farmers, James Wilson (1752-1836) and William Hogan (1760-1836). They are studied because there is extensive documentation about them and because they were representative in being, like a majority of the population, subsistent producers and were neither rich nor poor. It also happens that the authors grew up hearing about them, as they were our ancestors.

From 1778 to 1782, Wilson and Hogan participated in eight documented militia tours, each of which lasted from two weeks to three months and spanned distances of 30 to 365 miles from their homes. Their tours involved them in little-known operations and in well-known events found in published histories, among which were the Third Florida Expedition (June-August 1778), the Granby Campaign (May 1781), and the Moncks Corner and Quinby Plantation Campaigns (July 17, 1781).

The popular resistance to the regular military, as manifested by agrarians such as Wilson and Hogan, consisted of a refusal to enlist in the Continental Army and a refusal by militia companies to subordinate themselves to, or cooperate with, the regulars on issues such as tactics, supplies, leadership, and operations. The beliefs underlying this resistance have been studied by historians like Gary [Nash](#). He called the religious, economic, and political beliefs that were held by the militia troops, and which motivated their resistance, the “small-producers creed.” Small-producers were characterized by self-sufficiency. With a majority of the population being farmers, they produced all they needed without the market. Many had a negative view of debt and usury along with the “envy, fame and wealth” associated with commerce.

The small-producers brought their beliefs and the militia tradition with them from Europe starting in the seventeenth century. They used the militias for neighborhood self-protection. Their tradition included the mid-seventeenth-century English Civil War in which working people under Cromwell leveled both the Royalist gentlemen and Parliament's Presbyterian merchants. Charles I, whom they beheaded, observed that “Kingly power is but a shadow without command of the militia.” The king's problem was that at common law, there was no standing army and militia operations were limited. The jurist William Blackstone noted that militiamen “are not compellable to march out of their counties, unless in case of invasion or actual rebellion, nor in any case compellable

to march outside of the kingdom.” For a century after the English Civil War, the militia in Britain was left weak because the landlords and merchants in Parliament had a “fear of arming the people.” In contrast, the newly constituted regular army was controllable through wages, and was neither “foes of the constitution” nor friends of “fanaticism and democracy.”

From the view of the colonial farmers, there was little need for militias, so they were often dormant. Charleston attempted to enact rules concerning periodic militia training, but the self-subsistent South Carolina farmers were a rule unto themselves. In the 1750s, they refused to be used against Native Americans to make the province safe for Charleston's land speculators.

The militias mirrored the small-producer creed. Like self-sufficient farming, they were independent from the market. They focused on neighborhood protection, not on profit. During the Revolution, Wilson and Hogan served without pay and provided their own supplies and weapons. In contrast, the Continentals were wage workers whose job was to kill. A French professional soldier in the Continental Army complained that farming people were negative toward him because of his illegitimate career. The Continentals were not, for the most part, mercenaries (in the Geneva Convention sense of being from a foreign country), but they were commodities in a mercenary economy.

From the perspective of the small-producer's creed, there was nothing to be gained by war; the farmers resisted it, and the Continental Army was created by the merchants to promote the war. Historians have noted that if anything, the South Carolina upcountry viewed Charleston as its main adversary, since it stood for profit and for its partners: war and the consumer, credit-based lifestyle of the English gentry. An observer commented, “The people of the backcountry had taken no part in the opposition to taxation by Parliament, and the slogan of no taxation without representation evoked little sympathy from people who had but slight representation in the colonial Assembly. Nor were they concerned with the struggles of the Assembly against the governor and Council. The backcountry population had as much or more reason to resent the actions of the Assembly as those of the British government.”

Illustrative of the small-producer's antiwar feelings was the reception given Charleston Presbyterian cleric and Revolutionary leader, William Tennent. He made a circuit in August 1775 to the Camden District where Wilson and Hogan lived. He found few who would sign an endorsement of the Association, which was the Revolutionary organization that the South Carolina Provincial Congress had just approved. Neither Wilson nor Hogan signed. In his diary, Tennent recorded that the people believed “that no man from Charleston can speak the truth, and that all the papers [newspapers] are full of lies.” To the Council of Safety in Charleston, he described the “unchangeable malignity of their minds and ... bitterness against the 'gentlemen' as they are called.”

