

Uncertain Commitment: West Point and the Active Duty
Service Obligation, 1950 - 1964

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In the mid and late 1980s some Congressional leaders expressed serious concern over the length of the Active Duty Service Obligation (ADSO) which United States service academy cadets and midshipmen incur upon graduation and commissioning. Acting on their concerns, despite strong resistance from the Army and the Military Academy, Congress and the President eventually approved an increase in the ADSO from five to six years. The 1989 modification marked the sixth ADSO change in the Military Academy's history¹, and it was the second time that the Federal government changed the ADSO in the face of resistance from the Military Academy.

The arguments in the debate about the appropriate length of the ADSO have changed little since 1950. Advocates of a longer ADSO argue that Academy graduates should incur a service commitment which is long enough to ensure the nation's taxpayers receive an equitable return on their sizable financial investment in the cadets' education and training. Opponents of the longer ADSO believe that increases in the ADSO make the Academy less attractive to prospective applicants and hinder the institution's ability to recruit and retain outstanding young men and women. Both arguments seem to have merit, but neither can be supported with compelling statistical evidence.

For much of the Academy's history the appropriate length of the ADSO was not a controversial issue, but between 1950 and 1964 the ADSO attracted an unprecedented

level of attention from Congress, the Department of Defense, and the Academy. Despite close scrutiny during this 15 year period, Military Academy officials failed to develop a consistent and unified stance on the ADSO issue. The failure, or inability, to clearly express a steadfast, institutional opinion of the ADSO's appropriate length eventually undermined the Academy's ability to dissuade Congress from increasing the ADSO in 1964.

During the Military Academy's long history, the ADSO has changed six times; the changes occurred in 1812, 1838, 1950, 1957, 1964, and 1989. Although the Military Academy was officially founded in 1802, there is no evidence that an ADSO, or its equivalent, existed until 1812.² Presumably, neither Congress, the President, nor the Army perceived a need to establish a legal or regulatory requirement for cadets to serve a specified period of time as a condition of appointment.

In 1812 Congress mandated a requirement for cadets "to serve five years, unless sooner discharged." This 1812 law credited time spent at West Point as part of the five year service obligation.³ West Point did not standardize a four year curriculum until directed to do so by Secretary of War George W. Crawford in 1816.⁴ Therefore, for at least five years (1812-1816) the amount of time Academy graduates were actually obligated to serve in the Regular Army varied. A cadet who graduated after four years at West Point would have only one year of his five year obligation remaining to

serve in the Regular Army. A cadet who graduated after two years at West Point would still have an obligation to serve three years in the Regular Army.

In 1838 Congress increased the service obligation to eight years. Again, time spent as a cadet counted to satisfy the eight year commitment.⁵ By this time the Academy's curriculum required four years of study. Therefore, cadets satisfied four years of their service obligation at West Point and were then required to serve another four years in the Regular Army.

A temporary relaxation of the eight-year service obligation occurred in 1879 and 1880. Apparently, during those years West Point was producing more qualified graduates than the small Regular Army could absorb. Therefore, Congress waived the service obligation for graduating cadets who would agree to forego service and accept a lump sum payment of \$750 plus mileage to their home of residence.⁶ Brief relaxations of the ADSO notwithstanding, the eight year obligation remained in effect for 112 years (1838-1950).

In 1950 Congress enacted a change in the ADSO which represents the only ADSO reduction in West Point's history. With this legislation, Congress required cadets to serve three years of regular service subsequent to graduation. Additionally, if Academy graduates resigned their Regular Commissions between their third and sixth year of service, they were required to serve in the Reserve Component until

the sixth anniversary of their graduation.⁷ The first West Point class affected by the 1950 law was the Class of 1953.⁸

The 1950 ADSO reduction passed into law as a minor provision of a bill that was designed to bring Military and Naval Academy laws into accord. Prior to the change, the Naval Academy's ADSO stood at three years while the Military Academy's was four years. Given a choice of standardizing their respective ADSO's at three or four years, both services agreed to lobby Congress for the Navy's three year ADSO.⁹

When Senator Leverett Saltonstall of Massachusetts explained the major provisions of the bill to the Senate he cited the intention to standardize: the number of cadets (midshipmen) the Academies could enroll from enlisted ranks, the minimum and maximum ages for admission to the Academies, and the Authority of the branch Secretaries to appoint qualified alternatives as replacements for appointees who fail to meet admission criteria. Senator Saltonstall did not describe the ADSO change as a major section of the legislation.¹⁰

Before bringing the bill to the Senate floor, Senator Saltonstall chaired the Senate subcommittee hearing where representatives of the Army and Navy argued for a standardized three year ADSO. During the hearing Senator Saltonstall questioned the adequacy of a three year ADSO; he expressed his belief that the ADSO should be long enough to ensure that the nation receives adequate service (in terms

of years served) from Academy graduates. Later, referring to the three year ADSO, Senator Saltonstall asked,

