

# **No Army Inspired: The Failure of Nationalism at Antebellum West Point**

**Jacob Kobrick**  
**Department of History**  
**Villanova University**

*Edited by Alison Fisk*

*“No army inspired by the spirit of the Military Academy can ever endanger a country’s liberty or can ever desert its country’s flag.”*

– Secretary of War Elihu Root, 1902

Elihu Root spoke these words upon a happy occasion – the centennial celebration for the United States Military Academy at West Point. But Root surely knew, as most of his audience probably did, that 286 graduates of West Point had, in substantially less happy times just 41 years earlier, both endangered their country’s liberty and deserted its flag by opting to fight for the Confederate States of America in the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> He also was no doubt aware that of the 86 Southern-born cadets at the Academy in 1860-1861, 65 of them resigned, abandoning their training for the United States Army in order to serve the enemy instead.<sup>2</sup>

With this in mind, Root’s statement takes on a strange tone. Given the context in which it was made, it seems more than likely that the statement was intended as nothing more than a reflection of the high esteem in which West Point was held at the dawn of the twentieth century and an affirmation that another civil war could never occur. Read literally, however, it can just as well be taken as a rather unsubtle criticism of the Academy’s checkered past. Viewed in this light, Root’s words beg an interesting question: to what extent were West Point cadets in the antebellum era “inspired by the spirit of the Military Academy”? To put it

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Fleming, *West Point: The Men and Times of the United States Military Academy* (New York: William Morris & Company, Inc., 1969), 166, 281.

<sup>2</sup> George S. Pappas, *To the Point: The United States Military Academy, 1802-1902* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 332.

another way, to what extent, if any, did antebellum West Point inculcate its cadet corps with a sense of nationalism that operated as a countervailing force against the natural inclination of many Southerners to desert the Union and rush to the defense of their native states?

At the time of the Civil War, many believed that the Academy was a miserable failure in this regard. Public sentiment in the North regarding West Point was understandably hostile, given that the Academy had trained a good portion of the enemy's officer corps, not to mention C.S.A. President Jefferson Davis (class of 1828).<sup>3</sup> Much of the hostility came from the Republican Party, the leaders of which believed that the Military Academy "had been a breeding place of southern sentiment and was responsible for the defection of many officers to the rebel cause." Republican frustration with West Point was exacerbated by the alleged incompetence or intransigence of those graduates who commanded Union forces early in the conflict, with the slowness of General George McClellan, a Democrat, serving as the prime example.<sup>4</sup>

Secretary of War Simon Cameron joined in the chorus condemning West Point, lashing out angrily at defecting Southern cadets and openly questioning whether their "extraordinary treachery" was the result of a defect in the Academy's system of education.<sup>5</sup> Radical Republican Senators such as Zachariah Chandler, Benjamin Wade, John Sherman, and Lyman Trumbull bitterly denounced the Academy as a producer of traitors, decrying what they believed to be its pro-Southern and pro-slavery influence, with some of them even going so far as attempting to have West Point abolished. Radical attacks on West Point continued into 1863, when they were finally quelled for good by the impressive performances in service of the Union of Military Academy graduates Ulysses Grant, William Sherman, and Philip Sheridan.<sup>6</sup>

The hindsight of history has been much kinder to West Point than Simon Cameron and the radical Republicans were. Stephen Ambrose points out that the Academy was one of the last American institutions to divide when war broke out and one of the first to reunite when it was over. Although West Point cadets felt a sense of obligation to the federal government for the education they had received, Ambrose asserts, "it plainly was unreasonable to expect most southern graduates to

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<sup>3</sup> West Point graduates serving the Confederacy included Generals Robert E. Lee (class of 1829), Joseph E. Johnston (1829), P.G.T. Beauregard (1838), Lafayette McLaws (1842), James Longstreet (1842), Stonewall Jackson (1846), George E. Pickett (1846), A.P. Hill (1847), John Bell Hood (1853), and J.E.B. Stuart (1854). Gerard A. Patterson, *Rebels from West Point: The 306 U.S. Military Academy Graduates who Fought for the Confederacy* (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2002), 159-163.

<sup>4</sup> T. Harry Williams, "The Attack Upon West Point During the Civil War," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 25 (Mar., 1939): 493, 495.

