

**West Point and the Post-World War II Years:  
From Bullets to Books**

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World War II had a profound impact on the United States Military Academy. West Point's emphasis went from academics to tactics. Furthermore, the curriculum changed to a three year format in order to provide leaders more quickly for the war effort. The institution of an air program produced aviators in large numbers. The discharge of cadets due to academic deficiencies sharply decreased. Cadets received drastically reduced summer furloughs and instructors departed West Point to serve on foreign battlefields. Upon World War II's culmination with V-E Day and Japan's surrender, the Academy began an exorbitant return to academics from its military footing. Within seven years of World War II, West Point was solidly providing a first rate college education. This paper will examine the Academy's years from 1945 through 1952, its Sesquicentennial. The central theme is that West Point not only returned to its pre-World War II condition, but that it also instituted reforms aimed at furthering its standing in the academic realm.

Two main reasons exist for West Point's shift back towards academics. The first was a deliberate attempt to broaden the cultural, intellectual, and political sophistication of cadets. Leaders throughout the Army echoed this need. In the post-war world, military officers were generally aware that the old martial virtues were not enough anymore, and that army officers should expect to serve political and diplomatic functions as

often as leading soldiers into combat.<sup>1</sup> The second reason for the return to academics is not as readily evident. Although West Point enjoyed a thorough reputation as a fine academic institution, the two world wars and the academy's strict scientific-technical background caused a decrease of scholarly appraisal. Since 1900, scholars tended to overlook the Military Academy and place it out of the main stream of educational development.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Academy instituted several initiatives after World War II aimed at broadening each cadet's intellectual foundation and increasing its own reputation as one of the premier academic institutions in the country.

Three categories characterized the Academy's initiatives following World War II. The first included those that returned West Point to its pre-World War II condition. The second type involved initiatives designed to bolster the Academy's academic enhancement. The final category consisted of West Point's efforts at earning the nation's appraisal as a leading undergraduate institution in the country. The Academy's first post-war superintendent, Maxwell D. Taylor, best synthesizes West Point's initiatives by stating "the cadets should not live in a mental cloister; their interests must be catholic, avoiding the small horizons sometimes attributed to the military mind."<sup>3</sup>

West Point's initial efforts focused on returning to its pre-war conditions. These efforts involved two initiatives:

the return to a four year curriculum and the return of a full faculty. As early as 1943, Academy leaders began preparing to return to a four year curriculum. The War Department rejected initial efforts as being premature, but the Academy formed a Post War Curriculum Committee to make periodic recommendations to the Superintendent. In 1945, the Secretary of War authorized the Superintendent to return to a four year curriculum.<sup>4</sup> The return to a four year course could not be abrupt, but the two years of work done by the Curriculum Committee paved the way for a smooth transition.<sup>5</sup> The Academy conducted the transition less than one year later during the 1946-1947 academic year resulting in homogeneous classes for all four years.<sup>6</sup>

The Committee's report, however, went much further than merely recommending a return to a four year education. It also called for the immediate return of a full faculty. The war created a dearth of available instructors. Cadets and reservists filled the vacancies during World War II. The end of World War II relieved this problem. West Point recalled its war heroes and even enlarged the academic staff and faculty. The Curriculum Committee recommended, and Congress subsequently approved, the appointment of an additional permanent professor to nine of the fourteen academic departments.<sup>7</sup> The Academy's intent was to enhance the quality of instruction and compare favorably with civilian academic institutions.<sup>8</sup> The Post War Curriculum Committee was essentially an internal review

committee designed to foster West Point's orderly return to its pre-war condition, which it completed admirably.

