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During the last decade there has been considerable debate over the American experience in warfare and, by extension, the character of the American military experience more generally. The U.S. Army has been condemned as a Cold War dinosaur; celebrated for its rapid conventional victory in seizing Baghdad; condemned again as a blunt, outdated war-fighting instrument; and then celebrated for transforming itself in the midst of war into the adaptive force for counterinsurgency and nation building that many believe it should have become two decades ago. All these reactions were overblown, often driven more by political and institutional motives than by evidence or historical perspective. They have resulted in greater attention to the “small wars” of America’s past, for which I have to be grateful. But the polemical ebb and flow have led to caricatures and straw men, an exaggerated dichotomy between conventional and unconventional, kinetic operations and counterinsurgency. There is and has historically been a wide spectrum of military missions and operations, often occurring simultaneously, that cannot be characterized simply as “small wars,” “Indian wars,” or “nation building.”

This is the first of two volumes telling the tale of these “constabulary” roles and their effects in the years between the War of 1812 and the war with Mexico—years American historians have labeled the age of Jackson or, more recently, the age of Indian removal. The present volume examines the first big part of the story—the “problem” of institutional instability, multiple loyalties, and insubordination. The second volume explores the second part—the “solution,” based on greater professional commitment, experience (as much political and diplomatic as military) developed during extended careers, and accountability to civilian authority, tempered in the forge of frustrating, politically complex constabulary operations along the nation’s frontiers. If there was an American way of war (a debatable construct) during this period, Jackson’s Sword shows that it was highly variable, adaptive, and contingent on specific situations and objectives rather than archetypal military developments.
(whether from Napoleonic example or technological change) or comprehensive American social phenomena (political ideologies of republicanism and Jacksonian democracy, the citizen-soldier ideal, or antagonism to standing armies). More important than any specific situation or skill set, the career officers of the national standing army developed greater professional commitment, practical experience, and subordination to civilian authority. Congress and the executive rewarded their effectiveness and accountability with insulation from partisan political attack and substantial autonomy in their implementation of national policy, a monopoly of strategic and operational command they have retained ever since.

The present volume focuses on the years when Andrew Jackson commanded the Division of the South and twice led it against the Spanish in Florida, contrary to orders from his civilian superiors. The minuscule national standing army tried to maintain order on the thinly settled frontier between Texas and Louisiana, first clashing and then collaborating with American citizens ("filibusters") who sought to undermine Spanish rule in Texas. The army also attempted to arrest the Baratarian corsairs (such as Jean Lafitte) and to prevent similar marauders and nonstate actors, particularly those sponsored by Latin American revolutionaries, from attacking Spanish Florida, even as up-and-coming young officers advised Jackson and the War Department to seize Cuba.

The core of this volume focuses on Jackson and his subordinates in their decade-long quasi-war with Spain and a variety of Creek, Mikasuki, and Seminole Indians along the northern border of Florida. Their pressure, combined with Britain’s refusal to support Spain or the Indians in containing U.S. expansion, compelled Spain to cede Florida to the United States in 1821 (the Adams-Onís or Transcontinental Treaty), even as Jackson supported a junior subordinate in hindering another American filibuster against Texas. Chapter 6 of this volume anticipates the army’s shift to the western frontier of white settlement and focuses on its most sustained campaign during this era—a series of expeditions to advance U.S. power up the Missouri River and drive British influence from the region of the Louisiana Purchase.

During these years the national Military Academy at West Point was reformed, and its graduates became more common within the officer corps, but most officers were veterans of the War of 1812 who had been commissioned because of their political connections in 1808 or 1812. Many of these men felt as much loyalty to a particular section (the South) or region (the frontier) as to the nation as a whole. Andrew Jackson set an example of repeated insubordination against civilian authority, and the officer corps remained as unstable as it had been since the end of the Revolution. These
dysfunctional phenomena began to change during the 1820s, as the international situation calmed, War of 1812 veterans resigned their commissions to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the territorial expansion they had advanced, and the Military Academy gained a virtual monopoly on new officer commissions.

These developments, which ushered in the stability that enabled and encouraged the development of professional cohesion, responsibility, and expertise, are explored in chapter 7 and the conclusion to this first volume. These sections examine army missions, civil-military relations—particularly civilian demands on and reactions to the army—and officer socialization, commissioning, resignations, and assignments in the context of social, political, economic, technological, military, and cultural changes during the age of Jackson (the 1820s through the 1840s). Doing so establishes the background for the second volume, which begins by detailing the army’s missions along the western frontier after 1825, when it withdrew from the Upper Missouri Valley at congressional behest. That volume explains the army’s significance in western territorial expansion, as well as the defeat and effective pacification and removal of the Indians of Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and the Indian Territory (future Oklahoma)—ethnic cleansing that was accomplished with surprisingly limited loss of life among soldiers, white settlers, and Indians alike.

This coercive diplomacy (intimidation) and peacekeeping proved immensely frustrating for career army officers, who often found their fellow white citizens far more irritating and distasteful than Indians. This friction and its complex consequences for civil-military relations and the development of military accountability to civilian authority are explored in depth in volume 2 in a block of chapters on Indian removal. These range from the army’s intervention to prevent the state of Georgia from conducting removal on its own in 1825 to its efforts to pressure the Cherokee to move west between 1836 and 1838, culminating in the “inglorious” war to drive the Seminoles from Florida between 1835 and 1842. Volume 2 then turns to the nation’s Canadian border, where both British and American officials credited the national standing army with restraining filibusters and preventing war between Britain and the United States between 1838 and the diplomatic settlement of 1842 (the Webster-Ashburton Treaty). Volume 2 concludes with the army patrolling the Louisiana border and advancing American power, sometimes controversially, into the Southern Plains and Texas, ultimately going to war with Mexico, where U.S. victory, directed and led by career officers of the national standing army, paved the way for the Civil War, which these veterans would command.
Between 1810 and 1821 the officers of the national standing army were often motivated by highly subjective emotions of regionalism, sectionalism, and antagonism toward Indians, Spaniards, and Britons, born of their sympathy for frontiersmen and their experiences in the War of 1812. The resulting belligerence encouraged junior and field-grade officers to support Andrew Jackson in his usurpations of constitutional civilian authority, to repeatedly invade or threaten to invade Spanish Florida and Texas without authorization, pursuing primarily military solutions to complex intercultural and international dilemmas. After 1821 the officer corps became decisively more professional—more subordinate, responsive, and accountable to national civilian authority rather than local, regional, or sectional interests—in great part because of West Point socialization in nationalism and statism among junior officers, but even more so because of the frustrating experience of trying to keep the peace between white frontiersmen and Indians.
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Jim Bradford has been the staunchest of patrons and friends since 1994; he is my oldest academic friend outside of Rice. Back then, as the southwestern regional coordinator for the SMH, he got me on conference programs;
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Last, my family: to my dad, still setting an example working to build an effective, democratic government in Iraq forty years after he finished his second tour in Vietnam; to my fellow scholar Wendy and to Peter (an engineer and now a soldier) and to Wendy’s parents, Ted and Liz Fibison; to my sister Jen, who has built her own life out West, and my niece Mary Elaine (“Focus!”); to the memories of my grandmothers and grandfathers; to my aunts and uncles, especially Jan and Gene and the boys in wonderful Texas; and to my brother Ed and his wife Sharon, my niece Allie, and my nephew James Eric, a soldier and a rockin’ drummer: a true family to me. I dedicate Jackson’s Sword to my mom, Mary Ann Ross Watson, who passed away in 2008. I am thankful that I had a sabbatical and could spend some time with her; I wish I had asked her more as she grew ill. I wish I had finished this book in time for her to see it, but that really doesn’t matter; she knew I’d get it done eventually. Happy dreams, Mom.
INTRODUCTION

THE SOLDIER AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN STATE

Insulation, Autonomy, and Agency

Throughout the nineteenth century, the career officers of the U.S. Army served as federal, international, and interethnic mediators, national law enforcers, and de facto intercultural and international peacekeepers. They effectively advanced national objectives and power with remarkably little overt violence by extending and enhancing the authority and cohesion of the American nation-state along its borders and frontiers. Nineteenth-century military professionalism did not develop independent of civilian society, nor was it simply a matter of growing expertise in the art of warfare. By examining army officers’ efforts to extend and maintain national sovereignty in the borderlands of the United States, Jackson’s Sword explores their professional development; the strength, trajectory, and impact of the nineteenth-century American army and nation-state; and the everyday realities of civil-military relations.

