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Coastal Defenses, U.S.

Defending the long U.S. coastline, which stretched from Maine in the North to New Orleans in the Southwest, against potential British or French attack was a major challenge for U.S. military policy makers during the early years of the republic. It was also a source of acute political controversy, characterized by immediate crisis management instead of coherent long-term strategic planning.

In January 1794, Congress appointed a committee to investigate the effectiveness of current coastal defenses and the need for coastal fortifications. The following month, Congress reported that 16 ports and harbors required fortifications. Congress requested \$76,000 in funding for this endeavor and an additional \$96,645 for ordnance to be stored in the fortifications. Congress subsequently added five additional ports and granted an additional \$30,000 in funding, approving the entire amount in April 1794. This legislation also created the Corps of Artillerists and Engineers within the U.S. Army and established the so-called First System of coastal defenses at sites such as Fort Jay (New York); Fort Whetstone, later Fort McHenry (Baltimore); and Fort Johnson (Charleston).

Secretary of War Henry Knox gave considerable leeway to local engineers in the design and construction of these defenses. The absence of specific U.S. engineering educational institutions at this time was reflected in the significant influence of British and French engineering practices in early American coastal fortifications.

Between 1794 and 1801, the U.S. government spent nearly \$830,000 on coastal fortifications, representing just over 5 percent of its total military budget. These expenditures declined to \$113,000 between 1802 and 1805, representing 3 percent of the military budget. These declines were prompted by the Democratic-Republicans' philosophical antipathy toward both strong national military forces and an expensive federal government. President Thomas Jefferson favored gunboats as the best means of coastal defense, and 174 of these were constructed during his presidency, although the purchase price of these gunboats was about \$1.5 million. Maintaining them annually cost an additional \$2.8 million over the total life span of the boats and their guns and ordnance.

In the 1802 the Corps of Engineers was separated from the artillery, and the

U.S. Military Academy was established at West Point, New York, and placed under Corps of Engineers supervision. The United States finally had a school devoted largely to military engineering. The June 22, 1807, *Chesapeake-Leopard* Affair, when off the Virginia Capes a British warship opened fire on a U.S. warship and seized four sailors, illustrated the weakness of the U.S. Navy as well as the nation's growing vulnerability to coastal attack. This incident produced an increase in annual coastal defense spending to \$1 million, although higher military budget requests were routinely turned down by Congress, and defense spending declined until the advent of the War of 1812.

The *Chesapeake-Leopard* Affair led to the so-called Second System of U.S. coastal defense. This emphasized open batteries, low earthen forts, and an increased use of masonry as a backing for earthen walls and a substitute for earthen foundations. U.S. coastal defenses tended to be simplified versions of complex European bastion systems. French military engineer Marc-René, Marquis de Montalembert, believed that coastal defense towers should be used to gain a height advantage and that guns should be mounted in tiers in internal chambers called casemates. The guns could fire through shuttered wall openings, and the number of available cannon would be determined by the wall's height instead of length. These practices were frequently incorporated into U.S. coastal defenses.

The Second System was essentially complete by 1812. By then, the growing number of graduates produced by West Point had decreased U.S. dependence on foreign engineers. The establishment of the Corps of Engineers with a single leader also established a centralized entity, which possessed the authority to impose design uniformity on national coastal fortifications.

A key unresolved coastal defense matter of the era was determining whether coastal defenses were to be built for deterring plunder or tribute raids or preventing a full-scale sea invasion; the deterrence philosophy, however, seemed to hold sway during the early 19th century. Some of the forts built in this era were involved in the War of 1812, with Fort McHenry being one of the most prominent battle sites. Debate over coastal defenses and their purpose would continue after the War of 1812 in both the military and Congress.

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See also

Chesapeake-Leopard Affair; Congress, U.S; Corps of Artillerists and Engineers; Democratic-Republican Party; Forts, General Overview; Jefferson, Thomas; Jeffersonian Gunboat Program; Knox, Henry; United States Army Corps of Engineers; United States Military Academy, West Point

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