Although eager and ready, West Point was not content with merely returning to its pre-war status quo. If the Post War Curriculum Committee was West Point's internal review, the Academy also had the foresight to seek external review. In November 1945, West Point invited several distinguished scholars and soldiers to review its new curriculum. These individuals comprised the USMA Board of Consultants and included Dr. Karl T. Compton, President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Dr. James P. Baxter, President of Williams College.<sup>9</sup> These esteemed scholars, together with several high ranking war heroes, deeply examined the new curriculum and cadet life in general. Their report presented the Academy with several recommendations. The basic tone of the board was best echoed by one of its members, Lieutenant General Troy H. Middleton, comptroller for Louisiana State University, who stated "as I look at your curriculum, I feel that you have gone too far away from the academic side in order to enlarge upon the military conception of the course."<sup>10</sup> Although not a very positive statement, it did give the Academy the candid analysis it desired. West Point was quick to embrace whole-heartedly most of the Board's recommendations for which the Academy received great praise.<sup>11</sup>

Three of the Board's recommendations and two additional Academy initiatives served as the basis for furthering West

Point's academic enhancement. These five independent initiatives were the creation of the Dean of the Academic Board, post graduate training for incoming instructors, greater balance between scientific and liberal subjects, an improved lecture program, and the modernization of academic facilities. Each of these five efforts proved extremely successful.

An Act of Congress in June 1946 officially created the Dean of the Academic Board.<sup>12</sup> The Dean was to be a brigadier general responsible for academic affairs. The Superintendent and Commandant would now be able to concentrate on their primary duties. The Dean had principal responsibility for the coordination of courses, schedules, and facilities of instruction.<sup>13</sup> The creation of this position, especially with the rank equal to that of the Commandant, indicates the Academy's new found commitment to scholastics.

Following World War II, USMA began sending its instructors for advanced schooling prior to their teaching duties. The Department of Mechanics sent its first four instructors to graduate school (MIT) in 1946.<sup>14</sup> The following year it sent ten additional instructors to prominent graduate schools such as Illinois and the California Institute of Technology.<sup>15</sup> By the 1948-1949 academic year, the Department of Mechanics hoped that all of its instructors would have graduate degrees.<sup>16</sup> Other departments experienced similar academic enrichment. By May 1949, all instructors in the Department of Electricity had been to graduate school, including two with Ph.D.'s.<sup>17</sup> West Point's

intent was to "insure general excellence in background and technical knowledge."<sup>18</sup>

West Point also broadened its education in the post World War II years. In the 1944-1945 academic year, the Department of Economics, Government, and History only taught six core courses.<sup>19</sup> To broaden its curriculum, the department was teaching thirteen core courses by the 1949-1950 academic year.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the Department of Military Psychology and Leadership sprang to life in 1946, also leading to a broader, more liberal education.<sup>21</sup> The "liberalization" of West Point's curriculum equaled academic progress and was a direct product of the Academy's attempt to inculcate its graduates with the ability to cope with the complexity of the post-war world. By 1948, liberal arts courses consumed over forty percent of the curriculum.<sup>22</sup> Superintendent Maxwell D. Taylor noted that "in recent years there has been a definite trend away from the rigid scientific-mathematical training of former times to a course quite similar to that required for the degree of Bachelor of Science in the leading colleges of the country."<sup>23</sup>

In addition to a more liberal curriculum, the Academy also used lectures to broaden the cadets' horizons. By interviewing famous civilian and military leaders of World War II, prominent businessmen, and well-known educators, an Academy study group concluded:

"The military in the foreseeable future would be cast in political-military responsibilities to a much greater extent than had been the case before...And we realized that this meant that future military leaders had to know

much more about the history, geography, the economics, the aspirations of a lot of people all over the world. This pointed to the need for more emphasis on the social sciences and humanities."<sup>24</sup>

The study group's conclusions profoundly affected West Point's lecture series. Although lectures had always been a prominent part of West Point, the post World War II years saw dramatic changes in their quantity, range of topics, and variety of speakers. The 1945 Superintendent's report lists only five lectures for the 1944-1945 academic year.<sup>25</sup> Five years later, fifty-two guest lecturers came to West Point, all with scholarly credentials such as Ph.D.'s from highly regarded institutions or international acclaim as businessmen or politicians.<sup>26</sup> During the 1948-1949 academic year, over forty lecturers visited the Military Academy and included such notables as E.L. Woodard, professor of international relations at Oxford; Estes Kefauver, who talked about "Organization of the House and Senate"; J. Lawton Collins, who discussed "A Future Concept of Warfare"; John J. McCloy, who spoke on "The World Bank"; and L.L. Lemnitzer, who lectured on "Military Cooperation and Western Europe".<sup>27</sup> The Academy was providing its cadets with exposure to the foremost authorities on subjects of great national and international importance.

