

**A ROLE WITHOUT FOCUS:**  
**Moral development at the United States Military Academy**  
**through 1910.**

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The role of religion and ethics training at the United States Military Academy has been the topic of much discussion and debate. The Academy introduced moral philosophy to the cadet curriculum in 1816 when regulations prescribed "a course of ethics [that] shall include natural and political law."<sup>1</sup> Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer mandated chapel attendance by regulation in 1818.<sup>2</sup> What followed was a century and a half of controversy that left cadets and graduates with a full spectrum of opinions about the purpose for the requirements to take courses in ethics and compulsory chapel attendance as a part of their training at West Point. As the Military Academy approaches its Bicentennial celebration with the purpose of "developing leaders of character for the nation," it is relevant to review the evolution of religion and religious training in the first century of the Academy. What then was the role of religion and how was it reflected at the Academy and received by the cadets at West Point from its formation until 1910?

By 1816 religion achieved a role at the United States Military Academy in the development of cadets. It was not until 1910 that the Academy reflected that role in three distinct ways; compulsory chapel attendance, chaplains without secular duties, and the completion of a new Cadet Chapel. While there are notable exceptions, cadets did not perceive moral development as an integral part of their training at the Academy.

The first ten years in the life of the Military Academy showed West Point to be less than an outstanding educational institution. There were no entrance examinations, the curriculum was elementary, and only seventy-one men graduated in that time.<sup>3</sup> When the Superintendent, Major Jonathan Williams, resigned in 1812, attention focused on West Point. His resignation was a clear signal that the Academy was in trouble. Williams had earlier declared: "the military academy as it now stands is a foundling, barely existing among the mountains and mustered at a distance out of sight, and almost unknown to its legitimate parents."<sup>4</sup> While he attempted to change the situation, he felt the obstacles insurmountable and tendered his resignation.

William's resignation partially accomplished what he had been unable to, for on 29 April 1812, Congress passed legislation in an attempt to correct the problems. The Act of 1812 set admission requirements; raised the number of authorized cadets to 250; augmented the faculty and staff; established regulations for discipline; and specified that cadets were to be recognized as a part of the United States Army.<sup>5</sup> While not specified in the act, Congress understood that the Superintendent would appoint a chaplain to the staff and faculty.<sup>6</sup>

The Superintendent, Captain Joseph Swift, felt that a permanent chaplain could help overcome the conditions described by one of the First Class cadets when he recorded,

"All order and regulation, either moral or religious, gave way to idleness, dissipation and irreligion."<sup>7</sup> Swift selected a friend, Adam Empie, an Episcopalian, to be the first chaplain. He felt that "the service of that church was... the most appropriate to the discipline of a military academy."<sup>8</sup> Empie received additional duties as "acting Professor of Geography, History, and Ethics."<sup>9</sup> Apparently Swift did not feel that the chaplain would be fully utilized without additional duties and foresaw no potential problems with this arrangement.

By requiring the First Classmen to take a course in moral philosophy, West Point aligned itself with prestigious trend-setting institutions like Yale and Princeton that had required ethical instruction for several years. But Yale "was in a most ungodly state...the college church was almost extinct...the students were skeptical, and rowdies were plenty, and Princeton, which only a generation before had been noted for its evangelical fervor, had less than 10 students who professed to be Christian."<sup>10</sup> There was a major difference between the method of ethical education at West Point and these other institutions. At the Military Academy, the chaplain was responsible for ethical instruction, whereas at the other schools, the college president instructed the course. The break from this precedent legitimized the position of a full-time chaplain at West Point. The apparent ineffectiveness at the other

institutions may have also helped influence Thayer's decision.

The dual-hatted role of the chaplain brought competing demands. The roles of the chaplains required them to be teachers, preachers, and enforcers of regulations. Even if the chaplain could handle these many and diverse roles, the cadets saw them more in the role of disciplinarian than as sources of help in time of need, making their position difficult at best.