The national standing army was almost continually challenged by nonstate actors, American or foreign, while being constrained by republican and liberal ideology, representative but racialist (white supremacist) democracy, adherence to due process and the constitutional separation of powers, and federalism and decentralization in sectional, regional, and localist forms. The officer corps’ claim to professional status and to the right to participate in its definition depended on civilian acceptance of its claim to authority over a distinct role in society’s division of labor, especially the power to select, promote, and exclude aspirants to that role. This claim was challenged by the anti–standing army and militia ideals, private and volunteer military units, and frontier constituencies that acclaimed those ideals and created such units when they believed that the regular army was acting contrary to their interests, as often
seemed to be the case in the confused welter of borderlands diplomacy and settler expansion. Yet despite widespread criticism as aristocrats, martinets, dandies, and Indian sympathizers, the officers of the regular army secured a fundamental acceptance of their professional role in the federal government and among the middle classes and elites who served in and identified with it.1

This acceptance permitted extraordinarily secure employment, making possible careers that lasted an average of more than two decades, and it meant that the regulars ordinarily exercised senior-level command over volunteer and militia forces during wartime. The officer corps gained this acceptance through fiscally accountable administration; genteel interaction with local and national civilian elites; the exercise, through military command, of an authority most civilian elites could only dream about; and the politically reliable performance of their duties negotiating, mediating, intimidating, and coercing along the borders and frontiers. Officers also made cogent arguments for the value of experience and specialization in military tasks. These arguments were accepted by most nationalist Republicans, National Republicans, and Whigs, and the officers clearly proved their capability by advancing U.S. territorial expansion during the war with Mexico. Most previous accounts have suggested that the army was subordinated to partisan politics—essentially patronage, regardless of education or experience—when it came to officers’ commissioning and promotion or that it was physically isolated and mentally alienated from civilian society. These assertions are inaccurate, individually and collectively. Crucially, unlike most other institutions of Jacksonian government, the army secured substantial insulation, even autonomy, from partisan politics and sectional or civilian economic interests in its internal administration and field operations. Yet the army officer corps became increasingly accountable to civilian authority in its internal institutional processes; in representative, constitutional, and federalist civil-military relations; and in the execution of foreign policy. Indeed, it struck a more diplomatic—a more just and less violent—balance among various social, political, and interest groups than most civilian frontiersmen or its European counterparts. The latter were thoroughly linked to civilian politics through commissioning and civilian officeholding, serving elite class power at home while launching imperial and colonial adventures abroad.2

Army operations in the Jacksonian borderlands restrained entropy, enhanced national security, and advanced orderly national territorial expansion. The efforts of the army’s frontier diplomats, including their exercise of restraint, discipline, or command over citizens and citizen-soldiers, helped prevent the establishment of competing polities (nations, states, or other political entities) that might have constrained U.S. growth; limited settler and citizen-soldier atrocities against Native Americans; and played a crucial—perhaps
decisive—role in averting a devastating war with Britain circa 1840. Their logistical expertise proved equally crucial to projecting U.S. national power, first to drive Indians from land sought by white citizens, then to do so against Mexico, and finally to reunite the nation during the Civil War. The army officer corps was certainly authoritarian in its internal discipline and in officers’ attitudes toward Indians and frontier civilians, and it was certainly more oriented toward national government, centralized authority, and social and political hierarchy than the decentralization acclaimed by the majority of Americans. However, its growing and, in Jacksonian America, unique professional autonomy did not come at the expense of political accountability. Autonomy, and the insulation that sustained it, enhanced accountability and subordination to civilian authority, to due process and the rule of law, and to the processes of representative constitutional government, however frustrating officers sometimes found them. If one is looking for themes and keywords, mine are responsibility, accountability, and subordination; institutional insulation and operational autonomy rather than isolation or alienation.

The length of this work demands an extended introduction to set out my themes, assumptions, and exclusions in advance. Here, I briefly outline my views on larger theoretical and comparative questions of state formation, civil-military relations, and civil and military professionalism, and I discuss where my work fits in the study of early American politics and international relations. Because most theoretical attention in these areas has been directed toward the late nineteenth century—and is often rooted in twentieth-century experience rather than nineteenth-century realities—I address and critique the leading interpretations of the relationship between the nineteenth-century army and the national state, particularly those involving the timing and meaning of military professionalization.

*Jackson’s Sword* is an exploration of diplomacy and civil-military relations on the frontier from the army’s side—local rather than national civil-military relations. It examines what army officers thought, wrote, and did in frontier and border regions; their attitudes and reactions toward white citizens, Indians, foreign nations and their nationals, and nonstate actors; and the impact they had on interethnic, intranational, and international relations. It is not a study of military strategy or national security policy directed against “conventional” (interstate) threats; it does not address American coastal defenses, plans for the defense of the northern border or the western frontier, or limited planning for an offensive against Canada in case of war. Nor is it a detailed examination of officers’ attitudes toward interstate war, Indian warfare,
national security policy, or U.S. foreign relations and policy, although several chapters touch on the last topic. *Jackson’s Sword* is intended to supply an analytic narrative that, though comprehensive in its treatment of significant army operations (which at that time meant almost anything above the squad or patrol level), is attuned to nonmilitary contexts and addresses larger questions in U.S. history. Although I emphasize officers’ agency, I hope I do so within the material and ideational, physical and conceptual structures of continental and Atlantic politics and economics, Euro-American culture, Indian relations, American society, and government institutions.

*Jackson’s Sword* is not a study of civilian reactions to army operations or of civil-military relations from the civilian side. I hope to locate the officer corps in its American social, political, economic, and cultural contexts, as well as those of international relations and the development of western military institutions and professionalism. In particular, I hope to relate officers’ attitudes to those of their society and culture, to connect motives, attitudes, and institutional developments and explore the links among the state, the elite and middle classes, and professional formation. But the narrative core of *Jackson’s Sword* concerns the army officer’s work as an agent of the national state. Between the end of 1814 and the outbreak of the war with Mexico, that work most often consisted of coercive diplomacy, whether expansionist intimidation or peace-keeping in support of stability. In other words, the army’s most common mission was diplomacy backed by the threat of force, conducted as much by military commanders on the scene as by civilian diplomats in national capitals.

*Jackson’s Sword* is not about enlisted soldiers. Much of the republican critique of standing armies was based on assumptions about the character of enlisted men, who were thought to be mercenary, dependent hirelings not much above slaves. American social and political leaders, and indeed officers themselves, shared this assumption, which was reasonable in terms of republican ideology, given the impoverished social origins of most enlisted men and the harsh discipline to which they submitted. Consequently, modern historical sensibilities notwithstanding, these subordinates appeared on elite radar screens (civilian or military) only when they resisted demands for obedience. Indeed, the hierarchical officer-enlisted relationship, whether seen as paternalistic or outrightly coercive, could serve as something of a model for class relationships among the increasingly conservative middle class in the decades of working-class formation after 1840. Ideology aside, civilian leaders thought of the army in terms of the genteel officer corps they dealt with on a day-to-day basis to handle practical military issues. Officers and civilian leaders were concretely linked by the process of nomination to West Point and often by personal friendship and informal influence over officers’ assignments, as shown
by the papers of any senior military leader and most junior officers and national politicians.4

Although it is a study of governance and administration in the broader sense, *Jackson’s Sword* is not a study of organizational behavior or bureaucracy per se. It is not primarily a study of the educational or administrative institutions in the army and its officer corps, which William Skelton and others have effectively addressed. Skelton has ably explored the sources and manifestations of professional socialization, commitment, cohesion, and expertise in his path-breaking work *An American Profession of Arms*; here, I address them at length only in chapter 7 and the conclusion of this volume. I am not writing an internal, organizational, or institutional history of the officer corps; I am concerned primarily with its relations to the “outside” civilian world, particularly on the nation’s borders and frontiers. One must be familiar with the former in order to understand the latter, however—a problem that plagues studies of the army by scholars who focus on partisan politics or ideology. By exploring the juncture between military operations, particularly “operations other than war,” and civil-military relations, *Jackson’s Sword* helps fill the current gap in the study of American civil-military relations between the Jeffersonian and Civil War eras. In doing so, it explains the hiatus that actually occurred in major civil-military tension between 1820 and 1860, notwithstanding some superficially vehement Jacksonian critiques of the army.5

It is hoped that this work will help historians better understand the complexities of territorial expansion and international relations, of relations between center and periphery, state and society, political rhetoric and ideology, and governance and political reality in the early American republic. Likewise, it should help scholars from a variety of disciplines refine their understandings of professionalism and professionalization and of state formation and consolidation. Military operations, civil-military relations, and intercultural and international relations all came together in upholding and extending U.S. sovereignty through peacekeeping and coercive diplomacy. Given the officer corps’ role (tacit or overt) in mediating among local, national, international, and interethnic (or intercultural) forces, *Jackson’s Sword* is a study of the negotiated and contested construction of local, sectional, national, and international interests and identities.