The Fairfield County small-producers were not alone in their antiwar beliefs. One study speculates that less than a third of the American population supported the war. The initial agrarian indifference to the Revolution was not unlike that experienced by workingmen in Boston and the other seaports. Paul Revere and the mechanics of Boston took up arms in 1775 only after the British soldiers began to menace them. Charleston's working people split over the war, but were unified in opposition to the regular army, if the failure to tax themselves to pay for, or enlist in it, is a measure of opposition.

Several students have argued that even as late as May 1780, when they took Charleston, the British would have won the war, if they had left the farmers alone. The small producers did not care who ruled in Charleston and would have remained neutral. But London wanted more than neutrality, and its brutality lost them any chance of loyalty. British General Henry Clinton issued a proclamation that gave the South Carolinians two choices: to swear allegiance to the Crown and fight their countrymen, or to be considered as "rebels and enemies to their country," subject to strong reprisals.

The neutralist influence of the small-producer creed extended to a Continental Congress minority that opposed the nationalist party and George Washington's Continentals. In July 1780, this "militia party" sought to replace Washington with General Horatio Gates. Historian John Dederer comments, "Gates and the Congressional faction who sponsored him believed that a strong militia was sufficient to fulfill America's military requirements, not the regular army advocated by Washington, Greene, Hamilton, and the pro-nationalists."

For their part, the market interests symbolized by Washington sought the weakening or destruction of the militias, since these organizations obstructed the establishment of the regular army and tended to level the market in the localities where they controlled. In the words of historian Robert Pugh, the militias came to be viewed by the market forces during the war period, and after, as nothing less than a "black beast."

It was because the farmer-controlled militias were neutral that the merchants and planters were forced to establish what was viewed as, in fact, if not in the words of its creators, a mercenary army in June 1775. In their recruiting efforts, the merchants and planters, in addition to wages, offered uniforms, arms, equipment, training, *esprit de corps*, organization, "patriotism," adventure, and travel as inducements. The farmers, as one military scholar notes, "had little desire to obtain these." They were decentralizers and localists, not attracted to "newspaper patriotism" and the polished preaching of the Charleston clergy.

When Continental General Nathaniel Greene requested South Carolina militia leader Thomas Sumter, under whom Wilson and Hogan sometimes served, to march his troops to Virginia to help in the fight there, he begged off, reflecting the sentiments of the small producers. They would defend their neighborhoods, but not go out of state.

George Washington complained that brief campaigning with the militia lured "many excellent men" away from more prolonged service with the Continentals. Wilson and

Hogan were among those who learned in their early militia campaigning the negative, if not ignominious, nature of military life and were lured away from the career military. Their early education was the Third Florida Expedition of 1778. Many lives were lost because of the summer heat, mosquitoes, dysentery, and disease. Hogan later succinctly remarked, "The troops [were] very sickly and a great many died of the flux." The British killed 250 Americans but 1,200 died from illness. About 25,000 soldiers were killed in the American Revolution. Of these, 6,500 died in battle, 10,000 succumbed to hunger, disease, exposure, or wounds, and 8,000 did not survive imprisonment by the enemy. A total of between 100,000 and 200,000 Americans took up arms during the Revolution.

In addition to recruitment, a second area of militia resistance was military tactics. The British and American regular armies dictated a top-down approach, such as close-ordered battle lines and disciplined bayonet fighting. This allowed maximum control to those on top, but brought slaughter to those on the bottom. Militia tactics called for taking cover, moving silently, shooting accurately, effecting surprises and ambushes, and developing the loose teamwork necessary in irregular fighting. Militiamen had no use for bayonets, swords, and sabers, and the close-order discipline necessary for their use. They fought in fluid battle lines, which allowed them the option to quit when necessary.