The chaplain's duties included saying prayers in the morning at roll call and at the end of the day following a parade when the cadets were "drawn up in an open square."<sup>11</sup> While attendance at church services was not yet mandatory, most students and staff attended. The Academy initially held chapel services in the old wooden academy, moved them to the Mess Hall, and in 1815, to a room in the new stone building housing the Academy.<sup>12</sup>

The Congressional Act of 14 April 1818 disbanded the Army Chaplaincy while it declared "that there shall be...one chaplain [in the regular army], stationed at the Military Academy at West Point, who shall also be professor of geography, history, and ethics, with the pay and emoluments allowed the professor of mathematics...."<sup>13</sup> The additional duties had become the law. Superintendent Colonel Sylvanus Thayer began compulsory chapel attendance with USMA Order 21, issued 21 September 1818.<sup>14</sup> The chapel service was

Protestant; he made no provision for either Catholic or Jewish services.

The requirement for chapel attendance was not without precedent. Article 2 of the Articles of War dated 10 April 1806, and signed by Thomas Jefferson, included the phrase that it was "earnestly recommended (that members of the armed forces) attend divine service." This Article of War was repeated through the Revised Army Regulations of 1861.<sup>15</sup> But mandatory attendance and the lack of services for Catholics and Jews fueled controversy, and the chaplain became the object of cadet discontent.<sup>16</sup>

The first two Academy chaplains departed under less than ideal conditions. Empie resigned when Thayer replaced Partridge as Superintendent. He felt a loyalty to Partridge and empathized with his dismissal.<sup>17</sup> Thomas Picton resigned at the recommendation of the Board of Visitors. They based their recommendation on his poor sermons.<sup>18</sup>

The search for the third chaplain ended with the assignment of twenty-five-year-old Charles McIlvaine. McIlvaine was anxious about his own youth. John C. Calhoun, then Secretary of War, answered, "that he preferred a young man who would grow with the place, rather than one whose habits of mind were so fixed with age that they could not be molded."<sup>19</sup>

Calhoun warned McIlvaine of conditions that he was likely to encounter at West Point: "that I should find not only no religious sympathy or fellowship in the institution,

but a widespread infidelity among officers and cadets."<sup>20</sup>  
Chaplain Thomas Picton's comments in 1825 attest to the  
chaplains' frustration:

Only on Saturday afternoon was any cadet allowed to visit an officer, or anybody else out of the barracks, without special permission from the Superintendent: and such was the feeling and prevalent sentiment about coming to see me, lest it should indicate something toward religion, that for a whole year I cannot remember that a single cadet ever visited me other than in the chapel or in the classroom.<sup>21</sup>

On six different occasions, the Board of Visitors recommended that the chaplain be released from his teaching duties, but the issue never came to a final vote in the U.S. Senate.<sup>22</sup> The Board of Visitors realized the difficulty of finding a chaplain with the ability to function well in all areas and to meet the competing demands that made the work still harder. Chaplain Jasper Adams protested in 1840 that the duties of the Professor of Ethics "frustrated the Object of Congress in providing for a chaplain."<sup>23</sup>

The construction of religious facilities at West Point underscored the problems and frustrations experienced by the chaplains. Superintendent Swift drew up a plan dated 8 December 1814 for a Cadet Chapel at West Point with a seating capacity of 400.<sup>24</sup> The Academy did not submit its official proposal for the Chapel for approval until 29 July 1833, when Brigadier General Charles Gratiot, Chief Engineer of the United States received a written description calling for a seating capacity of 600 persons and at an estimated

cost of \$25,897.87.<sup>25</sup> However, the building did not stand erected until 1837. There was no reason given for the delay. Since there were buildings erected during this time, money does not seem to have been the major issue.

Consistent with the problem of multiple and conflicting duties assigned to the chaplain, the lack of priority given to building a chapel reinforced the fact that religion and ethical training received less emphasis than academics in the training of cadets.