The history and historiography of the nineteenth-century army, and of nineteenth-century American military history and professionalism, revolve around two fundamental issues: civil-military relations, which are ultimately evaluated by the degree of military accountability to civilian control, and the military’s ability to accomplish the missions assigned to it. Indeed, these are the two most crucial issues in the study of military professionalism, and they
are critical to evaluating the utility of force as an instrument of national policy. Historically, these concerns were inextricably entwined: the degree of policy-maker emphasis on one or the other shaped contemporary force structures, and scholarly emphases on one or the other have strongly influenced interpretation and evaluation. This complex but crucial relationship is particularly evident in five major areas of scholarship: (1) military efficacy in general and (2) in the nineteenth-century army’s conduct of the Indian Wars in particular; (3) the relations between regulars and citizen-soldiers (volunteers and the militia); (4) the desirability, development, character, and extent of military professionalism; and (5) civil-military relations more generally. Jackson’s Sword provides an in-depth exploration of military attitudes and operations across the spectrum of coercion—from diplomatic communication to war—in the borderlands and frontier areas where the army conducted most of its operations prior to the Civil War.6

Exploring how the career commissioned officer corps of the national standing army reacted to these missions and the challenges and dilemmas they presented should allow a better understanding of five significant historical and theoretical questions posed by recent historians and political scientists. First, how strong and how influential was the early American state, particularly on the nation’s frontiers, and did it grow stronger or weaker between 1800 and 1860? Second, how insulated or autonomous were the army and its officer corps? Were they able to concentrate on accomplishing their missions without bias or distortion from contested social, political, and cultural influences, particularly from the partisan pressures that dominated American political life following the rise of the Second Party System in the 1830s? This question is central to an assessment of professionalism and professionalization because some insulation from nonspecialist, nonexpert pressure is presumed to be necessary for specialists to impartially exercise their expertise and judgment in the performance of complex missions. My answer suggests that significant dimensions of nation-state autonomy—if only those justified by national security and centered in the executive branch—endured even in that increasingly destabilizing era of populist partisan democracy.7

Third, how isolated, or even alienated, were career officers from civil society, from the political system, and from American culture as a whole? This question is ultimately one of civil-military relations: even if officers were accountable in the formal sense of being subordinate to the constitutional, democratic civilian authority of the nation-state, were they responsive to its social, political, and cultural norms? Did they shirk the missions assigned to them by elected representatives? Was their professional group ethic a threat to civil society?
Fourth, what was the timing and trajectory of professional development in the officer corps of the national standing army? Did mental or physical isolation help officers focus on developing their professional capability, as several scholars, mostly of the late nineteenth century, have argued? More important, what was the focus and content of American military professionalism during the early and mid-nineteenth century? Are the criteria employed by previous scholars relevant to that period, or would other criteria be more useful for a historical understanding and assessment?

Finally, what was the character of the nation’s frontiers and borderlands during the early and mid-nineteenth century? What was the impact of American federalism? (This subject has rarely been explicitly addressed in studies of intercultural and international relations along borders and internal frontiers.) To what degree and at what point in time did the United States, or its white citizens, come to dominate these regions? Did it or they achieve hegemony, and if so, in what sense? How much freedom of action did indigenous peoples, the American nation-state, and its citizens have in pursuing their objectives in these contested zones? What role did the national standing army play in U.S. territorial expansion and the dispossession of the Native Americans?

NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN GOVERNMENT: A “WEAK STATE” OF COURTS AND PARTIES?

Historical sociologist Michael Mann suggests that “professionalizing and bureaucratizing state militarism,” or the nationalization and rationalization of armed force, was one of the four principal tracks of Euro-American societal development during the nineteenth century (the other three were the moves toward mature capitalism, greater political representation, and political centralization and nationalism). As Mann observes, encapsulating the conclusions of historical sociologists since Max Weber, “Bureaucracy entered states mainly through their armed forces, substantially bureaucratized well before civilian administrations.” This was largely true in the United States as well, particularly after the decline of Federalist statism after 1800. Yet as historian Mark Wilson recently observed, scholars “have tended to search for the roots of American bureaucracy in virtually every field except the military.” Many American historians and political scientists still write as if citizens need to pay income taxes or receive transfer payments to have meaningful interactions with the state. All too often, eminent scholars skim over or minimize the role and significance of the nineteenth-century American state, assuring us that most of the population never encountered the federal government except at the post
and that American government was dominated by parties and their patronage at every level.10 During the 1980s political scientists Martin Shefter and Stephen Skowronek drew on historian Morton Keller’s portrayal of the post-Reconstruction period as an era of “organizational politics” to reinforce this interpretation, projecting it, without substantial archival evidence, backward throughout the century. This was epitomized in Skowronek’s widely cited dictum that nineteenth-century American government was a “state of courts and parties.” Skowronek was actually writing about executive branch agencies, so ultimately, the point was that partisan concerns (patronage more than ideology or policy) dominated the functioning of these agencies: inputs external to the policy questions at issue mattered far more than policy objectives or outputs. Whether the state was weak or strong, it was not autonomous. Taking this conclusion to its logical extreme, Daniel Carpenter, another political scientist writing about the Progressive Era, dismissed the early national state as “clerical.”11

Arguments against a strong nineteenth-century state commonly stem from anachronistic comparisons with the twentieth century; from assumptions that republican ideological antagonism toward centralized power dominated American politics throughout the nineteenth century; from the focus on electoral politics rather than policy, characteristic of the “party period” and the ethnocultural schools that dominated the historiography of nineteenth-century American politics between the 1970s and the turn of the century; or from apples and oranges comparisons with European states facing very different ideological and security environments. Social, cultural, and ethnohistorical perspectives—the linguistic and cultural turns in the social sciences and humanities since the 1970s—have privileged rhetoric and individual agency at the expense of policy and institutions. This has contributed to “a sense of statelessness” that probably characterizes modern scholars much more than the historical actors. None of these perspectives does much to examine the nineteenth-century American state on its own historical terms. Nor have the political scientists who compare the nineteenth-century state with the twentieth-century state relied on the papers of early- and mid-nineteenth-century executive branch officials or on an understanding of what their state—particularly the army—actually did in practice. These scholars study rhetoric, values, and political culture much more than governance or government.12

Historians cannot simply blame ignorance of the nineteenth-century state on political scientists. These assumptions, rooted in repetition rather than investigation, are among the most common anachronisms espoused by American historians. For many historians, including those of the nineteenth cen-
tury, the belief in a weak or minimalist state depends on a belief in the con-
tinuing pervasiveness of classical republicanism, which was deeply suspicious
of concentrated power. This belief was advanced to the point of scholarly
orthodoxy by historians of colonial and Revolutionary America in the 1960s
and 1970s who took contemporary partisan rhetoric, particularly that of
republicanism, at full face value. Among historians specializing in American
politics, the legislative focus of Richard L. McCormick—a variant of the “state
of courts and parties” thesis—shaped similar views. McCormick recognized
the impact and significance of the pre–Civil War nation-state as a distributive
agent, but he saw policy making as almost solely the province of parties act-
ing through legislatures, paying little attention to courts, much less to exec-
utive agencies, both of which seemingly did exactly what Congress told them
to do, every time. The promotional or distributive politics of legislation that
created direct and indirect subsidies (such as the import tariff, the employ-
ment of army officers to survey railroads and canals, or land grants to rail-
roads, homesteaders, and veterans) thus became a large-scale version of
Morton Keller’s patronage politics. 13

Historians who do not specialize in the early republic commonly accept
glosses by political scientists like Skowronek and Shefter. They, in turn, draw
from McCormick, from Keller, and from Louis Hartz’s review of American
liberalism to make huge generalizations about the dominance of Jacksonian
ideas over their Whig competitors, with almost no archival evidence. Yet as
William Skelton points out in “Samuel P. Huntington and the American Mil-
itary Tradition,” the historiographical foundation for this interpretation was
shallow and highly overgeneralized to begin with and has been steadily under-
mined by the tremendous mass of archivally detailed work done by historians
since 1960. Historians now recognize that, as a whole, early-nineteenth-
century America was much less egalitarian, much less antagonistic to institu-
tions and privilege, and, by the 1830s, much more receptive to specialization.
The shorthand for this recognition can be expressed in two words: the Whigs.
The Jacksonian Democrats maintained a slim, closely contested majority in
American politics, a far cry from the overwhelming predominance Samuel
Huntington found in the Jackson- and Jacksonian-centered historiography of
the 1950s. Yet this recognition has not penetrated most historians’ under-
standing of the state or its army. 14

Scholarly inattention to the army of the Jacksonian era both in the histo-
riography of the frontier and the West and in studies of American political
development and the state proceeds from and reinforces this errant perspec-
tive. Skowronek recognizes that the state’s “organization of coercive power
was no less indispensable for its unobtrusive character. The early American
state maintained an integrated legal order on a continental scale. . . . [D]espite the absence of a sense of the state, the state was essential to social order and social development in nineteenth-century America.” Nevertheless, Skowronek blithely asserts that Americans “relegated . . . the [apparently insignificant] tasks of securing the frontier and aiding economic development” to the army. Keller opines that “before 1861 the army was a neglected arm of the government”; historian William Nelson contends that there was no “significant federal bureaucracy” before the Civil War and does not mention the army at all.15 Yet even Joel H. Silbey, dean of the “party school” of interpreting nineteenth-century American political development, recognizes that “the purpose of all this partisan combat [or pluralist agency] was [to develop] particular public policies,” whether distributing benefits through direct or indirect subsidy or attempting to control personal behavior. Indeed, Silbey recently suggested that “the lineaments of a nascent American state were becoming . . . more visible” during the Jacksonian period than they had been since the Federal era of the 1790s. Building on a wide range of detailed studies by a new generation of historians beginning with Richard John and William Novak, political scientist Ira Katznelson recently labeled the early republic “an assertive, expansive, and permeable liberal state.” He recognizes that liberalism depends on power as much as any other public system, especially when constructing and maintaining coercive property relations—such as slavery and the expropriation of the Indians.16

