

THE EVOLUTION OF WEST POINT'S MISSION STATEMENT:

A NECESSARY CONDITION FOR SURVIVAL

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The present mission of the United States Military Academy (USMA) is:

To educate and train the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate shall have the attributes essential to professional growth as an officer of the Regular Army, and to inspire each to a lifetime of service to the nation.¹

How has the mission evolved to this point, and what have been the factors behind this evolution? In over 190 years since the Academy's establishment, its mission has changed numerous times, primarily influenced by four factors:

"wars, national military policy, changing national environment, and the personality of West Point's leaders."²

From 1802 until after World War I, the Academy did not have a formalized mission statement; however, several of the superintendents, the Academic Board, the Board of Visitors, or Federal Agencies did prepare various mission statements.³ But none of these appeared in either USMA or Army regulations, because these missions were purely for the Academy's internal use--to provide a general guideline for both the staff and faculty and the Corps of Cadets. It was not until after MacArthur's turbulent superintendency did USMA first receive a formal, externally directed, mission promulgated by the Department of the Army. In the years that followed the mission statement changed five times as both West Point and Army officials had to answer continued, and increased, attacks by external sources (mainly Congress) on the very existence of the Academy. How well the Academy's, and the Army's, leadership answers future

attacks, by redefining the mission of USMA, may well determine whether or not West Point will continue to produce leaders for the 21st Century.

This step in the mission statement's evolution is a necessary condition for the Academy's continued survival, but it also creates an unfortunate shift in the proper audience of the mission. The mission statement is no longer an ideal to guide and shape the Corps of Cadets, but it is an attempt at silencing, or at least satisfying, the Academy's external critics.

THE FIRST CENTURY

President Thomas Jefferson officially established the Military Academy on March 16, 1802 by signing the Military Peace Establishment Act.⁴ Major Jonathan Williams, the first Superintendent, received the following directive from the Jefferson administration:

This academy is expected to furnish to the Army a supply of efficient officers; to the Militia an intermixture of well-trained citizens, qualified on emergency, to discipline that last and best arm of republics; to internal improvements a corps of engineers capable of giving wholesome direction to the spirit of enterprise which pervades our country. The young men... will be trained to the manly exercise of arms, and imbued with the tastes of science and literature, instructed in the principles and action of our political system and the living exemplar from which sound education may rear the social edifice.⁵

Despite this guidance, and stated, mission West Point struggled through its first ten years because of inadequate organization and administration. On the brink of war in 1812, Congress enacted legislation that attempted to

strengthen the fledgling Academy by providing for professorships of Engineering, Mathematics and Natural and Experimental Philosophy. This act, and the outbreak of the War of 1812, "preserved the Military Academy in its first trial."⁶ The act also officially provided, for the first time, that graduates of the Academy would be appointed "in the service of the United States"...and specifically made provisions for the Corps of Engineers.⁷ A prominent historian Henry Adams, wrote, "During the critical campaign of 1814, the West Point engineers doubled the capacity of the little American Army for resistance, and introduced a new and scientific character to American life."⁸

The Mexican War did not have a direct effect on West Point's mission. The war did, however, certify the Academy's emphasis on producing engineers and was successful in "silencing the critics of the past, the graduate had supplied knowledge, skill, and sometimes resolution."⁹

General Winfield Scott, himself not a West Point graduate, testified to the Academy's contribution in the Mexican War:

I give it as my fixed opinion, that but for our graduated cadets, the war between the United States and Mexico might, and probably would, have lasted some four or five years, with, in its first half, more defeats than victories falling to our share; whereas, in less than two campaigns, we conquered a great country and a peace, without the loss of a single battle or skirmish.¹⁰

Prior to the Civil War, national military policy influenced the mission of the Military Academy, This policy supported the internal expansion of the United States. Thus, this policy reinforced the engineering and militia features of the mission and was largely responsible for the emphasis placed upon engineering and technical subjects in the curriculum.⁹ This military policy which provided many

engineers for the early development of the country would not, however, survive the Civil War. And in 1855, as the possibility of war grew stronger, the Attorney General, Caleb Cushing said that the mission of USMA was:

The education of a class of men to be rendered competent by condition, character, and knowledge to maintain the military service of the country at the highest possible point of elevation, to keep the noble traditions of the discipline and science of arms in time of peace and to constitute the permanent nucleus around which, when war shall come, the volunteer forces of the nation may rally to defend the integrity and security of the Union.¹¹

This statement exemplified the experience of the West Point graduate of the Civil War. In 1860, there was not one general officer among Academy graduates; however, by 1865, over 300 of the almost 800 graduates on active duty would be rapidly promoted, or breveted, to the ranks of general, and would command both the armies of the North and the South in every major engagement.

