

Our Need of a Navy

By HENRY GEORGE

This editorial, which appeared in "The Standard" of April 6, 1889, has been widely quoted by both sides in the present war controversy. It is reprinted here without comment, as a service to our readers, exactly as in the original; even the typographical errors have been retained. The page proofs have been carefully checked against a copy of "The Standard."

One of the matters for which the papers favorable to it most praise the last administration is its management of the navy department. Reviewing what has been done under the secretaryship of Mr. Whitney, the New York Times says:

Never before in the history of the United States has a party been able to retire from office with the satisfaction of knowing that during its four years' term of power it has done so much toward strengthening the defensive system of the country and at the same time developed so many material resources for the maintenance of a modern naval establishment.

This is doubtless true. Instead of wasting millions in repairing ships unfit for modern warfare, the policy of the last administration has been to build good vessels, and by a judicious placing of large contracts to induce private firms to set up the expensive plants needed for the making of heavy armor plates and monster guns. In this it has been successful. For the first time since iron began to supplant wood, and powerful marine engines to be developed, we have several iron ships that can both fight and run, while several others are in course of construction. Guns of great size have been made here as cheaply as in Europe, and heavy steel armor plates have been cast at a price only twenty-five per cent greater than they would have cost in Great Britain. We have, in short, got the nucleus of a great modern navy, such as those by which the European powers are trying to outvie each other, and in the Bethlehem Iron Works and the Hotchkiss Arms Company the expenditures of the government has brought into being a couple of infant Krupps. For all this, President Cleveland's administration deserves whatever credit is due. But is it not the credit that belongs to the doing well of what in itself is bad?

What do we want with a navy?

To protect our commerce? We have no sea-borne commerce except what creeps around our coast. Protection has killed our foreign commerce, and on the ocean American passengers and American freights are carried under foreign flags. Yet even if we had foreign commerce, it would need no navy to protect it. We have but to agree to it, to secure to private property at sea in time of war the same immunity that the usages of civilized nations now give to private property on land. And even if this were not so the days of convoys have passed.

To protect our seaboard cities from bombardment? Who is there who wants or is likely to want to bombard our cities? And if such there were, is it not certain that the most effective defense of our seaboard

cities from bombardment would not be steel-clad ships such as we are now constructing and that are certain to be antiquated with the first great war that comes, but by balloons and submarine boats and torpedoes and electrical devices such as American ingenuity, if its springs be kept in strength, will bring forth whenever there is need?

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In the beginning of the century, when compared with European powers, we were small and weak; when the black flag was yet known in the gulf, when Barbary rovers yet sailed the Mediterranean and passed beyond the straits; when the eastern seas were infested with Chinese and Malay pirates; when railroad and telegraph were not known, and it took months to communicate between places where now only minutes are required—then there might have been some reason for spending money on a standing navy. But what reason is there now? Pirates have disappeared, barbarism, on the sea coasts at least, has everywhere succumbed to the power of civilization, and all the principal ports of the world are linked in telegraphic communication with New York and Washington. The American republic, in the beginning of the century small and weak, is now, all things considered, the strongest nation in the world, while every decade as it passes steadily increases her superiority. Separated by three thousand miles of ocean from the rivalries and enmities of Europe, seated without hostile neighbors on a continent where none would dream of measuring strength with us, what foe have we, what foe are we likely to have, against whom we should need a navy? The notion that any nation on earth would be "tempted by our defenseless condition" to deliberately attack us, is worthy of a lunatic asylum. There is no power or combination of powers that could successfully invade us, and there is no power or combination of powers that could have any temptation to wantonly attack us. So long as we refrain from wantonly attacking others, peace with all the world is in our hands. It is perhaps the very greatest of all the advantages which we enjoy over the other great nations of the earth that so far as human eye can see we may rest secure of honorable peace so long as we prefer it to dishonorable war.

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But "war may come." Yes; war may come. No one could deny that any more than any one could deny that Mrs. Toodles' daughter might marry a man named Thompson. But what use is there in keeping up an expensive navy to meet that possibility? The possession of steel-clad fleets and navy yards and foundries based on government contracts does not mean maritime strength. We may build and maintain a navy as great as that of England, but so long as we have no mercantile marine—so long as England carries our passengers

and transports our freights on the high seas—we shall not rival England's maritime power.

The robbing system of protection has reduced us from the first rank of maritime peoples to the maritime rank of the Turks or the Japanese, and now the advocates of this same system, as one of the excuses for keeping up the blighting taxes from which some few monopolists profit, insist on giving us a "modern naval establishment." It will no more make us a naval power than the purchase of ironclads by Turkey and Japan make those countries naval powers. A navy without a merchant commerce is an exotic that may make a brave show in time of peace if money enough be spent on it, but that will surely wither in the blast of war with a commercial nation. To become strong on the seas again—to have again the American flag floating over the swiftest ships and the best seamen that any nation can boast, it is only necessary to give freedom to American enterprise and American ingenuity—to abolish the taxes that have driven them from the ocean. The millions that we are spending on this infant "modern naval establishment" of ours, if left to private enterprise by the abolition of duties on everything that enters into the cost of building and sailing ships, would soon give us a mercantile marine that would be a better reliance in time of war than any navy; would soon build up foundries and machine shops able to turn out more and better and quicker work than any establishments that mere government patronage can create.

