

DENNIS HART MAHAN  
(1802-1871)  
AND HIS INFLUENCE ON  
WEST POINT

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In 1776 a young fledgling democracy, the United States of America, emerged into a world dominated by European world powers such as Britain, France, and Spain. The United States was not eager to confront these countries, but would defend itself if provoked. During the next quarter century a national debate raged as to whether or not the United States needed a military academy. Finally in 1802, the United States Military Academy opened its doors to provide the Nation with leaders of character who serve the common defense. But who was qualified to teach at the new military academy at West Point? And what instructional materials were available for instructors to provide instruction from? Dennis Hart Mahan understood the importance of providing leaders of character to serve the common defense. Later he said about military professionalism, "No one can be said to have thoroughly mastered his art, who has neglected to make himself conversant with its early history; nor, indeed, can any tolerably clear elementary notions even, be formed of an art, beyond those furnished by the mere technical language, without some historical knowledge of its rise and progress; for this alone can give to the mind those means of comparison, without which everything has to be painfully created anew, to reach perfection only after many cycles of misdirected mental toil."<sup>1</sup>

Dennis Hart Mahan answered the call. He provided both instruction in Engineering and Military Professionalism and instructional references to the United States Military Academy at West Point. Dennis Hart Mahan (United States Military Academy, USMA, 1824), joined the faculty at the United States Military Academy in 1831 as the head of the Engineering Department and remained there for four decades. The thesis of this paper is that Dennis Hart Mahan's influence was instrumental in formatting the intellectual development of future officers of the Army. This influence came essentially through the United States Military Academy (USMA) whose foremost teacher and instructor taught courses in Engineering and Military Professionalism.

West Point influence has been pervasive through civil and military endeavors. West Point graduates have provided the United States of America with leaders of all walks of life

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-- in business, government, agriculture, the professions, explorers, and presidents. West Point graduates have contributed with distinction in each of the nation's ten wars including the War of 1812, Mexican War, Civil War, Indian Wars, Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, and the Gulf War.<sup>2</sup> Many of the successes in war are indirectly related to the influences Dennis Hart Mahan has had at West Point. In this paper, I will discuss the state of the military academy prior to the arrival of Dennis Hart Mahan, Dennis Hart Mahan's background, the impact Mahan had on the military academy and how his programs ultimately increased the level of professionalism in the Army.

From the United States Military Academy's inception in 1802 to 1830 when second lieutenant Dennis Hart Mahan joined the faculty at West Point, the military academy had had its share of problems. These hardships included organizational or administrative and curriculum problems as well as political interference from the Jefferson administration.<sup>3</sup>

Upon West Point's inception, Jonathan Williams became its first superintendent. However, unlike today, the superintendent did not control all of West Point. Superintendent Jonathan Williams was in charge of the Corps of Cadets but not the garrison troops unless it was an emergency. This structure of command further clarified the implicit purpose of the military academy as the Jeffersonians saw it: This regulation finally resulted in the resignation of Superintendent Williams in 1812. West Point could produce the technician (engineer) rather than the commander. This thought illustrates the fear the administration (Jeffersonian) had about a standing army and a military academy. Further organizational deficiencies continued to frustrate the development of the United States Military Academy. Superintendent Williams, on top of performing duties as the Superintendent, was responsible for performing duties as the Chief of Engineering. This latter responsibility caused him to spend many days away from West Point. "In a moment of despondency he complained that he could not be expected to be at a variety of places at the same time, and.....perform more than nature allows to the faculty of any man.<sup>4</sup> His

frequent absences from West Point left mediocre subordinates in charge of day to day operations.