Although the Military Academy was very reluctant to initiate any change after the Civil War, it was the rapidly changing national environment of the American society that influenced a fundamental change in the Academy's mission and to the Army as a whole. The economic revolution which fostered business pacifism which, in turn, sparked the growth of professionalism in the service.¹² Thus, "during the initial stages of the Progressive movement in America, captains of industry applied scientific managerial techniques to the problems of production ... and 'Progressives in uniform' sought similar expertise and bureaucratic forms, which would allow them to utilize prewar preparations in the most 'scientific' wartime manner."¹³

General William T. Sherman, a vocal advocate of the professional reform movement and commanding general between 1869-1883 remarked that:

West Point would furnish both the preliminary liberal education required of any professional man and the indoctrination in military values and discipline required of the military man.¹⁴

Hence, West Point became more professionally centered--more concerned with developing character in its students.

The increasing complexity and depth of the sciences contributing to the military art made the adequate instruction of this subject in the crowded Academy curriculum impossible.¹⁵ There was simply no enough time at West Point to teach everything, so professional schools in addition to the Academy became necessary for an officer's continued development. This promoted the creation of advanced technical institutions such as the Artillery School in 1868, the Engineer School in 1873, and the Infantry and Cavalry School in 1881.

The rise of these professional schools ultimately caused a shift in emphasis in West Point's mission from one of producing engineers to one more focused on producing graduates prepared for military service in general and war service in particular. Academy orators, such as the superintendents and the Board of Visitors, no longer spoke of preparing engineers; they regarded West Point as a school of military science.¹⁶ This dramatic shift is evident in the small number of graduates commissioned into the Engineer Corps. Between the years 1880 and 1888, only two percent of

the Academy's graduates received commissions into the Engineer Corps, as compared to over 60 percent before the Civil War.¹⁷

The war aspect of the Academy's mission continued to be emphasized through the remainder of this century and in 1894, the Board of Visitors stated that the "best way to preserve peace is to prepare for war."¹⁸ In 1896, the Superintendent, Brigadier General Oswald H. Ernst, stated in his annual report:

The object of this Academy is to furnish to the country a number of young men qualified in the fundamental principles of the sciences of war and fortification.¹⁹

Despite the Academy's admitted shift in mission, there were still many critics of West Point's approach to accomplishing that mission. Samuel Huntington in his book, The Soldier and the State wrote:

By 1900 professional purposes were foremost at both West Point and Annapolis. The military emphasis distinguished both schools from the main currents of American education. In teaching methods, curriculum, organization, stress upon character development, as well in the substantive content of courses, the service academies trod their lonely path, impervious both to Eliot's ideas on elective and to Dewey's pragmatic progressivism. While the rest of American education explored the limits to which freedom might be granted college students to go their own ways, the military academies continued to stress obedience, discipline, and regularity through a prescribed course and daily recitations. Just as the military profession as a whole developed in opposition to business liberalism, the military schools remained relatively untouched by the new ideas in education.²⁰

Huntington apparently did not evaluate the fact that liberal arts colleges were preparing students for any number of

professions, while the Military Academy was preparing its graduates for a single profession! The Centennial of the Military Academy aptly defended West Point's approach to accomplishing its mission then:

The Military Academy is responsible to the Nation and not to the individual, both in its methods and in its results. It must guarantee a standard in its performance that will justify its existence as a national school; and, in consequence, it cannot leave to the student an independent initiative in any matter bearing upon his development as a professional soldier.²¹

Thus, the Academy, and therefore its mission, changed from the school of science and technology and production of engineers of pre-Civil War days to the basic national school for the preparation of professional Army officers. This transition was complete by the end of the Academy's first century. The Centennial further emphasized this complete transition, "The Academy does not serve the profession of civil and mechanical engineering any longer."²²

THE SECOND CENTURY

With the success of the Army's school system, and the acceptance of the military as a professional body due to the professional reforms of Elihu Root, the Academy's mission remained unchallenged through the completion of the first World War. World War I led to the first formalized mission statement of West Point. The many lessons of that war, including the new tactical, strategic, political, and social concepts of large scale war, had to be incorporated into the instructional program.²³ Brigadier General Douglas

