

San Francisco Examiner
September 9, 1889

Concerning Desertion

In attempting to account for the wide and lasting popularity of desertion among our country's gallant but uncommissioned defenders, everybody seems to have overlooked one reason which can hardly fail to influence many of our hardy warriors to "take their hook." While all the other civilized nations are arming their soldiery with the most afflicting modern weapons—cannon of desolating power and repeating rifles exceedingly disagreeable to confront—we retain the ancient arms of the Rebellion period, whose fire it is more blessed to receive than give. Now, the American private soldier, born abroad in most cases and having the advantage of personal acquaintance with the superior European weapons, may be supposed to know that in combat with those who wield them he would not have the ghost of a chance for his life. The gratification of dying for his adoptive country is all that we can promise him. In the pomp and circumstances of parade that may be sufficient to sustain his courage and urge him to spectacular deeds; but in the silent watches of the night, when the monotony of his toil is unbroken save by the sound of his brush as he polishes the boots of his officer, he needs a spiritual stimulant of robust strength. If the pattern of his weapon would assist his fancy to picture himself in triumphant contemplation of a fallen foe it would wonderfully lighten his task of tidying up the rooms of his officer's wife and pushing the perambulator of his officer's wife's baby.

The American private soldier is not insensible to perils of war that lurk in Bismarck's hostility to the American hog. He is alive to the significant affirmation of his country's unworthy by the Canadian press, and to all the possibilities involved in our determination to maintain our fences around the Bering Sea. That these "questions" are full of thunder he knows as well as the Secretary of State does; and the consciousness that he may be pitted against a British or German veteran gifted with a gun that will kill is naturally disquieting. We are far from implying that our private soldiers are lacking in the military virtue of courage; they are willing to fight, but do not wish to be made ridiculous. Some of them have already felt the sting of an enemy's derision while endeavoring to conquer the Red Man intelligently armed by the War Department of his tribe.

If for every man who deserts we would arm a remaining man with a good serviceable weapon we could well afford to let the deserter go, grant him a full pardon and permit Commissioner Tanner to pension his whole family. An army of even one-third the number that we have now would be, if well armed and equipped, a more effective force. We do not need a large army, but whatever army we have should be maintained in the highest possible state of efficiency. The better our soldiers are armed the fewer we need—a consideration imperfectly apprehended by the economists who are ever to the fore in Congress, demanding a "reduction of the army." Expended in purchase of improved arms, the amount of a month's pay to 10,000 men would enable us, with distinct advantage to the service, to muster out that number, giving them

back to the arts and industries and making them back to the arts and industries and making them producers of wealth. It would not only increase the efficiency of the force as then constituted, but would secure a better quality of recruits and do at least something to check desertion; for even if all should leave, the blacklist would not contain as many names by 10,000 as it now bids fair to do.