

DEFENDING THE RAMPARTS:  
THE UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY'S  
STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL IN THE AGE OF JACKSON

CPT MARK RICE  
LD 720



Although the current political and economic climate present what appear as unique challenges to the Academy, the controversy over the need for West Point began shortly after its creation. Indeed, many of the contemporary arguments against the Academy are strikingly similar to those that West Point faced in the 19th Century. From 1829 to 1837, during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, West Point faced determined opposition to its existence. Difficult economic conditions and a new political philosophy militated against the existence of a nationally funded military academy. The political and economic climate engendered vociferous, if largely unwarranted, charges of elitism and fiscal impracticality against the Academy at West Point. An examination and analysis of the steps taken by the Academy's administrators and political allies to answer these challenges cast contemporary arguments in historical perspective and provides insight into the history of the survival of the United States Military Academy.

*The Jacksonian Democrat*

The challenges to the Academy's existence during the Age of Jackson had their roots in some of the beliefs common to Jacksonian democrats. While no collective description can be absolutely accurate, certain "traits" serve to describe a majority of Jackson's followers. Egalitarianism stood first among these. Historian Edward Pessen has observed that, "high on the American's scale of values was his egalitarian belief that one man - particularly an American - was as good as any other, certainly that he should be treated like any other."<sup>1</sup> Egalitarianism translated into an anti-intellectual attitude toward limited-access professions, and an elitist bias against institutions which produced educated professionals. Most notable among these professions were law, medicine, and the military.

The political climate of egalitarianism and anti-elitism produced an environment hostile to the Military Academy. Suffrage expanded (although remaining limited to white men), and, according to Harry L. Watson, the idea that simple majority rule was "a more reliable guide to the common good than the paternal benevolence of a few well-trained and high-minded gentlemen"<sup>2</sup> took hold. Politicians sought the support of the "common man" by hiding any superiority of education and opposing any institution which sought to elevate one man above another. As Pessen points out, even licensed medical academies were subjected to accusations of elitism by zealous Jacksonian politicians attempting to prove their fidelity to the common man.<sup>3</sup> Given the nature of the institutions under attack by these politicians, the Military Academy was certain to face opposition.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 51.

<sup>3</sup>Pessen, 160.

### *The Challenges of 1828-1831*

Debate concerning the abolition of the Military Academy, however, began prior to the inauguration of Andrew Jackson. Both public opposition to and public support for the Academy existed in 1828. An article from the newspaper the Literary Cadet and Rhode Island Journal, dated 28 May 1828 illustrated the ambivalent nature of the feelings toward the Academy:

The subject, about which our friends have been disputing - i.e., the expediency of continuing the Military Academy at West Point - is one which has not a little agitated the public mind, and given rise to a variety of opinions. As for our single selves, we consider the institution to be a valuable one, and if properly conducted, well calculated to do much good. We are not however, so wedded or bigoted, to our opinions, as not to admit that there are evils existing in the polity of the West Point Academy, which should be corrected, or the establishment should be abandoned.

While the article failed to specify the nature of the existing "evils," or the specific reasons that might recommend West Point for abolition, the article did show that both support and opposition characterized feeling toward the Academy as Andrew Jackson began his first term as President.

The attacks on elitist institutions that typified Jacksonian politics produced political advantages for the attacking politicians. As the off-year elections of 1830 approached, Davy Crockett, congressman from Tennessee and outspoken opponent of West Point and the Regular Army, launched a campaign for the abolition of the Military Academy. Antagonism towards the Academy accompanied a rise in similar negative feelings toward all colleges. Some viewed colleges as exclusive institutions of the rich and privileged, and believed that their existence ran contrary to the egalitarian nature of the times. The survival of private colleges, however, did not depend on continued funding and support from Congress. The Military Academy's survival did.<sup>4</sup>

Congressman Crockett's attack on the Academy amalgamated several political themes of the Jacksonian democrats. In opposing the Academy, Crockett challenged the elitism of the Academy (and colleges in general), questioned the purpose of a national military academy, and argued for the citizen soldier over the professional soldier. A summary of his views appeared in the 11 March 1831 issue of the Erie Gazette:

He considers it unfair that one citizen should have his children educated at the expense of government and not another, when the merits of those citizens are otherwise equal and that in addition to all this, it excludes a

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<sup>4</sup> For a complete discussion of the rise in antagonism towards colleges, especially the Military Academy, see George S. Pappas, To the Point: The United States Military Academy 1802-1902 (Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 193.

large portion of American youth from commissions in the Army, as none but graduates of that school receive commissions. He also questions the utility of the institution, and asserts that it is better calculated to make dandies than soldiers.