I am not arguing that the origins of the welfare state lie in the 1830s or that partisan patronage did not undermine the efficiency, impartiality, and effectiveness of government during the Jacksonian era. On the whole, following Richard John, Ronald Formisano is right to label that period one of “state regression.” Yet while government may have been a withered limb of nineteenth-century American society, the military was not neglected within it. Katznelson observes that between 1808 and 1848 the military absorbed at least 72 percent of the national budget every year; the army took about half the budget, with the navy and the civil service taking 20 to 30 percent each. Consequently, Katznelson concludes that “the military provides a privileged vantage point from which to probe the character, ambitions, and limits of the United States as a liberal state. . . . Both the American military and the state . . . have been underestimated badly. . . . It was the military that . . . defined the key contours of America’s regime in space and in ambition.” However inadequate by twentieth-century (or contemporary European) standards, the early- and mid-nineteenth-century American state proved sufficient to create and maintain a national military force capable of projecting power from Florida to Wisconsin to Texas, from California and Oregon to Mexico City.
In fact, Keller’s statement that the Civil War army was “an organization whose size, power, and administrative complexity were unmatched in nineteenth-century American . . . history” is equally true for the antebellum army and antebellum American organizations, private as well as public. The experience of that army, the subject of this book, provided the basis for effective civil-military relations, logistics, and power projection in the army of the Civil War. Whatever the validity of the “state of courts and parties” and the “weak state” theses as generalizations, for comparison with European states or the twentieth-century American one, the national standing army was a critically—indeed, decisively—significant exception in its own time.17

CONTEXT IS (ALMOST) EVERYTHING: JACKSON’S SWORD AS A STUDY IN MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM

Examining the interests, values, and perspectives of American officers operating in the borderlands has important implications for the study of nineteenth-century American military professionalism, particularly officers’ sense of professional mission and responsibility. Officers’ actions and attitudes toward international relations, frontier diplomacy, and national security policy demonstrate a range of individual efforts to meld distinctly American beliefs and circumstances with the socially functional yet self-interested quest for preparedness expected of any military body. Examining this fusion between abstract model and social reality casts much-needed light on the influence of American belief in exceptionalism on a profession—and a historiography—founded on the example of European institutions and ideas. The American officers who gave conscious thought to wider policy issues often demonstrated a remarkable ability to recognize and accept the interdependence of military, political, economic, and even cultural resources and objectives, and they exhibited a socially responsible and politically accountable willingness to direct military policy and subordinate military goals to the service of objectives valued by the civilian polity. These patterns of thought and behavior also suggest significant limits on the mental isolation and alienation produced by military missions and socialization in the midst of an increasingly liberal society—an important issue in assessing the evolution of socially responsible and politically accountable civil-military relations.18

Notions of professionalism were unevenly developed and widely contested in Jacksonian America. This should not surprise us: like most complex human phenomena, professionalism is a shifting, relative, constructed phenomenon, not an unconditional or permanent one. It is asserted and defined both
through the efforts of aspiring professionals and through the external social and political relationships—the demands of those the profession claims to serve—specific to particular historical contexts. Consequently, professionalization is always an ongoing process of jurisdictional definition and defense, as well as the development of commitment, expertise, and responsibility. The cultures of society, state, and profession (or of the occupations and organizations claiming professional authority) play an important part in establishing the aspiring profession’s role in this process. The aspirants’ expertise and the demand for their services are ultimately constituted—conceived, perceived, understood, recognized, and reconceived—by the society they serve, based on its values and priorities as well as on the threat environment. Although we may agree that all states share a desire for security, threat determination is a political process. Would-be professionals secure recognition as privileged claimants to mission and authority only when they convince society that they deserve it.

Doing so requires that aspiring professionals accommodate their expertise to society’s needs. There can be no permanent, unquestionable professional status or skill set (beyond some of the most fundamental cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and the ability to focus one’s study and analysis); there can be no single ideal-typical professionalism to which every military force or every claimant to professional status (civil or military) can aspire. Like civil-military relations or any other socially constituted relationship, professionalism can never be perfected for all eternity; it can only be improved to serve the society in which it is identified or asserted. When professionals, particularly those dealing with the political issues of conflict and war, advise their clients or constituents, they must do so critically, without imposing a preconceived solution. They must recognize that the clients possess the right to define their own interests, objectives, and priorities and thus the missions they will assign and (more indirectly) the skill sets they require.

Political scientist Samuel P. Huntington’s enormously influential *The Soldier and the State* (1957) was the first American work to explicitly lay out a taxonomy of military professionalism. According to Huntington, the content of civil-military relations and the opportunity for developing professional capability revolved primarily around the degree of military autonomy from civilian control, which was presumed to be essential for the development of expertise for national defense. Huntington’s advocacy of an idealized “objective civilian control,” which he privileged as “objective civil-military relations” ultimately meant that civilians should leave the military alone to develop its expertise and to conduct warfare as effectively as possible. The onus was on politicians—the policy makers—and the political system to give the military the tools it needed (or said it needed) and to accept the military’s definition of
the problem at hand. International security—the primacy of foreign relations—trumped all social, economic, ideological, and even constitutional considerations. Any problems in civil-military relations came primarily from civilian refusal to recognize the priority of military expertise. If the civilians stayed out of military affairs, the military would focus on fighting foreign armies and leave the civilians alone. No coup, no problem.

In addition to being deficient as a measure of military subordination to civilian policies, this definition of the problem presumed that autonomy from civilian oversight (assumed to be destabilizing because of the unpredictable operation of politics—particularly democratic politics and politicians’ inability to devote themselves to military matters) was necessary for aspiring professionals to develop expertise and provide expert advice. This expertise would emerge both through experience, which would require career stability free from politically motivated intervention in promotions and rewards, and through formal training and education, which should therefore be run by the increasingly expert military, including substantial control over the conditions of entry into the profession. This autonomy would enable the military to define threats (problems) and desired skill sets (solutions) without distraction or intervention by those lacking experience, training, and education. In return, the military would remain subordinate to the civil power by staying out of any policy questions that did not involve national security.

A rigid binary distinction between liberal civil society (with diverse interests represented by legislatures) and conservative military professionals (shielded from liberalism by the national executive) is the essence of Huntington’s “objective” civilian control; it does much to account for his praise of the Prusso-German army of the Second Reich as a model for civil-military relations, which would have shocked most Anglo-Americans prior to the Cold War. If interaction with civilian society threatened military professionalism, professionalism could develop only in isolation; conversely, successful professional development would probably produce isolation as officers concentrated on their distinct, perhaps unique, mission while civilians went their own way. This process was essentially circular: left to itself, this closed loop was ahistorical both in evidence and in potential for change. The profession would define the problems it existed to combat; it would then claim superior expertise, and thus a superior ability to define the problem, on the basis of the training and education it developed to combat the problems it had initially defined. If it succeeded in defining which problems it would address—which missions it would accept—then its members would develop experience primarily in those missions and skill sets and would feel more strongly that they had identified the right ones.19
Nineteenth-century military professionalism did not develop independent of state or society, nor was it simply a matter of growing expertise in the art of conventional warfare. Government control meant government prodding, a pressure that officers frequently resisted, while their own proposals for reform were always subject to cost-conscious civilian review. The criteria of professionalism were the subject of constant if often tacit dispute between the advocates of socially elite “character” and leadership—inherently ascriptive and subjective—and the advocates of specialized and implicitly middle-class education and expertise—achievements that were at least theoretically measurable by standards applied to all aspirants. Sometimes governments pushed for the primacy of one or the other, but the mass of officers, especially those serving in regiments and central headquarters, saw character and esprit de corps as the indispensable moral underpinnings of internal cohesion, battlefield effectiveness, and political accountability. Since the development of distributed maneuver—maneuver by autonomous but coordinated formations to set up and exploit battles—during the Napoleonic era, analysts of military affairs have privileged “operational maneuver” and the operational art it is said to embody as the essence of conventional war fighting. By the 1980s, the crucial role of operations in linking tactical engagements and strategic intent led military officers to idealize the operational level, which is often viewed as the most intellectually challenging of the three levels of war (tactical, operational, and strategic) because it combines the specificity of tactics and the abstraction
of strategy. Such complex coordination requires a great deal of the specialized expertise and extended abstract study (rather than on-the-job training) associated with professionalism, and the planning and conduct of large-scale operational maneuver was the forte of the Prussian and German general staff, the prototype for modern military coordination.