The completed Chapel showed that it had more than a strictly religious message. The design of the Chapel was unique and provided insight into the role of religion in the evolution of the Academy. It showed that architecture was an important combination of science and art--a symbol of classical and national ideals. It showed the symbolism of the ancient world of Greece, "The country whose greatness came through her democratic city states,"<sup>26</sup> and Rome, "The mother of republics as of empires."<sup>27</sup> "The classic world thus became, first, an inspiration; second, a refuge; and third, a sort of marvelous vision of a Golden Age."<sup>28</sup>

The chapel has a very distinctly military flavor. Above the alter is the mural "Peace and War." Along the wall there are tablets bearing the name, rank, and dates of birth and death of general officers of the Revolutionary War, with the exception of Benedict Arnold, who has only his rank and date of birth. The fact that Arnold's treason to the country resulted in the removal of his name from the

chapel testifies to the integration of the state with religion and religious training. The chapel also contains memorials to heroes of the War of 1812 and the Mexican War.

The 1850s witnessed the start of an invigorating period when ethics instruction flourished at the Military Academy. When the curriculum expanded to five years, the study of ethics was covered in three of those years. The chaplains taught natural and experimental philosophy three hours daily to Third Class cadets, moral science, history of philosophy, logic, and conduct for three hours every other day to Second Class cadets, and law, history, and conduct for two hours every other day to First Class cadets.<sup>29</sup> When the curriculum returned to four years in 1861, the program was sharply curtailed, further emphasizing the fact that the study of humanities was subordinated to math and engineering. In 1867, all instruction in the subjects of geography, history and ethics was officially discontinued, and the department itself was abolished, only to be re-established in 1877 when Chaplain Forsyth began a series of lectures to Fourth Classmen. This next period of ethics instruction would last less than twenty years.<sup>30</sup>

On 18 February 1896, an Act of Congress permanently removed the chaplain from his academic post.<sup>31</sup> He could now attend fully to the duties of chaplain without the often conflicting demands made of him as an instructor in a classroom. This same act dissolved the Department of Geography, History, and Ethics. In the matter of ethics,

the Academic Board reasoned that "the influences, both social and official, under which the training of cadets is carried on, are such as to minimize the necessity of formal instruction in this subject from textbooks...."<sup>32</sup>

This law did not solve all of the problems for the chaplains. Brigadier General (R) Gilbert A. Youngberg, Class of 1900, wrote a letter to his classmates for their fiftieth reunion. He addressed his classmates as those who "'by order' (supported (?) not too often by personal inclination), attended chapel services every Sunday for four years...."<sup>33</sup> He spoke of the memory of "a former Chaplain named Postlewaite [who] apparently lingered as a tender memory in the minds of the upperclassmen, i.e., tender like a sore thumb."<sup>34</sup> He referred to the Chapel services as "Possies," and he recalled announcing, as a "gunner" at the table, "So many Possies 'till June, Sir."<sup>35</sup> With this attitude prevalent among cadets at the Academy, the chaplain's job was still not easy.

In a letter to the Army-Navy Journal, a cadet acknowledged the "refining influence" of chapel attendance but protested that it was "wrong, nevertheless, to force a man to go." In the same letter he indicated that the faculty's indifference toward divine worship set a poor example for the cadets. He claimed that there were enough officers to fill the chapel, but that "none ever go except one aged professor and a lieutenant."<sup>36</sup>

At some point the Academy allowed Roman Catholics to attend mass in Highland Falls and separate Jewish Chapel Services. In 1898 Congress passed a bill authorizing any faith group who could show a need to build a place of worship on West Point grounds. In 1900 the Archdiocese of New York constructed Most Holy Trinity Catholic Chapel at West Point for Roman Catholics using private funding. The Archdiocese of New York appointed and supported the priests ministering at the Chapel. The Archdiocese did not officially attach their priests to the Military Academy.<sup>37</sup>

