

UNDERSTANDING AMERICA



Why Provide for the Common Defense?



Mackenzie Eaglen

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The Declaration of Independence reminds us that all people have inalienable rights—among them, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. To secure these rights, the U.S. Constitution creates a government of the people to “establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”

Why did the Founding Fathers believe that the federal government must provide for the common defense?



The U.S. Military Academy at West Point was founded in 1802. It embodies the American faith in peace through strength, its commitment to military professionalism, and its belief in the vital importance of civilian control of the armed forces.



The weakness of the thirteen states under the Articles of Confederation, before the Constitution, convinced the Founders that the nation needed a stronger government, including a stronger military. The Founders were careful to grant the federal government only the few, limited powers that were necessary for it to carry out its aims. Under the Constitution, most powers are reserved to the states, or to the people.

The federal government is concerned only with issues that affect the welfare of the entire nation. It has the exclusive power, for example, to create an army, to declare war, and to make treaties. Indeed, as James Madison wrote in *The Federalist Papers*, “the operations of the federal government will be most extensive and important in times of war and danger.” For the Founders, a primary and central job of the federal government was to “provide for the common defense.”

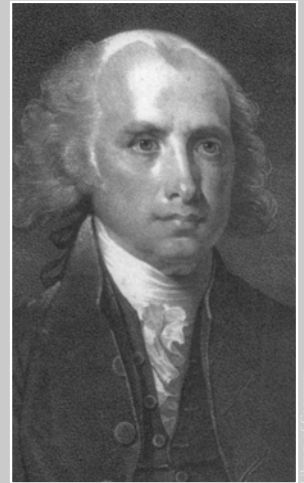
The Founders realized that only an organized and professional military could respond to both domestic and foreign threats. That is why they authorized the building of forts, the creation of the U.S. Navy, and the founding of West Point. In times of peace, the United

States has often been tempted to believe that it could safely disarm. The experience of the Founders convinced them that no peace was so secure that it could be relied upon with assurance, and no nation was so safe that it did not need to maintain sound and reliable defenses. America has regularly had to relearn this wisdom, often at great cost in money and men.

But the Founders were also suspicious of standing armies. They knew that, in Europe, standing armies had been used by monarchies to oppress the people. In order to avoid this danger, while providing for the nation's security, the Founders made the common defense a shared responsibility of Congress and the President, the elected (and separate) branches of government. This ensured the American military would serve the nation, not subvert the rule of the people.

Thus, Congress declares war and funds the armed forces: the Constitution gives Congress power to "raise and support armies" and to "provide and maintain a navy." The President commands the armed forces and controls their operations: as Commander in Chief, he is obliged to defend and protect the nation. In his role as the country's chief diplomat, he also seeks to keep the peace.

“How could a readiness for war in time of peace be safely prohibited, unless we could prohibit, in like manner, the preparations and establishments of every hostile nation?”



—James Madison
January 19, 1788



On December 23, 1783, in the Maryland State House in Annapolis, George Washington resigned his commission as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army. By resigning, he established the supremacy of the civilian authority over the military, a fundamental principle of American democracy that in 1789 became part of the Constitution of the United States.



The American Founders held out the possibility of more peaceful relations among nations. But they nevertheless understood that “the surest means of avoiding war is to be prepared for it in peace.”² As Thomas Paine warned, it would not be enough to “expect to reap the blessings of freedom.” Americans would have to “undergo the fatigues of supporting it.”³ Supporting freedom and defending the nation would require public spending on the nation’s defense forces in peacetime. As President George Washington asserted in his First Annual Message, delivered in 1790, the “most effectual means of preserving peace” is “to be prepared for war.”⁴

During his presidency, Washington warned against leaving the nation’s security “to the uncertainty of procuring a warlike apparatus at the moment of public danger.”⁵ By then, it would be too late. In his Farewell Address, Washington urged Americans to remember “that timely disbursements to prepare for danger frequently prevent much greater disbursements to repel it.”⁶

Washington believed defense spending was necessary because he, like all the Founders, knew the history of wars in Europe and

had experience with North African pirate attacks against American shipping. Washington’s generation knew the world was a dangerous place. As John Jay put it, “nations in general will make war whenever they have a prospect of getting anything by it.” Furthermore, dictators or “absolute monarchs” would often make war even “when their nations are to get nothing by it, but for purposes and objects merely personal.”⁷



Most if not all of the Founding Fathers agreed that when America was threatened, the nation had to respond clearly and forcefully. After the United States obtained its independence in 1787, it lost the protection of the French Navy. Soon, the U.S. had to defend its sailors and commerce against North African pirates enabled by the Barbary States of Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers. At first, Congress followed the tradition of the European countries and appropriated what would today be millions of dollars as tribute to the pirates. These ransom payments merely encouraged more pirate attacks and more demands for money.