Along with close-order discipline, militia tactics rejected the psychology that accompanied it, the notions of duty, honor, service, country, and glory. According to a student of South Carolina history, even the Continental troops did not accept such beliefs. The regulars suffered repeated defeats because the merchants feared to adopt egalitarian tactics. Where the farmers and their militias ruled, the profit system was compromised. Charleston protested frequently against the militia tactic of leveling Loyalist planters. The merchants had class, family and economic ties to these people. They were hurt by the leveling and the Continental Army itself was sometimes used to defend the Loyalists from the militiamen.

For the farmers, the most disastrous result of fears about leveling was the merchant surrender of Charleston and of the southern Continental Army in May 1780. The threat that British canons would disrupt their property was all it took to make the merchants servile. This opened the door to the British invasion of the upcountry and to two years of struggle to drive them out. The militiamen had reason to condemn Charleston for starting the war for profit, then surrendering for the same reason.

Militia resistance over enlistment and tactics also extended to a third area: leadership. Unlike the regular army, the rank-and-file militiamen chose their leaders. They chose men such as Thomas Sumter, Francis Marion, and Richard Winn (who fought "Indian style,") who were not averse to leveling and were not servile to the regular army and merchants. Sumter was so unpopular with the Charleston gentlemen that Governor John Rutledge designated James Williams to replace him in October 1780. A witness later remembered that the troops "refused to have anything to do with him [Williams] or his commission and if he had not immediately left the camp he would have been stoned out

of it.” In contrast, Richard Winn, who often led the Fairfield militia and for whom John Wilson, the father of James Wilson, served as a wagon master, was well-regarded because he minimized risk. A student of the war summarized, “he does not seem to have been all that active in the field.” Like the rank-and-file, he did not condone suicide for the sake of the market.

The egalitarian authority of militiamen in designating their leadership led to their resistance to Continental Army efforts to give them orders in the field or elsewhere. On one of William Hogan's tours, a party of militiamen risked capture because they refused to obey two Continental captains seeking to command them. On another occasion, in July 1779, a militiaman, when chided by his captain for being absent from a sentry post, answered roughly. After being arrested, the militiaman then tried to shoot the captain. But when Continental General Benjamin Lincoln sought to intervene and convene a court-martial, the militia officers refused to serve on the grounds that militiamen could be tried only under the militia laws of South Carolina. They forced Lincoln to concede that he had no authority.

Contrasting with small-producer views about authority, those of the regular army generally reflected market beliefs. Soldiers were valued seemingly like cattle or slaves for the profit they could derive. Those who were deserters, thieves, and incompetents were valueless, or as George Washington put it, “subversives,” and were treated harshly. After the Battle of Hobkirk's Hill, which was 30 miles from the Wilson and Hogan homesteads, Continental General Nathaniel Greene “was pleased” to order the execution of five deserters. The Fairfield militia would not have permitted this.

While the market placed little value on the lives of working people, killing ran counter to the small-producer creed, as expressed in their evangelical religion. William Hogan and his family were Methodists. A fellow Methodist summarized, “I was determined I would have nothing to do with the unhappy war; it was contrary to my mind, and grievous to my conscience, to have any hand in shedding human blood.” From ancient times, the commandment against killing brought the church's rank and file into conflict with empire and market builders. Church historian Terry [Sullivan](#) documents that starting in the fourth century, the Emperors Constantine (272-337), Constans (320-350), and their ecclesiastical collaborators such as Augustine (354-430) began the persecution of the rank-and-file because they refused military service and participation in the perennial war-making.

Also unlike the regular army, the Fairfield militia displayed egalitarian resistance about their military operations, as well as about their leadership. Only part of the district went out on tour at any one time. Tours were sometimes voluntary, sometimes obligatory. Taking turns allowed the farmers time to attend their crops. In their militia operations, Wilson and Hogan were not unusual in being quick to cut short their length of service when they encountered the regular army. In their eight documented tours they came late or left early in half of such outings, so as to miss some of the bloodiest encounters. The

Continentalists, who were enlisted for years or the duration, as one account puts it, “were of the opinion that their part-time comrades in arms were forever taking leave on the eve of battle.” The merchants spoke of cowardness and lack of manhood; the farmers, as demonstrated by their tactics, marveled at the gullibility of those who believed merchants.

