

This Day in History... September 29, 1789

U.S. Army Established

On September 29, 1789, Congress created the US Army after multiple requests from President George Washington.

Prior to the American Revolutionary War, the colonies had their own militias composed of citizen-soldiers. During larger threats, such as the French and Indian War (1754-63), they created temporary provincial regiments.

By the 1770s, relations with Britain began to deteriorate, and the colonists started to form militias for a possible war. After Britain passed the Intolerable Acts in 1774 to punish Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party, many of the militias stepped up their training. In the fall of 1774, Richard Henry Lee was among several colonists to call for the creation of a national militia, but the First Continental Congress rejected the idea.

The following spring, as tensions continued to rise, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress created its own colonial army of 26 company regiments on April 23. Other colonies soon followed, including New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.

That June, the Massachusetts Congress addressed the Second Continental Congress and requested that they take over authority of the colonial army. With support from John Adams among others, the Second Continental Congress agreed to take command of the Boston troops. They also recognized the need for greater defense and passed a resolution creating the Continental Army on June 14, 1775. This included appropriating \$2 million in support of the troops around Boston and New York City. Congress also authorized the creation of 10 companies of expert riflemen (who later became known as the 1st Continental Regiment) from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, who were sent to Boston to support the militia there. The following day, the Continental Congress unanimously elected George Washington commander-in-chief of the Continental Army.

About a month later, Congress asked all the colonies to form their own militia companies from "all able bodied effective men, between sixteen and fifty years of age." Congress, as well as many colonists, didn't want a standing army, but they also needed to have the discipline to face an organized British force. The Continental Army began its service in Massachusetts, but moved on to New York following the evacuation of Boston. They spent the next five years battling the British in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania at such notable battles as Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Germantown.

Because it was such a young military force, the Continental Army was plagued with issues from the beginning, including poor planning and training, short enlistments, and rivalries between the states. While patriotism drove early recruits, incentives were needed to convince men to join later in the war. However, the leadership of George Washington and other officers helped to keep the Army together and learn from mistakes with each battle.

After the war ended with the Treaty of Paris, the Continental Army was largely disbanded in 1783, as the US legislature believed that a standing army during peace time was dangerous and unnecessary. Some troops remained active to guard munitions and about 700 members of state militias were prepared to take on potential threats from Native Americans and the British. It would be over 10 years before America created its permanent Army.

When the Constitution was ratified, Congress was given the power to raise and support armies. But they didn't see this as a priority. During their first session, which began in March of 1789, they focused on creating the State, War and Treasury departments, a judicial system, and argued over where to establish the new capital.

However, President Washington saw the importance in creating an American army. On August 7, he wrote a letter to Congress urging them to make the creation of an army a priority. He said, "I am particularly anxious it should receive an early attention as circumstances will admit; because it is now in our power to avail ourselves of the military knowledge disseminated throughout the several States by means of the many well instructed Officers and soldiers of the late Army; a resource which is daily diminishing by deaths and other causes." Even after Secretary of War Henry Knox read Washington's letter aloud, no action was taken. Days later, Washington reminded them of his request.

It wasn't until over a month later, on the last day of the session, that Congress addressed Washington's request. They passed a bill that allowed the President "to call into service, from time to time, such part of the militia of the states, respectively, as he may judge necessary." Thus, the US Army was born on September 29, 1789. And unlike before, states couldn't refuse to send their men for service.



Bicentennial stamp honors the Continental Army – the precursor to our modern Army.



As a military man, President Washington saw the importance of creating an army and pressed the first Congress to establish one.



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