

The Academic Board Versus Sylvanus Thayer

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In 1812, Superintendent Jonathan Swift proposed the formation of an Academic Board to provide curriculum, academic, and annual examination oversight. But due to his frequent absences and power struggles among faculty members, Swift's proposed Academic Board failed to materialize.

It was not until Sylvanus Thayer's arrival in 1817 that the Board emerged as an effective, cohesive group. He used the Board, composed of the major academic department heads, to help him with the administration of the Academy's business. As Thayer began shaping West Point's curriculum, organization, and instruction techniques, he recruited academic department heads who shared his vision. Thayer saw the Board as a means to preserving the system he established thereby ensuring the survival of the fledgling institution. But he realized thirty years after his departure from the Academy that the Academic Board had done only to well what he had empowered it to do. Thayer believed that the Board he had shaped was hindering the Academy's advancement. He put forth a multitude of propositions which primarily called for a reduction of the Academic Board's powers in order to allow for improvement. However, the group of men who sat on the Board, all of whom either Thayer personally selected or were cadets during his superintendency, considered his system as dogma; sacrosanct traditions not to be changed. The Academic Board remained committed to the Thayer system in spite of calls for change, even from the acknowledged "Father of the Military Academy".

Prior to Thayer's arrival in July 1817, irregularity, inefficiency, and parochialism characterized the atmosphere at West Point. Superintendent Swift tried to manage these problems by updating the Academy's regulations in 1816. It provided for a Board of Visitors who were responsible for oversight of the Academy, made the position of Superintendent a permanent assignment, and created an Academic Board composed of the Superintendent and senior members of the academic staff for the administration of Academy business.¹ But with Swift's frequent absences due to other duties and the abrasive temperament of acting Superintendent Captain Alden Partridge, none of the reforms were truly enforced.

The Military Academy needed a man who was not tied to the past to change and advance the institution into the nineteenth century. Major Sylvanus Thayer represented such a man, who could bring new life into the struggling Academy. His forethought and positive outlook gathered support as he pieced together his vision of the Military Academy.

By force of personality and with the support of regulations, Thayer set out to lay the foundations upon which the Academy was to grow into its present state. One of his major influences that remains today is the Academic Board. Though Swift codified the Board's existence, it was Thayer who breathed life into it to help him govern the Academy. The Academic Board first formally met on 30 March

¹ USMA Regulations, 1802-1816 (West Point), p. 13.

1818.² "The following members of the academic staff shall constitute a board for the transaction of business: viz. The professors of natural philosophy, mathematics, engineering, and ethics; . . . of which board the Superintendent shall always be President."³ The Board's duties were ". . . to superintend the initial, and all other examinations; decide on cadet merits and standings; grant diplomas, recommend for promotion; . . . report to the Secretary of War, on the system of studies and instruction, proposing for his approbation such additional rules and regulations for perfecting the same".⁴

Thayer strongly believed in the power of the Superintendent and in his ability to control all activities at the Military Academy. He also firmly believed that the position of Superintendent should be free from partisan influences. In a series of propositions submitted to Secretary of War John Calhoun in 1818, Thayer recommended that the Military Academy be a distinct organization from the Corps of Engineers and subject only to the orders of the Secretary of War and President of the United States. Although the Academy provided the preponderance of its graduates to the Corps, he argued that it also furnished

² Edgar Denton, "The Formative Years of the United States Military Academy, 1775-1833", (Ph.D. diss.: Syracuse University, 1964), p. 187.

³ USMA Regulations, 1823 (West Point, 1823), p. 4. Hereafter cited as Regs, 1823.

⁴ Regs, 1823, p. 5.

graduates to the rest of the Army.⁵ Therefore, he contended that the position of Superintendent should be permanent, charged with the "immediate control of the Institution, and be held responsible for the correct management of it. He will direct the studies" ⁶ Thayer saw the combination of a permanent Superintendent and an Academic Board as essential to the survival of the Academy. As the head of the Academic Board, the Superintendent could effectively control the curriculum and methods of instruction.