The institution costs the nation an immense sum, and it is certainly objectionable in principle. We passed through the war of the revolution and the war of 1812 without its aid, and we believe it might be safely dispensed with.<sup>5</sup>

While a significant threat in and of itself, Crockett's objection received support from a former Military Academy superintendent.

Crockett's challenge gained momentum with the publication of the pamphlet entitled The Military Academy at West Point, Unmasked or Corruption and Military Despotism Exposed. The author of this work, writing under the pseudonym Americanus, was in reality a former superintendent of the Academy, one Alden Partridge. Partridge had been replaced by the current superintendent, Sylvanus Thayer, in 1817. Never notified of his impending removal, Partridge refused to acknowledge Thayer's written orders and to relinquish command. Ultimately, Partridge was removed, arrested and tried by court martial for disobeying orders. Embittered, Partridge resigned from the Army and, spent the rest of his life attacking both Thayer and the Academy.<sup>6</sup>

Partridge's document consisted of three sections: the first addressed to Congress, the second to the President, and the third to the American people. The document threatened the Academy by charging it with elitism, challenging its legality and recommending that its commissioning function be replaced by a system of appointment of qualified enlisted men. Partridge also denounced the investigation by the House Committee on Military Affairs into Academy operations, even though he had been instrumental in persuading the committee chairman, James Blair, to launch the investigation. Although less than unified and harmonious allies, Crockett, Blair and Partridge posed a notable threat to the survival of the Military Academy.

The significance of the threat to the Academy did not escape the Superintendent, Sylvanus Thayer. Thayer sought advice from those in Washington whom he believed friendly toward the Academy: Secretary of War John Eaton, General Charles Gratiot, Chief of Engineers, and Joseph Vance, senior member of the House Committee on Military Affairs. In a letter to Thayer, Gratiot described the situation as follows:

Since the appearance of (Alden) Partridge's Pamphlet I do not perceive that his object has had the least success - it is spoken of by none but such

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<sup>5</sup> Erie (Pa.) Gazette, 11 March 1830.

<sup>6</sup> For a more complete account of the replacement of Partridge by Thayer, see Theodore J. Crackel, The Illustrated History of West Point (West Point: Association of Graduates, United States Military Academy), 1991, 104.

as entertain a lively interest in all matters which concern you. The Publication is treated, as far as I can ascertain, with disgust...Your friends concur in the belief that the allegations set forth in this Pamphlet are not worthy your notice...<sup>7</sup>

While Gratiot's letter may have reassured Thayer, the question of the wider political impact of the Crockett challenge remained to be seen.

Thayer gained some insight into the political opposition confronting the Academy in a dispatch from Joseph Vance. With this communication, Vance made his political meaning clear: while some would always oppose the Academy, there existed enough support in Congress to prevent Crockett and Partridge from doing any harm.

I do not believe that the hostile feeling towards the institution is either general or serious. There are to be sure several members opposed to it, but this has always been the case and will continue to be so under any state of things, but under all the influence of retrenchment and demagoguism, of the present time, I have no doubt that a large majority of the House of Representatives are decidedly in favor of cherishing and sustaining the military academy, the Army - & the Navy, as well as all other necessary department of the government...My decided opinion is that no steps are necessary to be taken by you to remove any suspicions that exist relative to the correct administration of the Institution...<sup>8</sup>

Both Gratiot and Vance proved correct in their assessments. Although Crockett continued to challenge the Academy on the House floor, a War Department report to the Military Affairs Committee satisfied the majority of Congressmen.<sup>9</sup>

Crockett and Partridge failed in their attack on the Academy for several reasons. First, the proponents of the Academy effectively refuted the arguments against the Academy. The charges of elitism proved untrue. The Academy was composed of men from all walks of life, as indicated by the War Department's report. This was not a federally supported haven for the sons of the rich and influential, but rather an institution open to those who could meet the entrance requirements and obtain an appointment. As well, the Secretary of War, on advice of Congressmen and Senators, appointed cadets "from as many states and districts as possible, undoubtedly for political reasons."<sup>10</sup>

