

**Evolution of the Cadet Disciplinary System: From
Confusion to Clarity (1802-1833)**

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The purpose of the United States Military Academy is to produce leaders of character to serve our nation's common defense.¹ To produce leaders of character, the Academy uses a rigid system of regulations that governs the behaviors of cadets. Thus, the Academy uses discipline as a tool to teach cadets to obey rules and to accept authority.

Although renowned for its formalized system of discipline, in its infancy, the United States Military Academy had very few regulations regarding the conduct of cadets. Therefore, the intent of this paper is to answer the following questions: Why did the United States Military Academy implement a cadet disciplinary system? Was Major Thayer correct in stating that a correlation existed between the disciplinary conduct record of cadets and their future performance as military officers?

This report addresses these issues. Moreover, historical examples of cadet and military officer careers will illustrate that contrary to the foundation's of Thayer's system, discipline (as defined by cadet conduct) is not always an accurate indicator of leadership potential.

The Congressional Act of 16 March 1802 established the United States Military Academy at West Point; it officially opened on 4 July 1802. The dependence of American forces on artillerists and trained engineers from foreign countries during the Revolutionary War caused both political and military leaders to concede that in order for this young

both roles adequately. Hence, in 1815, Captain Alan Partridge, who often acted as Superintendent in General Swift's absence, recommended to Secretary of War James Monroe that he make the office of Superintendent a separate and permanent position at the Military Academy. Although Captain Partridge's recommendation created some consternation for Superintendent General Swift, some minor revisions to the recommendation appeased General Swift. Thus, Secretary of War Monroe approved Partridge's recommendation and appointed Partridge as the new Superintendent.⁷ Captain Partridge's superintendency was controversial at best; some authors contend he did nothing but orchestrate havoc at the Academy; others maintain that Partridge enhanced programs initiated by General Swift which Major Thayer, Partridge's successor, received credit for as Superintendent.⁸

Among other issues, poor disciplinary policies marred Captain Partridge's tenure as Superintendent. In his memoirs, George D. Ramsay, a cadet during this time, wrote "as a disciplinarian Captain Partridge was rigid but somewhat given to favoritism."⁹ This lack of consistency in imposing punishment coupled with no clear guidelines, contributed to a Court of Inquiry hearing for Captain Partridge in 1816. Cadets alleged that punishments administered by Partridge included: going to isolation in a hole in the ground (black hole), sitting on cannons and marching around the parade field at a quick time. Although

the Court of Inquiry did not substantiate these allegations, the repercussions of the Court of Inquiry caused Partridge's relationship with his staff and faculty to further deteriorate.¹⁰

This situation climaxed in June 1817 after President Monroe's visit to the Academy. Subsequent to witnessing the problems associated with Partridge's Superintendency and relaying this information to General Swift, Swift relieved Captain Partridge and appointed Major Thayer as the superintendent of the Military Academy.¹¹

As superintendent of the Academy, Major Thayer provided the foundation for an effective system of discipline which would evolve with the needs of the Academy. A graduate of the Academy in 1808, Thayer believed strongly in discipline. Upon assuming the duties as the Superintendent in July 1817, he immediately started to clean house at the Academy. He noted:

On assuming the command I made new organization of the studies and commenced a system of reformation which was indispensable and required vigorous measures which were not very pleasing to the Cadets....I have dismissed Cadets, suspended others and shall persevere until I produce that state of Military Discipline which is as indispensable in an institution of this nature as in a regular Army.¹²

In addition to these changes, "he appointed an officer of the Army to command the battalion as instructor of infantry tactics and in soldiering discipline, and was responsible for the interior police and administration."¹³ The commander of the battalion held the title of Commandant of Cadets. His responsibilities for the interior police of

the cadets included taking charge of the cadets, assigning demerits, and ensuring that the cadets were policing themselves for violations of regulations.¹⁴ The assignment of the Commandant to oversee the conduct of all cadets reflected Thayer's philosophy of discipline. In a letter to the Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, reflecting the attitude of his faculty and cadets regarding discipline, Thayer stated:

they look upon the maintenance of Discipline as a first principle in Military Economy, and it must be obvious to every one that the observance of its rules is at least as essential to the prosperity of the Military Academy as to the well being of the Army. Indeed it is here that Candidates for the army should be established in habits of obedience before entering upon the Theater of Military Life.¹⁵