To sum up, militia resistance to the war and to Continental recruitment, tactics, leadership operations, and supplies followed the colonial small-producer tradition. After the war, the militiamen resisted the Constitution, the funding of the national debt, and the federal government. Such resistance helped prevent the establishment of a regular army in the Constitution, and none existed for several decades afterwards.

In return, commercial interests condemned the militias because they were a barrier against militarism. A Frenchman living in Philadelphia in 1782 commented about the merchant dislike for the emerging termination of hostilities: “It is already observable that peace has no outspoken partisans except in the countryside. The inhabitants of towns whom commerce enriches, the artisans who there earn much greater pay than before the war, and five or six times more than in Europe, do not want peace.”

In the War of 1812, the militias refused orders to cross the Canadian border on the grounds that their job was to repel invasion, not menace their neighbors. Except for a small number, they similarly refused to participate in the pillaging of Mexico in the 1840s. During the Civil War, the southern merchants and planters were forced to create a professional army and draft recruits because the small producers in the militias resisted leaving their neighborhoods. Significant numbers of draftees deserted, especially after 1863, when it became clear the war was about slavery. The widespread agrarian fear of international complications, militarism, and monopoly powered the southern Congressional delegation to prevent Woodrow Wilson from turning the National Guard into a Continental Army during World War I.

A theorist of the professional military bemoaned that “to admit that military power is equivalent to militarism is tantamount to confessing that we are without faith in our national integrity.” But the faith of the small producers such as Wilson and Hogan was indifferent to nationalism. They resisted the Constitution and had no faith in the militarism upon which it was based. Saul Cornell, in his study of the early militia, notes that “the language found in many state constitutions set the militias and the right to bear arms against the danger of a standing army.”

Wilson and Hogan's neighbor, Thomas Cooper (1759-1839) reflected the small producer creed of the “democratic decentralizers and provincialists opposed to nationalism and cosmopolitan corruption.” He signed his articles “Back County Farmer,” but in time, taught at the University of South Carolina. He protested the new federal government's attempts to protect American foreign commerce with a standing military. He maintained

that such commerce was worth less than the expense of supporting it. He pointed out that American exports consisted of articles “of the first necessity” and that they would be carried away in foreign vessels if American were not available. He stated, “Thus the only part of our commerce really defended by the American ships of war is the *carrying trade*.”

In making his argument against the regular army, Cooper noted that for the benefit, not of the farmer or mechanic but primarily of British agents in commercial towns, heavy taxes were levied on the entire community, and a standing navy was created, which led the nation to continuous belligerency and war. As he put it:

I know of no body of men, so ready to postpone the interests of their Country to their own Interests, as Merchants. They are truly a swinish multitude: touch but the bristle of one of them and the whole herd cryout murder. Profess to defend your own territory and that only, and you will have no wars; profess to defend your distant Commerce, and you are never safe for a Day.

In speaking the logic of the small producers, Thomas Cooper contended that “If wars are necessarily attendant upon commerce, it is far wiser to dispense with it: to imitate the Chinese and other nations who have flourished without foreign trade: your commodities, the nations who want them will fetch away:—if they will go to China for tea cups, they will come to America for Bread.”

The regular army maintains it is carrying on the American tradition. But American values were not necessarily those of the professional military. Rather, traditional values in recent times have been manifested in societies that have duplicated the economic security of the self-sufficient farmer by modifying or eliminating the market, and by establishing government-guaranteed jobs, housing, health care, and similar blessings. These values have required an uprising of the lower classes at the expense of the society's gentlemen. Obedience to the market is not necessarily a traditional value.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- 1. Moreland, Claudia and Terrar, Toby (2009) *Militia Resistance to the Professional Military: The American Revolution from the Rank and File's Perspective*.. — Available at <http://www.angelfire.com/un/hoganhistory/hog/H3-CWil-8.html>
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- 4. Sullivan, Terry (2003) *The Church of the Empire Versus the Christian Church of North Africa: 312-430 AD* Christian Radical Press , Denver, CO