Nevertheless, however important Prussian developments were for the future of interstate war after midcentury, fears of Bonapartism in western European nations, and of social and political revolution in central Europe and Russia, conditioned debate about the character of European military establishments throughout the nineteenth century. The consensus among European elites in favor of the rigidly hierarchical status quo meant that systemic wars posing a major threat to national existence or the continental balance of power were unlikely to recur. Therefore, most debates about military reform turned more on internal considerations of political reliability than external ones of military efficiency. Loyalty to the standing order was ultimately far more important to social and political elites, including military officers themselves, than the development of military expertise per se; they feared that the triumph of technical specialists—implicit, in the most important example, in the era of Prussian reform between 1807 and 1819—might mean the disestablishment of privileged social classes and the derangement of the social and political order. The Prussian system of higher military education has long been held up for praise and emulation, and recent historians have emphasized the vitality of military reform movements in France and Britain. Yet the criteria of European military professionalism remained fundamentally social and subjective, elitist and ascriptive, rather than achievement based throughout the decades between Waterloo and the Crimean War. All officer corps, even that of bourgeois France, espoused a heroic or agonistic conception of warfare where honor—consisting of intangibles like chivalry, gallantry, and courage—was the most important value. To these men, professional success or failure seemed immeasurable save by the post facto judgment of combat itself. In the interim, the association between these subjective values and the landed classes and the aristocracy constrained officer selection, sustaining officer corps whose social composition and political values reinforced class hierarchy, even as the growing industrial working classes protested its injustice.20

Within armies, as Edward Spiers observes of the British, “preserving the esprit de corps of the regimental system was deemed the essence of military efficiency.” Discipline and its supporting values of hierarchy, order, and cohesion seemed indispensable, given the physical and psychological chaos of the battlefield; the prevailing middle- and upper-class attitudes toward the working classes, which provided the bulk of enlisted men; and the possibility—
indeed, the probability, outside of Britain—that these troops would be deployed to coerce or kill their erstwhile fellows. After a quarter century of egalitarian revolution, middle- and upper-class European officers did not trust their men’s initiative in battle or riot any more than they had during the era of Frederick the Great half a century before. Critical thinking seemed to lead to uncertainty and unrest, and the antidotes to military and political chaos remained subjective, class-derived character and morale, not matters of independent individual intellect or the quasi-objective efficiency of purely “military” expertise. Nineteenth-century officers were gradually compelled to address the evolving distinction between mind (character) and matter (technique) and the related phenomenon of remote, apparently unwilled causation. Yet it seemed difficult to adapt to these challenges without losing the institutional-occupational autonomy and sociopolitical accountability to elite rule that underlay the authority of command; European officers largely succeeded in ignoring that dilemma, ultimately to their detriment and that of the empires they defended.  

The officer corps of these European armies—to which American officers looked for examples of war-fighting expertise—presented widely varying pictures of expertise and cohesion, including the standardization of administrative procedures, but all of them save the French remained fundamentally subordinate to the political institutions of their social classes (the aristocracy and other elites). (The French army became an antidemocratic force after the 1830s, in large part due to its demoralization in Algeria.) Since these regimes were substantially undemocratic, and since the maintenance of elite class dominance and empire was a prominent factor boxing Europe into systemic war and catastrophe in 1914, this sense of responsibility and the resulting political accountability should concern us as much as any of the more specifically military developments in Europe. Yet the damaging role of the Prusso-German military in Wilhelmine-Hohenzollern constitutionalism and civil-military relations writ large was virtually invisible in Huntington’s theory of “objective civil-military relations.” It is highly debatable whether Prusso-German civilian control—to the degree civilians actually controlled the military—was objective: the rationale for executive (monarchical) control was as much to maintain social order—the order in which the army held so much prestige and authority—as to ensure national defense. Nowhere is Huntington’s failure as a historian more clear than in his praise for the Prussian example (though supposedly in contrast to the Nazi one) as the epitome of successful civil-military relations. Whether the crisis was in 1848, 1914, or 1918, Huntington should not have needed to read Gordon Craig’s Politics of the Prussian Army to recognize that
something was not right with German military professionalism, long before the indisputably subjective civil-military relations of the Nazi era.

Nor did that professionalism suffice when Germany faced the international coalition its civil and military leaders feared. The First World War demonstrated the limits of the narrowly specialized expertise developed by professional military leaders, particularly the Germans that Huntington acclaims as his exemplars of objective civil-military relations. Attention to technical details and effectiveness in military tactics and operations—war fighting—trumped consideration of alternative national strategies or diplomacy in prewar plans for mobilization, deployment, and operations. Confidence in war-fighting prowess obscured strategic constraints and indeed the very objectives of warfare. Trying to avoid a stalemate and a long war they knew they could not sustain, senior European military commanders effectively tied the hands of their civilian rulers by presenting their plans for mobilization, deployment, and initial operations as faits accomplis that could not be altered without dooming the nation to catastrophic defeat. Nor did the autonomy to develop professional expertise actually produce tactical or operational asymmetries sufficiently decisive to overcome the constraints of scale and defensive technology when nineteenth-century military professionalism faced its supreme test in 1914. (However, we should acknowledge that the tactical dilemmas presented by growing scale and defensive firepower were to some degree intractable, given the technological limits of communications and mobility.)

Huntington’s theory encouraged and appeared to intellectually validate a very present-minded, often very inflexible definition of military missions and expertise. Huntington and, more importantly, the Cold War and post–Cold War military officers and historians who found his work so congenial identified their principal mission as what is often called war fighting—primarily, defense against high-intensity conventional (or nuclear) attack by large-scale, essentially symmetrical forces serving other nation-states, akin to the recent world wars. Doing so was not at all unreasonable in 1960, given the devastating experience of world war and the intense ideological antagonisms between states possessing immense military forces with the power to subjugate or destroy entire nations. Yet Huntington’s followers often attempted to define the threat in perpetuity, to resist acknowledging that historical circumstances change. They tended to depict any non-war-fighting missions, and often unconventional war-fighting ones like counterinsurgency, as “subjective”—that is, partisan, ideological, and unpredictable—civilian interference that
would distract the profession from preparing to fight and win the nation’s wars. They not infrequently implied that military leaders were right to resist developing new skill sets. The result was a wave of cognitive dissonance and uncertainty when the Soviet Union collapsed.

The argument widely expressed during the last generation—that the U.S. Army’s core mission is to fight and win the nation’s wars—appears innocuous enough. Yet choosing to specialize in that mission while making war fighting a moral buzzword, to the de facto and sometimes explicit exclusion of other missions and skill sets, ultimately amounts to an appropriation of the political decision to provide the army with mission taskings—“shirking,” in the words of political scientist Peter Feaver, echoing Huntington’s contemporary Samuel Finer. The assumptions (which are internally logical) are that society needs the military to fight large-scale wars to protect vital national interests and ensure national survival, and that multitasking degrades the efficiency encouraged by specialization in a single core function. Army officers have been making this argument for 200 years, not infrequently confusing past and present, history and personal preference, in their efforts—which all claimants to professional status make—to find a usable past.22

The predispositions of many officers and military historians notwithstanding, war-fighting expertise, particularly of the conventional sort, is not the most valid criterion for evaluating military professionalism in all historical or contemporary circumstances. Nor, of course, should we privilege counterinsurgency, irregular or unconventional warfare, operations other than war, or “stability and support” operations as “complex operations” that are somehow more challenging than large-scale conventional maneuver, as too many officers and civilian analysts are wont to do today. In either case, too many students and military practitioners misuse sociologist Andrew Abbott’s innovative work on professional “jurisdiction” over missions and skill sets to attempt to shape current military professionalism in a predetermined manner, not as a tool for analysis or to respond effectively to the strategic concerns of civilian authorities. Indeed, these officers and scholars embody Abbott’s arguments about professional self-aggrandizement through self- and problem definition. Technique supplants politics, means displace ends. Yet the question of professional mission and utility ultimately depends on the audience or constituency a profession claims to serve. Different varieties of expertise may be most relevant to the missions demanded by society and its political representatives at a particular point in time. At some early points in professional development, commitment and the consequent cohesion may be most important to professionalization, as William Skelton’s work suggests; alternatively,
responsibility to society’s demands may be most significant, which is my own take for the period covered by this book. Thus, although much of Jackson’s Sword demonstrates the remarkable autonomy of military professionals and the state in nineteenth-century America, the historically specific content and development of American military professionalism depended on the contingent, historically specific social context of that era: what did society want from those who claimed professional status? This was and is an inherently and inescapably political question, though it does not have to be a partisan one.23

As historian Michael Geyer observes of the Prussians, “it was the fragmentary condition of army reform rather than the complete remaking of the army, the simultaneous and [often] incoherent presence of multiple directions within the army and in the relations between army and society, that characterized the condition of the [Prusso-German] military in the first half of the nineteenth century. It took nearly half a century . . . to put the various elements of partial change together” to form a professionally capable—but hardly a professionally responsible—army. To observe that the U.S. Army lagged behind its European counterparts in preparations for large-scale or high-intensity conventional operations or that its bureaucracy was rigid does not mean that it was incapable of performing the missions it was actually assigned. In fact, the army proved an extremely successful agent of American power projection in the nation’s decisive international conflicts—the war with Mexico and the Civil War—prior to 1898; to judge it based on its preparation for intervention in Europe or Asia—the only missions that would justify comparisons with Prusso-German developments—is highly anachronistic. Late nineteenth-century army officers sought Prussian-style reform, but we can certainly question, as many contemporaries did, whether their initiatives suited American geostrategic realities.24