During Superintendent Williams tenure, many administrative problems plagued the military academy. For the first couple of years there was no fixed curriculum or entrance or graduation standard. Between 1802 and 1810, the age of the Corps of Cadets was between twelve and thirty-four years. Some were married while others were not. Additionally, the educational level of the incoming students varied between a college education and very little education.<sup>5</sup> The physical plant of the military academy was in such bad shape that during brutally cold winters students would be sent home. Professors qualified for teaching at the Nation's military academy were short in supply. For example, between 1802 and 1808, only Francis D. Masson was available to teach both French and Drawing.<sup>6</sup>

Lastly, the political interference that Superintendent Williams ran into from Secretary of War William Eustis almost destroyed the United States Military Academy at West Point. Secretary of War Eustis apparently had a mistrust of a professional army. Secretary of War Eustis refused to nominate cadets and spread cadets and officers assigned to West Point to other parts of the Army. In 1811 only one of the authorized instructors was under contract and he was on leave; no instruction was being given to the six cadets that remained at the military academy.<sup>7</sup> With the start of the War of 1812 a year away, the United States Military Academy stood empty.

However, in the fifteen years before Second Lieutenant Mahan arrived at the United States Military Academy as part of the faculty, solutions were found to some of the problems stated above. The sudden thrust of the War of 1812 ignited a whirlwind in Congress to reorganize the military academy. It all started when Congress enacted the Act of 29 April 1812. Significant articles included the following:

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Section 2: "And it be further enacted that the military academy shall consist of the Corps of Engineers, and the following professors, in addition to the teachers of the French language and drawing already provided, viz: one professor of natural and experimental philosophy...one professor of mathematics...one professor of the art of engineering in all its branches...each of the foregoing professors to have an assistant professor, which assistant professor shall be taken from the most prominent characters of the officers or cadets.....

Section 3: And be it further enacted, That the cadets heretofore appointed in the service of the United States, whether of artillery, cavalry, rifleman or infantry, or that may in future be appointed as hereinafter provided, shall at no time exceed two hundred and fifty: that they may be attached at the discretion of the President of the United States, as students to the military academy, and be subject to the established regulations there of; that they shall be arranged into companies of non-commissioned officers and privates, according to the directions of the Commandant of Engineers, and be officered from the same Corps, for the purposes of military instruction; that there shall be added to each company of Cadets four musicians; and the said Corps shall be trained and taught all the duties incident to a regular camp; that the candidates for Cadets be not under the age of fourteen, nor above the age of twenty-one years; that each Cadet, previously to his appointment by the President of the United States, shall be well versed in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and that he shall sign articles, with the consent of his parents or guardian, by which he shall engage to serve five years, unless sooner discharged; and all Cadets shall be entitled to and receive the pay and emoluments now allowed by law to Cadets in the Corps of Engineers.

Section 4: And be it further enacted, That when any Cadet shall receive a regular degree from the academical staff, after going through all the classes, he shall be considered as among the candidates for a commission in any Corps, according to the duties he may be judged competent to perform;.....

Section 5: And be it further enacted, the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars be, and the same is hereby appropriated, to be paid out of any money in the treasury not otherwise appropriated, for erecting buildings, and for providing, a library and all necessary implements, and for such contingent expenses as may be necessary and proper, in the judgment of the President of the United States, for such an institution."8

The academy was reopened in 1813 and by 1816 West Point admitted three hundred Cadets. The academy opened up just in time for a new Superintendent by the name of Thayer.

The Act of 29 April 1812 and the arrival of Superintendent Thayer began the steady improvement of the United States Military Academy at West Point. The concept of a Board of Visitors, distinguished men of science who were annually to be present at the cadet oral final examinations; a four year curriculum; the ranking of cadets in academic order of merit; improved admission and graduation standards; regulated size of class; and

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the appointment of a permanent superintendent were introduced at the military academy. A new barracks, messhall, and academic building were also constructed during this period.<sup>9</sup> By the time Second Lieutenant Dennis Hart Mahan joined the faculty, Thayer's major curriculum and disciplinary reforms had been introduced and were proving accommodating to the cadets. But who is Dennis Hart Mahan?