Why should it not be longer? Why should it not be 4 years for both, rather than 3 years? We give 4 years of free education in one of the best institutes there are. Why should not a man be compelled to give 4 years to his country rather than 3?¹¹

The service representatives, General Byers (Army) and Captain Cooper (Navy), attempted to allay Senator Saltonstall's concern by arguing that officer retention was not a problem in either service. They explained that, when considering Military and Naval Academy graduates from the previous 30 years, fewer than 20% had resigned.¹²

Senator Saltonstall was satisfied with the explanation, and the bill proceeded through Congress with the provision for a three year ADSO intact. President Truman signed the bill into law on June 30, 1950.¹³

The Department of Defense, not Congress, mandated the 1957 increase in the Military Academy's ADSO. Like the change which occurred in 1950, the 1957 change was enacted to bring the Military Academy's ADSO into accord with that of the Naval Academy. In 1954 the Naval Academy had increased it's ADSO to four years (effective with the Class of 1958), and in 1957 the Defense Department directed the Air Force and Military Academies to follow the Navy's lead.¹⁴

The Military Academy's Superintendent from July 15, 1956 until July 1, 1960, Major General Garrison Davidson,

stated that the ADSO was not a major issue at West Point during his tenure. In fact, he had no specific recollection of why the obligation was increased in 1957. He supposed that the Army directed the increase, and that the Academy simply complied.¹⁵

In 1957 General Davidson was not concerned that the ADSO increase would hinder recruiting and retention. He made no effort to resist the increase in the ADSO for two primary reasons: First, the change simply restored the regular service obligation to four years, where it had been from 1838 until 1950; Second, General Davidson believed that "the Army and the Government were [even with a four year ADSO] too lenient in that regard." In fact, General Davidson prefers the currently pending ADSO (six years effective with the Class of 1996) to the three and four year obligations which existed during his Superintendency.¹⁶

Congress again changed the ADSO in 1964, when it increased the regular service commitment to five years (effective for the Class of 1968). The reserve commitment again remained fixed at six years.¹⁷

The ADSO change which occurred in 1964 was the first Congressionally mandated ADSO increase since 1838, and it extended the regular service obligation past four years for the first time in the Academy's history. Interestingly, the increase in the ADSO to five years is almost wholly attributable to one man, Congressman Harold Royce Gross, a Republican from Iowa's Third Congressional District.

H. R. Gross (1899-1987) served his district from 1949 until he retired in 1975. He was a fiscal conservative who advocated careful consideration of all government spending.¹⁸ On the House floor, Congressman Gross reportedly once startled his colleagues by questioning the propriety of spending government funds to pay for the gas which fuels the eternal flame on John F. Kennedy's grave.¹⁹

Congressman Gross was an Army veteran: he served with the First Iowa Field Artillery in the 1916 Mexican Border Campaign and later served with the American Expeditionary Force in France during World War I. After World War I Gross studied journalism at the University of Missouri. He worked for various newspapers from 1921 until 1935. In 1935 he began a career as a radio newscaster and became known as "the man with the fastest tongue in radio."²⁰ His fast tongue would later prove instrumental in increasing the Military Academy's ADSO to five years.

Gross seems to have first gained interest in the ADSO in 1956. While discussing an unrelated House bill in February 1956, Congressman Gross explained that he "read in the paper the other day where one of the outstanding football players of the West Point team may go into the ranks of professional football." Gross argued that it was wrong for Academy graduates to receive education and training worth "\$40,000" without giving the nation "several years of active service" in return.²¹

It is not possible to determine specifically which newspaper article Congressman Gross referred to, but the West Point football player he read about was almost certainly Army's All-American, Don Holleder. In 1956 Holleder was selected by the New York Giants in the eighth round of the National Football League's Amateur Draft, but Holleder did not seek a release from his Regular Army commitment.²² Instead, Holleder, who was from Rochester, New York, served as a Commissioned Officer in the Regular Army until he was killed in Vietnam in October, 1967.²³

Gross's reading about the possibility that Don Holleder might enter the NFL rather than entering the ranks of the US Army seems to have provided the impetus for a one man crusade to increase the ADSO. After seizing on the issue in 1956, Congressman Gross introduced three separate bills which would have significantly increased the ADSO. On August 22, 1957 Gross introduced the first such bill; it would have mandated 10 years of regular service for all Service Academy graduates. The bill apparently gained little support and died in committee.²⁴

Congressman Gross did not abandon his efforts to increase the ADSO: on January 7, 1959, he introduced another bill designed to increase the ADSO to eight years. Again, his bill died in committee for lack of support.²⁵ Two years later the voters of Iowa's Third Congressional District returned Gross to Washington, and Gross reintroduced a bill to increase the ADSO to eight years.

