

Institutional Survival: Evolution of the Admissions Process
During the United States Military Academy's First Century

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The laws of physics dictate that one cannot make something out of nothing, and one might argue that a similar principle holds true for the growth and development of men. In its embryonic stages, the United States Military Academy had no method to control the quality of its prospective cadets, and as a result, could not reach its potential in producing quality Army officers. Over time, the requirements for admission became standardized and demanding. The institution's survival, especially during the Civil War, depended largely on the quality and contributions of its graduates. Without a means of quality control, West Point may have failed to survive.

The survival of the Academy was also contingent on the public's perception that the nation was fairly and equally represented among the Corps of Cadets. Even though democracy was a relatively novel approach to governing people in the early nineteenth century, its legacy mandated equality. During its first century, the Military Academy survived numerous charges of elitism and of catering to "aristocracy." The selection and appointment of new cadets was the critical link in the chain that held the institution together in the face of these attacks. That process grew

from one typified by the selection of a narrow range of cadets to one based upon equal geographic and socio-economic representation of the country.

In its earliest years, the Academy did not have any specific entrance requirements. Some new cadets may not have even been able to read and write.¹ In 1810, the Academy first formalized its entrance requirements, and included the three major areas that would shape all future screening measures: physical, mental, and moral-ethical. A new cadet had to demonstrate that he was "well-versed in the English language, in writing and arithmetic; [and] that he [was] of good moral character and of sound constitution."² Regardless of the requirements, the appointees were not formally screened until 1818, when all cadets had to take an oral entrance examination.³ Perhaps as a result of the demanding mathematics and engineering curriculum, the Academy added the ability to reduce "simple and vulgar fractions" to the entrance requirements in 1821.⁴

The supposedly tougher requirements did not satisfy everyone. In 1826, the Board of Visitors reported that nearly all candidates who reported to West Point for examination were accepted--a result of low entrance requirements.⁵ The physical screening of prospective cadets did not occur until 1823, when cadets had to show that they were not "diseased."⁶

West Point's early appointment system also lacked standardization. In Mr. Jefferson's Army, Theodore J.

Crackel posits that early appointments to West Point were politically motivated, and that the Academy offered an excellent "means to further Jefferson's reformation and Republicanization of the army."⁷ Jefferson believed that the Army had to be compatible with the administration it would defend. Crackel continued:

Drawn from Republican families and trained under officers carefully selected for the task, these young men, it was hoped, would form an officer corps that would be thoroughly attached to the republican principles and institutions they were sworn to defend.⁸

Amid charges of partiality, the Board of Visitors in 1821 suggested that the country should be divided into districts, and that USMA officials should examine candidates at one location within each district. Each state would then be allocated a number of appointments commensurate with its population.⁹ These recommendations were never followed, but in 1828, the Secretary of War started allocating one cadet appointment to each Congressional district, two to each state (at large), and a dozen or so to the President. This was only a matter of custom; the process was not codified in law until 1843.¹⁰ All that the authorities at USMA could do was to examine the nominees for mental and physical fitness--all who met the standards were accepted.

The charges that West Point catered to the rich and promoted the rise of aristocracy festered until the Board of Visitors in 1840 recommended a radical change in the appointment process. The Board suggested that the best way

to combat accusations of partiality would be to take the power of selection and appointment away from Congress, and give it instead to each state and territory's volunteer military organization.¹¹ The Congressmen balked; they were apparently unwilling to give up a "cherished political plum."¹² In 1842, the Board of Visitors recommended the use of competitive examinations to select and appoint the best-qualified candidates.¹³ They also sought, through the use of statistics, vindication on the accusations of partiality. The Board presented the following demographics of the Corps of Cadets in their 1842 report:

<u>Father's Occupation</u>	<u># of Cadets</u>
farmer.....	56
deceased.....	48
lawyer.....	27
misc.....	23
mechanic	14
physician.....	12
Army officer.....	10
government officer.....	5
inn-keeper.....	5
clergy.....	4
planter.....	3
	total: 217

Of the 217 cadets at the Academy in 1842, 182 were described as coming from "moderate circumstances," and 144 of these cadets lived in the country.¹⁴ "In the opinion of the Board, these facts afford conclusive refutation of the idea that the benefits of the Academy are enjoyed chiefly, or even materially, by children of the wealthy or influential."¹⁵ On 1 March 1843, Congress mandated

appointments for one cadet in each Congressional district (the cadet had to reside in the district) and ten "at large" appointments for the President.¹⁶