Dennis Hart Mahan was born to John and Mary Mahan on 2 April, 1802, the same year West Point opened. John and Mary Mahan had arrived from Ireland to New York City in 1800. The year after Dennis Hart Mahan was born, the Mahan family moved to Norfolk, Virginia where John Mahan could employ his carpenter trade for better payment. Dennis Hart Mahan's mother Mary died in July 1802 when Dennis Hart Mahan was only three months old. When Dennis Hart Mahan was three years old, his father married Eleanor McKim in 1805. Eleanor Mahan died in 1808 and John Mahan married Ester Moffitt six years later in 1814, when Dennis Hart Mahan was fourteen. It was Ester who Dennis had his closest stepmother relationship.

In 1814, the Mahan family moved to Suffolk, Virginia. John Mahan did not become rich or prominent in the carpenter trade but was successful enough to pay his bills. Dennis became interested in medicine and decided a career in medicine was what he wanted to do. So in 1817 at the age of fifteen, Dennis moved back to Norfolk, Virginia to live with Dr. Robert Archer, an Army surgeon stationed at Fort Monroe. Dr. Archer became Dennis Hart Mahan's mentor. Dr Archer's Army career seemed to influence Dennis Hart Mahan.

In 1817 when Dennis's interest in Drawing became apparent to Dr. Archer, Dr Archer recommended to Dennis a career in Drawing. Dr. Archer knew West Point had the finest drawing course of any university in the United States. So by the summer of 1819, Dennis Hart Mahan applied for a nomination to the United States Military Academy at West Point from Secretary of War John C. Calhoun. Dr. Archer elicited the help of Charles Mallory and newspaperman Thomas G. Broughton of Norfolk and Congressman

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Thomas Newton of Virginia. In March of 1820, Dennis Hart Mahan received his nomination to West Point from the Secretary of War. On 4 July, 1820, on a very hot and humid day, Dennis Hart Mahan arrived at the United States Military Academy at West Point unaware it would be his home for more than four decades.<sup>10</sup>

The four years Dennis Hart Mahan spent as a cadet at the military academy were the formative years in his preparation for a career as an officer and teacher. Mahan's strong character and intellect quickly propelled him to the head of his class.<sup>11</sup> Dennis Hart Mahan was an unusually hardworking cadet and caught the eye of Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer. Living and working under such a man as Superintendent Thayer developed in Mahan a sense of duty and discipline that stayed with him the rest of his life. In fact, Dennis Hart Mahan expected the same kind of conduct from his students years later. Mahan's success during the first year at West Point propelled Superintendent Thayer to have Mahan as a third classmen, become acting assistant professor of Mathematics. This required Mahan to perform double duty as cadet and instructor which robbed Mahan of his time for much needed rest for his health was not what it should be.

Dennis Hart Mahan graduated on 1 July 1824 at the head of his class and was promoted to Second Lieutenant Mahan in the Corps of Engineers. He spent the next two years teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point. The first year was spent as the assistant professor of Mathematics from 1 August 1824 to 3 August 1825, and the following year he spent as the assistant professor of Engineering from 4 August 1825 to 1 August 1826. Dennis Hart Mahan was not a sturdy, healthy man and started to develop pulmonary problems towards the end of his cadetship and on into his two years as an instructor. He requested a leave of absence from West Point for one year to go to a warmer climate (France) and recover from his illness. This leave of absence became a four year stay in Europe. The War Department allowed Dennis Hart Mahan to spend from 1827 to 1830 in Europe studying engineering works such as fortifications, roads, bridges, and canals in hopes of bringing new techniques to West Point upon his return. From 1

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January 1829 to 10 March 1830, Mahan attended the famous Military School of Application of Engineers and Artillerists in Metz, France. It was here that Dennis Hart Mahan learned from the great instructors who had been instructed in the great campaigns of the great Napoleon. It is no surprise Mahan returned from Europe full of esprit and motivation to pass on what he had learned. It would not be long before he received his chance. In 1830, circumstances at West Point were working to open the doors for Dennis Hart Mahan to join the faculty.