Gross introduced the third bill on January 3, 1961. Like the first two bills, however, the third bill never gained committee support.²⁶

Gross remained fixed on this relatively minor issue because he wanted to ensure that no service academy graduate could take advantage of the taxpayers. In 1961 Congressman Gross argued,

We spend \$40,000 to \$45,000 a year educating cadets at the various service academies; yet, at the end of 4 years - 3 years in some instances - they can resign and go their merry way.²⁷

Gross finally grasped an opportunity to increase the ADSO in August, 1961. The House was then considering a bill which, if approved, would nearly double the size of the Military Academy. Congressman Gross demanded an amendment which would mandate a seven year ADSO. Gross argued for his amendment, explaining: "I have tried for a long time to get a bill to this effect out of the Committee on Armed Services of the House, but I have not had any luck." When Congressman L. Mendel Rivers of South Carolina suggested that Gross withdraw his amendment and allow the committee to consider it in greater detail, Gross retorted, "And then wait another 6 years and not get any action at all?"²⁸

Gross was not able to persuade the House to wholly accept his proposed amendment, but his persistence did result in a compromise to the amendment. The House members finally settled on a provision for a five year ADSO (an effective increase of one year) rather than the proposed

seven year obligation. Most of the Congressmen who were involved in the discussion agreed that a four year ADSO intuitively seemed to be too short, but they were not willing to approve a seven year ADSO without first studying the issue.²⁹

The amended bill became enmeshed in joint conference (for reasons other than the ADSO modification) and died at the close of the 87th Congress.³⁰ The bill was reintroduced at the beginning of the 88th Congress, and was amended by Congressman Melvin R. Laird of Wisconsin to include another provision for a five year ADSO. Congressman Gross stated that he preferred a seven or eight year ADSO, but he supported Congressman Laird's amendment.³¹ Both the House and Senate eventually approved the bill, and President Johnson signed it into law on March 3, 1964.³²

When the bill was discussed during Congressional hearings in 1963, each of the service academies voiced opposition to the proposed ADSO increase. Major General William Westmoreland, near the end of his tenure as the United States Military Academy's Superintendent, argued that a longer ADSO would prove detrimental to recruiting. Major General James B. Lampert succeeded General Westmoreland as Superintendent on June 28, 1963. When General Lampert was called to testified before a Senate Committee later in 1963, he maintained that the current ADSO provided "adequate" assurance that incoming cadets were committed to military service. Unlike Westmoreland, Lampert did not argue that

the proposed ADSO increase would hurt the Academy's recruiting efforts.³³

Academy representatives could offer no evidence that a five year ADSO would damage admissions efforts, and eventually, even the Department of Defense rejected the notion that a five year ADSO would prove detrimental to the academies. Congressional advocates of the longer ADSO countered the Academy's argument by questioning whether West Point should be interested in admitting anyone who would not agree to serve the Army for five years. They also, predictably, argued that a five year ADSO increased the likelihood that Academy graduates would provide the American taxpayers with an equitable return on their investment.³⁴

The five year ADSO went into effect with the West Point Class of 1968, and, once enacted, was not a major concern at the Academy. General Richard G. Stilwell (Commandant of Cadets 1961-1963) and General Michael S. Davison (Commandant of Cadets 1963-1965) both state that a pending increase in the ADSO was not a concern during their service at West Point. Both Commandants explain that their (and the Academy's) primary concern was planning for the institution's expansion.³⁵

Neither Davison nor Stilwell was worried that a longer ADSO would hinder recruiting or retention. In fact, General Davison, who was still the Commandant of Cadets when the Class of 1968 arrived at West Point, states that he did not think the cadets who were affected by the change were at all

concerned.³⁶ A member of that class, Colonel Patrick A. Toffler, concurs with General Davison's assessment. Colonel Toffler explains that although he and his classmates learned of the longer ADSO only a few months before arriving at West Point (the increased ADSO became law in March 1964 and the new cadets reported to West Point in July 1964), they accepted it with little hesitance.³⁷

Despite repeated wrangling over the ADSO from 1950 to 1964, the Military Academy did not attempt to systematically study the issue until 1969. By 1969 the Academy became sufficiently concerned about the ADSO to commission two separate studies: the Academy's Office of Research conducted the "Study of the Impact of the Five Year Service Obligation on USMA Cadets," dated 24 November 1969 and a committee headed by Colonel Thomas E. Griess, Head of the Department of History, conducted the "Investigation of Current Service Obligation for USMA Graduates," dated 11 December 1969. Both studies concluded that insufficient evidence existed to demonstrate that a four year ADSO was more advantageous than a five year requirement.³⁸ Since 1969, the Military Academy has made a number of other efforts to study the effects of increasing the ADSO, but the results of each study were inconclusive. Attempts to study the issue are confounded because the ADSO is only one of many factors which can influence an individual's decisions about whether he should attend the Military Academy, whether he will stay at the

