

From Disorder to Discipline:  
The Origins of the Thayer Disciplinary System

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Colonel Sylvanus Thayer maintains constant vigilance over the Corps of Cadets from his post at the northwest corner of West Point's Plain. His monument bears the title "Father of the Military Academy," which is a tribute to Colonel Thayer's successful efforts to place the Military Academy upon a solid foundation.

The nineteen years preceding his Superintendency were marked by uncertainty and a lack of direction at West Point. These conditions were a result of both the lack of a clear mission from Congress and a lack of vision on the part of the Academy's leadership. Differences in opinion existed over whether the institution should be primarily a Military Academy or a National Scientific University.<sup>1</sup> The conflict brought about by the proponents of these competing philosophies detracted from any consistent purpose until Colonel Thayer was appointed Superintendent in July 1817.

Colonel Thayer instituted a series of reforms which enabled the Military Academy to pursue both callings. A number of his academic reforms, such as small class size, sectioning by ability, and order of merit, still exist to varying degrees today. These reforms, known as the "Thayer System," are the subject of extensive historical study.

Much less attention is devoted to Thayer's efforts to instill discipline within the Corps of Cadets, though many of his disciplinary reforms have remained intact. In a letter to the Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, Colonel Thayer wrote:

The necessity which all military experience has so fully demonstrated of a strict adherence to the rules of Discipline and Subordination in an Army, . . . it must be obvious to everyone 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 Theatre of Military Life.<sup>2</sup>

The result of this belief was the "Thayer Disciplinary System." This system was characterized by "the institution of an authority based upon specific rules of conduct and organization."<sup>3</sup> Thayer's discipline was strict and required complete subordination to authority and the regulations.<sup>4</sup> Within the first year Thayer had established a rigid order at the Military Academy and Secretary of War Calhoun wrote: "It affords me pleasure to witness the progress of the institution under your superintendence and to express to you my approbation of the measures you have adopted to promote its improvement."<sup>5</sup>

It is remarkable that Thayer, with only nine years of active service, was capable of the conception and successful implementation of such a comprehensive and durable system. A fuller understanding of the origins and rationale for this system may be gained in the study of Thayer's formative years. One is led to the conclusion that Thayer's

philosophy of discipline was forged in the Puritan environment in which he was brought up, and hardened by the lessons of the indiscipline and poor leadership which he witnessed in the War of 1812. The disorder which prevailed at the Military Academy until 1817 so appalled Thayer, that his first priority as the Superintendent became the implementation of a rigid system of discipline.

The first seventeen years of Sylvanus Thayer's life were marked by his adherence to Puritan ideals, especially hard work and subordination to the authority of his elders. Thayer was born in 1785, the fifth of seven children, into a family in which Puritan values served as the foundation for life. The birth of the Thayers' seventh child, when Sylvanus was nine, made it difficult for Nathaniel Thayer, Sylvanus' father, to house and feed his family. Nathaniel sent Sylvanus to live with his brother-in-law, Azariah Faxon. It was Faxon's belief that "sturdy character can only be forged into final shape by the blows of obstacles, [and] by sharp and persistent struggle."<sup>6</sup> Faxon required Thayer to devote his full efforts to school and to various jobs.

John Faxon, another of Thayer's uncles, moved to Azariah's home and developed an interest in Sylvanus. He had graduated from Brown University and was an outstanding scholar. His interactions with Sylvanus sparked an interest in academic pursuits and Thayer's vigorous intellect began to assert itself. Thayer became proficient in basic

mathematics and Latin grammar and by age sixteen was teaching in the local school, continuing his own education, and working at his uncle's store.

It was during this time that he developed a friendship with Brigadier General Benjamin Pierce, a veteran of the Revolutionary War. Pierce was an avid student of Napoleon's campaigns and Thayer emulated this interest. Thayer read whatever he could find regarding the campaigns and leadership of Napoleon.<sup>7</sup>

Thayer returned to his father's home in June 1802 to help with the farm.<sup>8</sup> During this summer, in consultation with his father, Sylvanus decided to further his education by attending Dartmouth College. He entered Dartmouth in 1803 and graduated in 1807 as the class valedictorian.<sup>9</sup> George Ticknor, Thayer's closest friend at Dartmouth and throughout his life, relates that Thayer's "tastes were military" and that he was the only student to subscribe to the National Intelligencer, which he did in order to read of Napoleon's campaigns.<sup>10</sup>