Urged on by the public, Thomas Jefferson, elected in 1801, refused to accede to Tripoli's demand for an immediate payment of \$225,000 and annual payments of \$25,000. Instead, Jefferson deployed frigates to defend America's interests in the Mediterranean. Tunis and Algiers responded to America's show of force by breaking their alliance with Tripoli. Hostilities with Tripoli only ended after American land forces took the fight to Tripoli, threatening to capture the city and depose its leader.

This episode taught America that bribery and appeasement encourage aggressors. Only an American Navy able to patrol the world's oceans would bring peace on the high seas. As American interests have expanded and technology has evolved, America has built a modern military. But the essence of American policy has not changed: strength is the best and safest path to peace and security.



America's Founders believed that peace through strength is preferable—militarily, financially, and morally—to allowing war to come through weakness. That is why, over two hundred years ago,

Thomas Jefferson advised George Washington that “the power of making war often prevents it.”⁸ In providing for the common defense, the goal of the Founders was to build a military sufficiently powerful and capable that America’s enemies preferred not to challenge it. In his Farewell Address, Washington hoped the day would soon come when “belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel.”⁹

American leaders in the 20th century agreed with Washington and Jefferson, and have followed their policies. President and former general Dwight D. Eisenhower stated in his own farewell address to the nation in 1961 that “A vital element in keeping the peace is our military establishment. Our arms must be mighty, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction.”¹⁰

Like the Founding Fathers, Eisenhower did not want a “military-industrial complex” to dominate the United States: instead, again like the Founders, he wanted a powerful military under civilian control, alongside a limited federal government. The American people have understood and respected this wisdom. In the words of



This photo shows the USS Benfold as it conducts exercises with a destroyer from the Japanese Navy. The armed forces of the United States work closely with friends and allies around the world to protect America's freedoms and to secure its interests.

“A truly successful army is one that, because of its strength and ability and dedication, will not be called upon to fight, for no one will dare to provoke it.”



Courtesy: Ronald Reagan Library

—Ronald Reagan
May 27, 1981

Ronald Reagan in 1982, “Our military strength is a prerequisite to peace, but let it be clear we maintain this strength in the hope it will never be used.”¹¹



As Reagan recognized, America’s military strength exists to secure the blessings of ordered liberty for the American people. The rights enshrined in our Constitution are only safe in practice when that constitutional order is defended by adequate power. It is the federal government’s responsibility to maintain that power, and to bring it to bear against nations or enemies that threaten America’s security or interests, and thereby its freedoms.

Throughout America’s history, its citizens have believed that an America capable of safeguarding and advancing their inalienable rights and freedoms would be a shining city upon a hill. But, in the words of George Washington, “There is a rank due to the United States among nations which will be withheld, if not absolutely lost, by the reputation of weakness. If we desire to avoid insult, we must be able to repel it; if we desire to secure peace, one of the most

powerful instruments of our rising prosperity, it must be known that we are at all times ready for war.”¹²

Under the Constitution, the responsibility to assure peace by maintaining our national defenses rests first with the federal government. America’s common defense is therefore the primary responsibility of the United States government—a responsibility that in the end makes it possible for us safely to enjoy our many freedoms. By providing for the common defense, the Constitution secures the inalienable rights recognized in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.



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Enduring Truths

For links to these titles, go to heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica.

- **President George Washington, *First Annual Message to Congress*, January 8, 1790**

In his first State of the Union address, Washington recommended that the Senate and the House devote particular attention to “providing for the common defence.”

- **General Douglas MacArthur, *Farewell Speech*, May 12, 1962**

General MacArthur’s words on duty, honor, and country to the Corps of Cadets at West Point are a testimony to the value of the American military, and a salute to its tradition of professional service.