A lack of political acumen was the second factor contributing to the failure of Crockett and Partridge. In invoking elitism and the privilege of professionalism, Crockett hoped to ignite the egalitarian sentiment behind Jacksonian politics. Crockett's fellow

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Gratiot, Washington, to Sylvanus Thayer, West Point, 11 February 1830, Thayer Papers, USMA Archives, West Point.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Vance, Washington, D.C., to Sylvanus Thayer, West Point, 9 March 1830, Thayer Papers, USMA Archives, West Point.

<sup>9</sup> For a complete account of Crockett's continuing challenges and the contents of the War Department report, see Pessen, 195.

<sup>10</sup> Pappas, 192.

Congressmen, however, were men of wealth and influence, not common men. Crockett severely overestimated the "common" nature of his colleagues.<sup>11</sup> Crockett underestimated the reluctance of his fellow Congressmen to label as elitist an institution whose demographics they had helped create. Partridge's criticism of the Military Affairs Committee in his document undoubtedly offended and alienated some possible supporters of his efforts.

The third factor contributing to the failure of Crockett and Partridge concerned the President's attitude toward the Military Academy. While much has been made of his comment "I believe it the best school in the world," more direct evidence of his attitude came from letters written to Thayer as the debate in Congress continued.

I take the liberty of sending a line to bespeak your kind attention for the bearer Cadet Wm. S. Reed who is the son of my old Aid de Camp in the southern campaigns of the last war.<sup>12</sup>

And again, two weeks later:

...the two young gentlemen who will hand you this...are the sons of Mr. William B. Giles late Gov. of Virginia, the younger of whom has been recently appointed a cadet and will report himself for examination. On account of the high claims of his Father to the favor of the country I feel a deep interest in the success of this young Gentleman...<sup>13</sup>

Thus the President, using his political influence to improve the chances of the sons of his friends, seemed unconcerned with contributing to the "elitist" nature of the Academy. His actions indicated a neutral, if not somewhat positive attitude towards the continuation of the Academy. If Old Hickory, champion of the common man, would recommend his friends to the Academy, then it must be a fair and acceptable institution to Jackson, at the least. Without Old Hickory's public support and the support of his fellow Congressmen, Crockett and Partridge seemed doomed to failure.

### *The Challenges of 1832-1835*

Economic issues shaped the election of 1832 and influenced Jackson's remaining years in the White House. Indeed, all of the major political issues of the Jackson Presidency were in some way associated with economic development. In Jackson's first term, the issues were Indian removal and the tariff. In his second term, the Bank War and

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<sup>11</sup> For an examination of the economic and social status of Jacksonian politicians, see Pessen, 97-98.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Jackson, Washington, D.C., to Sylvanus Thayer, West Point, 24 May 1830, Thayer Papers, USMA Archives, West Point.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, 16 June 1830, *ibid*.

internal improvements predominated.<sup>14</sup> As domestic economic issues surged to the foreground of Jacksonian political debate, politicians searched for ways to demonstrate their fiscal responsibility. Attacking inefficient and impractical federally funded institutions was one of these ways.

Jackson fired the first lethal shot in his war against Nicholas Biddle and the Second Bank of the United States when he vetoed the bill that would have provided for the recharter of the Bank. Biddle returned fire by initiating a policy of contraction in August of 1833, producing a mild depression which further encouraged the trimming of budgets for federally funded institutions.<sup>15</sup> As the contraction policy continued and the depressions deepened, matters of Academy finance received greater attention. The 1832 Board of Visitors reported Academy finance as follows:

The expenses incurred in cherishing and sustaining so valuable an institution are, in the opinion of this board, of immaterial import, compared with the advantages which have already conferred upon the country, and the more important and lasting ones which are in promise.<sup>16</sup>

By 1833, the report indicated a more detailed examination of Academy finances.

