

# Fearing Your Government's Military is Reasonable

Occasionally, you'll see gun-ownership advocates mocked for believing that the Founders both feared a standing army and believed that an armed citizenry would be a deterrent against a military takeover of the country by its own government.

Why it seems absurd that the Founders would hold such views is beyond me. The Founders had just fought off the standing army of their former government (Britain) in order to establish their own government, first with the Articles of Confederation and later with the Constitution. That memory was still quite fresh for them. Second, they were pragmatic idealists. They founded a country on the idea of freedom, while recognizing that some government was still necessary.

Now when it comes to the validity of the argument today, we must grant that technology has changed tremendously in favor of government military forces since the late-1800s. Nonetheless, it remains true that an armed citizenry can make it quite difficult for an army to maintain control. If you disagree, please consider the difficulties the U.S. Army has had in Iraq as a result of militants armed mainly with AK-47s, RPGs, and IEDs.

But back to the Founders. What did they say in their own words about the threat of their own government and gun ownership by citizens? Quite a bit, actually. If you don't believe it, consider the just the very limited comments below by Alexander Hamilton (first Secretary of the Treasury) and James Madison ("Father of the Constitution" and the fourth president of the United States) who are both writing for what we know as *The Federalist Papers*. Those documents were public arguments for the establishment of the Constitution.

**James Madison, [Federalist No. 46](#) (January 29, 1788)**

“Extravagant as the supposition is, let it however be made. Let a regular army, fully equal to the resources of the country, be formed; and let it be entirely at the devotion of the federal government; still it would not be going too far to say, that the State governments, with the people on their side, would be able to repel the danger. The highest number to which, according to the best computation, a standing army can be carried in any country, does not exceed one hundredth part of the whole number of souls; or one twenty-fifth part of the number able to bear arms. This proportion would not yield, in the United States, an army of more than twenty-five or thirty thousand men. To these would be opposed a militia amounting to near half a million of citizens with arms in their hands, officered by men chosen from among themselves, fighting for their common liberties, and united and conducted by governments possessing their affections and confidence.”

“Besides the advantage of being armed, which the Americans possess over the people of almost every other nation, the existence of subordinate governments, to which the people are attached, and by which the militia officers are appointed, forms a barrier against the enterprises of ambition, more insurmountable than any which a simple government of any form can admit of. Notwithstanding the military establishments in the several kingdoms of Europe, which are carried as far as the public resources will bear, the governments are afraid to trust the people with arms.”

**Alexander Hamilton, [Federalist No. 29](#) (January 10, 1788)**

“If standing armies are dangerous to liberty, an efficacious power over the militia, in the body to whose care the protection of the State is committed, ought, as

far as possible, to take away the inducement and the pretext to such unfriendly institutions.”

“By a curious refinement upon the spirit of republican jealousy, we are even taught to apprehend danger from the militia itself, in the hands of the federal government. It is observed that select corps may be formed, composed of the young and ardent, who may be rendered subservient to the views of arbitrary power.”

“This will not only lessen the call for military establishments, but if circumstances should at any time oblige the government to form an army of any magnitude that army can never be formidable to the liberties of the people while there is a large body of citizens, little, if at all, inferior to them in discipline and the use of arms, who stand ready to defend their own rights and those of their fellow-citizens. This appears to me the only substitute that can be devised for a standing army, and the best possible security against it, if it should exist.”

Remember, these men are arguing *for* the Constitution and *against* the Articles of Confederation. They believed that America needed a stronger federal government, with military powers, but they also recognized the threat a strong army can be to domestic freedom and that a natural balance of power can somewhat be maintained with an armed citizenry.

So, the next time you hear someone say that an armed citizenry is a deterrent to government power, keep in mind that even the very people who created our federal government also believed the same thing.