USMA regulations made each of the major department heads responsible for developing and presenting courses of study, subject to approval of the Superintendent and other members of the Academic Board. Because the major department heads-Albert Church of Mathematics, Jacob Bailey of Chemistry and Mineralogy, William Bartlett of Natural and Experimental Philosophy, and Dennis H. Mahan of Engineering-represented the primary courses taught, they jealously guarded against any significant changes to the prestige of their respective areas. Each, except Bailey, served on the Academic Board until 1872. All were cadets under Thayer's superintendency, and each was "thoroughly devoted to Thayer's concepts and methods."⁷ The Academic Board

⁵ Denton, p. 183.

⁶ Regs, 1823, p. 3.

⁷ Denton, p. 284.

essentially remained unchanged and held true to the method of instruction and curriculum Thayer established himself.

Thayer's departure in June 1833 ended his direct influence upon the Academy. But the system of education, programs, and organizations that he developed were felt long after his departure. The true legacy of Thayer lies in the Academic Board, which he saw as the source of West Point's continuity, free of the capricious and arbitrary whims of future Superintendents and government leaders. For the Academy to succeed and continue its contribution to the country, Thayer felt that the collective wisdom of the Academic Board would protect the programs and systems, designed to produce officers to meet the nation's needs, that he had established.

Following the Civil War, American colleges were undergoing significant changes. Colleges were changing from classical to modern curriculums, offering specialized degrees through the use of electives. West Point, since its inception, had essentially been providing cadets a modern curriculum specializing in engineering, making it the premiere engineering school in the country. Superintendents Swift and Thayer had discarded classical study in favor of a math and science education which they felt was best suited for producing future Army officers.⁸ The Academic Board cited the distinguished Civil War records of West Point

⁸ Theodore J. Crackel, The Illustrated History of West Point., (New York: Harry N. Abfams, 1990) p. 179.

graduates as proof of the Academy's system of education.

As the body of engineering knowledge expanded, the Academic Board did not change the curriculum, believing the new information was beyond the bounds of what was required for a military officer's training.⁹ The Board's attitude doomed the Academy to fall behind other institutions, thus losing its prominence as a technological school. Thayer, who still believed his system was the correct way for training future Army officers, recognized the pedagogic changes occurring throughout the country. Similar to the situation of modernizing the Academy he faced when he first became Superintendent, Thayer realized that the Academy would also need to make some changes in order to continue providing top quality graduates for service to the nation. However, the Academic Board he established, which jealously guarded Thayer's system from changes, would prove to be a formidable obstacle.

Thayer noted to a friend that the Academy had scarcely changed in its organization, system of instruction, general regulations, or its administration in the thirty-five years since his departure. He saw these examples as evidence that his system was sound. However, Thayer recognized that institutions, being creations of man, were subject to imperfections and thus "subject to the law of progress. To stand still and or [sic] not to advance is to retrograde."¹⁰

⁹ ibid, p. 184.

In 1865, Thayer authored a plan entitled, "Propositions and suggestions for the improvement of the U.S. Military Academy." The twenty propositions outlined his proposals for improving, among other things, the selection and entrance requirements for new cadets, curriculum, and reduction of the Academic Board's powers. Thayer specifically recommended that USMA establish a permanent Board of Improvement, appoint an Inspector of Studies, and make the Superintendent responsible for the direction of studies.¹¹ Thayer suggested that the Academic Board be responsible only for examination oversight.

The Board of Improvement's responsibilities would include the review of the curriculum and the methods of instruction and recommendations for changes. But, more important, the Board of Improvement would, in consultation with the Professors and instructors, define in detail the subjects of study, the manner of instruction, and the amount of time allocated for study. The department heads would have no say in the "matters to be taught or the amount of instruction to be given."¹² The Board would be composed of the Superintendent, the Inspector of Studies, and not less than three, but no more than five, Academy graduates, not

¹⁰ Thayer to Robert Anderson, 12 February 1869, Thayer Papers, USMA Archives. This will be cited as TPUA.

¹¹ U.S. Government, Report of the Board of Visitors to the United States Military Academy, made to the Secretary of War for the Year of 1891, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1891), p. 22. Hereafter cited as BOV, 1891.

¹² BOV, 1891, p. 22.

directly affiliated with West Point. The Board would report to the Secretary of War for approval of their observations and recommendations for change.¹³ Thayer felt the Board of Improvement members would provide unbiased and fair assessments of the curriculum, since they did not have a vested interest in the Academy.

