

On the Road to Professionalism: The Evolution and
"Extinction" of Hazing at the United States Military Academy

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The United States Military Academy has perpetuated many proud customs and traditions throughout its 190-year existence. Most of these have positively influenced the operations and reputation of the Academy; a few have not. Two aberrations of these customs and traditions became known as the practices of deviling and hazing. The American Heritage Dictionary defines deviling as "to annoy or torment."¹ The Oxford English Dictionary defines hazing as "to affright, scare: to scold; also, to punish by blows and to subject to cruel horseplay (as practiced by American students); to bully."² Hazing began at the United States Military Academy during Sylvanus Thayer's term as Superintendent from 1817 to 1833. Although the precise birth of hazing is difficult to trace, many notable former graduates and faculty members would agree that hazing began as a result of the fourth class system. Hazing initially referred to Plebes performing menial tasks for the upperclass cadets, similar to what junior enlisted soldiers did for their superiors in the same time period. The intensity and humiliation associated with these tasks sharply increased during and immediately after the Civil War regardless of the efforts of the authorities and cadet chain of command at West Point to stop them. Hazing continued for several reasons until Congress felt impelled to intervene.

¹American Heritage Dictionary, 2d Ed., New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1983, p. 196.

²Oxford English Dictionary, 2d Ed., Vol. VII, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 32.

The Congressional Hearings of 1901 convened because of an incident of hazing at the United States Military Academy.

The practice of hazing, originally termed fagging, began in the English public school system.³ As early as 1860, several major colleges and universities, including Harvard, Princeton, and Cornell, experienced serious hazing incidents.⁴ Fagging referred to upperclassmen commonly requiring freshmen students to perform menial tasks for them. A number of cadets had previously attended civilian colleges where upperclassmen practiced a similar form of fagging. This could help explain the continuance of this practice at their new school, West Point.

Fagging evolved into the practice of deviling at West Point before the Civil War years. The menial Plebe tasks included gathering firewood, delivering fire buckets of water to upperclass cadet rooms, and performing guard sentinel duties. Upperclass cadets expected Plebes to perform these tasks only during the summer encampment. The upperclass cadets equated these tasks to similar duties expected of lower enlisted soldiers that were performed for their senior ranking officers. The upperclass cadets would occasionally interfere with plebe guard sentinels in a good natured manner. Eventually, the upperclass cadets started

³Dillard, Walter S. "The United States Military Academy, 1865-1900: The Uncertain Years." Ph.D. Diss., University of Washington, 1972, p. 89.

⁴Nuwer, Hank. Broken Pledges: The Deadly Rite of Hazing. Atlanta, Georgia: Longstreet Press, 1990, p.286.

to bedevil the subordinate Plebes with various types of abusive practices.

Upperclass cadets intended these hazing practices to be humiliating and tormenting with the hope that the Plebes would become tougher and more disciplined. James H. Wilson, West Point class of 1860 and commander of the China Relief Expedition in 1901, described his Plebe hazing experiences as "good-natured, but at times rather rough play between old and new cadets which, so far as I could see, did no harm but much good to all...It sharpened our observation, stimulated our vigilance, and excited our curiosity."⁵ Practical jokes became more frequent and abusive and evolved into the more serious form of devilment, hazing. In 1844, a Plebe sentinel became frustrated with interference from a group of upperclass cadets while he tried to carry out his duties. He finally became quite emotional and tossed his musket, with bayonet unsheathed, into the group, resulting in a serious wound to Cadet Henry Heth.⁶ Fewer than two years later, upperclass cadets tied a string around Cadet Candidate Thomas Seabury's testicles while pouring turpentine on his buttocks.⁷

⁵Morrison, James L., Jr. "The Best School in the World": West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866. The Kent State University Press, 1986, p. 68.

⁶Ibid, p. 66.

⁷Ibid.

Upperclass cadets originally restricted hazing to summer encampment before the Civil War. The practice gradually carried over to the regular academic year. An interesting situation began in September when a second group of Plebes entered the Academy after the graduating class left in June. The older Plebes initiated the newer plebes with the same type of hazing they had received upon admission to the Academy. There seemed to be no end in sight for the practice of hazing.

