

**AN INQUIRY INTO THE  
IMPORTANCE OF  
THE MILITIA TO A  
FREE COMMONWEALTH**

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An Inquiry Into the Importance of the Militia to a Free Commonwealth by William H. Sumner & John Adams

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**WILLIAM H. SUMNER & JOHN ADAMS**

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THE MILITIA TO A  
FREE COMMONWEALTH**



AN  
**INQUIRY**  
INTO THE  
**IMPORTANCE OF THE MILITIA**

TO A  
**Free Commonwealth;**  
IN  
A LETTER FROM  
**WILLIAM H. SUMNER,**  
ADJUTANT GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS,

TO  
**JOHN ADAMS,**  
LATE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES;

WITH  
HIS ANSWER.

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1823.

# **Letter**

FROM

**WILLIAM H. SUMNER,**

TO

**JOHN ADAMS.**

LATE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

*Boston, May 3d, 1823.*

SIR,

In an address to governor Brooks, accompanying my last annual return of the militia of this commonwealth, I made some observations on its condition, of which I beg leave to enclose to you a copy. My public situation has made it particularly necessary for me to investigate the uses of the militia, as a military institution; but this is not the only light in which it should be viewed. Its effects on the manners, habits and laws of our ancestors, are easily traced; the advantages resulting to us from the application of their principles, by the convention which framed the constitution, to our new condition under it; the continued influence of the militia in producing pride of character, respect for authority, obedience to the laws, and a just subordination among the people, are reasons of sufficient weight to make it questionable, whether it ought

to be considered of the most importance as a civil or a military institution. Yet, as, in the first point of view, it is now hardly ever regarded, and, in the second, in my opinion, not sufficiently so, I beg leave to trouble you with some remarks on its utility, in both respects. Besides the consideration of individual respect, my particular inducement to address you on this subject, arises from the sense I entertain of its importance, the open manner in which the militia has been assailed, and, the belief I have, that you will afford your support to an institution, the maintenance of which, appears to be essential to the preservation of our civil rights.

The pilgrims, who landed at Plymouth, seemed to have been fully possessed of the value of military science; for they brought out a military leader, as well as ministers and elders with them, knowing that they should not be able to enjoy the rights of conscience, and their spiritual privileges, without the aid of temporal power. Their danger from the Indians convinced them, that this was a subject which was not to be left to accidental acquirement; and, in fifteen years after their landing, captain Myles Standish and Lieutenant William Holmes, were appointed "to teach the use of arms for the towns of Plymouth and Duxbury." These officers were each allowed a salary of £20 sterling a year, "to be paid in corn or beaver, as it should then pass." As the settlement in other towns increased, provision was made for their instruction in like manner. To encourage attention to the subject, military attainments were made the ground of honorary titular distinctions which were allowed by the express grant of the civil government. It is remarkable, in the early old colony records to observe, that those who filled important civil offices are noticed by the appellation of Mr. only, while such as held military commissions were

always distinguished by the titles which their rank conferred.

In founding their military establishments upon the love of distinction, which animates mankind to the most extraordinary exertions, our ancestors discovered that accurate knowledge of the human character which deserves the consideration of their descendants. The charter of the school for military discipline, which was granted in Plymouth in 1642, is so instructive on the point of the application of many of those principles, which will always be necessary for making good citizen soldiers, that I cannot forbear to notice its leading characteristics. It provides, "That the officers should be chosen by the association, and approved by the court.

"That their exercise should be begun and ended with prayer.

"That they should have a sermon preached to them once a year, on the election of their officers.

"That none should be received into the company, but such are honest and of good report, freemen and not servants; and that they should be well approved by the officers, and the majority of the company.

"That every man who should be admitted as a member, should be subject to the command of his officers, and every delinquent, and those who should not keep silence, or, who exercised jeering, fighting or quarrelling, should be adjudged guilty of a misdemeanor, and punished according to the order of military discipline, and the nature of the offence.

"That every man who should be absent, except on good occasion, or the hand of God was upon him, should pay for his default; and, if he refused, he should be distrained, and put out of the list.



"That every man who entered the military list, and did not provide his arms, should be put out of the list ; and that all who came with defective arms, should be fined sixpence for each article deficient.