During Dennis Hart Mahan's stay in Europe, the current professor of Engineering at West Point, Captain Douglas became alienated from Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer. Captain Douglas had received an offer for employment outside of the military and he wanted to investigate the possibility of engaging in such employment. After several furloughs were declined so he could investigate these employment offers by the War Department, Captain Douglas resigned his position as professor of Engineering at West Point, leaving the department without a professor. The door was now open for Dennis Hart Mahan to enter the faculty at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Second Lieutenant Mahan returned to the United States Military Academy at West Point at a time when the egalitarianism espoused by Jacksonian Democrats were growing increasingly hostile to the faint spark of professionalism. Professor Mahan first had to learn how the academy was administered and what his critical problems were. In Europe, Mahan commanded many resources and had his way, but at the United States Military Academy he had to learn the ropes. This meant learning how the Academic Board worked in relation to the curriculum and how West Point was tied to Washington D.C..

From 1831 to 1841, professor Mahan quickly identified his major problems and devised solutions. Mahan saw his role as professor going beyond the scope of the Engineering Department, but instead to the entire military academy. During his first decade at West Point, professor Mahan formulated and applied a philosophy of military education which was transmitted to the cadets through his textbooks: a firm grasp of a

soldier's duties and responsibilities. As the Nation's leading war theorist, Professor Mahan organized military education by providing theory and then gave cadets practical application. The problem was Professor Mahan did not like the previous textbook used by Gay de Vernon, the previous chief of engineers. Mahan thought Gay de Vernon's textbook was too long, inaccurate and did not clearly describe principles of military science. As adequate textbooks did not exist, Dennis Hart Mahan quickly wrote them. Mahan's textbooks include the following:

- (1) Treatise on Field Fortifications --1836.
- (2) Permanent Fortifications.
- (3) Elementary Course of Military Engineering.
- (4) Advanced Guard, Outpost, and Detachment Service of Troops -- 1847.
- (5) Treatise on Fortification Drawing and Stereotomy -- 1865.
- (6) Civil Engineering.
- (7) Moseley's Mechanical Principles of Engineering and Architecture.
- (8) Industrial Drawing -- 1853.

The political environment in 1830 espoused the idea of West Point training engineers and spreading them across the country to help with internal development of roads, bridges, and levies. Dennis Hart Mahan agreed with this notion but as he started to mature, he grew firmly convinced that the real purpose of West Point was to try and keep alive military science in the country between wars.<sup>12</sup> Mahan believed that military science needed to be kept alive so that it did not die out during long periods of peace; so the country could remain responsive to national emergencies. Mahan thought military science/professionalism needed to be expanded to all branches. Mahan believed that if the cadets could develop this professionalism, it would eventually spread throughout the officer Corps and to the rest of the Army. Two of his more prominent textbooks helped to illustrate how Dennis Hart Mahan thought military professionalism was important. He wrote "Treatise on Field Fortifications" in 1836. In the preface of "Treatise on Field

Fortifications". he wrote, " in preparing the work now laid before the public, which is chiefly designed for the use of the Cadets of the United States Military Academy, the aim of the writer was to make a book which should also be generally useful -- one that should contain all the principles and important details of that branch of the Art of Fortification of which it specially treats, developed in a manner to be within the comprehension of any person of ordinary intelligence, -- a book not for the study alone, but one which the officer can take with him into camp, and consult at any moment"<sup>14</sup> Treatise of Field

Fortifications described how soldiers in the field could build fortifications to protect them from invading enemy forces. In the introductory chapter, Dennis Hart Mahan describes the effects of then present day weapons effects on wood, stone, and brick. The rest of the book is devoted to describing techniques on how to build different kinds of fortifications such as the star fort, the bastion fort, entrenchments, parapets, revetments, obstacles and bridge building. The book, also, describes techniques to use in the attack and defense.