<sup>5</sup> Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 37<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, July 1, 1861, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, 497, 504.

fight for the North.”<sup>7</sup> James L. Morrison has refuted claims that West Point was dominated by pro-Southern or pro-slavery elements, and concluded that “the evidence strongly suggests that the antebellum Military Academy lent its weight to nationalism rather than sectionalism in the protracted struggle between these two forces which took place within the confines of the institution.”<sup>8</sup>

The case against a Southern-dominated West Point in the antebellum years is a strong one. As Morrison points out, in the ten years preceding the war, no department contained more than 40.5 percent Southern-born officers, and in only three departments, including the administrative staff, were more than one-third of the officers Southern-born. In addition, a mere 14.8 percent of the 155 officers who served at the Academy between 1850 and 1861 joined the Confederacy, with more than one-third of all the Southern officers who taught at the Academy during this time remaining loyal to the Union. As far as the cadets were concerned, Morrison notes that more Southerners were admitted to West Point between 1830 and 1860 than their proportion of the population warranted, but this can be attributed to the poor quality of education in the South, as a result of which a disproportionate number of Southern cadets failed out of West Point, creating vacancies to be filled with other Southerners.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the strong statistical evidence that antebellum West Point did not harbor a nefarious pro-Southern influence, many have alleged that those West Point graduates who deserted the Union were influenced to do so by the Academy’s curriculum itself. The specific culprit was allegedly an 1825 textbook by Northern lawyer William Rawle entitled *A View of the Constitution*, which taught in no uncertain terms that every state had the constitutional right to secede from the Union (despite the fact that Rawle himself was no advocate of secession). Rawle noted that while the Constitution required that each state maintain a representative republican form of government, this requirement applied only as long as a state remained a voluntary member of the Union.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, the records of the Military Academy are not entirely clear as to exactly when or for how long Rawle’s book was used as part of the curriculum, but the evidence indicates that it was definitely used at some point. Morris Schaff, a cadet from Ohio and a member of the class of 1862, stated in his memoirs that the book was used only from 1825 to 1827, but had a prolonged effect on the

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 182, 189.

<sup>8</sup> James L. Morrison, “The Struggle Between Sectionalism and Nationalism at Ante-Bellum West Point,” *Civil War History* 19 (June, 1973): 148.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-145.

<sup>10</sup> Walter D. Kennedy and James R. Kennedy, ed., *A View of the Constitution of the United States of America by William Rawle: Secession as Taught at West Point Military Academy* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Land and Land Publishing Division, 1993), 235.

Academy, particularly due to its influence on Jefferson Davis, who graduated in 1828.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Confederate General Dabney H. Maury, a member of the class of 1846 from Virginia, believed that the book was introduced to the Academy by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun in 1822 (which must be inaccurate as the book was not published until 1825) and remained an official textbook until it was removed in 1861. Maury claimed that he and the other West Point Virginians who served the Confederacy “were not only obeying the plain instincts of our nature and dictates of duty, but we were obeying the very inculcations we had received in the National School.”<sup>12</sup>

It appears that Schaff’s account is more accurate than Maury’s, as an exhaustive search of West Point records conducted by Edgar Dudley in the early twentieth century reveals that Rawle’s book was probably used as an official textbook on constitutional law only in the year 1826, making Albert S. Johnston the only Confederate general to have been instructed in it.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Jefferson Davis denied reading *A View of the Constitution* and was said to be quite conversant with Kent’s *Commentaries*, a book replacing Rawle’s in the West Point curriculum and holding that secession was illegal.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it seems that there is little case to be made that the West Point curriculum was to blame for the defection of Southern West Point graduates.

If the Military Academy can be absolved of the charge of actively subverting the national loyalty of its graduates – and it appears almost certain that it can be – the question remains whether West Point actually did anything to affirmatively promote nationalism in the antebellum period. Although there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that it may have, there is very nearly a complete lack of direct evidence to support the point, and some evidence that the Academy did almost nothing at all.

Like much of the evidence used to refute the charge of a pro-Southern influence, much of the circumstantial evidence to support the claim that West Point had a nationalizing effect on its cadets is statistical. The most frequently cited statistic is as follows: of the 343 officers on active duty at the outbreak of the war who were not West Point graduates, 99 of them, or 28.8 percent, defected to the Confederacy, while of the 655 active members of the West Point classes of 1830 through 1860, only 161 of them, or 24.6 percent, left the Union.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Morris Schaff, *The Spirit of Old West Point, 1858-1862* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1907), 231-232.