Another concern of Thayer was cadets who left the Academy prior to graduation due to lack of fortitude, academic prowess, or discipline. In 1818, Thayer wrote in his proposal regarding the reorganization of the United States Military Academy to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun that "Persons who shall have been dismissed from the Academy to be ineligible to any office in the Army for five years thereafter and forever if dismissed for any act in itself dishonorable."¹⁶ Thayer recommended this proposal because it was a common practice for some resignees to join the Army as an officer and gain rank on peers who remained at West Point.¹⁷ He felt that this was an unfair practice to those who remained at West Point and that eventually such a practice would undermine the mission of the Academy itself. Thayer wrote to Calhoun:

There is yet another point of view in which the promotion of these young men as well as that of many cadets who resign from the Academy is calculated to wound the sensibility and discourage the exertions of the meritorious and deserving. Less disgusting perhaps in some instances, it still involves the same consequences and if not checked must inevitably sap the very foundations of this Establishment.¹⁸

Thayer's actions reflected his beliefs, and he had little tolerance for cadets who chose not to abide by his philosophy. Reflecting on this transitional period from Captain Partridge to Major Thayer as Superintendent, Rawlins Lowndes a cadet during this time wrote, "To the Cadets Major Thayer was, after assuming command a mysterious personage. We had seen Captain Partridge everywhere....Thayer we never saw. We knew that he occupied his quarters, and from them frequently issued orders that were read on parade."¹⁹ While the cadets thought that he was tyrannical at times, Thayer's goal was to restore order and discipline to the Academy. By April 1818 a little less than a year after assuming the Superintendency, Thayer had the firm support of his staff and the War Department in the implementation of his policies.²⁰

At times, the cadets tested Thayer's authority. Captain John Bliss, one of Thayer's first Commandants, was a strict disciplinarian who demanded adherence to all regulations. An incident occurred in November 1818 that helped to clarify the status of the Academy and the cadets simultaneously. During a parade, Bliss noticed a cadet walking out of step. After being corrected by Bliss, the

cadet continued to walk out of step. This outraged Bliss; consequently, he physically pulled the cadet out of the parade. As a result of Captain Bliss's actions, five cadets asked Thayer to remove Captain Bliss as Commandant. When Thayer refused, the cadets began a petition which led to a Congressional Inquiry.²¹

The Congressional Inquiry upheld Thayer's decision not to remove Bliss. More importantly, the investigators felt that the acts of the cadets were a form of mutiny. During a court-martial for Cadet Thomas Raglund, one of the mutineers, the court found no authority to try Raglund because cadets did not fall under military law.²² President Monroe overruled the action of the court when his Attorney General, William Witt, issued an opinion that

The Corps at West Point form a part of the land forces of the United States and have been constitutionally subjected by Congress to the rules and articles of war and to trial by courts-martial.²³

This opinion clarified the status of cadets by declaring that cadets were soldiers and not civilians. Thus, they were subject to martial law.²⁴ This opinion also reinforced the government's support for Thayer. Thus, from 1818 to 1829, there were over 125 courts-martial conducted at the Academy. The reasons for the courts-martial ranged from abusing or harassing guards to deserting post to intoxication. Punishments ranged from twelve days in closed confinement to twelve days in (the light prison) and three extra guard

duties (walking the area) to dismissal respectively for the violations cited.²⁵

Thayer also believed that the way to keep cadets out of trouble was to limit their free time and to provide structure in their daily routines. In describing his thoughts, he said that the one item of most importance is "to leave no idle time on the hand of students"²⁶ To do this, he felt that instructors should give students the amount of work equal to their intellectual capacity, test students everyday, and take roll calls. Additionally, he felt that tactical officers should inspect rooms frequently to ensure that cadets were in their rooms at appropriate times, and that the cadets respected the rules about entertainment, gambling, and drinking. Also, by depositing their monthly pay with the treasurer, the Academy could restrict the cadets' access to their money and deter any unnecessary debts.²⁷

To evaluate each cadet, Thayer required all instructors to provide a weekly grade to him regarding the cadets' performance. Additionally, he instituted a program to determine the general merit-roll for each class. To instill the importance of discipline, the final general ranking for cadets would include a conduct grade determined by total number of demerits. Additionally, with class progression, the weight of conduct increased.