"Treatise of Field Fortifications" was written in such a fashion (small) so officers could take into the field with them and consult it when needed. It was a working manual.

"Treatise of Field Fortifications" was the first attempt by Dennis Hart Mahan to fill the void of textbooks at the military academy and in the Army.

Several years later, Dennis Hart Mahan wrote another textbook to be used by officers and cadets in the field. The book was titled, "Advanced Guard, Outpost, and Detachment Service of Troops with the Essential Principles of Strategy, and Grand Tactics for the Use of Officers of the Militia and Volunteers." Commonly known as Outpost, this textbook guided military thought of two generations of American's professional soldiers. This textbook was an attempt by Mahan to outline different tactics used in different situations by the United States Military. The textbook discusses an early history of ancient and modern armies, tactics, the Manner of Placing and Handling Troops, Positions, Advanced Guards and Advanced Posts, Reconnaissance Detachments, Convoys, Surprises and Ambuscades, Principles of Strategy and Grand Tactics, and the Organization of the

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United States Military Forces. It was in this textbook that Dennis Hart Mahan said that officers and cadets who make this profession a career must study early history to master military art.<sup>16</sup> The demand for this textbook amounted to over 8,000 copies, and has been very great, it having been adopted in many State military schools, by the National Guard of New York, and by most volunteer and regular officers during the late rebellion. Both this and the work on field fortifications were considered so indispensable in the seceding States that they were reprinted there, the publisher having patriotically refused to sell them any copies.<sup>17</sup> Dennis Hart Mahan's chapter on Principles of Strategy defined the following terms:

- (1) Base of operations
- (2) Objective
- (3) Line of operations
- (4) Line of defense
- (5) Line of retreat
- (6) Strategy
- (7) Tactics

Additionally, Dennis Hart Mahan formulated a Principle of War which stated that, "the object of every war ought to be to gain an advantageous peace, and this object can be attained alone by decisive strokes. The great art therefore of a General consists of judging well both of the points, and the moment when he can strike a decided blow with the greatest prospect for success, and the only real certainty of success is to appear on the point with forces superior to the enemy. It therefore results that the fundamental principle consists in operating with superior forces a combined movement on a decisive point."<sup>18</sup> Treatise of Field Fortifications and Advanced Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops were instrumental in providing cadets and officers alike with working manuals they could take to the field and consult at anytime. This meant that the professional solution was

always within grasp of an officer who had the textbook. Textbooks were a significant contribution by Mahan, but he also influenced the curriculum at West Point as well.

There were many influences on the development of the curriculum at West Point such as the Academic Board, Congressional inquiries, and directions from Secretaries of War. This fact alone makes Professor Mahan's instruction in military education much more meaningful and important.

The scope of military education within the curriculum fell mainly on the shoulders of Professor Mahan. The course load in the curriculum at West Point taught theory through the third year and by the fourth year more practical application of the science of war was taught. Professor Mahan's courses in engineering loomed large in importance in the fourth year. Professor Mahan could influence the outbound Second Lieutenant one last time with the thoughts of military professionalism and inspire them for future self study.

Engineering and military education were aligned together for several reasons. First, the qualifications to teach military education were high. What better branch to teach military education than the highest qualified branch - Engineers. After all, the Superintendent of the military academy was an engineer. Secondly, Americans thought a relationship existed between science and military professionalism and education. The Jeffersonian approach to military science stressed the scientific method. Thirdly, engineering and military education were linked together because French military thinking linked both engineering and military education. At that time, American military thinking was very much influenced by French military thinking. After all, Superintendent Thayer had modeled West Point after the French military academy.