The 1832 Board of Visitors requested that the minimum age for new cadets be raised from fourteen to fifteen years, and cited an increased capacity for learning as their primary argument.¹⁷ Congress agreed, but not until 1839, when they raised the minimum age for cadets to sixteen years.¹⁸ The 1840 Board recommended that the minimum age be increased to eighteen years:

This age would allow a more mature applicant to enter who would better be able to assume responsibilities. Additionally, the student would arrive at an age at which he could assume the responsibilities of a contract to serve his country as a soldier. All the intermediate agencies of parents or guardians would be unnecessary, and the Government would have the power to compel the cadets to perform their portion of the obligation.¹⁹

Though several subsequent Boards suggested that older applicants would be beneficial, the minimum age of new cadets remained unchanged until 1873, when it was increased to seventeen.²⁰

During the antebellum period, the authorities at West Point tried, with limited success, to tighten up the entrance requirements. Starting in 1839, appointees could not be married, and for the first time, had to swear a national oath of allegiance during admission.²¹ The Academy standardized its physical examinations in 1853 with the use

of a "medical board" of three officers, but neither the physical nor mental examinations of that period appear to have been very challenging.²² The doctors checked eyesight (it seems that the lack of blindness was the acceptable standard!), height, weight, and looked for skeletal and dental deformities. For the mental examination, prospective cadets had to do a simple math problem, answer a few questions, read aloud from a book, and transcribe a paragraph dictated by a professor.²³ In 1859, the Board of Visitors recognized that the standards were low, but judged that this approach was necessary to allow admission of the poor, or the "unlearned."²⁴

Apparently in reaction to the resignation of both Northern and Southern cadets, Congress (in 1861) required new cadets to swear an oath of allegiance that specifically recognized the supremacy of federal over state authority.²⁵ The Civil War also brought the harshest criticisms yet of the Academy as an institution. The American public felt betrayed by the cadets and graduates who deserted to the South to support the rebellion. Only through the martial contributions of graduates like Grant and Sherman were the critics finally silenced. Another effect of the Civil War on West Point admissions was the temporary dropping of the requirement for "residence in district."²⁶ Northern cadets filled unused Southern billets, but Congress never changed the law, and the practice ceased to exist in 1866. Also after the Civil War, Congress denied former Confederate

soldiers or sailors the right of application to West Point, but never blocked the admission of other Southern boys.²⁷

Reconstruction also had an impact on the West Point admissions process. In 1870, the first black cadet received an appointment to the Academy, and in 1877, Henry O. Flipper became the first black graduate of West Point. In the fifty years following the Civil War, thirteen blacks attended USMA, three of whom graduated.²⁸ Although the percentage of black cadets did not mirror the percentage of blacks in American society, their attendance marked an important advance in the evolution of the West Point admissions process.

Several Boards of Visitors, Congressmen, and the authorities at West Point asserted that the use of competitive examinations would lead to higher quality appointees. The two major arguments against the use of competitive examinations were: that this would lead to an unequal representation of certain parts of the country (those with better education systems), and that the sons of poorer parents (hence poorer quality of schooling) would not be able to compete with the rich. The 1848 Board of Visitors recognized the need for higher quality applicants, but seemed to surrender to helplessness in searching for a solution to the dilemma:

The cadets at the time of their admission, are quite inferior to the young men who are admitted into the different colleges and universities of our Country; at all which, candidates for admission are subjected to an examination more or less rigorous....There is no remedy....Were more rigorous and extended examinations required for admissions, the sons of the poorer classes of our citizens, would in numerous instances, be shut out from the Academy.²⁹

In contrast, the Board of 1861 asserted that the system of appointing cadets "is attended with many evils, and liable to much abuse."³⁰ As it currently stood, each Congressman could nominate only one candidate. These appointments were, in many cases, political, and spawned disappointment and vindictiveness in the young men who were not selected. The Board argued that rather than a single boy from each district, every Congressman should nominate ten to twenty-four candidates, the best of which would be selected by competitive examination.³¹

In 1863, the Board of Visitors opined that the low entrance requirements served a purpose when the minimum cadet age was fourteen. When Congress raised the minimum age to sixteen, however, the entrance requirements did not reflect the change.³² The 1863 Board urged a system of competitive examinations and a single national order-of-merit list to select prospective cadets. Their report mentioned that some Congressmen were actively using competitive examinations to select the best-qualified applicant within their district. Furthermore, "not a cadet known to have been thus selected and appointed has ever

broken down from want of vigor of body and mind, or failed to reach and maintain an honorable position on the merit-roll of the Academy."³³ The Board then refuted, although unconvincingly, arguments that a system of competitive examinations is: too expensive; would deny politicians a chance to appoint sons of meritorious officers or sons of the poor (after all, the Academy is not a "public charity school or home for orphans"); would select only the "most forward," or upper class boys; would select only the best-instructed; and would allow candidates to "cram for the occasion."³⁴ The 1863 Board used the experiences of the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich to back its arguments:

The most important result of the competitive examinations for Woolwich was the superior mental ability, the vigorous health, and the eagerness for study exhibited by the new classes, and the small number who have failed on account of ill health or incompetency.³⁵

Congress never did authorize the use of competitive examinations to select prospective cadets, but within some Congressional districts, the practice continued. The arguments for their use, as well as the need for tougher entrance requirements, continued into the twentieth century. In 1866, Congress mandated that cadets be appointed one year prior to admission in an attempt to raise the mediocre graduation rate (at that time, less than half of the appointees eventually graduated).³⁶ Appointees were also required to have a knowledge of "English grammar, descriptive geography, particularly of our own country, and

the history of the United States" in addition to the more rigorous math requirements.³⁷ The tougher humanities requirements were imposed allegedly to negate the effects of these subjects' absence in the curriculum.³⁸

Also in 1866, the appointment system itself changed. Under the new laws, each Congressman nominated five candidates, the best-qualified of whom won an appointment to West Point. This practice lasted only one year-the lawmakers were apparently not satisfied with the finalists.³⁹ In 1870, USMA authorities further standardized the mental portion of the entrance examinations. From that time on, all such tests were written, rather than oral.⁴⁰

In 1871, the Superintendent, Colonel Thomas H. Ruger, proposed that English studies, especially grammar, should be included in the curriculum. He argued that the Academy rejected more candidates from 1867 to 1871 for a lack of proficiency in English than in any other subject. In the past, this unusually high rejection rate had been used to justify the lack of English in the curriculum, that is, if cadets were proficient in English when they entered the Academy, they need not have learned it there.⁴¹ Colonel Ruger was also a proponent of competitive examinations, and argued both in 1871 and 1872 for their acceptance. He asserted that the percentage of graduates after the imposition of more stringent entrance requirements in 1866 (44%) was not significantly greater than that for earlier classes (42.5%).⁴² According to the Superintendent, the

only noticeable effect of tougher requirements was an increase in rejections. Colonel Ruger believed that if candidates knew that they must compete for appointments, they would study more and become better prepared to face the rigors of higher education.⁴³

Major General John M. Schofield, the Military Academy Superintendent in 1878, applauded the tougher admissions process, but in 1879 he reversed himself and argued that the standard of admission should not be raised so high that it would exclude less-privileged areas of the country.⁴⁴

General Schofield also applauded the use of competitive examinations (in general practice), but cautioned against forgetting about the need for moral character: "Good character and manly deportment are certainly no less important than scholarship and physical health."⁴⁵ Colonel Wesley Merritt, the Superintendent in 1886, also extolled the virtues of competitive examinations. He asserted that cadets who received their appointments through competitive exams were better students: "of those appointed after competitive examination, 47% graduated, while of those appointed without competition only 25% graduated."⁴⁶

Another tactic employed to recruit higher-quality cadets was more successful than the drive for competitive examinations. In 1890, the Board of Visitors recommended that the entrance examination be administered "at several other places besides West Point," in an attempt to attract more, and potentially better applicants.⁴⁷ The

Superintendent in 1891, Lieutenant Colonel John M. Wilson, also championed this cause, and in 1892 Congress agreed.⁴⁸ Prospective cadets reported to the nearest military reservation for physical and mental testing prior to admission. This basic system, and many of the same test centers, are still in use today.

Two final changes in the admissions process mark the close of the Military Academy's first century, and demonstrate its continuing evolution. The first was an anomaly begging to be corrected, and the second was an aspect of evolution designed to meet the needs of a changing society. In 1890 and 1894, the Boards of Visitors requested an increase in the size of the Corps of Cadets and recommended that each state be allocated two additional appointment slots. Each state's United States Senators would appoint the additional cadets (prior to that time, only members of the United States House of Representatives and the President appointed cadets).⁴⁹ This initiative gained momentum, and in 1900, largely as a result of the war with Spain, became law.⁵⁰ In 1901, Congress gave the Secretary of War the authority to frame the admissions requirements, and reformer Elihu Root imposed two revolutionary changes in the admissions process. First, the admissions authorities would consider the following in lieu of the regular mental examination: 1. The results of the competitive examination for those who received their appointments that way; 2. A high school or normal school

graduation certificate; or 3. Proof of enrollment in a recognized college or university. Second, the mental screening system (regardless of type used) would require knowledge of reading, writing, spelling, English grammar, English composition, English literature, arithmetic, algebra through quadratic equations, plane geometry, descriptive geography, United States history, general history, and general principles of physiology and hygiene.⁵¹