For each year that a Cadet may be a member of the Institution, his offences shall be made to count more by adding to the number expressing his demerit one

sixth for his second, one third for his third, and one half for his fourth.²⁸

Another reform was that the academic board assigned a relative value to the importance of the studies in each particular class informing the general merit-roll.²⁹ For the First Class, the board assigned the following values: Mathematics (2), Natural and Experimental Philosophy (2), Descriptive Geometry (.5) Drawing (1), Engineering and the Art of War (2), French Language (1) and Drills and Military Conduct (1.5).³⁰ "These figures were used as multipliers of the actual grades of each cadet in the subjects tested, to arrive at a total figure to determine his rank among his class-mates."³¹ With respect to this system, Thayer wrote "the emulation excited by the class report and by the merit roles has produced a degree of application to study."³²

Although the merit-roll included a value for conduct, there was no limit to the total number of demerits that a cadet could accumulate for one year without facing serious punishment.³³ The poor performance of Cadet H. Ariel Norris was the impetus for a change in the system. Cadet Norris, initially an outstanding cadet on paper, dropped from tenth to fourteenth in a class of sixty-one in academics and from the middle of his class to the sixth from last in the whole Corps with a total of 222 demerits in the span of one year, 1830-1831.³⁴ As a result of Cadet Norris's misconduct, the academic board recommended that if a cadet received more than 200 demerits in a year, the Academy should consider the cadet deficient in conduct. Hence, the Academy would

recommend the cadet for discharge from the West Point.³⁵ All of these policies helped to strengthen Thayer's intent of a disciplined corps of cadets.

However, in 1829, Andrew Jackson became President of the United States, and his actions created a great deal of disequilibrium in Thayer's system. Jackson, for political purposes, frequently reinstated cadets who the Secretary of War had approved dismissal upon the recommendation of courts-martial held at West Point. Additionally, "when the sons of proteges of influential politicians failed in academics on the first attempt they were often given a second chance."³⁶ During his first two years, Jackson's Secretary of War overturned seven of sixteen courts-martial that recommended dismissal for cadets.³⁷ These actions led to serious disciplinary problems within the Academy and adversely impacted on Thayer's ability to maintain order and discipline. In 1831, Captain Hitchcock, the Commandant of Cadets, bitterly said:

A cadet who was really a disgrace to the Academy would frequently be thus returned to the institution after dismissal, to scoff at the regulations he had defied and furnish an example by which great numbers of the thoughtless would also become reckless.³⁸

President Jackson's actions of readmitting cadets who the Academy had recommended for dismissal caused Thayer to become so disgusted that he resigned as Superintendent in 1833.

While Thayer suggested through his words and policies that discipline of cadets as reflected in conduct was an

indication of future performance, the careers of Ulysses S. Grant, Jefferson Davis, and George A. Custer suggest otherwise.

One of Thayer's success stories was Robert E. Lee who graduated from the Academy in 1829. Lee was an outstanding cadet who finished second in a class of forty-six that had started with 105 new cadets. Throughout his time as a cadet, Lee did not receive one demerit. During his first class year, he was Adjutant of the Corps. Upon graduation, Lee entered the Corps of Engineers.³⁹ When he received his orders for the Mexican War in 1846, he was a Captain. By the time the war was over, his distinguished service enabled him to achieve the rank of brevet-colonel. From 1852-1855, he served as the Superintendent of the Academy. In 1861, he became a General for the Confederate forces after declining command of the Union forces. Despite his loss during the Civil War, Lee had a distinguished career.⁴⁰ His contributions as an apparent flawless cadet are still remembered today.

To the contrary, Ulysses S. Grant graduated twenty-one out of thirty-nine in 1842.⁴¹ Unlike Lee, who never received a demerit and who rose to high rank in the corps of cadets, Grant was an average fellow. Grant came to the Academy because of the wishes of his father. In his memoirs, Grant pointed out, "A military life had no charms for me, and I had not the faintest idea of staying in the Army even if I should be graduated, which I did not

expect."⁴² Grant was an above average student who excelled in engineering courses. Most of his time, he spent reading novels for pleasure. He did not care for the military aspects of the academy, and this at times, got him into trouble, although not for serious offenses. He wrote, "I never succeeded in getting squarely at either end of my class, in any one study, during four years. I came near it in French, Artillery, infantry, and cavalry tactics, and conduct."⁴³ During this time, the superintendent and commandant selected cadets for positions within the corps based on military bearing and qualifications.⁴⁴ In discussing his rank, Grant said:

I had been "called out" as a corporal, but when I returned from furlough, I found myself the last but one--about my standing in tactics of 18 sergeants. The promotion was too much for me. That year my standing in the class--as shown by the number of demerits of the year--was about the same as it was among the sergeants, and I was dropped, and served the fourth year as a private.⁴⁵

