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MSS "The Army" - A Toast. General Howard's Address Dec. 23, 1889

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Recommended Citation

Collection, O.O. Howard, "MSS "The Army" - A Toast. General Howard's Address Dec. 23, 1889" (1889). *Manuscripts*. 8. https://dh.howard.edu/ooh_manuscripts/8

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“THE ARMY.”—A Toast.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN OF THE NEW ENGLAND SOCIETY:

Pristine New England training having caught somewhat of the Round-head, Puritan, and Pilgrim theory about standing armies—which standing armies were supposed to bolster up the authority, and the prerogatives of kings and princes—pristine New England training, which aimed to differ radically from things farther back, has tinged New England's descendants with a settled opposition to a “regular” force. But New Englander as I am and must ever be, as I was early emancipated from color blindness by the presence of a negro lad in our household, so have I been most fortunate to have eliminated from my composition the ~~anti~~-army-phobia, by, as I have but lately discovered, a most remarkable inoculation. It came by inheritance from one of my forefathers, one who is said to have had a residence in the family of Captain Miles Standish. Therefore, whatever be our philosophy about family traits and inherited tendencies, one thing is certain, this “regular” spirit, whether derived by birth-right, by West Point bias, or by influence of war, however it has come, has full possession of my mind and heart; that is to say, though incorporated with volunteers, I am and have been a friend of the Regular Army. And whether they use the plough shares, the pruning hooks, or, as did our revered ancestors, the scythe-blades, there will, in my judgment, be need of that army's watchful care and prompt readiness for legitimate duties, without too much parleying, against the inveterate enemies of our country, and that for many years to come.

The old arguments against the use of military force, which were very abundant before the War of the Rebellion, and which by many were thought conclusive till driven from them by positive and dreadful necessity, are again repeated. It is sought to make it a shame to wear the uniform, which, a little while since, everywhere among the loyal people was a welcome sight, and all military tendencies in the education of our youth are deprecated in the most unqualified terms. The whole argument turns upon the statement that “it is

always a sin to take human life." Some carry their theory so far as to assail the Almighty, who has required life for life, and has taken, or will take, all human life.

Now, we regulars, while we unite with the journals of the day in condemning the ordinary destroyers of human life, like the railways, the storm-ships, poisoning dens home or foreign, the electric light machines, including the big unprotected, uninsulated wires above and below the ground, the theatres which have too few doors and stairs, with other like snares and traps, whether on the earth, in the upper air, or beneath the surface of the waters; yes, while we join in the common cry against these, and emphasize the divine commandment addressed to every individual of the race—thou shalt do no murder, we do, nevertheless, honestly and solemnly believe that judges, marshals, governors, policemen, militia, and regular troops, under the proper restraints and limitations of wholesome regulation, have the right, and it is their bounden duty to take human life; and it does not lessen the sense of duty to do this thing, as is often the case, at an extreme peril to themselves.

Now, we army folk, from Miles Standish down to the humblest modern Major General, have ever objected, and do ever object to be classed as murderers. Understand us, the definition of murderer, in laws, encyclopedias, or dictionaries, abridged or unabridged, does not include such men as George Washington or General Grant—the Benedict Arnolds and the copperheads to the contrary notwithstanding. It is quite another word which applies, *not murderer, but patriot*. Patriotism, it is true, implies some strong hardy virtues, which will hold back with an irresistible, mailed hand of iron-mould all anarchists organized and armed, or unorganized and unarmed, from their clutchings at the throat of the Republic. The giant, Force, is quiet and waiting, and moves his trunk and limbs with friendly caution, but remember, all malignant haters of men, that he is in breath and health and tremendous in power, and might crush you without a tremor of hesitation, should the spur of duty demand it.

Yes, friends of peace, give Love its place of nine to one. Give Arbitration, as did Grant with England, the fore-front, till patience has had her perfect work; but do not, amid spiritual and moral powers, forget that body-force must have its own portion; so, let it have its full panoply of armor and honor.

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To have no army and no forts would, in my judgment, be simply folly! It is a like hazard to having no fire-force; no iron safes or private locks; no river or ocean dykes; no adequate water-dams; no insane asylums; no jails and prisons; and no armed police or *posse comitatus*. It is the craze of what is falsely called "Christian Science" run mad, viz.: Just think everybody good; and everybody *is* good! Believe that the millenium is here; and the millenium *is* here!

We will not allow a deceptive and erroneous philosophy, however attractive and however seductive, to rob us of our practical common sense, or let it make weaklings or cowards of our children. We cannot become a prey to dynamiters and other criminal classes, that care for nothing but to revel on the garbage of a society assassinated, murdered and rotting, should their vile schemings and perpetrations materialize.

New England, whose theory, whatever has been the practice of her escaping sons, has been to lift up men, women and boys to the level plains of equality, has nevertheless inherited or absorbed an abnormal and paradoxical prejudice from the old country—a sort of settled undervaluation of a *regular soldier*. While we are without stint, as we verily ought, praising the volunteers for taking and holding and transmitting to us the first thirteen States of our Union; for their successful raid into Canada under President Harrison's grandfather; for capturing Oregon from our English fur-men; for snatching California, Texas, and New Mexico from our southern Latin neighbors; and finally for putting down a gigantic rebellion which wanted to make slavery the key-stone of a free republic, and to establish by arms the doctrine that our fancied constitutional cordage was but a rope of sand; may we not forget the distinguished part our regular soldiery have borne in the nation's work? Their feet were bare and bleeding in Washington's winter campaign; they stood loyal, fearless and grand under the tall American at Lundy's Lane, and under Captain Wool in Canada, while selfish friends looked on coolly from the New York side of the Niagara. They helped Taylor and Scott on the plains of Mexico, and carried our standards to the Pacific; they guarded the avenues of approach and protected your trains when they were few against savage bands, so that the trans-continental railways became possible; they, the rank and file, when statesmen veered and betrayed, and commissioned officers failed of previous

promise, remained staunch and true to the old flag; they joined in every battle of the rebellion always with honor and usually with great sacrifice; and since then they have kept planting the emblem of freedom on every frontier till the frontiers have disappeared. So we say, never let the press-gangs of the olden times, nor the few drunken fools, nor the miserable tramp-deserters of the present despoil the vast proportion of good regular soldiers of the praise and favor that are their due. No soldier of Gettysburg will forget the solid influence of Ayer's regulars when they deployed around Little Round Top. Whose heart did not thrill with patriotic fervor and gratitude as the regular batteries began their rapid work!

Our present Adjutant General truly says that our regulars are all "volunteers." Indeed they are volunteers, as no constraint brings them into the Army.

We have seen them under the most trying ordeals stand the test without a murmur in indian wars, where rewards even of praise were scarcely attainable, undergoing extreme privations, like those which render Stanley's men in Africa world-renowned. They have come through the longest campaigns and the cruelest fightings and woundings without a known desertion from the ranks. So are they not, these devoted unheralded men, always on the alert and ready when there is anything to be done? Therefore I say, my New England friends, let the little representative Army of a free people be ever honored and respected by New England men. A just esteem has in it a lifting power. Respect us and we will be stimulated to greater and greater self-respect.