MacArthur became the Academy's Superintendent in June 1919, and in his 1920 Annual Report stated:

With the termination of the World's [sic] War the mission of West Point at once became the preparation of officer personnel for the next possible future war. The problem which [now faced the Academy] was, therefore, this: Have new conditions developed, have the lessons of the World War indicated that a changed type of officer was necessary in order to produce the maximum of efficiency in the handling of men at arms? [Yes] Such changed conditions will require a modification in type of the officer, a type possessing all of the cardinal military virtues as of yore, but possessing an intimate understanding of the mechanics of human feelings, a comprehensive grasp of world and national affairs, and a liberalization of conception which amounts to a change in this psychology of command.²⁴

MacArthur wanted the official mission to reflect war preparation, but despite his eloquent language, and his persuasive abilities, it was not until 1925, three years after his departure from the Academy, that the War Department promulgated the first official mission statement which read, "To provide a four year course of instruction and training for the Corps of Cadets which will prepare its graduates for commission in the Regular Army."²⁵ Although not a very inspirational statement, it was, at least, the first time in over 120 years that the Army had officially recognized West Point as being the first stage in the professional school system. It is my opinion that there were two primary reasons the War Department issued such a broad mission to the Academy. The first was the return of the Academy's four-year course of instruction, which changed several times during and after the war. A second reason, perhaps more subtle, was the establishment of Reserve

Officer Training Corps (ROTC) in 1916--West Point was still seen as the predominant source of Regular Army officers.

The World War was not the only factor to impact on the mission of the Academy during this period. The forceful personality of MacArthur and his reorganization plans influenced the mission in four ways:

First, he expanded the physical education program that had existed prior to the war. Second, he reinstated the vital character training and made it more effective by formalizing and recognizing the Cadet Honor Committee and the Honor System. Third, MacArthur increased the emphasis of the academic course toward a liberal humanistic pattern of general education. Finally, he changed the military education program so that West Point training was integrated with the type and level of training in the Army Service Schools.²⁶

Despite many criticisms of his superintendency, MacArthur initiated a dramatic shift away from a technical engineering education to the broader and more general education that was required of the modern officer. As he stated before he left, "The old West Point could not have been recognized in the institution as it appeared in June 1919. It had gone; it had to be replaced."²⁷

In 1930, the Superintendent, Major General William Smith, recommended the following restatement of the mission statement:

The mission of the Military Academy is to train a cadet to think clearly and logically and to do so habitually; to teach him discipline and the basic principles applicable to the various arms in the Military Service; to develop his physique and above all his character; and to teach him to approach all of his problems with an attitude of intellectual honesty, to be sensible of the rights of others, to be inspired by a high sense of duty and honor, and unhesitatingly to lay down his life in the service

of his country should the occasion arise.²⁸

Obviously, Smith disagreed with MacArthur as to the primary mission of the Military Academy. Although the War Department did not approve this mission statement, it did however, reignite "a debate that had erupted on several earlier occasions concerning the relative emphasis to be accorded formal education on the one hand and military training on the other."²⁹ This debate is still evident today.

In 1939 the Superintendent, Major General Jay L. Benedict, proposed a new statement of the Academy's mission. The War Department altered his proposal slightly and approved the following statement in October 1940:

The mission of the Military Academy is to instruct and train the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate will have the qualities and attributes essential to his progressive and continued development throughout a lifetime career as an officer in the Regular Army.³⁰

This mission statement reflected a military policy decision that the Academy should continue its focus on the academic development of the cadets. And in 1945, the newly-named Department of the Army issued its official guidance officer management and commissioning officers into the Regular Army. This further reinforced the Academy's position on the academic preparation of the Corps of Cadets. This mission would remain unchanged for the next 25 years. This was due, in part, to the success of the Academy's graduates in World War II and the lack of any major external criticism.

With the increased commitment to the war in Vietnam just a year away, President Johnson signed a bill on March 3, 1964, which increased the size of the Corps of Cadets from 2500 to 4400.³¹ Rapidly following this event was the removal of the word "lifetime" from the Academy's mission statement in 1965. Although there is not an official reason for this deletion, Doctor Steve Groves, West Point's official historian, asserts that it may be because "lifetime career" was ambiguous.³² I would argue the reason may have been more deliberate. Academy, and Army, officials may have done this to allay the fears of the officer corps, a majority of whom were not West Point graduates. There were many during this time who felt that West Pointers controlled the top ranks of the Army, although USMA commissioned only a fraction of the total officer corps. Doubling the size of the Academy meant doubling the number of USMA graduates; therefore, increasing the likelihood of further monopolization.