<sup>12</sup> Dabney H. Maury, “West Point and Secession,” *Southern Historical Society Papers* 6 (Jul.-Dec., 1878): 249.

<sup>13</sup> Edgar S. Dudley, “Was ‘Secession’ Taught at West Point? What the Records Show,” *The Century Magazine* (Aug., 1909): 635.

<sup>14</sup> Fleming, 59.

<sup>15</sup> Morrison, “The Struggle Between Sectionalism and Nationalism,” 147.

These statistics do illustrate that a West Point graduate was less likely to desert the Union than a non-graduate, but they are nevertheless of limited utility. First and foremost, a crucial piece of information – the proportion of each group of officers that was Southern-born, and therefore would have had any desire to join the Confederacy in the first place – is missing. Second, the difference of 4.2 percent between the two samples is undoubtedly significant, but not overly large. Third and finally, the statistical information suffers from the problem inherent in all statistical data – it cannot by itself show causation. Even James Morrison, who believes that West Point did have a nationalizing influence, admits that “it would be foolish to argue on the basis of these fragmentary statistics alone that the Military Academy was the sole, or even the most critical, determinant in tipping the scales toward the Union.”<sup>16</sup>

There is other circumstantial evidence to support the claim that West Point promoted nationalism. Defenders of the Academy pointed out that at the outbreak of the war, 65 of the 86 Southern-born cadets at West Point resigned, while other Northern educational institutions saw their entire Southern contingents depart. Emory Upton, a member of the class of May, 1861,<sup>17</sup> asked rhetorically, “can Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Union, Princeton, or any other college in the land show a higher record of patriotism and sacrifice? Assuredly not, for their Southern graduates espoused the rebel cause almost en masse.”<sup>18</sup> The rejoinder to this argument is somewhat obvious, however. George Pappas has noted that “civilian students, of course, had not taken an oath to support the government of the United States and had no matters of conscience to delay their departure.”<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, Stephen Ambrose points out that “the United States government was not providing four-year, all-expense scholarships” to other Northern schools.<sup>20</sup> A comparison between West Point and other Northern schools is therefore clearly unfair.

Some letters written by West Point cadets provide further circumstantial evidence of nationalism at the Academy. For example, one particularly patriotic cadet was Samuel Nicoll Benjamin of New York, who graduated in May of 1861. When civil war appeared possible in early 1860, Benjamin “shuddered at the idea” of fighting against men who had been his fellow cadets,<sup>21</sup> but by January of 1861 he was prepared to do so, promising that “where [Winfield] Scott ‘Chief of Men’

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 147-148.

<sup>17</sup> Due to the exigencies of civil war, the Academy graduated classes in both May and June of 1861.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph Kirshner, *The Class of 1861: Custer, Ames, and Their Classmates After West Point* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>19</sup> Pappas, 332.

<sup>20</sup> Ambrose, 182.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Samuel Nicoll Benjamin to family, February 14, 1860, Samuel Nicoll Benjamin Papers, USMA Library Special Collections.

leads I will follow, and if I should fall it would be fighting in defense of the Union, given to us by Washington and the giants of that day.”<sup>22</sup> A short time later he reaffirmed, “I shall be true to my oath of allegiance, and fight for our flag and Union.”<sup>23</sup> There is nothing to indicate, however, whether or not Benjamin’s patriotism was a result of West Point’s influence.

Moreover, Benjamin’s sentiments are somewhat atypical of antebellum West Point cadets. Most cadet letters from this period focus on the more mundane matters of everyday life at the Academy – the rigor of the academic program, the monotony of drills and formations, the poor quality of the food, health concerns, and perhaps above all, the cadets’ never ending obsession with their class rank. The letters are also generally devoid of a sense of pride in being a cadet at West Point, training to be an officer, or serving the country.<sup>24</sup>