Yet the ahistorical presumption that the essence of military professionalism is expertise in conventional war fighting continues to drive the analyses and determine the conclusions of very capable historians, who are often looking forward to the Civil War or the United States’ world role in the twentieth century rather than analyzing the antebellum era on its own terms. Most arguments that the army did not professionalize until after the Civil War ultimately depend on a narrow and, indeed, anachronistic definition of military professionalism as preparation for major conventional wars. Yet the scholarship of the past generation suggests otherwise: the commitment, persistence, and cohesion William Skelton demonstrates; the administrative and logistic skill, autonomy, and accountability historian Mark Wilson explores; and the actual evidence of expertise and capability in a variety of missions provided by these
and other recent scholars like Durwood Ball, Wayne Hsieh, Mark Smith, and Robert Wooster. Scholars may search for evidence of preparation for a conventional civil war, but that was not the mission the American political nation gave the army. Overawing whites and Indians on the frontier was the regular army officer’s primary purpose before 1861—that was the political and historical reality. Officers may have wanted to fight the British, but that was not the mission for which the government paid them tax dollars. It is fundamentally ahistorical to judge their actions, priorities, expertise, or performance as if their duty was to prepare for the Civil War or World War II.25

In the nineteenth-century U.S. Army, as in most armies, there were multiple professionalisms: expertise in conventional war fighting, which most officers preferred to develop because of its apparent political simplicity and potential for earning civilian applause, and expertise in constabulary or stability operations—peacekeeping and law enforcement—to name the most basic categories. (Constabulary operations is a vague term, but it may be less likely to mislead than the terms peacekeeping and stability operations, which imply an ethnocentric, sometimes morally objectionable American perspective. See appendix D for an outline of these types of operations on the nineteenth-century frontier.) Superficially, the distinction in expertise was embodied by the contrast between Winfield Scott, who built on a European inheritance to “conquer a peace” in Mexico, and Edmund Pendleton Gaines, Jackson’s protégé and Scott’s rival, who presented himself as an Indian fighter (until he came to disagree with Jackson’s removal policy) and a practical man of the frontier. Yet in reality, Scott and Gaines both fought against the British in 1814, while Scott spent most of his “operational time” handling border crises as a diplomat—perhaps a third form of American military expertise in the nineteenth century, if it could be distinguished from constabulary, stability, or peacekeeping operations. As fondly as officers liked to imagine themselves gallantly outmaneuvering British opponents in a rematch of the War of 1812, the European threat proved much less urgent than frontier peacekeeping and law enforcement missions, where diplomacy and shows of force, rather than combat operations, were the principal instruments of national policy.26

Although they lacked a permanent strategic and operational planning staff after the Prusso-German model, nineteenth-century American civil and military policy makers did possess strategic visions and a military strategy for peace enforcement on the Indian frontier: the full range of coercive diplomacy, followed, if necessary, by violent power projection through punitive expeditions, material destruction, and battle. One might even argue that they inherited an operational tradition, or a sense of operational art, to guide and provide alter-
natives for operations against Native American groups. But—and this is a key but—that strategy, that operational tradition, required diplomatic, logistical, and tactical skills (roughly in that order of chronology and significance) much more than proficiency in large-scale distributed maneuver à la Moltke or Napoleon. Given these missions and their demands, my bibliography contains far more books on the British and Russian armies and empires, whose missions were roughly similar to those of the U.S. Army, than on the Prusso-German or even the French ones (despite their influence on nineteenth-century American military education).

Before assessing expertise and capability, which can vary so greatly by circumstances, we should recognize that every society wants its professionals to have some sense of responsibility and reliability; society needs some reason to trust them with the power of their expertise and the autonomy to employ it. This is particularly true of the military—the “armed services”—which are funded by governments to serve as their instruments. Governments create armies because they believe they need a reliable as well as a capable coercive instrument. The need for expertise—or, more specifically, effectiveness—in performance may be the reason professionalism comes into being, but that does not make it the defining criterion of professionalism, regardless of historical context. Since the seventeenth century, few governments have been willing to entrust control over an armed force to armies they have not created themselves. Thus, officers supply themselves in response to a demand not just for a certain set of services requiring a certain expertise but also for subordination, accountability, and responsibility in the performance of those services. Mercenaries were expert but not necessarily reliable. Noblemen and knights may have been expert, at least in individual combat, but they were often unreliable; many considered their individual interests as important as those of their sovereigns and were loath to accept subordination or incorporation into larger units. Indeed, most of the world’s military history suggests that such subordination has been a necessary prelude to effective “national defense” (whatever the actual size of the political community in question) against foreign enemies, while its absence has often proved a threat to domestic tranquility and social peace. It is no accident that federal employees swear oaths to uphold the Constitution “against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

My interest in Jackson’s Sword is not primarily in the supposed objectivity or subjectivity of civilian control over the military: my concern is with the objectivity (emotional detachment or, perhaps in some instances, impartiality) or subjectivity of the military in its relations to society, its sense of mission, subordination, and responsibility to those it is supposed to serve.
Emphasizing professional responsibility—the primacy of context and mission, the necessity of conforming means to ends, expertise to mission, and supply to demand—may not suit those who believe that the “management of violence” means combat, particularly the conduct of large-scale distributed maneuver. But, as historians William Skelton and Mark Grandstaff have intimated, it provides a much more historically accurate explanation of how the regular army officer corps’ claim to professional status and a degree of autonomy in the performance of its missions became accepted by American society and its representative constitutional authorities during the supposedly rampant egalitarianism of the Jacksonian era. Emphasizing responsibility also provides a more accurate understanding of the army’s historical missions and skill sets and the complex, multivariate, and multilinear trajectory of American military professionalism in the nineteenth century and the twenty-first. The army officer corps of the Jacksonian and antebellum eras was professional in its socialization, commitment, and cohesion as an occupational group; in its autonomy, expertise, and effectiveness in the missions it was assigned; and in its responsibility, subordination, and accountability to constitutional civilian government and most civilian political norms. As such, the officer corps met all of Huntington’s criteria for military professionalism, without the sociopolitical isolation he thought necessary for professional development.
THE LIMITS OF THE CITIZEN-SOLDIER IN MILITARY OPERATIONS SHORT OF WAR: JACKSON’S SWORD AS A STUDY IN PROFESSIONAL MONOPOLY

Ironically, Jacksonian Democrats and other decentralist politicians, who often condemned the national standing army, compelled it to remain focused on continental expansion and domestic constabulary or pacification missions, such as armed diplomacy and peacekeeping along the Native American frontier, rather than preparing for interstate war. The army did so with remarkable success and no small degree of autonomy. The form and content of the officer corps’ professionalism varied widely, depending on the circumstances and issues; its greatest success lay in the development of accountability to civilian political control, centralized in the nation-state. In turn, employment by the nation-state was indispensable to the regular officer corps and its professionalization project because this sponsorship enabled the army to carve out a legal position that was unavailable to other occupations aspiring to professional status in the face of Jacksonian antagonism toward monopoly.

Thomas Jefferson’s first inaugural address is often employed as an epigram demonstrating American adherence to the citizen-soldier ideal. The president applauded “a well-disciplined militia”—which he knew from experience it was not—as “our best reliance in peace and for the first moments of war,” but only “till regulars may relieve them.” Thus, in practice, Jefferson relied on the national standing army for the occupation of Louisiana and its defense during the Sabine River confrontation with Spain and the Burr crisis in 1806. He tripled the size of the national standing army he had reduced in 1802 in order to enforce his embargo and prepare for conflict with Britain. Madison followed suit during the War of 1812, while using the prewar standing force to occupy western Florida; afterward, Monroe employed that army to intimidate Spain to give up the rest of that peninsula. Monroe also relied on the standing force to occupy critical posts in the Upper Mississippi and Missouri Valleys, and his successors did so to protect the trade of the Santa Fe Trail. As president, Jackson relied primarily on national forces during Indian removal and the consequent wars, augmenting the army by nearly 20 percent.