In response to hazing incidents, the Academy developed a set of rules in Regulations, USCC. As early as 1839, Regulations, USCC maintained that cadets who harmed any other cadet would face possible dismissal.⁸ In 1870, Superintendent Charles Ruger requested the authority from the Secretary of War to convene courts-martial for cadets found hazing.⁹ Regardless of these punishments, hazing continued at the Academy.

During and immediately following the Civil War, several war veterans gained admission to West Point. These veteran cadets seemed to overlook the serious consequences of hazing for various reasons. First, many had personally witnessed horrendous battlefield injuries and felt that hazing violations were of minor significance compared to their

⁸Regulations, USCC, 1839, p.33-34.

⁹Ruger, Thomas H. Annual Report of the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1871, p.429.

battlefield experiences. Second, many felt that strict and immediate adherence to orders was of paramount concern. During the war, a hesitation to obey orders blindly of senior leaders could result in the failure of a mission. Third, these veteran cadets had witnessed the senior-subordinate relationships between officers and enlisted soldiers. These relationships were quite different from those practiced by professional soldiers in today's Army. In the years during and immediately following the Civil War, the rift between privates and noncommissioned officers was noticeable; the rift between privates and officers was even more significant. Officers and noncommissioned officers did not include privates in their social activities.¹⁰ These senior-subordinate differences apparently continued for veteran cadets at West Point. Such reasons further perpetuated the disregard for hazing infractions at the Academy.

In the 1870's, cadets developed an impervious attitude toward dismissals imposed for hazing. Cadets dismissed for hazing would appeal to their respective congressmen or senators for reinstatement to the Academy. These politicians would, in turn, pressure the Secretary of War and the Superintendent to reinstate their constituent into the Academy. These military authorities had no recourse but

¹⁰Pappas, George S. "More to the Point." Unpublished Manuscript, 1992, p. 519.

to bow to the civilian control of the military.¹¹ Hence, this resilience to dismissal for hazing partially contributed to the perpetuation of the practice. During this same time, Lieutenant Colonel Emory Upton allowed his task of rewriting infantry tactics manuals to interfere with his duties as Commandant of Cadets.¹² This delinquency of duties further allowed the practice of hazing to develop.

West Point was not the only educational institution affected by hazing in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Cadets followed newspaper coverage of American college harassment of freshmen in the form of "branding fraternity candidates, using electric shock treatment, shaving heads, and paddling."¹³

West Point's version of some of these practices included bracing (tucking the chin in as far as possible inside the dress grey coat), eagling (a form of side straddle hops performed until near exhaustion), sitting on a bayonet, swimming to Newburgh (straddling a foot locker and performing swimming strokes), dragging men out of bed, standing on one's head in a tub of water, throwing sentinels in a ditch, and fighting.¹⁴

Fighting matches among Plebes and upperclass cadets pervaded West Point throughout the latter half of the

¹¹Dillard, p. 95.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid, p. 92.

¹⁴Congressional Record, pp. 933-935.

nineteenth century. Upperclass cadets scheduled any Plebes who resisted hazing to report to Fort Putnam to fight out their differences. Plebes fought to uphold their honor. At the end of the duty day, they would stealthily report to Fort Putnam with a secondary, a fellow classmate required to continue a fight if the initial Plebe quit. These fights would normally last for two to three rounds of about two minutes each.¹⁵ Plebes were normally the underdogs in these contests because they had physically exerted themselves throughout the strenuous work day of summer encampment. Of forty known fights between 1897 and 1901, Plebes won only four.¹⁶

Incredibly, plebes contributed to the continuance of hazing. Cadets considered their treatment by the upperclass cadets as a rite of passage into the Academy. Upperclass cadets believed that they were responsible for initiating and disciplining the new cadets. When Plebes graduated to the next class, they felt responsible to carry on with the practice of hazing as a type of tradition. Additionally, many cadets believed enforcement of and compliance with strict disciplinary measures would unite the class into a group that was obstinately loyal to the institution. Finally, the fear of getting cut (i.e. the upperclass

¹⁵Fleming, Thomas J. West Point: The Men and Times of the United States Military Academy. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1969, p. 272.

¹⁶Ibid.

cadets' practice of silencing and ostracizing any cadet who reported hazing incidents) was evidently more powerful than the possible dismissal from the Academy.