He proposed the Board of Improvement because he believed that the Academic Board was no longer capable of doing its job. In Thayer's opinion, the Board had become an oligarchy, composed of men limited in their desires and abilities to change the Institution.¹⁴ Thayer believed the power and prestige each of the Academic Board members enjoyed blinded them to the much needed changes in the curriculum. He considered the members unwilling to make substantive changes. Therefore, the members would pass each other's programs without interference to avoid conflict, resulting in no real scrutiny of the curriculum, thus linking the Academy to an archaic system.¹⁵

Thayer described the duties of the Inspector of Studies as concerned with the general supervision and control over the studies and instruction of cadets. The officer, an Academy graduate, would observe the instructors' manner of

¹³ BOV, 1891, p. 22.

¹⁴ James L. Morrison, "The Best School in the World": West Point, The Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866, (The Kent State University Press, 1986) p. 151.

¹⁵ Thayer to unknown, December 1865, TPUA.

teaching to insure compliance with the prescribed methods of instruction and report his findings directly to the Superintendent.¹⁶

Finally, Thayer proposed that the Academy amend USMA regulations and charge the Superintendent with the responsibility of directing studies. During Thayer's superintendency, regulations provided for this responsibility but they were changed in 1839, for unknown reasons, leaving the individual department heads the task of developing studies.¹⁷ He believed that a permanent Superintendent would provide unbiased curriculum guidance since he was not an academic department head. Thayer felt the Superintendent would rise above the Board's power struggles and truly be a man of vision, with the Academy's best interests at heart.

Each of these areas in which Thayer suggested change challenged the very foundation of the Academic Board. To amend the Board's powers would surely threaten the prestige and autonomy enjoyed by the current Board members. But Thayer no longer considered the reasons for which he initially set up the Academic Board as valid. In the beginning, he saw the Board as a survival strategy to help the Academy to avoid interference from future leaders. Thayer believed that the conservative Academic Board and the

¹⁶ BOV, 1891, p. 21.

¹⁷ USMA Regulations, 1839, (West Point, 1839), p. 3. I found no records to indicate why the regulations changed.

USMA regulations would make it extremely difficult for others to make changes, thus giving the systems he established a chance to take hold. He did not realize, however, that the Board members would become an entrenched bureaucracy, insensitive to the Academy's welfare. Thayer now saw the Board as the Academy's "Achilles' heel" if it did not implement his changes.

Thayer appealed directly to many camps to garner support for his propositions for change. In a letter to Superintendent George Cullum, Thayer compared his takeover of the Academy to Cullum's:

My mission and task were unlike yours; mine were to create, to construct, to build up from the foundation under difficulties coming more from within than from without . . . to preserve and defend what had been accomplished against the assiduous [sic] of open attacks of its enemies among whom was sometimes the government itself . . . against the visionary schemes of its professed friends . . . both were, however, successfully resisted up to the time I left . . . Your mission is to repair, to restore . . . our dear Alma Mater . . . you as her doctor will . . . restore her to pristine health.¹⁸

Subsequent to writing this letter, Thayer submitted his plan for improvement of the Academy to the Secretary of War's office for consideration. The Secretary's office ignored the plan. This did not stop Thayer in attempting to co-opt others to support his propositions. He followed up his earlier letter to Cullum with another requesting his support, suggesting that his propositions were "important and necessary to the growth and prosperity of the Academy".

¹⁸ Thayer to George Cullum, 20 March 1865, TPUA.

Academy."¹⁹ Thayer specifically requested Cullum's help in establishing a Board of Improvement, Inspector of Studies, and the permanent appointment of a Superintendent subject only to the orders of the President of the United States.²⁰ No records indicate what, if any, thoughts Cullum might have had on the subject.

Thayer received a letter from Horace Webster, West Point graduate and President of the College of the City of New York, supporting the proposed changes. Webster believed the "views expressed in that paper were very wise and judicious and . . . would make our Alma Mater one of the most renowned [sic] in the world."²¹ But Webster died a short while later, thus losing another supporter for Thayer's plans.