Thayer did not remain at Dartmouth long enough to deliver the valedictory address since General Pierce had secured a warrant for Thayer's admittance to the United States Military Academy. Thayer arrived at West Point in March 1807 to find a small Corps, without a definite system of instruction or control, living a bare existence. Colonel Jonathon Williams, the first Superintendent, characterized the Military Academy during this time as a

"foundling, barely existing among the mountains and nurtured from a distance out of site, and almost unknown to its legitimate parents."<sup>11</sup> The Academy had forty-six cadets and four faculty members.<sup>12</sup> It appears that Thayer's most significant activity at the Academy was his membership in the United States Military Philosophical Society. His name appears on the rolls taken at almost every meeting. Much of the discussion at the meetings concerned the construction of coastal fortifications, in which Thayer would later play an important role.<sup>13</sup> Thayer received his commission as a Second Lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers in February 1808 after less than a year as a cadet. He was ordered to report for duty to survey the harbor defenses in New England. His superior was Major Joseph Swift, the Military Academy's first graduate. Thayer cultivated a close professional relationship with Swift that would endure until Swift's death. The following spring, Thayer was ordered to duty at West Point to serve as a junior instructor.<sup>14</sup>

The War of 1812 provided an opportunity for the officer corps to employ their professional skills. Captain Thayer was sent from West Point to the Northern Army at Plattsburg, New York, where he was assigned as Major General Henry Dearborn's "commissary of ordnance" or logistics officer. His primary task was to equip Dearborn's Army which was a difficult task, especially in the northern wilderness.<sup>15</sup>

During this time Thayer witnessed two events which impressed upon him the inadequacy of the Army's leadership,

discipline, and fighting capabilities. In October 1812, Dearborn's force moved north to invade Canada. Major General Stephen Van Rensselaer, an officer of the New York militia and one of Dearborn's subordinate commanders, attacked at Queenstown Heights, Canada, and achieved initial success. The British counterattacked, and Van Rensselaer ordered a regular army regiment, waiting on the American side of the border, to assist his forces. The regulars refused to comply with the orders of a militia officer and watched as Van Rensselaer's force was destroyed by the British.<sup>16</sup>

In November another of Dearborn's forces, under the command of Colonel Zebulon Pike, attacked and seized a Canadian strongpoint. As they secured their position, another New York militia force approached the strongpoint. Pike's soldiers mistook them for enemy soldiers and opened fire. In the confusion that ensued, the Canadian force counterattacked and retook the strongpoint. This failure resulted in Dearborn's decision to turn back from his invasion of Canada and return to Plattsburg.<sup>17</sup> The lack of discipline and trained leadership was painfully apparent to Thayer in both of these actions.

With the renewal of fighting in the spring of 1813 Thayer was appointed aide-de-camp to Major General Wade Hampton and was able to continue his study of inept leadership. Joseph Swift was appointed as Hampton's Chief Engineer and commented upon his arrival at Hampton's

headquarters at Plattsburg, " . . . everything [was] in a most disgraceful and deplorable condition; no plan of campaign studied or definitely fixed; the enemy's position unknown."<sup>18</sup> In his memoirs, Swift noted that "British officers acknowledge our dauntless courage, but observed we were undisciplined and fought without order, and indeed scenes of that day justify these observations."<sup>19</sup> As the aide, Thayer carried orders to subordinate commanders and witnessed a campaign in which incidents of cowardice and desertion in the face of the enemy were prevalent. The Northern Army again failed in its attempt to invade Canada and retired to Plattsburg for the winter.

In November 1813, Thayer received orders assigning him to Brigadier General Joseph Swift's headquarters in New York City. Swift had been promoted and appointed the Army's Chief of Engineers. He sent Thayer to Norfolk, Virginia where Thayer was to supervise the construction of Norfolk's harbor defenses until the end of the war.<sup>20</sup>

At twenty-eight, Thayer had accumulated a wealth of experience in a variety of fields. He had graduated from Dartmouth and had completed the course of study at West Point in less than a year. His practical experience included work on harbor defenses and three years as an instructor at the Military Academy. The most significant experience during these years seems to have been his service in the War of 1812 with the Northern Army. The lack of leadership and discipline within the Army contributed to its

disgraceful performance and made a significant impression upon Thayer.