Perhaps a below average cadet by Thayer's standards, Grant achieved great success during the Mexican and Civil Wars. During the Mexican War, he successfully served with Generals Taylor and Scott. His distinguished performance resulted in his promotion to brevet Captain. In 1854, he resigned his commission and did not return to duty until the outbreak of the Civil War. Upon his promotion to Lieutenant General in 1864, Grant assumed command of the Union forces and eventually achieved victory. He was also President of the United States from 1869 to 1877.⁴⁶

Like Grant, Jefferson Davis did not have a distinguished cadet career. He graduated twenty-three of thirty-three cadets in 1828. At graduation, his conduct standing was 163 out of 208 cadets.⁴⁷ Although he received the usual demerits for an unkempt room and deficiencies in uniform appearance, Davis's more serious offenses revolved around drinking liquor. In 1825, a court-martial proceeding found him guilty for leaving post and drinking at Benny Haven's Tavern. However, the court remitted its recommendation for dismissal based on previous good conduct.⁴⁸ In February 1827, the Academy freed Davis from arrest when authorities could not substantiate whether he had or had not participated in the "Eggnog Riot" on 25 December 1826.⁴⁹

During the Mexican War Davis also served with distinction under General Taylor. However, he received a painful wound in his foot at Monterrey and Buena Vista; this wound forced him to retire. Upon retirement, he became a politician, and in 1861, the provisional Congress of the Confederacy chose him as President.⁵⁰

Like Grant and Davis, George A. Custer was not an outstanding cadet. As Custer stated upon entering the Academy there were 125 in my class, "Of this number only thirty-four graduated, and of these, thirty-three graduated above me."⁵¹ At graduation in 1861, he had the highest number of demerits (726) for his class. Despite his apparent lack of discipline, Cadet Custer could decide when and when not to abide by the rules. "When he was close to

the maximum number of demerits for six months or a year, he was able to go for several months without a demerit."⁵² He too served in the Civil War. He distinguished himself at Gettysburg and during several campaigns in the Shenandoah Valley. In 1876, he died in battle of Little Bighorn.⁵³

In light of the above, contrary to Thayer's contention, the cadet and officer careers of Grant, Davis, and Custer suggest that there may not be a correlation between cadet conduct and future performance as an officer. To help explain why there may not be a causal relationship between cadet conduct and leadership potential one needs to hear the words of Brigadier-General John Gibbon. A graduate of the the Academy in 1847, he did not achieve great success as a cadet, but did exceptionally well in the Army. At his speech to the graduating class of 1886 he said:

Looking back over the past, one cannot help being struck with the remarkable, sometimes whimsical, way in which the dice-box of Fate has apparently belied all prognostications formed here. The results in after life should impress us with the conviction that the humblest member of any class need never despair when he quits these Academic groves, if his outlook seems less favorable than that of some of his comrades. **THIS INSTITUTION DOES NOT MAKE GENERALS.** It simply implants the A B C of the soldier's profession. He becomes great who afterwards builds best upon the foundation laid here.⁵⁴

To make his point he illustrated the careers of James Longstreet who graduated third from the bottom in a class of fifty-six and to Ulysses S. Grant. Thus, one could argue that Thayer's system of discipline only plants the seeds for future growth and success as an officer.

The failure of the administrators of the Academy from 1802 to 1817 to create a rigid disciplinary system was due to the fact that the government had not really determined what the role of the Academy was during this time. After the War in 1812, military leaders and politicians realized that the Academy needed to produce Army officers capable of not only competing with the British and French officers, but also officers who could lead soldiers in defending the needs of the nation. The selection of Sylvanus Thayer in 1817 for the superintendency enabled the Academy to head in the right direction. Upon assuming this position, Thayer immediately instituted reforms particularly in the disciplinary system. With respect to the policies and regulations that he not only implemented but also enforced, the cadets did not always like Thayer; however, he stood his ground and achieved success.

Many of Thayer's actions and words indicate an attitude that the actions of a cadet will determine success or failure in the future. Robert E. Lee's successful cadet and military careers substantiate Major Thayer's beliefs. However, the less than average cadet careers and successful military careers of Ulysses S. Grant, Jefferson Davis, and George A. Custer do not substantiate Thayer's contention. Thus, there is no conclusive evidence to support Thayer's beliefs regarding the relationship between cadet conduct and leadership potential.