West Point also conducted a significant modernization of its academic facilities. It put into service a new electronics laboratory in 1946.<sup>28</sup> Technical laboratories were using excess Signal Corps equipment.<sup>29</sup> Items including diesel-electric

dynamometers, oscilloscopes, jet engines, turbines, and laminar flow tanks appeared between 1946 and 1950.<sup>30</sup> Although the Academy was increasing its emphasis on liberal arts, it was not abandoning its technical heritage. In fact, the Superintendent remarked that, "the curriculum has a core of mathematical and scientific subjects comparable to that found in any leading college giving a Bachelor of Science degree."<sup>31</sup> The same study group that called for an increase in the liberal arts also found that "the Army, Navy, and Air Force were developing for the future a lot of material which would require a more profound and intimate knowledge of the underlying sciences than had heretofore been the case."<sup>32</sup> The final result was that the Academy still had to focus on technical education, hence, the Bachelor of Science degree awarded to graduates. However, with a good balance of liberal arts, the Academy sought to provide top notch facilities that ensured success in the increasingly complex and technological world of the post-war era.

Although West Point's primary objective was to produce a military leader of high moral character, it also recognized the importance of academic excellence demanded by the complex and dynamic world of post-World War II. The preceding five initiatives changed West Point's azimuth from a destination of militarism towards that of soldier-statesman. The Academy's leader through this changing era, Superintendent Maxwell D. Taylor, remarked that "the tendency toward specialization in the arms and services resulting from wartime requirements has

been reversed."<sup>33</sup> How well these changes achieved their objectives is the focus of the final category of the Academy's post-war initiatives.

Academy leaders felt that the renewed academic vigor paid great dividends for West Point and its graduates. However, they also wanted to ensure that the Military Academy received "academic credit" for the shift from the battlefield to the classroom. To place West Point among the top undergraduate institutions was of utmost importance. The Academy's second post-war Superintendent, Lieutenant General Bryant E. Moore, espoused West Point's desires by stating:

"We must have the educational prestige to attract young men to West Point. We are in competition with Harvard and Yale, and the University of California -- and everyone else. Second, our undergraduate education must be second to none."<sup>34</sup>

To gain this "educational prestige", the Academy used four measures: Graduate Record Exam testing, Rhodes Scholarships, accreditation, and a national council on American affairs.

Beginning with the USMA Class of 1948, senior cadets took the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). West Point compared the scores of its cadets with the top colleges in the nation and USMA clearly excelled. Against a control group of 1,174 senior men from forty-one liberal arts colleges, the USMA Class of 1948 had an average of 589 versus 523 for the control group.<sup>35</sup> West Point's scores were higher in math, physical science, social studies, literature, and expression.<sup>36</sup> Only in fine arts and biology did cadets fall below the average, but West Point

taught neither subject.<sup>37</sup> The classes following 1948 achieved similar results. The GRE served as positive proof that the Academy's academic efforts were producing its desired objectives.

During the war years from 1939 to 1945, only two cadets earned Rhodes Scholarships. The six year period after World War II saw a dramatic increase. Eight cadets earned Rhodes Scholarships between 1946 and 1952. These facts indicate that esteemed scholars at the national level recognized West Point for its scholastic merits and that the Academy could compete with the finest undergraduate institutions in America.

West Point's academic reforms did not go unnoticed. In November 1949, the Military Academy earned accreditation by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools.<sup>38</sup> During a three day inspection and evaluation, the Association commended West Point for its efforts in achieving academic enrichment.<sup>39</sup> Accreditation served as a pinnacle of West Point's recognition. It was the "test" the Academy had to pass to make it a legitimate undergraduate college. Had the accreditation committee tried to evaluate West Point in 1945, prior to its academic reforms, a much different outcome would probably have resulted.