Thayer, breveted a Major for his meritorious service during the war, requested permission to travel to Europe in order to study French military establishments in the Army of Napoleon. General Swift, who was also the Superintendent of the Military Academy, was presiding over the expansion of West Point and directed Thayer to obtain instruments and books as he saw fit.<sup>21</sup> Thayer returned from France in May 1817 with detailed knowledge of French instructional methods and manuals.

During Thayer's stay in Europe, Captain Alden Partridge had become the Superintendent of the Military Academy. Two diametrically-opposed views of Partridge's Superintendency exist. Major General George Cullum, one of Partridge's detractors, recounted in his biographical history of West Point, that from 1812 to 1817 the required course of study was largely ignored by Partridge in favor of Infantry and Artillery drill, which Partridge is said to have loved.<sup>22</sup> He alleged that Partridge's methods of punishment were cruel and included marching with a placard on one's back, straddling a cannon, and confinement to a basement known as the "black hole."<sup>23</sup>

Since Partridge had become Superintendent, there had been a continuous struggle over how best to educate future officers. Professor Jared Mansfield, in particular, felt that academics continually suffered at the expense of drills

and frequently wrote to the President and Secretary of War concerning the state of the Academy under Partridge. Partridge felt that the professors had formed a conspiracy intended to oust him and turn the Academy into a university.<sup>24</sup>

The notoriety of this controversy led to a board of inquiry into the allegations against Partridge and ultimately his court-martial. In his testimony, Partridge contended that punishments consisted only of public reprimands, confinement to rooms or limits, extra guard duty, probation, or suspension. Partridge was cleared of all charges and in the closing statement, the board commented that Partridge was "solicitous about the health, morale, and improvement of the cadets."<sup>25</sup>

The results of the court-martial did not eliminate the dispute between Partridge and the professors. Partridge felt that he had been vindicated and continued to exercise his power in a manner that offended the professors. President James Madison expressed his opinion to the Secretary of War that Partridge might be detailed somewhere other than West Point. General Swift, the Chief of Engineers, informed the Secretary of War that no one else in the Corps of Engineers would accept an appointment as Superintendent.<sup>26</sup> The following summer President James Monroe responded to the professors' continued correspondence by scheduling a visit to West Point. During this visit he determined that Partridge should be replaced and court-

martialed for his harsh treatment of the faculty.<sup>27</sup>

Partridge's relief had little to do with competence as he was a good instructor and was often commended for the zeal with which he approached his duties. The Secretary of War commented that "it was because his aspect was uncouth, a want of what is called genteel carriage, and awkwardness of manner that gave a repulsive first impression."<sup>28</sup>

On 28 July 1817, Brevet Major Sylvanus Thayer became the Superintendent of the Military Academy. The situation that he inherited was chaotic. The professors, two of whom had been placed under arrest by Partridge, immediately descended upon Thayer in order to list their grievances and detail the changes that they believed were necessary.<sup>29</sup> Thayer assured the professors that academic endeavors were of primary importance and worked with them to institute the reforms he had envisioned. In return he required that each professor submit a description of their courses as well as a weekly report of the academic status of each cadet.<sup>30</sup>

When Thayer arrived, the cadets were on summer leave and had not been told when to return. One of his first official acts was to write the Secretary of War and request that he issue an order for the cadets to return on 31 August.<sup>31</sup> Upon the return of the Corps it was apparent to Thayer that there were many cadets who were not physically or mentally capable of meeting the standards for commissioning. Thayer wrote, "I have dismissed several cadets, suspended others, and shall persevere until I

produce that state of Military Discipline which is indispensable in an institution of this nature as in a regular army."<sup>32</sup>

Partridge's administration had been characterized by "favoritism on the one hand and injustice on the other."<sup>33</sup> Thayer developed a code of behavior which ruled every aspect of the cadet's life. He forbade drinking, gambling, smoking, and cooking and cadets could take leave only once during the four years.<sup>34</sup> He also stopped the practice of departing post indiscriminately without permission.<sup>35</sup>

Thayer deplored favoritism and his discipline was administered justly and without fail. Precision, neatness, and punctuality were Thayer's hallmarks and he expected the same of his cadets. Some argued that West Point "remade young Americans in the image of Thayer himself."<sup>36</sup> Thayer chose to remain aloof from the cadets and was viewed by the Corps as tyrannical.<sup>37</sup>

