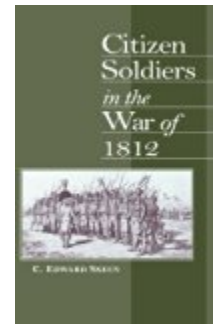


C. Edward Skeen. *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999. viii + 229 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2089-8.

Reviewed by Michael P. Gabriel (Department of History, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania)
Published on H-SHEAR (July, 1999)



The Militia and the War of 1812

The War of 1812 has attracted renewed interest over the past several years. Major studies have appeared on such topics as the Battle of Lake Erie, the British attack on Washington, D.C., and the Iroquois' role in the conflict.[1] C. Edward Skeen contributes yet another volume to this growing scholarship by examining one of the most fundamental institutions of the war, the militia. In *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812*, Skeen investigates militia participation at the state level and its use to supplement regular forces. He also provides an overview of militia performance and concludes that these troops were ineffective for carrying out the war. As a result, although the general public glorified the militia after the war, "[m]ost responsible leaders of the federal government" did not. Instead, "Genuine reliance on the militia in the pre-War of 1812 era gave way to mere verbal reliance in the post-war era (p. 3).

One of Skeen's early and reoccurring themes is the sorry state of the militia system before and during the war. Americans' traditional fear of a standing army resulted in the young republic depending heavily upon militia, rather than regulars. Still, in the years after the Revolutionary War and the ratification of the Constitution, many states allowed their militia system to decay. Training was woefully inadequate, and a chronic shortage of weapons and other military equipment existed. With painstaking detail, Skeen chronicles Congress' repeated attempts to strengthen and standardize state forces during these years, but to no avail. As a result, many states had to recreate their militia from scratch once war was declared in June 1812.

Skeen identifies a myriad of problems which plagued the militia. He ultimately places the blame for many of these on the Constitution, which divided authority over the militia between the state and national governments. Although the federal government tried to mobilize militia, state officials repeatedly hindered their efforts for a variety of political and constitutional reasons. Federalist governors, who tended to oppose the war, resisted mobilization by narrowly interpreting the Constitution and adopting states rights arguments. They claimed that the current situation did not meet the constitutional provisions necessary to nationalize their forces, and, therefore they remained under state control. They also interfered with federal recruiting efforts and supported habeas corpus suits to obtain the release of apprentices and minors who enlisted without their guardians' consent. Skeen asserts that such controversies helped precipitate the Hartford Convention in 1814.

Disputes with federal officials quickly arose even in states which supported the war. These included adapting the militia's command and organization structure to federal standards, and, more importantly, who would pay and provision the troops. Most states argued that the national government was responsible for this because it had called out the militia. Federal officials, however, frequently lacked the resources to provision the troops and disputed whether they had authorized particular call ups, thus making the states liable for supporting them. One result of such disputes was that by 1815, ten of eighteen states contemplated or had created their own armies for local defense. They also considered withholding part of

their federal taxation to support these forces.

Skeen properly devotes much of the middle portion of the book to the militia's performance in each of the major theaters of the war. He recounts a litany of problems and failures, such as state troops mobilizing slowly, lacking even the most rudimentary provisions, and refusing to cross national borders. These culminated in a series of American disasters, such as Detroit, Queenston Heights, and most notably, Bladensburg, "probably the worst example of militia performance in the war. It illustrated in microcosm all the things wrong with the militia in the War of 1812" (p. 138). Still, the author correctly notes that criticism of the militia may be somewhat overstated as poor conduct always attracts more attention than good. When properly led, American militia more than held its own against Indians, Canadians, and British regulars. As evidence, Skeen cites Peter B. Porter's efforts on the Niagara Frontier and Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans. The latter engagement, the final battle of the war and an American victory, somewhat rehabilitated the militia's perception among the general public, but not among most national leaders. The Army Reduction Act of 1815 relegated "the militia to a secondary role in national defense" and this trend continued (p. 178). The ensuing years witnessed growing professionalism in the regular army and continued deterioration of the militia system.

Citizen Soldier not only provides insights into the War of 1812, but also into the broader American militia tradition. Skeen's descriptions of regular-militia controversies over command and troops leaving when their enlistments expired, regardless of the military situation, corroborates the finding of others who have examined earlier periods of American history. Both the British and Continental Armies confronted similar difficulties when using American militia in the colonial and Revolutionary wars, respectively.[2] Skeen's book demonstrates the persistence of such trends and the inherent tensions between regular and short-term soldiers.

Skeen has organized his book thematically, with chapters on such topics as "Congress and Military Mobilization," "The Militia and the War in the West," and "Federal-State Relations." While this structure allows the author to explore each topic thoroughly, it somewhat disrupts the flow of the book. It would also have been helpful if he had provided a stronger narrative of the military campaigns to set them into a broader context. The book contains four detailed maps and a solid bibliographic essay. Skeen has obviously researched his topic thoroughly, with information culled from a wide array of local, state, and national archives and newspapers. *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812* is a valuable resource to any scholar investigating the militia system or the United States' first declared war under the Constitution.

Notes

[1]. David Curtis Skaggs and Gerard T. Altoff, *A Signal Victory: The Lake Erie Campaign, 1812-1813* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1997); Anthony S. Pitch, *The Burning of Washington: The British Invasion of 1814* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998); Carl Benn, *The Iroquois in the War of 1812* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

[2]. Alan Rogers, *Empire and Liberty: American Resistance to British Authority, 1755-1763* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Douglas Edward Leach, *Roots of Conflict: British Armed Forces and Colonial Americans, 1677-1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Mark V. Kwasny, *Washington's Partisan War, 1775-1783* (Kent, Oh. and London, England: Kent State University Press, 1996).

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: Michael P. Gabriel. Review of Skeen, C. Edward, *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3277>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.