In 1949 West Point initiated the Student Council on United States Affairs (SCUSA) which included intense interaction with prominent civilian universities.<sup>40</sup> Cadets used the opportunity to show the academic elite in the United States that West Point

was more than a technical school that prepared combat officers. Students and professors from other colleges witnessed that West Point was not merely a military bastion of tactical thought, but also a national institution dedicated to strategic and national issues that dominated the world scene.

In summary, West Point instituted several important initiatives immediately following World War II. They did not all have the same objective, but they did move West Point toward an Athenian orientation from the Spartan condition it assumed during World War II. West Point did not initiate every proposed reform, for the Academy still had to maintain its position as the preeminent military leader development institution in the nation. An example was the recommendation to change West Point's name to the United States Military College (instead of Academy) because "college" indicated an undergraduate education and "academy" sounded like a preparatory school.<sup>41</sup> However, the Academy instituted most reforms and they all contributed to increasing West Point's standing among academic institutions in the United States. The Superintendent, in his 1942 report to the War Department, dedicated a single page to academics while devoting four pages to tactics.<sup>42</sup> Four years later, academics received seventeen pages while tactical training only received nine pages, primarily devoted to recreation and psychology activities.<sup>43</sup> By 1952, West Point's sesquicentennial, the United States Military Academy had successfully proven to the nation that it could

develop outstanding military leaders while simultaneously serving as one the country's foremost undergraduate institutions. The austere, militaristic nature of West Point in the World War II years had evolved into an environment where books took precedence over bullets.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Stephen E. Ambrose, Duty, Honor Country. A History of West Point (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 300.

<sup>2</sup>William J. Morton, foreword to The Educational Objectives of the U.S. Military Academy, by Sydney Forman (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Printing Office, 1951).

<sup>3</sup>Maxwell D. Taylor, "West Point Looks Ahead," Field Artillery Journal 36 (March 1946): 137.

<sup>4</sup>Memorandum from General Headquarters to Superintendent, USMA, Report of the Post War Curriculum Committee (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Archives, 1945).

<sup>5</sup>G.T. Campbell, "Reconversion and Change," Assembly IV (October 1945): 11.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Report of the Post War Curriculum Committee (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Archives, 1945).

<sup>8</sup>G.T. Campbell, "Reconversion and Change," Assembly IV (October 1945): 9-10.

<sup>9</sup>Report of the Board of Consultants (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Archives, 1945).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>G.T. Campbell, "Reconversion and Change," Assembly IV (October 1945): 9.

<sup>14</sup>Annual Report of the Superintendent (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Archives, 1944-1950).

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>G.T. Campbell, "Reconversion and Change," Assembly IV (October 1945): 10.

<sup>19</sup>Annual Report of the Superintendent (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Archives, 1944-1950).

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Stephen E. Ambrose, Duty, Honor Country. A History of West Point (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 301.

<sup>23</sup>Maxwell D. Taylor, "West Point Trains for the New Army," Army Information Digest 2 (April 1947): 5.

<sup>24</sup>Joseph Ellis and Robert Moore, School for Soldiers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974): 50-51.

<sup>25</sup>Annual Report of the Superintendent (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Archives, 1944-1950).

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Stephen E. Ambrose, Duty, Honor Country. A History of West Point (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 300.

<sup>28</sup>Annual Report of the Superintendent (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Archives, 1944-1950).

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Maxwell D. Taylor, West Point: Its Objectives and Methods (West Point, NY: U.S. Military Academy Printing Office, 1947).

<sup>32</sup>Joseph Ellis and Robert Moore, School for Soldiers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974): 50.

<sup>33</sup>Maxwell D. Taylor, "West Point Trains for the New Army," Army Information Digest 2 (April 1947): 8.

<sup>34</sup>Bryant E. Moore, "Address by the Superintendent, USMA," Assembly VIII (July 1949): 2.

<sup>35</sup>Stephen E. Ambrose, Duty, Honor Country. A History of West Point (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966): 301.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Annual Report of the Superintendent (West Point, NY:  
U.S. Military Academy Archives, 1944-1950).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Report of the Board of Consultants (West Point, NY:  
U.S. Military Academy Archives, 1945).

<sup>42</sup> Annual Report of the Superintendent (West Point, NY:  
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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

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