This is certainly true of the letters of Henry A. du Pont of Delaware, the highest-ranking member of the class of May, 1861. Like most cadets, du Pont was primarily concerned with getting through West Point and attaining a high class rank. Occasionally, however, he did address weightier matters, such as his father’s desire that he resign from the army after graduation, apparently because he wished to see Henry establish himself in business. In 1858, du Pont told his aunt that he was reluctant to adhere to his father’s wishes. His reasons for this stance, however, stemmed more from the dishonor that would be involved in breaking his oath to serve in the U.S. army than from a sense of nationalism.<sup>25</sup> A year later he again expressed reluctance to resign, this time attributing his feelings to a sense of obligation to West Point for providing him with an education, but not to an affirmative desire to serve his country.<sup>26</sup> In fact, on the same day Samuel Benjamin declared his willingness to die for the Union, du Pont wrote to his family, “I know if Delaware was in a similar position to South Carolina I should consider it my duty to resign at once and go home.”<sup>27</sup>

On April 14, 1861, in the immediate aftermath of the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter, du Pont told his father, “I regret now that I am at this juncture in the service of the U.S.” To his disappointment, however, he could see “no honorable mode of leaving it.” He therefore resolved, unhappily, to do his

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from Samuel Nicoll Benjamin to family, January 5, 1861.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Samuel Nicoll Benjamin to family, January 23, 1861.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., letters of George Horatio Derby (class of 1846), letters of George Cushing (class of 1858), letters of Thomas C. Bradford (class of 1861), letters of William Anthony Elderkin (class of 1861), letters of William H. Harris (class of 1861), letters of Jacob F. Kent (class of 1861), letters of Alfred Mordecai (class of 1861), letters of Charles E. Patterson (class of 1861), letters and memoirs of George A. Woodruff (class of 1861), USMA Library Special Collections.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Henry A. du Pont to aunt, October 31, 1858, in Stephen E. Ambrose, ed., “West Point in the Fifties: The Letters of Henry A. du Pont,” USMA Library Special Collections.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Henry A. du Pont to family, June 11, 1859, in Ambrose.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Henry A. du Pont to family, January 5, 1861, in Ambrose.

sworn duty and defend the Union.<sup>28</sup> He was greatly influenced in this decision by his father, who firmly believed that a soldier's primary loyalty should be to his nation, and not to his state.<sup>29</sup> A week later, du Pont became more militantly pro-Union, based on his being "disgusted" at the "spitting on the heads of Union men from the galleries in the Virginia convention" and "anarchy in Maryland," but it seems clear that his change of heart had nothing to do with West Point.<sup>30</sup>

The letters of Tully McCrea, a member of the class of 1862, suggest that nationalism was somewhat dormant at West Point until the attack on Fort Sumter revived it. On April 21, 1861, McCrea wrote, "the cadets from the northern states are perfectly united in sentiment and feelings; all are ready to defend the Stars and Stripes and uphold the government in its endeavors to quell the treason of the southern states. It is the first time since I have been here that I have seen them so united." He then described a Union meeting held in one of the cadets' rooms, during which patriotic songs were sung and the cadets cheered the Union troops. McCrea noted that "such cheers were never heard here before," and that the Southerners still left at the Academy "were not expecting such a universal outburst of patriotic indignation."<sup>31</sup> It seems, then, that external events, rather than anything that occurred within the walls of West Point, stirred up nationalism among the cadets. Moreover, when McCrea's relatives from Mississippi, the state of his birth, begged him to resign from West Point and join the Confederacy, he declined, but cited as the basis for his loyalty to the Union only the fact that he had spent most of his life in Ohio, and mentioned nothing having to do with West Point.<sup>32</sup>

In April of 1861, at the same time McCrea was writing of the patriotic fervor among the Northern cadets, some members of the class of 1861 sent a petition to the Secretary of War asking that they be allowed to graduate early and join in the defense of their country. It would be a mistake to accept this uncritically as evidence of nationalism at West Point, however. Samuel Benjamin eagerly signed the petition, in accordance with his patriotic desire to fight for the Union.<sup>33</sup> But not all who signed the document had similar motives. Stephen Carr Lyford, Jr., a member of the class of June, 1861, also signed the petition, but for very different reasons.