Following Huntington’s lead, Stephen Skowronek envisioned the army’s missions almost entirely in terms of large-scale conventional conflict against symmetrical interstate adversaries, leading him to assert that “the backbone of the American army was a locally based militia system,” the only system available or feasible for raising such a force in nineteenth-century America. Yet in practice, this was true only during the Civil War; it was not even remotely true...
of western territorial expansion either before or after the Civil War or of offensive operations during the War of 1812 and the war with Mexico. To take the most important example, contrary to popular belief, apart from Buena Vista (a single defensive battle) and the small-scale campaign in Chihuahua, the war with Mexico was fought primarily by preexisting regular army units. (The First Dragoon Regiment shared the conquest of New Mexico and California, small-scale campaigns, with volunteers and the navy.) Only three of the twenty-five American regiments in the decisive Mexico City campaign were state volunteer units; fourteen were units of the antebellum standing army—virtually its entire force—and another was composed of federal marines led by Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Watson (no relation to the author). Seven were regular army regiments raised for the war; their officers, largely Democrats, were raised through state patronage machines, but they were commissioned by the federal government, subject to federal military law, and under the command of one of the most self-consciously professional American soldiers, Winfield Scott.28

By the 1830s, Secretary of War Lewis Cass, an experienced frontiersman and populist Democratic politician, openly admitted to Congress that citizen-soldiers were not “our most important means” of defense in any conflict short of large-scale war (meaning with Britain). President Martin Van Buren relied on national troops in the Second Seminole War and as peacekeepers during the Canadian border crises, for which Congress created a new regiment; James K. Polk did so to protect the Oregon Trail (creating another new regiment) and in the war with Mexico. Franklin Pierce did the same amid the violence in Bleeding Kansas and on the Texas Indian frontier, increasing the army more than 25 percent, and James Buchanan continued the pattern in Kansas and the expedition to assert U.S. sovereignty over the Mormons in Utah. Most slave unrest and localized maroonage (armed resistance to slavery, usually after flight) was repressed by militias or vigilantes, but two army officers, one a thirty-year veteran and the other a recent West Point graduate, led a contingent of marines to seize John Brown at Harpers Ferry.29
grounds, or as if the statistics Skelton painstakingly developed on career persistence and the rarity of resignation do not exist. Politics did influence the selection of officers for command, but not nearly as comprehensively as many think. Arthur P. Wade has argued that prior to 1900, most general officers were commissioned as generals directly from civil life without prior military training, education, or socialization. This was certainly true in the Revolutionary War (of course), the War of 1812 and the mobilization that preceded it, and even (by a slight majority) the war with Mexico and the Civil War. Yet Wade himself points out that the command of the peacetime army, constrained in size and rank by Congress, was almost entirely the province of long-serving regular officers, usually colonels with brevet (honorary) rank as brigadier generals. (Brevet rank was employed so that officers could command forces larger than their permanent ranks would normally allow, sometimes in order to deploy an officer who would outrank militia or volunteer competitors. The president and secretary of war normally supported this stratagem, precisely because they valued professional efficiency and reliability.) And as Skelton has made clear in his analysis of “High Army Leadership in the Era of the War of 1812,” the men promoted to general rank in 1813 and 1814 were overwhelmingly officers of the prewar army who had risen to prominence through their meritorious wartime service.30

We should also remember that presidents usually relied on recommendations from other politicians for patronage appointments, which became a source of factional conflict and division as well as reward. In the worst case, a commander appointed via patronage or from the militia would pursue state, regional, or sectional interests contrary to national policy—as Andrew Jackson did during several of the operations explored in this book. Thus, career army officers, increasingly and ultimately predominantly graduates of the national Military Academy at West Point, held most strategic and operational commands throughout the nineteenth century. This was the case in the Second Seminole War, when the territorial governor of Florida, a War of 1812 veteran, was replaced as theater commander by regular army Quartermaster General Thomas Sidney Jesup, a veteran of that war who had remained in national military service. President Polk pressed a more open challenge to the professional direction of the war with Mexico, but he was unable to secure sufficient congressional support to replace Winfield Scott with senator and political ally Thomas Hart Benton. Indeed, all the theater commanders—Scott, Zachary Taylor, and Stephen W. Kearny—were regulars, and Taylor and Scott usually assigned the most difficult and important tactical missions to their regular subordinates.

Varying missions and skill sets aside, the acid test of any issue in nineteenth-
The reality of military frontier diplomacy: Stephen H. Long negotiates with the Oto and Pawnee Indians, 1819, by H. Charles McBarron. (Courtesy Army Art Collection)
century American military history remains its outcome or influence in the Civil War. Even in 1861, no one believed that mobilization would be as limited as it had been in 1812 and 1846; the enthusiasm of citizens on both sides led to mass volunteering, with larger forces mobilized and trained in 1861 than in the three wars with Britain and Mexico put together. Although regular army commanders like Scott attempted to preserve the cohesion and integrity of the peacetime army (fearing partisan politicization), junior officers (lieutenants, captains, and a few majors) seized the opportunity to gain rapid promotion by transferring to the volunteer regiments organized in the states. There were certainly plenty of “political generals” commissioned directly from civil life, and they usually had substantial leadership experience in inspiring and coordinating supporters. Yet Military Academy graduates, who made up 75 percent of the army’s officers in 1860—probably the highest proportion in history—commanded most theaters, districts, departments, armies, and corps and eventually the majority of divisions throughout the conflict, and they almost completely supplanted political generals in the command of theater- and army-level formations by its end. Although the direct commission of civilian politicians or other civilians with political influence would continue until World War I, long-serving professional officers developed military strategy and directed the operational employment of national military force throughout the nineteenth century.31

Nor was the national standing army in any way subordinate to citizen-soldier forces, which its officers consistently commanded when citizen-soldiers were mobilized. Citizen-soldiers may have proved adequate to maintain white supremacy in the South, but they failed to advance the frontier of white territorial expansion, which was essential to the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian social visions. Consequently, the army’s Jacksonian critics produced a lot of smoke but very little fire. The army was reduced in force in 1815 and 1821—essentially after the end of the undeclared war with Spain examined in *Jackson’s Sword*—and after the war with Mexico, the Civil War, the world wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the end of the Cold War, but prior to Vietnam, the army virtually always came out larger than before it went to war. The 1821 reduction, essentially returning the army to its enlisted strength from a decade before, was the only exception, but even then, a disproportionately large number of officers were retained. Apart from these postwar reductions in force, careers in the regular army, particularly those of commissioned officers, have been virtually tenured, given good behavior: no more than a handful of officers have been discharged for reasons other than malfeasance during peacetime since 1821. The permanent army was augmented in 1832, 1836, 1838, 1846, and 1855, a growth of more than 70 percent in its
number of regiments (and even more in the officer corps, because the staff was increased substantially in 1838), half occurring prior to the war with Mexico. In every case except for 1838, these augmentations were for western missions; in every single case, they were undertaken by Jacksonian Democrats who professed to fear or resent the national standing army. Scholars who see nothing but the retreat of state authority during the Jacksonian era are ignoring a significant area of state autonomy and power; they do not and cannot explain the central role played by professional military officers in the mobilization, supply, and strategic and operational direction of American military forces during the nineteenth century as well as the twentieth. Nor can they explain the actual process of U.S. territorial expansion and the expropriation of Native America.32

AUTONOMY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND LONG-TERM IMPACT: JACKSON’S SWORD AS A STUDY IN BORDERLANDS AND DIPLOMATIC HISTORY

Nor have American foreign relations, whether diplomatic or military, been exempt from “weak state” interpretations privileging private and nonstate actors. The role of interstate competition and war is a commonplace in studies of European state formation, but with few exceptions outside military and diplomatic history, it has been insignificant or absent in the study of early- and mid-nineteenth-century American history. Yet the early American state was especially active in the realm of international relations, continental as well as transatlantic. The common public interest and elite leadership embodied in classical republicanism came together with the security concerns, liberal self-interest, and ethnocultural democracy (democracy for white men) expressed in territorial expansion to the south and west. The specialized division of labor characteristic of liberal capitalism meant that the democratic majority was no more capable of routine attention to the allocation and distribution of power and resources in the international arena than in the domestic one. Much as the majority turned to the new political and communications professionals—partisan politicians and newspaper editors—to represent their interests in the domestic political economy, they were compelled to rely heavily on another developing profession—the officer corps of the national standing army—to mediate and advance their interests in the international political economy of the North American continent. The navy performed much the same role outside the continent, although its deployments far from the oversight of Amer-
ican law and politics made its dynamics more akin to the imperial operations of European armies.  

Yet growing scholarly attention to the concepts of borderlands and “middle grounds” has aggravated rather than remedied the interpretive lacunae of “weak state” arguments. The original middle ground, as conceived by historian Richard White, was created by diverse white-Indian interactions sheltered by a balance of military power in the Upper Great Lakes region; it ended with the coming of American dominance, embodied in British retreat after the War of 1812 and the arrival of the U.S. Army, followed by massive civilian settlement. As Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson point out in a comparison of North America and South Africa, “it took the united national power of the United States to defeat the Indians.” Private, nonstate actors—settlers and railroads—motivated by individual or corporate profit were not a “united national power”; the national power united against Native America was state mobilized, state funded, state directed, and quintessentially military. Yet the destruction of successive middle grounds, the dominance of successive borderlands, and the conquest reemphasized by “new western historians” like Patricia Nelson Limerick have not led to a greater examination of the role of national military forces by historians in general, who prefer to examine the agency, diversity, and fluidity of middle grounds rather than the processes that brought them under American hegemony.