General Robert Anderson attempted to gather support for an Association of West Point graduates and contacted Thayer for his thoughts and backing. Anderson suggested that one purpose of the Association be to "see what should be done to perfect and perpetuate this truly national institution."²² Thayer quickly saw this as another opportunity to solicit endorsement for his plan. He suggested to Anderson that the Association's mission include advancing his propositions and

¹⁹ Thayer to Cullum, 9 December 1865, TPUA.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Thayer to Horace Webster, 19 May 1865, TPUA.

²² Thayer to Anderson, 12 February 1869, TPUA.

bringing maximum pressure to bear when necessary.²³ No records indicate what Anderson's thoughts were on the subject.

But perhaps Thayer's closest ally and most influential insider was Dennis Hart Mahan. As a member of the Academic Board, Mahan was best situated to argue and advance Thayer's plan with other Board members. In a circular requesting suggestions for improvements to the Academy, Mahan responded to the Superintendent vigorously endorsing Thayer's propositions.

Mahan objected to the Academy's organization in that "it approaches too much in spirit to that of a close corporation."²⁴ He believed the Board of Visitors, who were responsible for reviewing the Academy, to be ineffectual. Mahan asserted that the Board's reports were either of little substance or merely rubber stamped Academy actions. He concluded that since the reports were of no consequence, "the Institution has been left to itself."²⁵

Mahan noted that individual department heads were left to their own devices to develop, control, and upgrade the courses of instruction to include textbooks and manner of instruction for their individual departments. The Board

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Dennis H. Mahan to General Pitcher, 12 September 1867, Academic Board Correspondence, Series 15, Box 2, USMA Archives. This will be cited as ABCS15.

²⁵ *ibid.*

members generally passed each others' plans to avoid conflict, thereby leaving the supervision of each department almost exclusively to the control of the department head. Consequently, Mahan asserted there were no checks on the professors; that "this state of things is not the most favorable to improvement and progress"26 He concluded that such a system could not honestly evaluate the Academy's programs.

Citing his arguments for change, Mahan suggested several improvements. First, the Academic Board should confine itself solely to the purposes of proctoring semi-annual examinations. Second, the Academy should appoint a Director of Studies (Thayer's Inspector of Studies) to supervise and control the studies and instruction. Finally, the Superintendent should appoint a Board of Improvement to examine the studies and discipline of the school.²⁷ In his response to the Superintendent, Mahan did not mention Thayer as the author of these proposals. Perhaps as a part of strategy, Mahan hid this fact in hopes of not creating a bias among the other Board members.

The other Board members' parochial responses dealt only with prestige and power issues such as requesting more building space and improved classroom conditions, greater weight of a department's courses in determining the order of

26 *ibid.*

27 *ibid.*

merit, entrance examinations for cadets, creating a committee to conduct annual examinations, and representation of the Artillery, Cavalry, and Infantry on the Board.²⁸ None of these recommendations, as could be expected, did anything to challenge or suggest change to the status quo of the Academic Board. The records do not indicate that the collective Board reviewed Mahan's proposals. With Mahan's death in 1871 and with Thayer's in 1872, the "Propositions and Suggestions for the Improvement of the U.S. Military Academy" also died.

Sylvanus Thayer's calls for change to the Academic Board fell on deaf ears. Either through apathy or the desire to remain in power, the Academic Board ignored their mentor. The Board that Thayer shaped to help establish and advance the Military Academy kept it anchored in the past. The improvements Thayer suggested threatened the powerful existence that the Board enjoyed. The members saw themselves as guardians of the sacrosanct Thayer traditions. The many accomplishments of West Point graduates showed the success of the Academy's methods used in teaching and training cadets thus reinforcing the Board's position on making no changes.

As a national institution entrusted with the future

²⁸ William Bartlett to General Pitcher, 16 September 1867; H. M. Black to Adjutant, 12 September 1867; Albert Church to Adjutant, 20 September, 1867; Henry Kendrick to Adjutant, 20 September 1867; Alfred Mordecai to Adjutant, 17 September 1867, ABCS15.

leadership of the Army and nation, West Point must not arbitrarily change its formula for producing leaders of character. The Academic Board acts as a stabilizing force against agents of change who would seek to alter the Academy's time-tested programs. Had the Board succumbed to the pressures for change, even from the "Father of the Military Academy", in the curriculum and organization of the Academy, West Point may not have retained its form which has served the Nation well.

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