While the Academy and the Army need an effective system of discipline to maintain certain standards of conduct, the Academy may deprive the army as well as the country of great leadership when it eliminates cadets solely for conduct reasons. In his speech, General Gibbon illustrated a story about two yearlings and a plebe who he caught off-limits one night. He said that the two yearlings ineffectively used the cape of their overcoat to hide their rank, while the third cadet effectively hid his rank. The two yearlings were court-martialed and barely escaped dismissal. He further stated:

I afterwards discovered the third was a plebe. All three rose to high rank in the military service, and the plebe practiced on many a hard fought field the bold strategic ideas thus early implanted in his young mind, and to-day is a living example of what a Devilish big general can be made out of a little Devil of a Cadet.⁵⁵

Notes

¹Dave R. Palmer, 2002--and Beyond. A Roadmap to Our Third Century (West Point, New York: USMA Press, 1990) 4.

²Edgar Denton III, "The Formative Years of the United States Military Academy, 1775-1833," diss., Syracuse U, 1964 1-2.

³Ibid. 30.

⁴Ibid. vii.

⁵Ibid. 105.

⁶Ibid. 105.

⁷Ibid. 105.

⁸Crackel, Ted. Presentation to HI600 class on 11 Sept 1990.

⁹Denton 100.

¹⁰The Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point from 1802-1902 Vol II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904) 67.

¹¹Denton 163.

¹²Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to Graham, 29 August 1817, contained in Cindy Adams, ed., The West Point Thayer Papers, 1808-1872 (West Point: The Association of Graduates, 1965) n, page. There is no pagination in this collection. The letters are arranged chronologically.

¹³Superintendent's Annual Report, 1896 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896) 123.

¹⁴Ibid. 123.

¹⁵Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, 28 June 1818, contained in Adams.

¹⁶Sylvanus Thayer, Proposition for the Re-organization of the Military Academy, 10 Feb 1818, contained in Adams.

¹⁷Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to John C. Calhoun, 28 June 1818, contained in Adams.

- ¹⁸Ibid. no page.
- ¹⁹Denton 179.
- ²⁰Ibid 179.
- ²⁰Ibid 179.
- ²¹Stephen E. Ambrose, Duty, Honor, Country (Baltimore: The John's Hopkins Press, 1966) 77.
- ²²Ibid 78.
- ²³Ibid 78-79.
- ²⁴Edward C. Boynton, History of West Point and its Military Importance during the American Revolution and the Origin and Progress of the United State Military Academy. (New York: D. Van Nostand, 1863) 221.
- ²⁵Personal Records maintained by various cadets from 1818 to 1827. USMA Archives.
- ²⁶Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to James Monroe, 23 November 1826, contained in Adams.
- ²⁷Ibid. n. pag.
- ²⁸Haskell M. Monroe and James T. McIntosh, eds. The Papers of Jefferson Davis, Vol I. 1808-1840 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press) 28.
- ²⁹Denton 191.
- ³⁰Ibid. 191.
- ³¹Ibid. 191.
- ³²Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to John C. Calhoun, 31 January 1818, contained in Adams.
- ³³Denton 256.
- ³⁴Ibid. 256.
- ³⁵Ibid. 256.
- ³⁶Ibid. 252.
- ³⁷Ibid. 253.
- ³⁸Ibid. 254.

³⁹Philip Stern, Robert E. Lee The Man and the Soldier
(New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963) 39-40.

⁴⁰Ibid 200-217.

⁴¹Hamlin Garland, Ulysses S. Grant His Life and Character (New York: Doubleday & McClure Company, 1898) 51.

⁴²Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant Vol. 1 (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1885) 38.

⁴³Ibid. 39.

⁴⁴Ibid. 40.

⁴⁵Ibid. 40-41.

⁴⁶Garland 159-175.

⁴⁷Haskel and McIntosh 103.

⁴⁸Ibid. 40-41.

⁴⁹Ibid. 82.

⁵⁰New Standard Encyclopedia Vol. V. (Chicago: Standard Education Corporation, 1985) 47-48.

⁵¹John M. Carroll, ed. Custer in the Civil War. His Unfinished Memoirs (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1977) 86.

⁵²Donald W. Horn ed., "Skinned" The Delinquency Record of Cadet George Armstrong Custer U.S.M.A. (Short Hills, New Jersey, 1980) ii.

⁵³Carroll 69.

⁵⁴John Gibbon "Address to the Graduating Class at West Point June 12th 1886." (West Point: The Association of Graduates, 1886) 9.

⁵⁵Ibid. 4.

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