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A Short History of Homeland Defense

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WASHINGTON -- Providing for the common defense was so crucial and basic a government obligation that the framers explicitly said so in the Preamble of the Constitution. When George Washington became president in 1789, "common defense" primarily meant two things: defeating a foreign invasion and defending against Indians.

Military forces -- and this included the various state militias -- were raised to defend the country against England, France and Spain. With the Revolution fresh in their minds, American leaders considered Britain the main enemy and a second war and possible invasion their greatest threats.

France, though a Revolution ally, claimed ownership of a huge tract to the west that posed a potential threat to American interests. Spain held Florida and virtually all the lands to the west not claimed by the French.

French and British naval ships both preyed on American merchantmen.

In the interior of the United States, settlers confronted American Indians as the boundaries of the country pushed west.

The Army and the Navy were the homeland defense. Congress authorized the Army to build or strengthen fixed



harbor defenses and the Navy to build blue-water ships to defend America's right to the sea lanes.

The USS Constitution, berthed in Boston, is a material example today of this building program. Fort Monroe, Va., Fort Washington, Md., and Fort McNair, Washington, D.C., are also remnants of these homeland defense efforts.

This does not mean the defenses were successful. During the War of 1812, neither Fort Washington nor the one that is now McNair stopped the British from capturing Washington and burning it. Seems the forts were in place, but not the manpower to adequately garrison them.

A bit later in the war, the British wanted to burn Baltimore as they had Washington. Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor withstood a British naval onslaught that inspired eyewitness Francis Scott Key to pen "The Star-Spangled Banner."

After the war, Congress appropriated more money to harbor defense. The best and brightest graduates of the U.S. Military Academy became engineers, and many were assigned to work on these fortifications. Robert E. Lee worked all along the East Coast building brick forts to defend the United States from foreign enemies. Fort Pulaski on the Savannah River in Georgia, Fort Totten in New York and Fort Jackson on the Mississippi were just some of the forts strengthened or built during this time.

In 1861, the Civil War broke out at Fort Sumter in the harbor of Charleston, S.C. The masonry fort withstood Confederate pounding, but the Union garrison surrendered because food was running out.

But technology was already passing these forts by. Conventional wisdom was that forts could withstand anything a ship could shoot. That wasn't true with the Union Navy's new rifled cannons. The weapons fired projectiles at higher speeds and with greater penetrating power than smooth-bore guns. Union ships pulverized Fort Pulaski in 1862 and ran past the forts on the Mississippi to take New Orleans.

The forts built at such expense and with such effort were obsolete.

On the frontier, the U.S. Army patrolled. Soldiers protected settlers and trade routes. In many cases, the Army acted as "frontier cops." This mission would continue through the 1890s.

After the Civil War, the Reconstruction Era saw changes in homeland defense. The Army occupied and policed the South. It propped up courts and protected former slaves, and soldiers had arrest powers. Reconstruction ended in 1876. The passage of the Posse Comitatus law in 1878 ended the military's having civilian law enforcement powers.

In the latter part of the 19th century came another era of ship building. While Americans still considered the Atlantic and Pacific oceans enough of a defense against foreign enemies, a strong Navy upon those waters was important. The U.S. Navy built larger all-metal steam ships that sported larger and larger guns.

The theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan became current. Americans viewed the Navy as America's first line of defense. Mahan, who wrote "The Influence of Sea Power upon History" and retired as a rear admiral, was instrumental in persuading Americans that the United States needed a large "battleship Navy."

By the time the Wild West was tamed, the Army was reduced to maintaining small garrisons in the West and now-obsolete forts in the East.

In 1898, the Spanish-American War broke out. During the six-month war, the Navy handily defeated Spanish fleets off Cuba and in Manila Bay, the Philippines. But Americans were shocked at what they perceived as thousands of miles of undefended coasts. In the years following the war, money poured into building new defenses around U.S. ports. Retractable guns and electric mines were the primary defenses. The coastal artillery branch of the Army manned these posts. They were never tested.

Another result of the Spanish-American War was the United States obtained the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico. A Navy able to keep the sea lanes open became a necessity.

In World War I (1917-18), the British bottled up the German fleet. America girded for war untouched by a threat to U.S. soil.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was the first foreign strike against U.S. territory since the war of 1812. While coast artillery units continued manning their forts early in the war, none ever fired a shot in anger. When it soon became apparent that aircraft and ships would be the main line of homeland defense, the Army transferred coast artillery officers and NCOs into field artillery.