On examining into the fiscal concerns of the academy, the board had every reason to be satisfied, that great economy has been exercised in the administration of this department of the institution, and cheerfully bear testimony to the order and regularity with which the books are kept, and the receipts and disbursements accounted for, as well as to the integrity and judicious economy with which the finances of the academy are administered.<sup>17</sup>

As might be expected, the 1834 report included a separate section detailing all the financial activities of the Academy. The portion of the main report which dealt with finances seems to send a message to Congress as to the appropriate allocation of funds.

The whole investigation of the board, lead them to the conclusion that the military academy is a most valuable and essential part of the army establishment of the United States; that, at a cost so low as not to exceed that of a second rate man-of-war, it prepares, and can spread over the whole country, officers instructed and capable of giving instruction in the military art; and...that if our young citizens were commissioned in the army as lieutenants, in the first instance, as they must be if this institution

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<sup>14</sup> For a complete examination of the economic issues of the first and second terms, see Pessen, Chapters 6 and 7, Watson, Chapters 4 and 5, or Glyndon G. VanDeusen, The Jacksonian Era 1828-1848 (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).

<sup>15</sup> See both VanDeusen, 67-85, and Pessen, 137-145, for in-depth accounts of the issues and battles between proponents and opponents of the Second Bank of the United States.

<sup>16</sup> Congress. House. "Report of the Board of Visitors to the Military Academy, 1832," American State Papers Cl. V, Military Affairs, vol. VI, 60-62.

<sup>17</sup> Congress. House. "Report of the Board of Visitors to the Military Academy, 1833," Niles Register (29 June 1833), 290-291.

be abolished, they could not obtain, in four years, even the same military knowledge as the cadets, while their probation and education would be far more expensive to the country.<sup>18</sup>

These reports seemed to satisfy Congress as to the fiscal responsibility of the Academy. Yet the issue of appropriations for continued funding of the Academy would resurface, as election year politics renewed the issues of professional elitism and egalitarianism.

With the President reaping the political benefits of the Bank War in 1832, Jacksonian Democrats across the country hoped to follow his lead in the elections of 1834. The Bank issue, reduced politically to a confrontation between the interests of a moneyed elite and the interests of the common man, laid the groundwork for other institutions to receive a similar elitist portrayal. This time, however, the calls for abolition of the Academy originated in state legislatures. As reported by The United States Telegraph on 11 October 1833,

In the Senate of Tennessee...Mr. Cannon submitted the following...Whereas the existence of the Military Academy at West Point in the State of New York is considered by this General Assembly as inconsistent with republican institutions and dangerous to the principles of free government, - therefore: Resolved, by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, That our Senators in the Congress of the United States be instructed, and our representatives requested, to use their exertions to repeal all laws authorizing the Military Academy aforesaid to be kept up: also, to oppose the passage of all laws making appropriation hereafter for the exercise of that institution.

By March of 1834, Ohio's legislature had adopted a similar resolution.

In Congress, the traditional enemies of the Academy joined with others who sought credit for attacking an inefficient and unjust institution. Once again, Congressmen questioned the need for a national military academy, accused the Academy of elitism, and claimed that the Academy was cost prohibitive. The issue of the continued existence of the Academy was referred to the House Committee on Military Affairs. The Committee reported to Congress, on 17 May 1834, an extensive document entitled Statement of the History and Importance of the Military Academy at West Point, New York, and Reasons Why It Should Not Be Abolished. In answering the question of the need for an Academy, the report states that:

The objections to the Military Academy at West Point which have been urged in Congress and in the public prints have recently assumed a more imposing character...After a careful and impartial consideration of the tendencies and operation of this system of instruction and discipline, the

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<sup>18</sup> Congress. House. "Report of the Board of Visitors to the Military Academy, 1834," Niles Register (2 August 1834), 390.

committee express their deliberate conviction that it would be difficult to devise one better adapted to form an able and accomplished officer...

In answering the charge of elitism, the report provided the following response:

The committee enter now upon an examination of a part of the general subject referred to them, which has given occasion for much of the popular prejudice existing against the Military Academy - the rules by which the selection of candidates for admission is determined...they who were entrusted with the higher concerns of the people, and who were directly responsible to the people, would be safe counsellors in the administration of this interest.