After the Civil War, authorities at West Point initiated a new system in reaction to hazing violations. They required the upperclass cadets to pledge that they would not haze any Plebes. Superintendent Thomas Pitcher formally enforced this system of pledges in 1868 and again in 1869. All Plebes had to take an oath "proscribing interference, harassment, molestation, and injury." Additionally, the oath forbade Yearlings from forcing Plebes to perform any menial or personal services for them.¹⁷

Superintendent after Superintendent cited in their annual reports that hazing was under control.¹⁸ In response to these Superintendents' claims and after repeated outbursts of hazing, Congress decided to intervene.

Booz entered the Academy in June 1898. An upperclass cadet ordered Cadet Booz to fall out of ranks. Booz refused and was then challenged to appear at Fort Putnam to fight this upperclass cadet. Booz proved to be unfit for this match and was supposedly beaten badly. He apparently conceded the match, which violated the honor of his classmates. Cadet Booz soon became the object of cadet scorn and was subjected to increasing amounts of torment.

¹⁷Dillard, p. 92.

¹⁸Annual Reports of the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy, 1877-1898.

Due to increasing pressure, Booz resigned in September 1898. After returning home, he developed tuberculosis and died in December 1900.

The highly publicized hazing case of Cadet Oscar L. Booz in 1900 forced Congress to convene a select committee of the House of Representatives in January 1901. The Congressional Committee interviewed dozens of cadets and faculty of West Point. Their findings stated that Booz's forced ingestions of discrete amounts of tabasco sauce did not account for his developing tuberculosis. However, the committee strongly criticized the Academy's handling of the hazing problem and forced the authorities to initiate stricter forms of discipline.

General Douglas MacArthur, West Point class of 1903, testified before the Congressional Committee in 1901. Even this great soldier admitted that hazing was commonplace at the Academy while he attended. In fact, MacArthur testified that "the hazing I underwent was in no way more severe or more calculated to place me in a serious physical condition than has ordinarily taken place."¹⁹ Under intense scrutiny, he refused to divulge the names of the upperclass offenders to the Committee.²⁰

¹⁹Congressional Record, 56th Congress, 1901: HR 2768, p. 916.

²⁰MacArthur, Douglas. Reminiscences: General of the Army Douglas MacArthur. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964, p. 25..

During the Congressional Committee hearing, the presidents of all four classes at West Point presented the committee with the following letter:

Sir: Having become cognizant of the manner in which the system of hazing as practiced at the Military Academy is regarded by the people of the United States, we, the cadets of the United States Military Academy, while maintaining that we have pursued our system from the best motives, yet realizing that the deliberate judgment of the people should, in a country like ours, be above all other considerations, do now reaffirm our former action abolishing the exercising of the fourth class men and do further agree to discontinue hazing--the requiring of fourth class men to eat anything against their desire and the practice of calling out fourth class men by class action--and that we will not devise other similar practices to replace those abandoned.²¹

This voluntary motion by the cadets appeased the Committee. The Committee chairman, Congressman Charles Dick, stated that he was convinced that "the present cadets will live up to those resolutions."²²

Unfortunately, the United States Congress intervened in the disciplinary process at West Point because of the perceived inactivity by the USMA officer and cadet chains of command in dealing with hazing problems. Superintendent Albert Mills and Commandant of Cadets Otto Hein felt that the inclusion clause of dismissal action in response to future hazing allegations to Regulations, USCC extinguished

²¹Fleming, Thomas J. West Point: The Men and Times of the United States Military Academy. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1969, p. 274.

²²Ibid, p. 275.

the practice of hazing. Lieutenant Colonel Hein reported in the Superintendent's Annual Report of 1900,

This pernicious practice, with its tendencies to develop all that is unsoldierly, and nothing that is manly, has, in its more injurious forms, been voluntarily abandoned by cadets generally; and be it said to their credit, is now a custom more honored in the breach than in the observance.²³

Even though these actions severely curtailed hazing practices, future events would prove that the new additions to Regulations, USCC were only partially effective. Evolution and improvement of senior-subordinate relations seemed to be two ways to solve the hazing problem. Increased awareness and recognition by congressmen as to the severity of hazing also seemed to taper off future occurrences. Finally, the cadets' understanding that neither civilian nor military authorities would tolerate hazing anymore led to its abatement.

²³Annual Report of the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy, 1900. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900, p. 28.

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