Thayer set up a system of giving demerits for each infraction of the regulations. His intent was to provide some type of penalty for minor infractions as well as to have a system by which he could rate cadets in their conduct.<sup>38</sup> Violations were divided into seven categories based upon seriousness of offense and a cadet could be awarded from one to ten demerits. Those who exceeded the maximum number of demerits were given tours of guard duty. That was similar to one of Partridge's sanctions; however, the fact that guards who had to walk normal tours with those

who were being punished caused resentment on the part of the regular guards. As a result, Thayer devised the concept of additional tours which were to be walked during a cadet's limited free time. Cadets who exceeded two hundred demerits in a year were subject to dismissal.<sup>39</sup>

The first challenge to Thayer's authority occurred at the end of his first month as the Superintendent. Partridge was distraught at his relief and returned in late August, contrary to Swift's specific orders, to reclaim the quarters he had vacated. Thayer had assigned these quarters to another professor and Thayer refused to evict the current occupant. Citing the fact that he was the senior engineer officer present, Partridge told Thayer that he was relieving him of command of the Academy. According to Professor Jared Mansfield, the cadets fully supported Partridge. A spirit of insubordination was prevalent among the cadets and they were pleased to be relieved of Thayer's bonds. They had met Partridge at the landing and had accompanied him to the Plain where a larger group of cadets began to cheer.<sup>40</sup> Thayer, uncertain of Partridge's intentions or ability to influence the cadets, departed West Point for New York City to report the events to General Swift.<sup>41</sup> The cadets' relief was short lived, as General Swift's aide accompanied Thayer on his return to West Point with orders for Partridge's arrest. Thayer's intention had been to instill in the cadets a sense of subordination to authority. The cadets' disregard for his authority in this situation could only

have served to strengthen his resolve to bring strict discipline to the Corps.

One of Thayer's major reforms was the appointment of a commandant, who was to be the instructor of tactics and soldierly discipline. Captain John Bliss was the first to exercise the duties of this position and it fell to him to enforce Thayer's regulations.<sup>42</sup> The record of demerits for 1818 and 1819 provides some insight into the high standards of conduct expected by Thayer. Cadets were awarded demerits for having muskets out of order, being absent from roll call; church, or inspection; disobedience of orders, poor police, bed not made, being disorderly in ranks, and most notably, having lights burning after taps.<sup>43</sup>

The cadets did not care for Bliss as they disliked his stern manner and discipline.<sup>44</sup> He exhibited erratic behavior to include throwing stones at the cadets, pushing cadets off railings, and on one occasion he grabbed, shook, jerked, and publicly damned a cadet who was not quick enough to obey an order. The cadet and four companions formed a committee which they claimed represented the feelings of 160 others. They drafted a complaint against Bliss and presented it to Thayer. Thayer was astonished that cadets would presume to speak against a superior officer and dismissed them with the admonition that they had no right to form a committee. That evening he ordered them to leave post pending an official inquiry into their conduct.<sup>45</sup>

Political connections and persistent efforts to bring the matter to the attention of the Secretary of War and the President resulted in an inquiry. The Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, informed Thayer that "Bliss can not control his temper and is to be relieved."<sup>46</sup>

The cadets were to be tried for insubordination; however, the court determined that it had no jurisdiction over cadets and the cadets were reinstated. A significant result of the affair was that the United States Attorney General declared cadets to be subject to martial law and able to be punished under the same. This gave Thayer the authority that he needed to support his disciplinary system.<sup>47</sup>

With the conclusion of the Bliss affair, Thayer was able to devote his attention to more pressing matters. He was astonished at this cabal of cadets which he felt grew out of a resentment to his rigid discipline. Cadets compared his disciplinary boards to the inquisition.<sup>48</sup> Cadets who had served under Partridge continued to resist Thayer's efforts at subordination. As these cadets graduated, cadets' opinion of Colonel Thayer became increasingly positive. Graduates of the late 1820s and early 1830s spoke of Thayer in glowing terms and it was this group, especially George Cullum, who contributed to Thayer's glorification as the "Father of the Military Academy." Thayer had brought the Academy through a difficult period and had succeeded in producing a Spartan environment in

which cadets were subordinated to a strict and rigid system of discipline.

There is merit to the argument that West Point molded men in Thayer's form. It was Thayer who possessed the intellectual abilities and force of character which were able to gain the necessary support from his superiors and his faculty for his reforms. The disciplinary system was enacted exactly as he had envisioned it would be, and basic to this system was Thayer's belief that subordination to authority be unquestioned. This is a belief that developed throughout Thayer's first twenty-nine years. The study of Thayer's formative years; his childhood and adolescence, his early experiences at the Academy, and his service in the War of 1812; yield an insight into the principles upon which his disciplinary system was founded.