"That all that are, or shall be elected, chief officers of the military company shall be so titled, and forever afterwards be so reputed, unless he obtain a higher place.

"That if any member of the company die, the members shall assemble with their arms, upon warning, and inter his corpse, as a soldier, according to his place and quality.

"That none shall be taken into the company without being propounded, one meeting, before they shall be received; and, that none shall be admitted, who shall not first take the oath of fidelity."

The same principles are contained in the grant of the first military company in Massachusetts, in 1638. That company is now composed of between two and three hundred members, who are principally active officers in the staff and in the line of the militia. They frequently meet together for drill and mutual instruction ; and the names of some of the most distinguished military commanders in our history are borne on its rolls. The patronage of all the branches of the civil government, afforded to their public ceremonies, which are performed, according to the requisitions of their ancient charter, on the day of their annual election of officers, has now a most salutary influence on the militia, as well as on the institution itself, and makes the anniversary of the Ancient and Honourable Artillery Company one of the most interesting of our public festivals.

Thus early, and upon these principles, were laid the foundations of the military taste and knowledge, which enabled Massachusetts to manifest that martial prowess for which her history, as a colony, is so much distinguished. In all combined operations, she was able to turn out more

than her quota of men, besides undertaking important expeditions from her own resources. The organizing and officering, the arming and training of the people, gave them the ability to act with great celerity and confidence. Recruiting for any projected expedition was always easy, because all who joined it knew that they should do some good. Success was almost certain, because every one was determined not to sacrifice his domestic comforts, but for an important purpose; and all felt, that the continuance of their civil privileges depended on the result of their efforts. Whether, therefore, we see the Massachusetts troops engaged with the wily Indian in untrodden forests; embarking for foreign expeditions; or assailing regular fortresses, we witness that subordination in discipline, which arises from a respect for authority; that cooperation in effort, which is indispensable in all confederacies; and that patience in suffering, which a confidence in success, alone, can inspire. The security which religious freedom derived from the militia, in the early periods of our history; the respect in which its leaders were held; its effects upon the manners of the people; the union of civil, religious and military authority in the same person, and the well tested security of this deposit of power, gave a civil importance and respectability to its institutions, which those, who laid the foundations of our political constitutions, knew how to value, and enabled us, who enjoy their beneficial influence on our habits and laws, justly to estimate.

All nations, to maintain their independence, must at least, possess the means of defence; and, those, who have not the advantage of our local situation, cannot long expect to retain it, without the power of annoyance, also. The militia is intended for defence only; standing armies for aggression, as well as defence. The history of all ages proves that large armies are dangerous to civil lib-

erty. Militia, however large, never can be ; for it is composed of citizens only, armed for the preservation of their own privileges. In time of war, the army should be increased in proportion to external emergencies ; and, in peace, it should always be so reduced, as not to excite any apprehension of danger, from its power, to constitutional freedom ; but, it does not thence follow, that the militia should also be reduced. On the contrary, in proportion to the want of the means of resistance, aggression is encouraged ; and therefore, as the army is diminished, the militia should be cherished. These principles appear to have been well understood, formerly in this state ; but a change in the opinions of the people seems to be commencing, founded on the erroneous notion that the militia is a military institution merely, of no use in time of peace. They who reflect upon the principles whereon the militia was predicated, will at once perceive that this opinion is fraught with danger to our civil rights ; while those, who have adopted the error, do not confine their plan of reduction to this establishment. Some of them advocate the abolition of the militia, without an increase of the army ; and with some, the army not only is to be disbanded, but the militia, also. The main defences of the country, are to be wiped away, as with a sponge, the marine only excepted. Notwithstanding the navy by its skill and gallantry, fought itself into the favour of the administration, as the army did of the people ; yet, I fear, that even this favourite arm of defence, is less indebted to our political sagacity for its preservation, than to the Algerines and pirates, who have given occasion for its constant employment. It is hoped that the danger to the public safety from external causes, and the encouragement to domestic licentiousness, which it is apparent would immediately follow the adoption of these schemes, will prevent it ; but, the very propositions themselves, shew in how