
A Military Era

by Eugene V. Debs

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Away back, some six or seven hundred years before the dawn of the Christian era, Isaiah, the prophet, with a prophet's vision saw, or thought he saw, a time when the nations would "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks," when "nation would not lift up sword against nation," and when they would "learn war no more,"¹ and some six hundred years after Isaiah's prophetic words Christ was born, and the angels filled the world with rapture when they sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."² It would scarcely be becoming to so much as intimate that Isaiah was the victim of hallucination, but so far, though twenty-four centuries have come and gone since he saw the disappearance of swords and spears, the nations are still learning war, and if here and there swords have been transformed into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, it has been because more effective death-dealing weapons have been available, and instead of "on earth peace," as the angels proclaimed, the war spirit has dominated the world, and never more completely than at present. Indeed, the present may very properly be regarded as a military era.

We have no desire to write of the military establishments of European nations — all Christians except a handful of Turks, and all trusting to guns instead of gospel, to powder rather than to prayer to carry forward our Christian civilization. We are particularly interested in the military affairs of the United States. True, as a nation, in our infancy we were rocked in a war cradle, and the music of the nursery was supplied by fife and drum, the scream of bullets, and the bursting of bombs. There were blood and carnage all the way from Boston to Charleston. There was a Continental army with Washington at its

¹ *Isaiah*, chapter 2, verse 4.

² *Luke*, chapter 2, verse 14.

head, and yet when the war was over and England retired from the fray, the Continental army disappeared as if by enchantment. There was no war spirit in time of peace, because peace hath her victories as renowned as war, indeed, far more renowned. Again, in 1812-15, when troops were required, the people, who are the government, supplied them, and when peace was declared everything bearing the appearance of war vanished. Again, in 1860-65, the people responded, saved the union, and this done, soldiers became citizens.

Standing armies are a menace to liberty, hence, as a nation, we do not want one, and will not tolerate such a machine to aid the schemes of heartless, ambitious men. But at this particular juncture ceaseless efforts are made to infuse the American people with what is called a "war spirit." True, there is no war, nor a probability of war, but there are thousands, soft-shelled lads, dudes, and donkeys, who are persuaded by men of small caliber who are ambitious to wear swords and parade for the delectation of hoodlums, to enlist in what they call the "home guard," the "state legion." This would be innocent enough were it not for the fact that these military nincompoops are the creatures of designing men, corporation plutocrats and mine owners who, by the aid of high state officials, can use the troops to perpetuate such outrages as their greed may require.

The press, as is usual, comes to the rescue and advocates more troops, better equipments, better guns with longer range, that death may be more certain. They say the times demand greater military power, but a military power is autocratic, it is despotic, cruel, heartless, murderous, bloody, and the only power which can reduce freemen to slaves. Why is there such a clamor for the establishment of such a power in the United States of America? Where are the enemies of our "God favored country?" Who are these enemies? What is their character? What are their implements of warfare? These are pertinent questions. They go to the marrow of conditions. They sink down into the soul of the nation like lead in still waters. What answers are made to these interrogatories? They come from every direction, north and south, east, and west, from center to circumference. The enemies to be killed by the military power are the workingmen of the country. They are found in our mines. They dig coal, iron, lead, zinc, quicksilver, copper, silver, and gold. The enemies of the country are found at the blazing, roaring forge.

They are in all the factories where wheels move by steam power or water power; they are along all of the 500,000 miles of land and water

transportation; peaceful, patient, industrious, they constitute the power that moves the world. Their implements of warfare are the pick, the hammer, the engine, the ten thousand and one tools with which workingmen build all the monuments that mark the country's progress and glorify our civilization. To subjugate such enemies is the high ambition of the plutocrats who clamor for troops. Steadily by degrees these enemies are being subjugated by the standing armies of states and of the nation. The dance of death and degradation goes merrily on. The sublime purpose of the war spirit now sought to be aroused is the reduction of the wages of workingmen and working women. To reduce wages builds up fortunes on the one hand, and on the other hand scoops out a deeper degradation for the wretched victims of the military power. The work is going bravely on. Every year the law forges fresh manacles for labor, and now the suggestion is that additional power shall be given the military arm; that it shall be larger and have a more devilish grasp; that it shall be stronger that it may strike a more death-dealing blow. To increase the military power, to whom do the plutocrats and their fawning, lickspittle press propose to appeal? To workingmen — and “tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon,”³ these plutocrats and their aiders and abettors expect to recruit their armies from the ranks of workingmen. Since time begun such an insult was never offered free men. And now the question arises, how do workingmen treat the unspeakable insolence and indignity? To hear the reply is enough to make all the pagan gods retire from the business, enough to make a brass dog tuck its tail between its legs and howl, for it is a fact that workingmen, black, white, and yellow fall into line in this military force and go forth to shoot workingmen whose crime is that they resist degradation.

The theory that ours is a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” was once well founded. A change has come. We cling to the shadow but the substance is disappearing. We have the shell but a military serpent has about sucked its last remaining liberty-sustaining principle. The government is rapidly becoming a military despotism. Laws are made to enrich the few and enslave the many, and the military arm, already powerful, is to be made more potent to trample upon justice, crown and enthrone the wrong, bludgeon truth to silence and exile right.

³ From *2 Samuel*, chapter 1, verse 20, which reads in full: “*Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.*”

The crisis is here. It is possible for workingmen to aid their enemies by joining the military, or they may by their ballots make for themselves a destiny of freedom.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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