During its first one hundred years, the West Point admissions process grew to maturity. In 1802, entrance requirements were non-existent, but in 1902, prospective cadets had to conquer a demanding physical and mental screening process. These tougher requirements brought a higher graduation rate and very capable appointees. In addition to reducing the institutional uncertainty of a new cadet's basic skills, standardization allowed better classroom instruction; classes could now be tailored to meet the needs of more capable cadets. The survival of the Academy in the face of its harshest attacks was probably due, in no small part, to the quality of cadets and the quality of instruction, hence the quality of the graduates.

Standardization also reduced the political nature of appointments. The public's perception that appointments were granted fairly, rather than being a means of garnering political support by catering to "aristocracy," was crucial to the Academy's survival. The appointment system became increasingly decentralized. In 1802, only one man made all

the appointments to West Point, and he used them for political advantage. In 1902, appointments were shared by all members of both the House of Representatives and Senate as well as the President. The system of selecting the best qualified prospective cadet became increasingly based upon merit, rather than on political connections. Finally, the decentralization of the screening process ensured that all young men in a growing society would have an equal chance to compete for an appointment to the Military Academy.

The evolution of the admissions process during the United States Military Academy's first century led to higher quality prospective cadets, valuable contributions by the Academy's graduates, and acceptance from the American public. Without these, the Academy might have perished. Thus, the institution that groomed Patton, Eisenhower, and Bradley might have been absent when America needed it most.

Notes

¹Theodore J. Crackel, "The Founding of West Point: Jefferson and the Politics of Security" (Unpublished report available in USMA Library files) 3.

²Regulations, USMA, 1810 (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1810) 1.

³Samuel E. Tillman, "The Academic History of the Military Academy, 1802-1902." The Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, Vol I: Addresses and Histories (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1904) 229.

⁴Regulations, USMA, 1821 (Philadelphia: M. Carey and Sons, 1821) 339.

⁵Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1826 (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1844) No page number.

⁶Regulations, USMA, 1823 (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1823) 19.

⁷Theodore J. Crackel, Mr. Jefferson's Army: Political and Social Reform of the Military Establishment, 1801-1809 (New York: New York University Press, 1987) 54.

⁸Ibid. 62.

⁹Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1821 No page number.

¹⁰Edward C. Boynton, History of West Point and its Military Importance During the American Revolution and the Origin and Progress of the United States Military Academy (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1863) 229.

¹¹Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1840 (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1844) No page number.

¹²James L. Morrison, "The Best School in the World: West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866 (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986) 63.

¹³Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1842 (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1844) No page number.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Laws of Congress Relative to West Point and the United States Military Academy from 1786 to 1922, Compiled by Robert H. Hall (West Point: USMA Press, 1922) 34-35.

¹⁷Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1832 (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1844) No page number.

¹⁸Regulations, USMA, 1839 (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1839) 10.

¹⁹Richard J. Bean, "A Brief History of Admissions to the United States Military Academy" (Unpublished report, USMA Admissions Office, 8 May 1967) 5.

²⁰Regulations, USMA, 1873 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1873) 10.

²¹Regulations, USMA, 1839 10.

²²Regulations, USMA, 1853 (New York: John F. Trow, 1853) 5.

²³Morrison 65-66.

²⁴Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1859 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1859) 661.

²⁵Laws of Congress Relative to West Point and the United States Military Academy from 1786 to 1922 54.

²⁶Tillman 226.

²⁷Laws of Congress Relative to West Point and the United States Military Academy from 1786 to 1922 60.

²⁸Stephen E. Ambrose, Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966) 232-233.

²⁹Bean 8.

³⁰Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1861 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1861) 31.

³¹Ibid.

³²Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1863 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1863) 86.

³³Ibid. 88.

³⁴Ibid. 88-90.

³⁵Ibid. 91.

³⁶Laws of Congress Relative to West Point and the United States Military Academy from 1786 to 1922 61-62.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Thomas H. Ruger, Annual Report of the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1871) 428.

³⁹Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1890 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1890) 16.

⁴⁰Tillman 229.

⁴¹Ruger 428.

⁴²Thomas H. Ruger, Annual Report of the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1872) 788-790.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴John M. Schofield, Annual Report of the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1878) 109.

⁴⁵John M. Schofield, Annual Report of the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1879) 175.

⁴⁶Wesley Merritt, Annual Report of the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1886) 192.

⁴⁷Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1890 16.

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