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Standing navies and armies are incongruous with our institutions—they belong properly to monarchies and aristocracies, not to democratic republics. Our standing navy and our standing army are and have been since their organization utterly alien to the true American spirit. In them are perpetuated that caste distinction between classes, the outgrowth of European aristocracy, that the American constitution aims at in prohibiting titles of nobility. Before the civil law all American citizens stand on the same level. Between the president of the republic and the lowest department messenger the distinction is merely that of place and duty. But between the commissioned officer of army or navy and the enlisted man there is a distinction of kind—a distinction essentially and historically the same as that made in the worst days of European monarchies between high born noble and base born peasant. Between the lowest commissioned officer and the highest non-commissioned officer in the American army or navy, there exists the same kind of impassable gulf that exists between the son of an English duke and his father's butler—the one is a member of a superior and privileged class, the other is essentially inferior.

Two American boys enter the navy at the same time. One the son of an influential father, is by favor of the president or some congressman sent to the Naval academy, or possibly in some cases where the congressman puts his privilege of appointment up to competition, he wins it by passing a scholastic examination, which, however it may test his ability to memorize and cram, gives

no indication whatever of his peculiar fitness for a sailor. The other enters as apprentice or enlists as an ordinary seaman. The one becomes a favored ward of the government. He receives good pay, an expensive education, and has but to pass the examinations and conduct himself with reasonable propriety to come out of the academy a permanent office holder for the rest of his days. "Society" opens its arms to him as a member of a privileged class. The other is despised as merely "a common sailor." All the one has to do is to live, and he will mount by successive stages to the highest rank. As for the other, his status is not that of a ward of the government and life office holder, but that of a hired man, employed from time to time at low wages and small comfort, who, during his terms of enlistment, is held to his service by force, and who, no matter what his application and ability, can rarely hope to rise in the national service above a position which leaves him the inferior of the youngest and lowest commissioned officer.

All this is utterly opposed to the spirit of American institutions. Its theory is the theory of monarchy and aristocracy, not the theory of republican democracy. The reason assigned for the maintenance of privileged classes—of hereditary office holders and law-makers—by the defenders of monarchy and aristocracy is, that men are thus educated for their duties, and that the state thus gets better service. Whether this is true or not is beyond the point, but it is perfectly clear that if we are right in picking out and educating boys to become officers in our army and navy, then we are wrong in not picking out and educating boys to become judges, senators, commissioners, consuls, presidents—in short, in not putting the whole functions of government in the hands of a specially educated class of life office holders.

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But this aristocratic organization of our standing army and standing navy is significant of something deeper, and shows that they are existing and not akin to our institutions. In the very nature of things standing armies and standing navies are inimical to democracy, and never, save in case of absolute necessity, should those who desire the perpetuity of democratic institutions consent to maintain them. Standing armies and navies have always proved the ready tools of tyranny, and in every country in which they have been suffered to pass a certain point have proved the death of liberty.

This arises from their nature. The great virtue of the military service is implicit obedience, and to its inculcation the whole military education is directed. In standing army or standing navy the citizen is converted into a mere killing machine, which reaches perfection as it becomes ready to kill with absolute indifference any one whom it is ordered to kill. "Theirs not to make reply; theirs not to reason why; theirs but to do and die" is the spirit and the virtue of standing army and standing navy. And there naturally grows up in it a distrust and contempt for democratic methods and forms.

In the very disposition to strengthen our standing army and navy there is an unconcealed desire to create a force that may on occasion be used not against a foreign enemy, but against the masses of our own people. "There is nothing more timid than a million dollars except two million dollars," and the millions in ones and twos and tens and scores and fifties and hundreds that are piling together in the United States today are more and more attracted to the idea of a strong government. "Militia can't be relied on to put down labor riots, and we ought to have more regulars," is a sentiment that has greatly grown among certain most influential classes during the last ten years, and that is not without open expression in the press. It is an indication that should remind us of what the whole history of government attests, that while "a well regulated militia is essential to the existence of a free people" a standing war establishment is always dangerous. If it is a great one, it is greatly dangerous. If it is a little one, it is less dangerous. But big or little, danger to free institutions inheres in its existence. For there is always a tendency in such things for the little to grow into the big.

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For the man or boy who has no legitimate use for a revolver, the best sort of a revolver to carry, if he must carry a revolver, is one that won't shoot. On the same principle, the wooden navy which the Republicans left when they went out was a better navy for us than the more efficient one that President Cleveland's administration has left. The old ships that could neither fight nor run, but did possess a marvelous capacity for undergoing repairs, fully served every real purpose for which an American navy is wanted—an excuse for giving a number of gentlemen pleasant life situations, for fattening a number of contractors, and for enabling the party in power to exercise considerable political influence. As it could neither fight nor run, there was less danger that it might be used to get us into some disgraceful war, such as Mr. Blaine had all but succeeded in getting us into with Chile at the time when his power was terminated by Mr. Arthur's accession.