- **Ronald Reagan, *First Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1981**

President Reagan’s speech of assurance and renewal promised to “check and reverse the growth of government,” but also to “maintain sufficient strength to prevail if need be, knowing that if we do so we have the best chance of never having to use that strength.”

Current Issues

For links to these reports, go to heritage.org/UnderstandingAmerica.

- **AMERICAN LEADERSHIP.** Arthur Brooks, Ph.D., Edwin Feulner, Ph.D., and William Kristol, “Peace Doesn’t Keep Itself,” October 4, 2010.

According to the Constitution, the power over the purse, meaning the power to spend money, rests with Congress. In this important statement, three conservative leaders, including the President of The Heritage Foundation, urge Congress and the Administration to make the case for military strength as a central part of an overall strategy of American leadership.

- **DEFENSE REQUIREMENTS.** American Enterprise Institute, Foreign Policy Initiative, and The Heritage Foundation, “Defending Defense: Setting the Record Straight on U.S. Military Spending Requirements,” October 14, 2010.

Over the past twenty years, administrations of both political parties have underfunded the military. Today, as the economy stalls and the government appears to be unable to control spending in other areas, defense spending is under attack again. The arguments

for defense cuts are faulty. This joint publication presents short, factual rebuttals of the myths that are driving the debate on defense spending.

- **MISSILE DEFENSE. Mackenzie Eaglen, “Why Missile Defense,” August 3, 2010.**

The threats facing America are real. In the past decade, the number of nuclear states has grown from six to nine, and 28 countries have ballistic missile capabilities. Read Heritage’s summary of the need for an effective system of missile defense to protect America from these threats.

- **DEFENSE LOOKING FORWARD. Senator Jim Talent and Heath Hall, “Sowing the Wind: The Decay of American Power and Its Consequences,” Spring 2009.**

Since the end of World War II, the reality and the perception of American military strength has deterred adversaries and allowed the world’s democracies to focus on diplomacy, international cooperation, economic trade, and constructive engagement to protect the integrity of the international order. In this service by service analysis, Heritage experts prove that American power

has been allowed to decay and explain why leaders need to make decisive changes soon. If they do not, all will reap the consequences.

Endnotes

- 1 James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, Federalist No. 45, January 26, 1788.
- 2 Joseph Story, Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States, January 1833, at http://www.constitution.org/js/js_004.htm (accessed November 15, 2010).
- 3 Thomas Paine, “The American Crisis, No. IV,” September 12, 1777.
- 4 George Washington, “First Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union,” January 8, 1790.
- 5 George Washington, “Fifth Annual Address Message,” December 3, 1793.
- 6 George Washington, “Farewell Address,” May 15, 1796.
- 7 John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, Federalist No. 4, November 7, 1787.

- 8 Thomas Jefferson, In a Letter to George Washington, December 4, 1788.
- 9 George Washington, “Farewell Address.”
- 10 Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Farewell Address,” January 17, 1961.
- 11 Ronald Reagan, “Promoting Democracy and Peace,” June 8, 1982.
- 12 George Washington, “Fifth Annual Address Message.”

About *Understanding America*

AMERICANS HAVE ALWAYS BELIEVED that this nation, founded on the idea of freedom, has a vital responsibility to the rest of the world. As George Washington first recognized, the “preservation of the sacred fire of liberty” depended on the American people. These words remain true today.

Understanding America explores how the United States’ commitment to the universal truths of human equality and the right to self-government—as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence—requires a vigilant defense of the cause of liberty, both at home and abroad.

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About This Cover

The illustration depicts the British bombardment of Fort McHenry in the War of 1812. This is the event that inspired Francis Scott Key to write the lyrics to “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

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Why Provide for the Common Defense?

“By providing for the common defense, the Constitution makes secure the inalienable rights recognized in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The American Founders believed that the federal government should have only a few, limited powers, and that it should be concerned only with issues that affect the well-being of the entire nation. That is why the United States Constitution gives the federal government a primary responsibility of providing for the common defense.

This volume in the *Understanding America* series discusses the Founders’ conviction that, in order to preserve peace, America must be prepared for war. They recognized that public spending on defense was necessary in order to maintain the strength required to defend liberty.

