

# Civilian Control: The Prerequisite to a Liberal Republic

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I learned about the George S. & Stella M. Knight Essay Contest from a family friend who knew I was interested in the history of the American Revolution.

## **Civilian Control: The Prerequisite to a Liberal Republic**

*“The President shall be the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States.” –*

Article 2, Section 2 of the Constitution<sup>1</sup>

The United States has a proud history of civilian control of the armed forces. Civilian control, simply defined, states that elected officials have direct authority over the military. In 2023, civilian control exists and is practiced in most countries, including every republic. Yet in 1776, civilian control was only practiced by a few minor republics, such as Corsica.<sup>2</sup> Every great power and monarchy – France, the United Kingdom, Spain – practiced some form of monarchical control where the monarch or his ministers controlled the military.

The importance of civilian control as a new ideology is often forgotten today: monarchical control, like monarchy, was the norm in 1776, and our founders trod new ground by striving to establish civilian control. It was not an easy path: the fledgling Congress had to face off against rising military discontent and attempted revolt from within the armed forces. Without civilian control, a democratic republic cannot survive, and the American revolution would have fallen into the same trap of military dictatorships that many other revolutions, such as the Mexican and French revolutions.

### **The Birth of Civilian Control in America**

Early revolutionary America harbored an intense fear of government overreach and of professional standing armies. The colonists had seen Boston wither under military occupation, and many feared that the forces of the “ministerial army,” as the British army was called, would

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Const. Art. II, § 2.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Carrington, “The Corsican Constitution of Pasquale Paoli (1755–1769),” *The English Historical Review* LXXXVIII, no. CCCXLVIII (1973): pp. 481-503, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/lxxxviii.cccxlvi.481>, 489.

pillage the colonies.<sup>3</sup> They feared that without any representation in Parliament or direct access to the king, the self-governing tradition that had developed would be destroyed, with the whole of the colonies being brought under direct British control.

It is thus no surprise that our founders nearly all agreed with James Madison when he argued that “[a] standing military force, with an overgrown Executive, will not long be safe companions to liberty. The means of defense against foreign danger, have been always the instruments of tyranny at home.”<sup>4</sup> Madison went so far as to argue that “the armies [of Europe] ... have enslaved the people.”<sup>5</sup> When the military is controlled by a non-elected position, then the democratic process can’t work, since the person in control of the military can force the government to install anyone as the leader. In addition to being inherently anti-democratic, the founders identified that monarchical control allowed non-elected leaders to commit troops to costly, ruinous, and useless wars. For example, when Louis XIV sent troops to fight in the War of Spanish Succession, over 500,000 French were killed or wounded, and the war sent France into an economic depression. Louis remained in power, quashed revolts against him in the wake of this policy, and then began another pointless war. The founders needed to prevent this abuse of power.

When Congress established the Continental Army, it had to decide how to reconcile its fear of large, oppressive armies with the need for a strong military to beat the British army. To solve this unique problem, Congress turned to a unique solution: civilian control. They reasoned that the civilian government would be rewarded with political support for well-planned and well-

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<sup>3</sup> “Washington Takes Charge,” Smithsonian.com (Smithsonian Institution, January 1, 2005), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/washington-takes-charge-107060488/>.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Coffman, *Words of the Founding Fathers: Selected Quotations of Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Hamilton, with Sources* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012), 163.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

fought wars and punished for ruinous and pointless wars. Additionally, the civilian government cannot use its army to “enslave the people,” as Madison worried, because the civilian government needed the political support of the people. The Democratic Peace Theory illustrates how effective civilian control has been at reducing useless wars: there have only been a dozen wars fought between legitimate democracies.<sup>6</sup>

### Civilian Control is Tested

Despite the support of Congress, civilian control seemed doomed to fail at the very beginning, taking the American experiment with democracy with it. The military was financially neglected during the revolution, with some soldiers not receiving any pay except what their commanding officer paid them out of their own wealth. Congress did not have the power to tax the states to provide the necessary funds, so the soldiers largely subsisted on donations. This situation was clearly untenable, and by early 1783, there was widespread discontent in the Continental Army. This led, dangerously, to a growing desire to force Congress to supply them with weapons and payment.

An unsigned letter to officers of the Continental Army began circulating in Washington’s Headquarters in Newburgh, New York. The author encouraged officers to force Congress to pay them, claiming that to submit to Congress without pay would prove to “the world how richly you deserve the chains that you broke.”<sup>7</sup> It went on to argue that the army should either refuse to

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<sup>6</sup>Bruce M. Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>7</sup> “Founders Online: From George Washington to Elias Boudinot, 12 March 1783,” Founders Online (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed December 11, 2022.

fight the British or refuse to disband after the war was over. Many officers agreed with the letter, and they showed up to a meeting on March 15 to discuss their options.<sup>8</sup>

Luckily for American democratic republicanism, George Washington burst into the meeting, stunning the group into silence. He denounced the letter's methods, while approving its goals. He strongly argued that mutiny "has something so shocking in it that humanity revolts at the idea. My God! What can this writer have in view, by recommending such measures? Can he be a friend to the army? Can he be a friend to this country? Rather, is he not an insidious foe?"<sup>9</sup> The officers agreed with Washington, and the next day they presented him with a signed resolution commending his actions.<sup>10</sup> If it were not for Washington intervening at this critical point, civilian control, a prerequisite for most other ideals in the revolution, would have failed. Just like all the other ideals of the American revolution, it was not guaranteed to succeed.

## Conclusion

Victory in the Revolutionary War effectively removed opposition to civilian control of the armed forces. The Federalists and anti-Federalists argued that different parts of the government should have different responsibilities, but both agreed that the concept that elected leaders should control the military had been proven during the revolution. Since the example set by the United States in 1776, most of the world has switched to civilian control of the military. Today, only single-party systems and dictatorships lack civilian control, notably China and Russia. In every genuine democracy, civilian control has been recognized to be of immense

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<sup>8</sup> "Newburgh Conspiracy," George Washington's Mount Vernon, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/newburgh-conspiracy/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Newburgh Address: George Washington to Officers of the Army, March 15, 1783," George Washington's Mount Vernon, accessed December 15, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> David Head, *Crisis of Peace: George Washington, the Newburgh Conspiracy, and the Fate of the American... Revolution* (S.I.: Pegasus Books, 2021), 114.

importance; how can government represent the people if non-elected military commanders control it? Although it doesn't get the same recognition as other American ideals, civilian control was as novel and arguably more important than any other single ideal. Without it, democratic republicanism and the realization of all other American ideals would not have been possible.

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