The Academy's upcoming Centennial and an increase in the size of the Corps of Cadets to 481 caused the Board of Visitors in 1900 to report that "additions and enlargements of buildings are regarded as absolutely imperative for the efficiency and discipline of the Academy and the well-being of cadets."<sup>38</sup> Among the specific recommendations was the enlargement of the cadet chapel to a capacity of 1,200 to 1,500. In 1901 the report recommended the "complete tearing down and a new building up" of the Academy.<sup>39</sup>

Congress allocated seven million dollars to the reconstruction of West Point by an Act of Congress on 28 June 1902.<sup>40</sup> The Superintendent invited ten architects to submit detailed plans for the several buildings involved. In 1903 a board of officers and architects chose the Gothic design of Cram, Goodhue, and Ferguson.<sup>41</sup>

The original prospectus called for the chapel to be built at Trophy Point. The architects disagreed and

recommended that it be built on the hill overlooking the Plain. They gave three reasons for this location. "First, in order to remove the Chapel from the immediate vicinity of the Academic Buildings; second, to give it a location where its tower would lift impressively above the other structures [for architectural effect]; and third, to give it a position convenient of access [to everyone on post]."42 The architects did not want to use Trophy Point because, among other things, "it seemed to give the building too great prominence for a military institution."43

While there is a contradiction between the Chapel "having too great prominence" [if it is located on the Plain], and having the tower "lift impressively above the other structures," at its current location, the board of officers followed the recommendation and laid the cornerstone on 5 April 1909. The Corps of Cadets dedicated the Chapel on 12 June 1910. Again, but with a different architectural style, the Cadet Chapel showed the mixing of the martial with the godly.

The chapel was a physical indication that religion was playing an increasingly important role at West Point. "Just as the mediaeval Gothic cathedral is a material representation of the search for realism of the time, so the Cadet Chapel is a realistic interpretation of religion's role at West Point."44 Many of the exterior embellishments speak to the military character of the structure. Above the center door is a sword embedded in a cross. The Latin

inscription on the great doors can be translated: "O God, who dost crush out war and by Thy powerful defense dost defeat the assailants of them that trust in Thee, come to the help of Thy servants who implore Thy mercy."<sup>45</sup> King Arthur's castle, crusaders, and bowman appear in the carvings. Saint George is shown battling the dragon. The west face of the tower has a soldier carrying books, a soldier with a bucket and a brush, a soldier kneeling, and others reading, playing a cello, and with a drum.

The interior has battle flags hanging above the arches and etched signatures of former superintendents who have attended the services. Above the altar is the figure of Saint Michael killing the demon. The coats of arms of the Military Academy and the United States are also present with the colors of the United States and the Corps of Cadets. The stained glass windows are all associated with the Military Academy. They fall into three natural groupings: a memorial to graduates of the Military Academy, the gifts of various classes, and a memorial to the alumni who died in World War I.<sup>46</sup> The prominent location of the structure, the military Gothic architecture, and the iconography all speak to the mission of the Academy and show the increasing role of religion at the Academy.

The role of religion and religious training during the first century of the life of the United States Military Academy was not characterized by a clear purpose. The chaplain was not a permanently assigned position until 1812.

From then until 1896 he was assigned duties as the Professor of Geography, History, and Ethics. The additional secular duties made it difficult to find a chaplain qualified to hold the position. The chaplain's responsibilities as an instructor caused cadets to perceive even the qualified chaplains more as an enforcer of regulations than as a source of help in time of need. The chaplain could not attend to his primary mission until Congress relieved him of secular duties.

The absence of initial emphasis on providing a chapel for worship also underscores the lack of prominence given to the religious training of cadets. It took thirty-five years to correct this deficiency, but when the Cadet Chapel was completed it showed a clear link between the martial and the godly and was a visible indication of the increased prominence of religion in developing cadets at the Academy. The new Cadet Chapel, completed in 1910, further attests to this fact.