The concept of borderlands presents similar dilemmas: most historians contrast borderlands with borders per se, using local and multicultural forces and influences as focal points, whereas those of nation-states and empires are refracted and diffused, if not deplored outright as hierarchical and oppressive. Yet borderlands are not synonymous with multicultural middle grounds; they are regions where nation-states and empires meet and compete, as in the Gulf of Mexico and its shores or the Canadian borderlands. Nor are borderlands the same as ethnocultural frontiers within the boundaries claimed by states and empires. Students of state formation and borderlands recognize that margins and peripheries can be just as significant to a nation and state as its center or core. Borders, which are internationally recognized as defensible with lethal force, are as significant an expression or measure of state power as can be found, particularly in preindustrial, prebureaucratic, prewelfare states. Borders define the limits of frontiers, not as zones but as boundaries of legal orders and action, of sovereignty and the putative state monopoly over legitimate violence. As historical sociologist Anthony Giddens observes, true borders “are only found with the emergence of nation-states.” Without established borders, the sovereignty of the nation-state is open to competi-
tion and challenge not just from other nations and states but also from its own populace, which may seek to establish alternative political organizations and centers and ultimately alternative polities through migration or secession. Whether advancing or restraining settlers’ interests, the frontier diplomats of the national standing army diminished the autonomy of nonstate actors and helped preclude secessionist challenges during the Jacksonian era.\(^{35}\)

A more specific, power-centered concept of borderlands would be to see them as zones of imperial contact and competition, centered around territorial claims. An example would be the “Gulf South” borderlands during the 1780s and 1790s, where Spain claimed most of modern Mississippi and Alabama and much of Georgia and Tennessee, while the United States sought direct access to the Gulf of Mexico, whether by means of a right of transit through New Orleans or territorial control along the coast. Borderlands of this sort shifted with diplomatic agreements and the military balance of power: when the United States secured control of New Orleans, the Gulf borderlands became western Louisiana, still claimed by Spain; eastern Texas, invaded by American citizens and threatened by the army; and western Florida, claimed (however disingenuously) by the United States. After 1803 all the parties in Louisiana and Texas—the United States, Spain, and Mexico—had a sense of a border; they recognized the existence of different sovereignties, however weak in practice, on either side, and they adjusted their activities to take advantage of or reduce the effects of that border. The border shaped their options, decisions, and actions; it structured their opportunities and their agency.

The Gulf became even more of a borderland with the rebellions against Spanish rule after 1808. It ceased to be a borderland, at least between the United States and Spain, only when Spain gave up Florida and the United States recognized the Spanish claim to Texas in 1821. Yet the region remained unsettled, with the American South from Louisiana to Georgia constituting a frontier, or a set of distinct but connected frontiers, in the Turnerian sense of ethnocultural contact and friction. Texas extended that frontier zone for Anglo-Americans immigrating at Mexican invitation, but the areas along the Red and Sabine River borders remained borderlands in the sense of incomplete pacification by the nation-states on either side. Meanwhile, the Indians and maroons of Florida maintained contacts with Indians, maroons, and Spaniards in Cuba and the Bahamas. Since the first decade of the nineteenth century, a borderland had started to develop in what is now Oklahoma, manifested most concretely in the Santa Fe Trail after Spanish trade regulations ended in 1821. This borderland involved something much more akin to a middle ground with the Osage, the Pawnee, a wide range of Texan Indians,
and above all the Comanche, who raided Mexico while trading with American citizens.

Under the federal territorial system, the process of geographic expansion was one of nation-state formation and societal integration, as well as extending the existing pattern of local self-government and regional or sectional political cultures. Territorial growth contained the potential both for social reproduction in the decentralized agrarian mode envisioned by the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians and for the institutional elaboration and political consolidation of a more powerful, authoritative nation-state as envisioned by the Federalists, National Republicans, and Whigs. Throughout the course of this process, the central government and its agents were constantly forced to reckon with the expansive—and potentially explosive—demands and actions of a mushrooming frontier population that could not be regulated and was capable of withholding its sanction from national policies or reshaping them in pursuit of local objectives. Yet despite the supposed weakness of American state power, and despite American individualism, libertarianism, and federalism—or perhaps, some would argue, partly because of that federalism—no substantial competitor states appeared in the interstices of the North American borderlands. With the exception of Texas (for less than a decade in duration), no sustained alternatives to the United States appeared among its millions of settler-citizens as they moved across the continent. Indeed, if we compare the thirty-year periods before and after 1815, we see a general shift from borderlands and middle grounds—regions or zones populated by a medley of native, nonstate, and civilian actors in which no one group was dominant—to frontiers shaped and often dominated by white, state, and military actors.

An examination of the officer corps in the borderlands can serve as a valuable exercise in the study of diplomatic history, American foreign policy and international relations, and nineteenth-century imperialism. During the last twenty years, American diplomatic historians have called for renewed attention to the foreign relations of the early republic and for the extension of our historical vision to include groups and individuals not usually examined in traditional studies of interstate diplomacy. The borderlands were a site of intersection between domestic and international, state and society, public and private, political and civil, a site of contestation not only between nation-states but also between racial-ethnic formations and sub- or nonstate and sub- or nonnational polities and societies. Though not formal policy makers, military officers served as “men on spot,” exercising substantial and sometimes decisive
discretionary influence over the implementation and final shape of national policy; they were mediators between local and national as well as international interests—the center in the periphery. Examining the national army officer corps in the borderlands therefore provides a study of governance—the practice of government and the execution of policy—in a middle ground or field of action between the reified, overly cohesive abstractions of traditional political and diplomatic history and the extreme diversity of social history. Focusing on the officer corps enables an analysis of policy execution closer to actual outcomes than would be possible with a focus on ideas, public opinion, or legislation. By exploring officers’ language, we can exploit linguistic as well as material approaches to causation. But attention to policy implementation is necessary to close the circle of cause, effect, and response between the large structures of international relations, national politics, and ideology and the diverse agencies of borderlands inhabitants. As mediators between national policy and these diverse inhabitants, the officer corps was a significant contingent force.36

Military officers also played a more abstract sociocultural role as representatives of the national center; they represented gentility, education, science, and cosmopolitanism, as well as extralocal resources obtainable through political influence rather than the exchange of scarce economic assets. Indeed, they served not only as agents of the national government in international relations but also as agents of cultural as well as national stabilization, pacification, consolidation, and rationalization in the largest sense. As Giddens has remarked, the national professional standing army is the “correlate,” if not necessarily the precondition, “of [an] internally pacified state-class relationship,” or of sustained internal sociocultural pacification in the form adumbrated by Norbert Elias. Or, as Max Weber once asserted, “[modern] military discipline is the ideal model for the modern capitalist factory, as [ancient military discipline] was for ancient plantation.” William Skelton has suggested that “social control [in the larger sense] was the raison d’être of the early army.” Though overt social control was no longer the army’s raison d’être after 1815, it certainly remained one of its most significant roles and often one of its missions, whether implicit or explicit, in the borderlands.37

The army’s constabulary duties in the borderlands call attention to the roles of nonstate actors, especially the nation’s own citizens, who challenged U.S. sovereignty far more often than nation-state competitors. Attention to the officer corps’ work in the borderlands thus underscores divisions within as well as between nations and nation-states: the United States was not a fully unified actor in international relations on the continental or Atlantic stage. In particular, a borderlands approach highlights the role of racial-ethnic factors
and American federalism, the pressure of white man’s or herrenvolk democracy, and the projection of tensions (particularly class tensions) from within white society onto racial-ethnic “others.” Yet in comparison to the aggressively expansionist, sometimes strategically irresponsible or insubordinate behavior of British, French, and Russian officers stationed in India, Africa, and Asia, the U.S. Army exhibited a far greater degree of subordination and accountability to civilian control. In the process, by both aid and restraint, “the army helped to cement [the] loyalties of frontiersmen on the far-flung borderlands” to the nation, resulting in a larger, more abstract scale of allegiance and a more centralized entity than autonomous settlement would have produced. Viewed from the centralist and often openly authoritarian perspective of officers charged with enforcing federal sovereignty, the most immediate product of territorial expansion usually seemed to be social entropy and disorder. As the most visible and potent agents of national power, army officers repeatedly had to confront and constrain aggressive private initiatives along the borders, often in the face of criticism from politicians from frontier regions. As armed mediators among so many interests, these frontier diplomats engaged in all the varieties of diplomacy recently conceptualized by political scientists and historians: armed and coercive diplomacy, “local” diplomacy, federal diplomacy, and the diplomacy of union.

In a federal system, which issues are national, which are international, which are regional, and which are local? Who decides? To quote a leading historian of an earlier European empire, the result of American expansion was “a ramshackle empire, maybe, as most empires are.” Yet the United States was an empire, with sufficient military power to expand without dissolving for more than half a century and then reunite by force—under the command of the career professional officers of the national standing army—after the secession of the slaveholding states. John Quincy Adams captured the paradox of the American federal empire, for better or worse, days after the defense of Fort McHenry in 1814: “I cannot imagine a possible state of [the] world for futurity in which the United States shall not be a great naval and military power. Between that and the dissolution of the Union there is no alternative.”