
Shall the Standing Army of the United States Be Increased?

Statement in Reply to
General Nelson A. Miles

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *New York Journal*, unspecified date, Dec. 1895. Reprinted as
“More Soldiers: Shall the Standing Army of the United States Be Increased?”
in *The Railway Times*, vol. 3, no. 1, (Jan. 1, 1896), pg. 1.

The New York Journal recently obtained an interview from General Nelson A. Miles on the subject of increasing the standing army.¹ General Miles maintained that there were imperative reasons for increasing the army to three times its present strength and efficiency. The interview of General Miles was telegraphed, in full, by the Journal to Eugene V. Debs, President of the ARU, with a request to review it fully, so that the interview and review could both be published in the same issue. Mr. Debs telegraphed the following statement, which was published in the New York Journal in connection with the Miles interview.

Terre Haute, Ind.

In proposing an increase of the standing army in his late interview at Washington, General Miles simply gives expression to his own well known views and to the views of his predecessor, General Schofield.²

¹ Gen. **Nelson Appleton Miles** (1839-1925), who headed the military contingent to break the Pullman strike in Chicago, was named Commanding General of the United States Army in 1895, serving in that capacity until his retirement in 1903.

² Gen. **John McAllister Schofield** (1831-1906) was Nelson Miles' predecessor as Commanding General of the US Army, holding the post from 1888 until the end of September 1895.

Since the strike in the summer of 1894 both have insisted that the peace and security of the country demanded a large increase in the standing army.

There are those who will agree with these renowned military chieftains, but they are decidedly in the minority. The American people, generally speaking, do not like standing armies, and are not inclined to cultivate the military spirit.

To come directly to the point, what is the purpose of General Miles in having the army increased?

Let us be perfectly frank in answering the interrogatory and avoid all ambiguous terms. General Miles says we have to anticipate “internal dissension” and be prepared for it. What is meant by “internal dissension?” The General does not leave us in doubt. He means labor strikes, though he does not like to use that term.

In plain language the object is to overawe workingmen who resist corporate greed and rapacity by organized effort, and, if need be, allay their hunger pangs and silence their protests with bayonets and bullets. There is no other internal dissension in sight, and the Hayes-Tilden incident is introduced simply as the ghost in the play, to arouse the nation to the frightful possibilities that are in store for it if the army is not increased.

Let it be understood that when the army is called out to interfere in labor disputes it is always for the purpose of subjugating and defeating the workingmen in the interests of capitalism.³ This has been the unvarying rule, and there is no exception to it. It does not matter that the employers were cruel, tyrannical, and dishonest. It does not matter that the employees had been the victims of greed and piracy and had been reduced to starvation and goaded into desperation — the one duty of the soldiery has always and everywhere been to overwhelm them with force; shoot holes in their emaciated bodies, and drain their veins with bayonet thrusts that a soulless corporation might without resistance gorge itself with the profits of their unrequited toil.

³ The 1876 election between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel Tilden was one of the closest and most controversial in American history, with Tilden failing to win election by the margin of a single electoral vote and barred from victory by the machinations of a specially-created election commission. To reduce the level of civil unrest a deal was brokered in which Reconstruction was ended in the South, beginning a new era of right wing white hegemony throughout the region.

There is still another purpose in having more federal soldiers, and that is to entirely prevent what General Miles is pleased to call “internal dissension.”

How is this to be done?

Easily enough. The soldiers are to be quartered near the centers of population where large bodies of workingmen are employed, and their very presence, with their murderous machine guns and their Krag-Jorgenson rifles,⁴ will overawe and intimidate workingmen, sap them of their manhood, and reduce them from the dignity of American citizens to the unresisting submissiveness of swine and sheep.

What then? The corporations may proceed with the barbaric sway to cut down wages to the the starvation point, and number their employees as ranchmen brand their steers, as is already being done in the large mills in Illinois and Wisconsin, and impose such other conditions as they may see fit, and the workingmen have only to suffer and submit in silence. Victims of industrial piracy, they have only to work their lives out in wretchedness and despair that their masters may gorge themselves with all the luxuries of all climes, and if they attempt to resist the outrage in the way that has been the glory of the nation, the army is promptly ordered out with shotted guns to tech them by the quieting effect of bullets obedience to their masters.

This is the purpose, and this is the only purpose General Miles has in demanding an increase of he standing army. It is strongly intimated that President Cleveland will urge the passage of such a bill in his message to Congress.

I do not doubt it in the least. It would be in perfect consonance with the plutocratic policy of his administration. But will the people, the great mass of liberty-loving American people, accept a policy which contemplates the subversion of their liberties and ultimately the overthrow of the republic?