Academy until graduation, and the length of his eventual service in the active Army.³⁹

From 1838 until 1950 the United States Military Academy's ADSO remained fixed at four years, but between 1950 and 1964 the Academy saw it's ADSO change three times. In 1957 the Department of Defense effectively reversed the 1950 ADSO reduction with no resistance from the Academy, then in 1964 Congress overruled the Academy's objections and increased the ADSO to five years. The arguments which many Congressmen advanced to support the ADSO increase were based on little more than their belief that a change was needed. The Military Academy representatives could neither refute the Congressional arguments, nor substantiate their own positions because the proper length of the ADSO is ultimately a matter of individual judgement.

That Congress should decide it's collective judgement was superior to the Academy's is not surprising. In the debate, the Academy could not maintain support from the Department of Defense, and even within Army and Academy circles there was no consensus on the ADSO issue. If the Military Academy had any chance to prevent the 1964 ADSO increase, it was to present an institutional stance which was consistent and unified. But Academy leaders could not establish such a stance. Because the ADSO issue is a matter of individual judgement, many officers held (and still hold) differing opinions about the ADSO's appropriate length. For example, Generals Davidson and Stilwell both believed that

an increased ADSO would not be harmful, and might actually prove advantageous to the Military Academy: it could serve to discourage applicants who were not fully committed to military service, but it would not dissuade the most dedicated applicants.

Generals Davidson and Stilwell did not subvert the Academy's effort to retain a four year ADSO, but their views do reflect a degree of institutional indecision. That indecision was also evident in 1963 Congressional hearings when General Lampert failed to echo General Westmoreland's contention that the five year ADSO would hurt Academy admissions.

If the Academy had clearly defined its position and then gained strong consensus on the issue, it would have been difficult to block the ADSO increase. However, without clarity and consensus it was impossible.

Notes

- 1 Patrick A. Toffler, "Service Obligations for Graduates of USMA," Assembly Nov. 1990: 55-57.
- 2 United States Military Academy, Laws of Congress Relative to West Point and the United States Military Academy 1786-1877. (USMA Press) 11.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 John P. Lovell, Neither Athens Nor Sparta? (Bloomington: Indiana U, 1979) 21.
- 5 United States Military Academy, 28.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Congressional Record, 81st Congress, 1950, 9179.
- 8 Toffler, 55-57.
- 9 Senate Armed Services Committee Hearings, June 13, 1950.
- 10 Congressional Record, 81st Congress, 1950, 9179.
- 11 Senate Armed Services Committee Hearings, June 13, 1950.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Congressional Record, 81st Congress, 1950. 9179.
- 14 United States Military Academy. "Investigation of Current Service Obligation for USMA Graduates" 11 December 1969. 2.
- 15 Telephone interview with General (Retired) Garrison Davidson, 29 October 1990.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Congressional Record, 88th Congress, 1964. HR 7356.
- 18 Current Biography 1964. (New York: Wilson, 1964) 172-174.
- 19 Winston W. Williams, "H.R. Gross is Dead: Iowa Congressman" New York Times, 24 September 1987: D23.

- 20 Current Biography 1964. 172-174.
- 21 Congressional Record, 84th Congress, 1956: 2107.
- 22 City of Rochester, Dedication to Donald W. Holleder, 1973.
- 23 Associated Press, "Holleder, '55 Army Star, Dies in Viet" Newburgh News, 18 October 1967: A1.
- 24 Congressional Record, 85th Congress, 1957: HR 9409.
- 25 Congressional Record, 86th Congress, 1959: HR 788.
- 26 Congressional Record, 87th Congress, 1961: HR 219.
- 27 Ibid. 14738.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid. 14740.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 United States Military Academy. "Investigation of Current Service Obligation for USMA Graduates" 11 December 1969. 2.
- 32 Congressional Record, 87th Congress, 1961: HR 219.
- 33 United States Military Academy. "Investigation of Current Service Obligation for USMA Graduates" 11 December 1969. 6-7.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Telephone interview with General (Retired) Richard G. Stilwell, 2 November 1990: Telephone interview with General (Retired) Michael S. Davison, 30 October 1990.
- 36 Telephone interview with General Davison.
- 37 Interview with Colonel Patrick A. Toffler, Director, Office of Institutional Research, United States Military Academy, 19 October 1990.

38 United States Military Academy. "Investigation of Current Service Obligation for USMA Graduates" 11 December 1969. 2: John D. Kraft, "Study of the Impact of the Five Year Service Obligation on USMA Cadets" United States Military Academy, 24 November 1969.

39 Interview with Colonel Toffler.

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