The Vietnam War, and the growing hostility of the American society against the military, took its toll on the Academy. The years that followed the 1965 mission statement change were extremely troubling for the Academy. West Point sent its graduates off to fight and die in an extremely unpopular war. Record numbers of graduates were resigning from the Army. Nearly one third of the Class of 1966 resigned in 1970, prompting a Pentagon investigation.³³ Over 50% of cadets polled in 1971, said they would not

attend West Point if given the opportunity again.³⁴ In 1973, legislation passed Congress that would allow women to enter the Academy. Morale was perhaps an all-time low.

Finally, in March 1976, West Point experienced an event that rocked the Academy to its very foundation and precipitated the first major revision of the mission statement since 1940--the EE304 Honor Scandal. Almost immediately the Secretary of the Army created a Special Commission on the United States Military Academy, chaired by COL (Ret) Frank Borman, to prepare a report on the incident. With respect to the mission of the Academy the Commission concluded:

The failure over the last decade to achieve a commonly understood perspective on how the Academy's mission is to be carried out contributed to the pre-EE304 atmosphere--an atmosphere described by one faculty member as follows, "There appears to be a general disdain for academics among a significant number of cadets. Academics are considered to be something relatively unimportant and to be suffered through but not really very useful. A good part of this appears to stem from the emphasis placed by the institution on military skills."³⁵

The Commission was also concerned that the word "educate" did not appear anywhere in the mission statement.³⁶ In 1977, the Superintendent, Lieutenant General Sidney B. Berry, requested, and received approval from the Army Chief of Staff for the following mission statement:

To educate, train, and motivate the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate shall have the character, leadership, and other attributes essential to progressive and continuing development throughout a career of exemplary service to the Nation as an officer of the Regular Army.³⁷

In 1978, the Final Report of the West Point Study Group recommended that this statement be slightly modified. This group, formed at the request of the Superintendent to assess the implementation of the Borman Commissions recommendations, acknowledged the "increasing importance of the intellectual foundation in an officer's development...and change the requirement to 'motivate' cadets to 'inspire' them."³⁸ Thus, the mission of the Military Academy became:

To educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate shall have the character, leadership, intellectual foundation, and other attributes essential to progressive and continuing development throughout a career of exemplary service to the Nation as an officer of the Regular Army.³⁹

This version of the mission would serve the Academy until 1986, when the Superintendent, Lieutenant General Dave R. Palmer, would direct the strategic planning initiative referred to as Project 2002.

Because of the perceived success of his two predecessors, General Palmer felt he could focus on the future direction of the Academy. Lieutenant Andrew Goodpaster helped recover the institution from the honor scandal, and Lieutenant General Willard Scott helped restore the Academy's confidence and self-esteem.⁴⁰ There are some who argue that General Palmer had ulterior motives in directing changes to the Academy and its mission, citing his personality most often. Nonetheless, his stated reason was to "develop a clear institutional view of the future

direction of the Military Academy."41 I would venture to say that it was a combination of the two.

One of the major actions of the Project 2002 initiative was the revision of the mission statement. This action would provide the Superintendent an opportunity to clear up "existing, ungrammatical aspects in the document and ensure that it was sufficiently all encompassing to denote the vital role of the institution."42 General Palmer proposed the following mission statement, which the Army Chief of Staff approved in May 1987:

To educate and train the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate shall have the attributes essential to professional growth as an officer of the Regular Army, and to inspire each to a lifetime of service to the nation.43

It is important to note that the word "career" did not appear in this mission. General Palmer's intent was to signify that even "those graduates who leave active Army service short of a full career should be inspired to continue to serve the nation as leaders of character."44

The national environment, which included a favorable attitude toward the military, also helped shape the final wording of this mission statement. In 1987, the Army had a known and quantifiable enemy to prepare for and the Defense budget was in no real jeopardy of being cut. The American economy was in good shape and the Academy was not suffering any major attack or criticism by Congressional officials. Within the next five years, however, all of this would no

longer remain true. What does the future hold for the Academy and its mission?

