

# Swiss tradition at risk

**T**oday Swiss voters are holding a national referendum to decide one of the most important questions to face the confederation this century: Whether or not to abolish the armed forces.

Since Switzerland is the world's oldest democracy, this is also a question that concerns us all. During the years that I lived in Switzerland, voting day in the Alps was always a moving experience.

Swiss farmers and herders would come down from the high Alpine valleys bringing their prize cows whose horns would be garlanded with wild flowers. Each man went to vote with his rifle—which all Swiss keep at home—over his shoulder. The symbolism was clear: The Swiss had won their freedom and right to vote by force of arms. It was each citizen's duty to defend them.

Some may scoff at the thought of the Swiss Army. After all, little Switzerland has only 6.5 million people. Most outsiders think of the Swiss as bankers, hotel keepers and chocolate makers, not warriors. Look again.

In 48 hours, Switzerland can mobilize 600,000 soldiers and 460,000 paramilitary troops, one of Europe's largest armies. On short notice, the Swiss can field more fighting troops than either France or West Germany. Only Israel can mobilize as quickly and potently as Switzerland.

Equally important, the Swiss have the latest Leopard II tanks, lots of artillery and a crack air force—backed by massive war stocks and a dense system of fortifications. Two decades ago the Swiss even considered acquiring nuclear weapons.

But who threatens neutral Switzerland? At the beginning of World War II, there was a very real threat that Germany might outflank the Maginot Line by attacking France through Switzerland. The French were hoping this would happen, thereby bringing the powerful Swiss Army into the war on their side.

Today, even in the era of cheery glasnost, the Swiss feel threatened by the Soviet Union, though they will never say so openly. The Swiss general staff has long feared a surprise Soviet attack on NATO that would cross neutral Austria and then

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break into northern Switzerland. Soviet tank armies would move via Zurich and Bern to erupt into France around Strasbourg and the Rhone Valley—so outflanking NATO's main defense line in West Germany and threatening US troops there with envelopment. The Soviets could use Switzerland just as the Germans used the Ardennes in 1940.

But any enemy that invades Switzerland will meet a fight-to-the death resistance from the Swiss citizen army. Taking northern Switzerland alone could cost an invader 1.5 million casualties.

Swiss leftists and many female voters want to see the army abolished. So do a good number of men, who must do rigorous annual military service between the ages of 20-50. No one gets out of military duty: If you don't serve, you go to jail, objectors of conscience included. In fact, as a recent government report observed, "Switzerland doesn't have an army, it is an army."

Supporters insist that military service is a key national unifying force in a country that speaks four languages and which is divided by fierce regional rivalries. Another study says that military service produces a society "impregnated with masculine values that shapes the Swiss national character's delight in hard work, a sense of duty and a taste for saving and discipline."

Come to think of it, a stint in the Swiss Army would do our feminized male politicians a lot of good: They badly need a stiff dose of such "masculine values" and a sense of fiscal morality.

I also believe strongly that all male citizens of democracies should do military service. The army teaches precisely what parents and schools fail to do today.

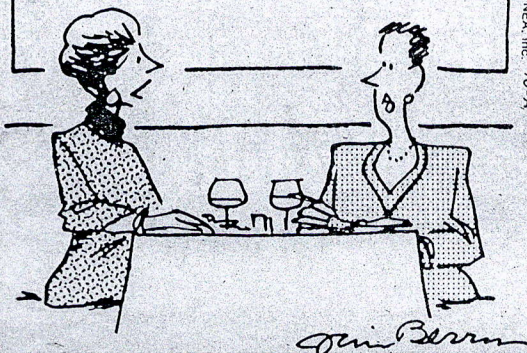
I hope that as Swiss go to vote they will remember Rutli, where in 1291 Swiss from the mountain and forest cantons joined to proclaim Europe's first democracy and a nation of free men.

And I hope they recall with pride Sempach, Morgarten, Morat and scores of other battles over 200 years in which the ferocious Swiss mountaineers crushed the knights of Austria or Burgundy and so ended the iron grip of feudalism. And think of Wolfram von Winkelried who broke an Austrian phalanx by throwing his body on the wall of spears, opening the way for the Swiss to swing their deadly pole-axes.

This glorious tradition lives on today in the Swiss citizen army—and in the Pope's Swiss Guard. Switzerland has grown rich and secure thanks in good part to its determined commitment to defence.

In the unlikely event the Swiss do vote to abolish the army, those with money in Zurich and Geneva may grow nervous at the thought that nothing is protecting their funds except some bankers armed with surplus Swiss Army knives.

## Berry's World



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