For us to spend money on a useless navy is only a little worse than throwing so much money into the sea; but to spend money on an efficient navy, when we have no need for any navy, is a great deal worse, since it creates a constant disposition to use it.

This is a real danger. To win a little military glory; to rouse the miserable vanities and vile passions that masquerade under the name of patriotism; to excite the madness that in man, as in some other animals, is worked by blood, is the most potent resource of a governing class who wish to divert attention from home matters and secure an unreasoning, unquestioning support. God forbid that the lust for power should bring the curse of another war of any kind upon the United States. It is the only thing that can. But just as we add to our military establishment, so do we increase the danger.

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That we in the United States have developed the be-

ginnings of a great "modern naval establishment," is this a thing to be proud of? Is it not like rejoicing that the beginnings of leprosy have been developed among a people that might be clean and whole?

Look at Europe today, cursed with monstrous military and naval establishments that not merely press with awful weight upon the productive energies of the people, but bar the way to all social and political reform. Look at Europe, so weighed down by these monstrous establishments that a nominal peace is becoming intolerable, and the only hope of advance seems to lie through a red sea of blood and a general bankruptcy of nations. Why should we take upon ourselves that curse? Why should we tamper or play with it?

War is the game from which both parties must arise losers! That is true of peoples. But it is not true of special classes who profit and wax strong at the expense of the masses of the people. Special interests find their account in war just as special interests find their account in protective tariffs, and concentrated special interests are always relatively stronger than diffused general interests. And what we are doing in building up a "modern naval establishment" is to develop those interests. To the masses of the people war always means suffering and impoverishment. But to the officers of a standing army or navy war means rapid promotion and enormously augmented importance; to contractors it means great fortunes; to politicians who can utilize its passions it means long leases of power. We can not be too careful not to build up such interests.

"The empire is peace," said the Third Napoleon. In this he inverted the truth, and a little while thereafter was, to maintain his empire, forced to involve France in a war which has left upon Europe a legacy of evil that no man can measure. Empires, monarchies, aristocracies—all forms of tyranny—are born of war and the war spirit. Democracy, on the contrary, is the child of peace, and can only really grow and advance in times of peace.

Trace to their root all forms of tyranny and enslavement, all the widespread curses that the world over have degraded and embruted men and made the masses but hewers of wood and drawers of water; ask how slavery, serfdom, cannibalism, private property in land, and national debts came to be; how savage superstitions were engendered and how the slavish reverence for ruling families and classes has been developed and perpetuated—it will be found to be war and preparations for war. Civilization, in what does it essentially consist, but in the art or condition of men living civilly and peacefully with each other? In our most highly civilized society individuals no longer go constantly armed. Why should not nations also become civilized, and discard their war establishments?

Most advantageously situated of all the nations, it might be the grand destiny of the American republic to lead the world to peace. Not to a "Roman peace" gained through blood and destruction, held by massive legions and carrying in its heart the seeds of its own decay, but a Christian peace, based on mutual respect

and forbearance—a living, deepening, growing peace, having for its foundation that golden rule that teaches us that we should act toward others as we would have others act toward us.

Some glimmering recognition of the true place of the American republic is shown in the proposal that has been made in her name that the nations should agree to settle disputes by arbitration. But how much more effective than any precept would be the example that would set before the world the spectacle of a great nation without a standing navy and a standing army!

Of all the nations, ours is the one that can most easily and most safely set such an example. Too strong to fear injustice, we ought to be too proud to do it. What do we want with a "modern naval establishment?" In the quick brains, the strong arms, the loving hearts of self-respecting independent citizens who have really "a stake in the country," the republic will find her only sure defense. Building and maintaining "modern naval establishments" can only divert us from securing that.

The real dangers that menace the republic are not from without, but from within. Standing armies and standing navies, heavy armor plates rolled by Bethlehem Iron works and big guns made by the Hotchkiss Arms company can not guard against these dangers; they can

only intensify them.

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Bethlehem! The very word recalls the sweet story, radiant with a light that has glimmered down through centuries of iron and blood. Bethlehem, over which the star of a world hope stood, and angels sang of cheer to men of good will; where long seeking wise men bowed in joyful reverence before the lowly cradle of the Prince of Peace, who should turn sword into reaping hook and spear into plow share! Is it not suggestive of our so-called "Christian civilization" that iron works of this name should have taken the contract to roll armor plates? "The old gods are not dead." Many are the statues of Mars and Pluto that have Christ's name painted on them.

Instead of aping European monarchies, why should not the American republic take her proper place and lead the way? The millions we have spent on a useless navy and are now likely to spend on a worse than useless one, what might they not have accomplished if intelligently devoted to the advancement of science and the kindly arts. Only a small part of it might ere this have made aerial navigation practicable, and relegated European steel-clads to the junk shop, and pointed fifty telescopes greater than the Lick nightly to the stars.



"... in the shadow of college, and library, and museum, are gathering the more hideous Huns and fiercer Vandals ..."