The attitude of most cadets toward compulsory chapel attendance remained unchanged throughout the first century. Most references to the spiritual atmosphere in cadet letters are derogatory in some way or another. In 1850, Cadet O. O. Howard opined, "The influences here are not of the healthiest kind as far as concerns the moral character."<sup>47</sup> Many felt that mandatory attendance as cadets was responsible for officers' lack of Sunday worship after graduation.

The completion of the new Cadet Chapel marked a potential beginning of a clear focus for the role of religion in developing cadets at West Point. The chaplain no longer had secular duties that conflicted with his ministry and the new chapel provided a prominent place of worship that bound moral development with service to the nation. The future held better promise than the past had delivered.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Herman A. Norton, The U.S. Army Chaplaincy, 1791-1865 (Washington, D. C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Department of the Army, 1977) 28.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. 28.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. 23.

<sup>4</sup>E. D. Waugh, West Point (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1944) 46.

<sup>5</sup>Statutes II: Government Printing Office, 1812. 1241-1242.

<sup>6</sup>American State Papers V: 350.

<sup>7</sup>Waugh 48.

<sup>8</sup>Harrison Ellery, The Memoirs of General Joseph Garner Swift (Privately Printed, 1890) 123, 138, 219.

<sup>9</sup>George W. Cullum, Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy (New York: James Miller, 1879) 83.

<sup>10</sup>William W. Sweet, The Story of Religion in America (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950) 223, 224.

<sup>11</sup>Niles Weekly Register, IX (1815-1816) 17.

<sup>12</sup>Mrs. Charles Davis, Reminiscences of West Point (East Saginaw: Evening News and Binding House, 1886) 27.

<sup>13</sup>Statutes, III: Government Printing Office, 1818. 1617-1672.

<sup>14</sup>Norton 28.

<sup>15</sup>Stephen B. Grove, "Mandatory Chapel Query"

<sup>16</sup>Norton 29.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid. 26.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. 29.

<sup>19</sup>William Carus, ed., Memorials of the Right Reverend Charles P. McIlvaine, D.D., D.C.L., Late Bishop of Ohio in the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1882) 20.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. 20.

<sup>21</sup>Thomas Picton Papers, 1 May 1799 to 11 October 1834, Manuscript Collection, USMA.

<sup>22</sup>Kenneth D. Shive, "Moral Philosophy at West Point in the Nineteenth Century," Friends of West Point Library Newsletter (West Point, New York, 1990) 1.

<sup>23</sup>Professor Adams to Superintendent Delafield, 3 February 1840, in the Jasper Adams Papers. USMA Archives.

<sup>24</sup>General Swift, Drawing of Cadet Chapel, 8 December 1814 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives)

<sup>25</sup>Rene E. DeRussy, Letter to Brigadier General Charles Gratiot, July 29, 1833 West Point Scrapbook, USMA Library, Vol.II 142-143.

<sup>26</sup>Talbot Hamlin, Greek Revival Architecture in America (New York: Dover Publications, 1944) 6.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>James L. Morrison, The Best School in the World (Kenton, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986) 166.

<sup>30</sup>Shive. 3.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Sidney Forman, "Scandal among cadets: An historical verdict," Teachers College Record 66 (1965): 486.

<sup>33</sup>Gilbert A. Youngberg, Letter to USMA Class of 1900, 12 October 1950.

<sup>34</sup>Gilbert A. Youngberg, Letter to Reverend Arthur B. Kinsolving, 19 September 1950.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Earl F. Stover, The United States Army Chaplaincy, 1865-1920 (Washington, D. C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Department of the Army, 1977) 247.

<sup>37</sup>Chaplains Report, Annual Year 89-90.

<sup>38</sup>Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1900 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1900) 28.

<sup>39</sup>Report of the Board of Visitors to the U. S. Military Academy, 1901 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1901) 7.

<sup>40</sup>Statutes Government Printing Office, 1902.

<sup>41</sup>George S. Pappas, The Cadet Chapel USMA West Point New York (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1983) 10.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid. 14.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid. 27.

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

<sup>47</sup>O. O. Howard, Letter to brother, 8 September 1850.