That the proceeding, if unchecked, will culminate in a military despotism no man capable of reasoning from cause to effect can doubt. For the workingman it means a bayonet at his back to keep him at his task under such conditions as his master may impose, and he may contemplate the spectacle at his leisure. I maintain that there is neither necessity nor excuse for an increase in our army, and that

⁴ The Krag-Jorgenson was a Norwegian-designed bolt-action rifle, manufactured by Springfield, that was the standard long-arm of the US Army from 1892 to 1903.

such an increase would be antagonistic to the spirit of the constitution and at war with free institutions.

Large standing armies and liberty do not go together. They do not thrive in the same soil. One or the other must give way.

In his farewell address Washington, the father of his country, in alluding to the American people, said:

They will avoid the necessity of those overgrown military establishments, which, under any form of government, are inauspicious to liberty, and which are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican liberty.⁵

Here we have it on the authority of Washington himself that overgrown military establishments are particularly hostile to republican liberty, and no true patriotic American citizen doubts it. It is not to resist foreign invasion, nor to defend against external violence that the army is to be increased. There is no danger in that direction. It is purely because of “internal dissension,” which General Miles deems inevitable, knowing that the commercialism of the times which now operates through monopolies, syndicates, and trusts, is grinding millions of workingmen to atoms, and driving other millions to idleness and desperation. It is not surprising that syndicates cause “internal dissension,” but he makes a great and grave mistake if he thinks he can allay trouble by being provided with soldiers enough to murder the hapless victims of man’s inhumanity to man.

In these days men do not strike without good cause. If the public could and would stop long enough to examine into the cause of labor disturbances, the results would be far different, and there would be far fewer strikes; but the public has neither time nor inclination to hear the woes of the suffering people. The powers of government and society are against them. The press, as a rule, maligns and misrepresents them. The pulpit is silent. The courts, the army, and nearly all officials are against the half-famished and wholly desperate victims of brutal corporate capital. In the treatment of the poor the doctrine of Christ is wholly ignored. The people see only the riot, and then they are ready to approve and applaud the killing of workingmen by armed soldiers, who are themselves supported by the profits upon the unpaid toil of their victims.

⁵ Washington’s farewell address, actually an open letter to the citizens of the United States, was published Sept. 17, 1796.

The people do not know, nor do they seem to care to know, that back of this riot, and leading up to it, is a long train of abuses and wrongs which are borne in silence until submission is no longer possible, and that then only do the poor wage slaves abandon their employment and seek redress of their grievances.

General Miles says: "We should have a military organization capable of protecting life and property against internal attacks." In a time of profound peace this is a sad commentary on existing conditions. From whence are these attacks to come? From the lawless, criminal elements of society? There is not a state in the union that is not amply able to protect itself against the vicious classes. I doubt it there is a governor in the union who will assert the contrary. The state militia in the several states is and will be equal to every requirement, and this is in harmony with the American theory of government, save of those who favor a large standing army, who approve the course of President Cleveland in ordering federal troops into a sovereign state in defiance of the constitution, and in utter disregard of the protest of the governor and of the local authorities. This is despotism pure and simple.

As for the rioting at Chicago during the Pullman strike, and the subsequent bloodshed, it occurred only after the arrival of the federal troops. This is a fact of easy verification. Had there been no federal interference, had affairs been left in control of state and municipal authorities, I doubt if a single life would have been lost or any serious damage to property have occurred.

I do not wish to unnecessarily sound any alarm bells, nor am I desirous of being sensational, but if the money power and its emissaries want to precipitate a fierce and bloody revolution in the United States of America, it cannot more certainly accomplish its design than by increasing the standing army. This will be the initial step toward the cataclysm. The American people are patriotic and peace-loving, and if only half-fed and half-clothed they will be content. If disturbance and turbulence are threatened there is a cause for it, and rather than prepare to murder the unfortunate victims, it would be a thousand times more humane, more to our credit and honor, and more in consonance with our much vaunted Christian civilization to honestly seek to remove the cause.

Instead of General Miles' program I would have the labor unions in every city and town in the country organize, equip, and maintain a uniform rank, let them drill and learn all the movements and maneu-

vers of military action, let them bear arms and know how to handle them.

Why not?

The suggestion is strictly in accord with the letter and spirit of the constitution They are the mainstay of the republic. They have fought and will have to fight all her battles. With the workingmen of the country trained and equipped for action the peace and security of the republic would be assured.

Eugene V. Debs.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · March 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
First Edition.