Thayer's Puritan upbringing developed his belief in the importance of living by a code of hard work and rigid discipline. His experience in the War of 1812 gave ample evidence of the indiscipline within the Army and the Army's failure in preparing its leaders for War. Thayer's early experiences at the Academy had convinced him that its course was aimless and that it failed to instill discipline within its cadets. Thayer arrived with a vision for the changes which he felt were necessary if the Academy were to succeed in producing military professionals. The implementation of a rigid system of discipline was an instrumental component of his vision.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Larry R. Donnithorne, "The Founding of West Point: Seeking the National Purposes in the First Federal Initiative in Higher Education" unpublished paper, United States Military Academy, n. d., 26-27. The author has analyzed the institution's "founding legislation" and proposes that there are nine possible purposes of the Academy embodied in this legislation. The debate over the Academy's primary purpose continued at the national level long after its founding and is even questioned today. The Academy's early professors envisioned West Point as a university, while Partridge saw it primarily as a military academy.

<sup>2</sup>Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to Secretary of War, John C. Calhoun, 28 June 1818, contained in Cindy Adams, ed., The West Point Thayer Papers, 1808-1872 (West Point: The Association of Graduates, 1965) n. pag. There is no pagination in this collection. The letters are arranged chronologically.

<sup>3</sup>Edgar Denton III, "The Formative Years of the United States Military Academy, 1775-1833," diss., Syracuse U, 1964, 181.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen E. Ambrose, Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966) 67.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Ernest Dupuy, Where They Have Trod (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1940) 144.

<sup>6</sup>Stacey B. Southworth, "Address delivered to the Officers of the United States Military Academy at West Point, NY, December 14, 1922," Assembly Jan. 1957: 3.

<sup>7</sup>Dupuy 13-14.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. 14.

<sup>9</sup>Forman 32.

<sup>10</sup>Edward C. Boynton, History of West Point, and Its Military Importance During the American Revolution (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1863) 196.

<sup>11</sup>Dupuy 18.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. 21-22.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. 31-33.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. 43-46.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. 50.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. 51.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid. 50.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. 53-54.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid. 55.

<sup>20</sup>Joseph G. Swift, The Memoirs of Joseph Gardner Swift, USA (New York: Privately Printed, 1890) 121.

<sup>21</sup>Letter, Joseph Swift to Sylvanus Thayer, 30 March 1815, contained in Adams.

<sup>22</sup>George W. Cullum, 9 Vols. Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy (West Point, The Association of Graduates, 1863) 3: 598.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid. 610.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. 602.

<sup>25</sup>Denton 137.

<sup>26</sup>Swift 141.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. 157.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid. 170.

<sup>29</sup>Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to George Graham, 4 August 1817, contained in Adams.

<sup>30</sup>Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to Academic Staff, August 1817, contained in Adams.

<sup>31</sup>Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to George Graham, 4 August 1817, contained in Adams.

<sup>32</sup>Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to Joseph Moulton, 17 October 1817, contained in Adams.

<sup>33</sup>Dupuy 104.

<sup>34</sup>Ambrose 71.

<sup>35</sup>Dupuy 139.

<sup>36</sup>Joseph Ellis and Robert Moore, School For Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) 33.

<sup>37</sup>Denton 179.

<sup>38</sup>Theodore Crackel, excerpt from an untitled manuscript distributed to Captain John Moore, n. d., n. pag.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Letter, Professor Jared Mansfield to John O'Conner, 3 September 1817, contained in Adams.

<sup>41</sup>Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to George Graham, 30 August 1817, contained in Adams.

<sup>42</sup>William H. Baumer, West Point: Moulder of Men (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1942) 166.

<sup>43</sup>Record of Demerits, HQ USCC, 1818-1819, n. pag.

<sup>44</sup>Letter, Sylvanus Thayer to Walker K. Armistead, 30 November 1818, contained in Adams.

<sup>45</sup>"An Expose of Facts, Concerning Recent Transactions, Relating to the Corps of Cadets of the United States Military Academy, at West Point, New York." (Newburgh: Uriaiah C. Lewis, 1819) 13-20.

<sup>46</sup>Letter, John C. Calhoun to Sylvanus Thayer, 15 January 1819, contained in Adams.

<sup>47</sup>Baumer 166.

<sup>48</sup>Forman 40.

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