The examination of lessons during 1840 revealed a serious problem - insufficient time to cover all the courses needed covering. It was a question of priorities. Professor Mahan, by virtue of his position on the Academic Board, elected to reduce Drawing class hours to sufficiently cover military education. Professor Mahan argued he needed

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approximately twenty-six recitations to cover the topic ever so marginally. Professor Mahan refused to teach a subject so shallowly that the cadet could not develop meaningful knowledge. The review of the curriculum by the Academic Board examined the idea of a five year curriculum. Various agencies were proposing changes in the curriculum, but there was not time available in the four year curriculum. Changes incurred in the curriculum were the addition of English, History and Military Education.

Professor Mahan realized that the United States Military Academy could not provide a complete education even with a four year curriculum. He thought the military academy should deal with the scientific and military education as the first priorities. Professor Mahan could subject the cadet to a taste of military professionalism by teaching it in his courses. He could wet the cadet's appetite for future self study during the cadet's fourth and last year at West Point. In this way, Professor Mahan would move the cadet along towards his basic objective--military professionalism. The five year curriculum was tried from 1854 to 1859 until West Point reverted back to the four year curriculum the next year.

Professor Mahan continued to espouse military education and professionalism in other ways besides the class room. Professor Mahan started the Napoleon Club in 1848. The Napoleon Club was a group of officers at West Point interested in studying military art. Professor Mahan was the driving force behind the club. The club would meet once a month and Professor Mahan would direct selected officers each month to present a discussion about different campaigns to the group. Here, the officers and cadets would submit their analyses of these campaigns to Professor Mahan and their colleagues for review and discussion.<sup>19</sup> Among the members who gathered for instruction in the club were: George Cullum, John J. Reynolds, William F. Smith, George B. McClellan and Thomas H. Neill. This training would, indeed, come in handy in 1861 with the start of the Civil War.

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When General Beauregard fired on Fort Sumter in 1861, the United States Military Academy once again became the focus of attention of the country. Dennis Hart Mahan was pressed into service as an advisor to the Secretary of War and as a researcher trying to obtain battlefield information to update weapons effects data for his textbook *Field Fortifications*. Additionally, Professor Mahan proposed a different organization for the Union war effort. He recommended a chief of staff position be implemented. He stressed that this chief of staff should not be the commander of any unit, but an administrator, an advisor to the Commander in Chief. Mahan suggested Halleck was best qualified for the job. In July 1862, President Lincoln appointed Halleck as chief of staff. Aside from the additional duties listed above, Dennis Hart Mahan continued to teach cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point throughout the Civil War.

Dennis Hart Mahan always had trouble with his health. The pulmonary problems he had developed as a cadet at West Point had plagued him his entire life. In 1871, upon the advice of his family, friends and the Board of Visitors, Dennis Hart Mahan was forced to retire after four decades as an instructor at West Point. Professor Mahan was seventy years old, way beyond the age of retirement of ordinary officers. Dejected on the prospect of leaving West Point, Professor Mahan, upon the advice of his family, left West Point by the steamship *Mary Powell* and was enroute to New York City to see his physician. As the steamship slowly moved down the Hudson River, Professor Mahan slowly rose from the saloon where he was sitting and went to the stern of the ship, and jumped over the railing into the paddle wheel and drown in the Hudson River.<sup>20</sup>

Professor Mahan, an advocate of Superintendent Thayer, advocated many of the same things Thayer taught: hardwork, discipline, integrity, and a sense of duty were demonstrated and demanded. But Professor Mahan, the nation's leading war theorist, instilled in the cadets a sense of military professionalism and military science. It was educating and teaching military art and military professionalism to thousands of cadets for over forty years that Professor Mahan contributed most to improving the Army. Over his

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tenure at West Point. Professor Mahan's ideas influenced and molded 189 Union generals and 136 Confederate generals. This had a dramatic effect in professionalism between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. For over forty years, Professor Mahan effected cadet instruction, assessed and reassessed curriculums as the head of the academic board, provided advice to Secretaries of War, wrote textbooks, and defended West Point from external forces. Professor Mahan is heralded as one of the greatest educators and teachers West Point has seen in its long and glorious history.

END NOTES

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