From these and similar views originated...the rule of selecting one cadet from each congressional district, and of allowing great weight to the recommendations of the representatives of the respective districts...It has been alleged, however, that under the influence of the motives which have been alluded to, (the extension of their personal interest and the gratification of personal regard) the representatives have exerted themselves for the success of the wealthy or powerful. A complete vindication of the majority of those who have had an agency in appointments...is furnished in the facts that not more than one-fifteenth of any one class could have received, without this aid, more than a common English school education, and that a still smaller number of the officers of the army possess any income or means of support beyond their regular pay and emoluments...The result to which the committee have arrived is, that the imputation of favoritism is one which is incident to all government appointments...and that it is as carefully guarded against by the existing rules for selection as it can well be...

In dealing with fiscal issues, the report stated that:

The committee are inclined to believe that not a small part of the unfriendly feeling which has been manifested towards the Military Academy is attributable to a vague impression that it is maintained at a heavy and unreasonable expenditure. In refutation of this impression they submit a statement of the expenses of this institution for successive periods:

From 1802 to 1821 the annual cost to the country (per) cadet was	\$555.50.
From 1817 to 1821 it was.....	\$525.25
From 1823 to 1833 it was.....	\$421.55

These sums include all the expenditures of every kind; and the statement exhibits the singular fact that the expenditures have sensibly diminished, while the means and advantages for education have increased.

And finally, the Committee concluded:

It is the great distinction of the academy at West Point that it has contributed largely and effectually to this elevation of the character of the military establishment...the Military Academy at West Point will not be deemed to have perverted the design of its founders nor will it be thought that the public interest requires that it should be abolished. The national legislature will still cherish it by a parental and judicious legislation, adapted to render it more perfect and to increase its capacity and facilities for accomplishing in their fullest extent the purposes of its creation.

This testament to the history, service and responsibility of the Military Academy proved extremely effective. The facts presented clearly supported the continued existence of such a fair and reasonable institution.

Once again, the assault on the Academy was primarily an issue of politics. The opponents of the Academy failed to achieve their stated ends - the abolition of the Academy - for two, mainly political reasons. First was the weight of evidence provided by Academy supporters in refuting the charges against West Point. Most notable was the Statement of the History..., which sufficiently and thoroughly responded to all the charges against the Academy. After this report, little to no discussion of the Academy occurred as a matter of record in Congress. As well, other more urgent political issues helped to relegate the debate over the Academy to a place of relative political insignificance.

The second reason for the failure of the Academy's opponents to achieve their ends has its roots within the realm of Jacksonian party politics. As the Academy proved to provide no threat to the well-being of the common man, Washington politicians lost interest in its prosecution. "Voters increasingly responded to politicians who could point to a conspicuous enemy of public liberty and equality and pledge to destroy the 'monster.'"<sup>19</sup> The bigger the monster, the bigger the likely voter response. The House Committee report made the Academy monster very small.

Jackson's removal of federal funds from the Second Bank of the United States and his stand against internal improvements created the very large monsters of financial stability and Presidential power. While the Academy remained open, the debate over its existence may have contributed to the covert purposes of its opponents. "The Democrats emerged from the elections of 1834 with an increased majority in the House...(while) twenty-seven Democrats confronted twenty-five Whigs in the Senate."<sup>20</sup> Thus again, Jacksonian Democrats triumphed in the politics of the common man.

The years 1828 to 1834 brought more challenge than change to the United States Military Academy. The challenges, motivated primarily by the rhetoric of equality and anti-elitism, and concerns of economic efficiency, forced the Academy and its supporters to evaluate and defend its existence. The Academy managed to do this, while maintaining its unique identity and ideals.

The environment which provided the challenges to the Academy during the Age of Jackson bears similarities to the environment of the Academy today. The political environment is filled with the rhetoric of reducing the role of the federal government, a

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<sup>19</sup> Watson, 112.

<sup>20</sup> VanDeusen, 90.

military drawdown and a return of political power to the people. The economic environment is characterized by a concern for controlling the national debt and an unprecedented debate over domestic economic issues. Within this context, the Academy must answer challenges from Washington as to its purpose, fiscal practicality and overall necessity. That the Academy was able to respond and adapt in ways sufficient to ensure its continuation beyond the Jacksonian Era, without compromising its identity, provides hope for those entrusted with the perpetuation of the Military Academy into the 21st Century.

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