During the war, the Army Air Forces and the Navy defended the homeland. Aircraft patrolled the approaches to ports looking for German and Japanese submarines. Navy destroyers and corvettes patrolled the sea lanes and pursued enemy craft that aircraft could not engage. The Navy even launched anti-submarine blimps to patrol the East Coast. At least one blimp attacked a German U-boat and was shot down for its effort.

Air power entered the homeland defense equation during World War II. The Nazi bombing campaign against Britain and the U.S.-British campaign against Germany made real the threat from the air. The safety America felt by being separated from the rest of the world by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans evaporated.

The United States was first in developing intercontinental bombing platforms with the B-29 Stratofortress. If the United States could develop long-range bombers, so could other countries. Nazi war plans in fact called for an "Amerika Bomber."

Conventional bombs were scary enough for defense planners, but the atomic bomb totally changed homeland defense.

The United States developed the atomic bomb and used two against Japan. The devastation and radiation dangers posed by the bomb caused the military to think of new means of defense. After the Soviet Union developed the bomb, the threat to America came from the skies.

The United States responded with the North American Air Defense Command. NORAD was a U.S.-Canadian organization charged with the missions of air warning and air control for North America. The command searched the skies for Soviet planes and would direct interceptors to shoot them down.

Later, with the development of intercontinental nuclear ballistic missiles, NORAD became the early warning system. To this day, there is no defense against these missiles. The NORAD warning would give people a chance to take cover in the event of a nuclear strike.

In the minds of the average American, "homeland defense" became "civil defense." And civil defense programs consisted of urging families to take cover and build fallout shelters and directing the development of community air raid shelters. Air raid drills became as common at schools as fire drills -- children practiced hiding under their desks or sitting together in the hallways.

In the traditional military sense, "homeland defense" meant forward deployment. U.S. forces stationed everywhere from Europe to Korea were America's line in the sand against the Soviet Union. Engaging the Soviets and their allies overseas precluded having to fight them in the United States.

With the exception of NORAD, a direct military connection to homeland defense eroded. Many Americans came to perceive the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps as assets to defend U.S. interests in distant lands, but not actively defending U.S. shores. Wars in Korea and Vietnam reinforced this attitude, as did operations in the Dominican Republic in 1965, Lebanon in 1958 and the Berlin Wall crisis in 1961.

Historians view the 1970s as the age of détente. President Nixon recognized the People's Republic of China. He and President Gerald Ford met with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. The Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 resulted, and the two superpowers moved to relax tensions. Through this period, homeland defense was seen mainly as a function of civil defense.

In the late 1960s, terrorism in the form of plane hijackings and assaults on innocent civilians grabbed public attention. U.S. aircraft were hijacked and diverted to Cuba or Mexico City or Rome. The U.S. response was not military, but centered on law enforcement. Sky marshals appeared. FBI agents investigated hijacking crimes and threats. Justice Department counterterrorism programs appeared.

So, the U.S. version of homeland defense meant the FBI was the lead federal agency for investigating or preventing terrorist incidents and the Federal Emergency Management Agency was the lead for remediation. The military stood by to help if called.

The events of Sept. 11 seem to be bringing homeland defense full circle. From the halls of Congress to New York street corners, Americans are calling for more military involvement in homeland defense. Sept. 11 changed the world just surely as the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki did. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld has said that the people of the United States need to debate this issue long and hard.

President Bush appointed former Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge as his director of homeland security. Ridge must see how the Defense Department fits in with all the other federal agencies and coordinate responses to threats to homeland security.

While the threats to America have evolved and changed, one aspect is clear: Whatever happens, the Defense Department will play a major role in defending America.

Useful U.S Government links:

- [The White House, Office of Homeland Security](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [Defense Threat Reduction Agency](#)
- [Director of Defense Research and Engineering](#)
- [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#)
- [Energy Department](#)
- [Environmental Protection Agency](#)
- [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#)
- [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\)](#)
- [Food and Drug Administration Bioterrorism Page](#)
- [Health and Human Services](#)
- [Justice Department](#)

- National Guard Bureau
- Postal Service
- Technical Support Working Group
- U.S. Army Soldier and Biological Chemical Command
- U.S. Army Chemical School (USACMLS)
- U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Chemical Defense (USAMRICD)
- U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID)
- U.S. Coast Guard

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