The national, as well as the international, environment is changing rapidly and will most likely continue to do so. This environment will effect the final size of the military's drawdown, which in turn will effect the size of West Point, and potentially its very existence.

In an effort to be proactive against potential future criticism, Lieutenant General Howard Graves, USMA's present Superintendent, is in the process of drafting yet another change to the mission. It is his feeling that an emphasis on a "career" is vital to the mission of the institution, particularly since the cost of a graduating a West Point officer is under renewed scrutiny.⁴⁵ General Graves feels compelled to do this, despite the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) of 1980, that allows for only 23.5% of a total year group, which includes all other sources of commission, to remain on active duty for a twenty-year career. Presently, USMA graduates are continuing on active duty toward retirement eligibility at an average of 40-45%.⁴⁶ Although not yet approved the proposed new mission statement is as follows:

To educate and train the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate shall have the attributes essential to professional growth throughout a career as an officer of the Regular Army, and to inspire each to a lifetime of service to the nation.⁴⁷

Effective with the Class of 1997, USMA will no longer commission its graduates directly into the Regular Army;

however, General Graves does not intend to remove, or alter, the phrase "officer of the Regular Army." He feels that the Academy's graduates will continue to perform well and will be integrated into the Regular Army with whatever plan is finally proposed and accepted.⁴⁸ Although the Regular Army commission is nothing more than a symbol in today's Army, it is still something General Graves does not want to give up.

Throughout the Military Academy's 190 year history, its mission has been influenced, to one degree or another, by four factors: wars, national military policy, changing national environment, and the personality of West Point's leaders. One exception to this is the change in the mission brought about by the crisis of the honor scandal in 1976. Despite what some may suspect has been the most influential of these factors, war has, in fact, had the least impact on the Academy's mission. Especially during the last century, the changing national environment and the personalities of West Point's leaders have had the most influence. After some reflection and analysis on the history of the Academy, and its mission, this does make sense. It has been in the times of environmental change and crisis that the personalities of the Academy's leadership have come to the front in order to ensure West Point's survival.

The mission of the United States Military Academy should not be just a collection of words that Academy and Army officials have to change to appease external critics. The mission of the Military Academy should be for the Corps

of Cadets, to guide them as they strive to become "leaders of character who serve the common defense." However, it now appears that changing the mission statement to satisfy, or at least quiet, the Academy's external critics has become a necessary condition for continued survival. With the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, and the ever-increasing pressure to cut the defense budget, the 1990's present the Military Academy with its greatest threat in recent memory. Thus, once again, USMA finds itself attempting to redefine its mission to survive and continue into its third century.

ENDNOTES

1 United States Military Academy, 2000--and Beyond: A Roadmap to Our Third Century (West Point, New York, 1990), 4.

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3 Association of Graduates, Assembly (West Point, New York, September 1987), 14.

4 Theodore J. Crackel, The Illustrated History of West Point (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 79.

5 Davidson, Curriculum Study, 7.

6 Ibid, 7.

7 Crackel, 93.

8 United States Military Academy, Bugle Notes (West Point, New York, 1981), 133.

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11 Davidson, Curriculum Study, 25.

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13 Allen R. Millet & Peter Maslowski, For the Common Defense (London: The Free Press, 1984), 255.

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- 33 Rick Atkison, The Long Gray Line (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), 347.
- 34 Atkinson, 348.
- 35 Frank Borman, et al, Report to the Secretary of the Army by the Special Commission on the United States Military Academy (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 15 December 1976), 73-74.
- 36 Borman, 71.
- 37 Sidney B. Berry, Annual Report of the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), 1.

- 38 Assembly, 15.
- 39 Regulations, USMA (West Point, New York, 1979), 1.
- 40 Dave R. Palmer, The Superintendent's Annual Historical Review, United States Military Academy (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987), 114.
- 41 Palmer, 114.
- 42 Ibid, 115.
- 43 USMA, 2002--and Beyond, 5.
- 44 Palmer, 118.
- 45 LTG Howard Graves, Superintendent USMA. Interview conducted on 2 November 1992 by CPT Michael D. Garner.
- 46 Data received from the USMA Office of Institutional Research (OIR).
- 47 Draft mission statement received from the Special Assistant for Strategic Planning, Office of the Superintendent, USMA on 3 November 1992.
- 48 Superintendent's interview.

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