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From the Archives

Civilian Control of the Military

HENRY C. GOLE

Civilian ascendancy over the military is a tradition among American service personnel, one that serves as a model to all democracies. A peek at private communications, however, suggests that the military has not always been unreversed in its admiration of civilian leaders nor has it necessarily longed for their close attention, as noted in this passage from a letter written after the presidential inaugural of 1909:

The army at large regards the change of administration with favor and with a certain degree of hope. Mr. Taft has never so far betrayed any particular interest in the Army, and if he will continue along that line and let us alone we will all be profoundly grateful. The intolerable personal interference of Mr. Roosevelt in the details of the service, and more particularly his absolute disregard of everything save his own personal favorites when he did take a hand in Army administration, have resulted in a demoralizing condition. If the administration would absolutely forget the Army for a few years it would settle down to its ordinary routine of life and duty.¹

Victor H. Metcalf, one of President Theodore Roosevelt's short-lived and less-distinguished Secretaries of the Navy, wrote this job description:

My duties consist of waiting for the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation to come in with a piece of paper, put it down before me with his finger on the dotted line and say to me, "Sign your name here." It is all any Secretary of the Navy does.²

Richard W. Thompson, an elderly Terre Haute lawyer, served Rutherford B. Hayes as Secretary of the Navy. Upon visiting a navy yard and inspecting a ship he is said to have noted, "Why, the durned thing's hollow." While still Secretary he accepted \$25,000 as an agent of the French company organized to dig a Panama Canal. "Hayes dealt with him swiftly, sending him a note to the effect that his resignation (unoffered) had been accepted."³

NOTES

1. US Army Military History Institute, The Stephen C. Mills Papers, Letterbook, semi-official, 1907-1910. Letter, Mills to the Honorable Clark E. Carr, 9 March 1909, on the inauguration of William H. Taft.

2. Robert Greenhalgh, *Makers of Naval Policy, 1798-1947* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Inst. Press, 1980), p. 41.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.