As Lyford explained to his family, he and many of his fellow cadets hoped to enter the army early in order to fill the vacancies left by officers who had

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<sup>28</sup> Letter from Henry A. du Pont to father, April 14, 1861, in Ambrose.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Elizabeth Sergeant, *They Lie Forgotten: The United States Military Academy 1856-1861* (Middletown, New York: The Prior King Press, 1986), 94.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Henry A. du Pont to father, April 21, 1861, in Ambrose.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Tully McCrea to Belle McCrea, April 21, 1861, in Catherine S. Crary, ed., *Dear Belle: Letters from a Cadet & Officer to his Sweetheart, 1858-1865* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 82-83.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Tully McCrea to Belle McCrea, May 11, 1861, in Crary, 95.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Samuel Nicoll Benjamin to mother, April 16, 1861.

defected to the Confederacy. Lyford believed that if he joined the army right away, he would most likely hold the rank of captain by the end of the war – a position that normally took fourteen years to attain. “Hence you can see,” he concluded, “it is of vital importance for us to use every exertion to secure our end. If Mr. Cameron does not do something for us, a number of our class will resign and enter the Militia.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, although he ultimately decided not to sign the petition, Henry du Pont acknowledged that had he done so, it would have been “in a purely professional point of view.”<sup>35</sup> So, while cadet letters do provide some circumstantial evidence of a nationalizing influence at West Point, they also illustrate that some cadets lacked feelings of nationalism, and reveal that others who took actions that seemed to be patriotic in nature were in fact motivated by more selfish concerns.

Compounding the weakness of the circumstantial evidence is the difficulty in finding any direct evidence that West Point attempted to instill its cadets with nationalism in the antebellum period.<sup>36</sup> A look at the Academy’s curriculum in the antebellum years is instructive in this regard. Put simply, West Point was an engineering school, and little else. As a result, the majority of the books in its library dealt with science, math, and engineering, as well as military affairs. In the classroom, humanities were paid little attention; math, science, and engineering took up most of the classroom time and counted more heavily than anything else in calculating merit rankings.<sup>37</sup> In fact, as William Skelton has noted, until the mid-1850s, “cadets devoted well over twice as much classroom time to mathematics, physical science, and engineering as to all other subjects combined.”<sup>38</sup> James Morrison has pointed out that “the men who controlled the institution viewed its mission as being the production of engineers who could also function as soldiers rather than the reverse.”<sup>39</sup>

The specific courses taught and books used at West Point in the years before the Civil War reveal nothing in the curriculum that would tend to imbue the cadet corps with a sense of nationalism or patriotism. In 1846, to take as an example a

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<sup>34</sup> Letter from Stephen Carr Lyford, Jr. to family, April 17, 1861, Stephen Carr Lyford, Jr. Papers, USMA Library Special Collections.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Henry A. du Pont to father, April 14, 1861, in Ambrose.

<sup>36</sup> James Morrison cites one piece of direct evidence on this score – a letter from Truman Seymour, a member of the class of 1846 from Vermont, who “declared that cadets seldom argued over sectional issues and that the faculty made a special effort to stimulate devotion to country.” Morrison, “The Struggle Between Sectionalism and Nationalism,” 143.

<sup>37</sup> James L. Morrison, *The Best School in the World: West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1986), 90-91.

<sup>38</sup> William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 168.

<sup>39</sup> Morrison, *The Best School in the World*, 101.



year in which many future Civil War generals were cadets,<sup>40</sup> the Fourth Class (or first-year cadets) studied mathematics, French, and English grammar; the Third Class studied the same subjects in addition to drawing; the Second Class studied natural and experimental philosophy, chemistry, and drawing; and the First Class cadets were instructed in Professor Dennis Hart Mahan's famed Engineering and Science of War course in addition to ethics, infantry tactics, artillery, and mineralogy and geology.<sup>41</sup> The only significant changes to this course of study in the ensuing years were the addition of a course in practical military engineering for the First Class, and the addition of courses in artillery and cavalry and infantry tactics for the lower classes.<sup>42</sup>

This course of study is unsurprising, for Professor Mahan, who was largely responsible for the content of the Military Academy's curriculum, did not place a high priority on the study of liberal arts or history. In fact, it seems that he actively discouraged the inclusion of such areas of study at West Point. As one historian has observed, "the great goal of the military academy, Mahan believed, was to furnish a solid foundation of scientific and military education. . . . Anything which detracted from this governing objective must be pruned away ruthlessly."<sup>43</sup>

The Academy's overwhelming emphasis on science and engineering to the exclusion of the humanities did not please everyone, however. In 1854, the Board of Visitors, a group of outside observers who annually conducted a thorough review of every aspect of life at West Point and issued a detailed report containing evaluations and recommendations for improvement, expressed its disappointment at the narrowness of the curriculum. In particular, the Board complained that "the subject of history is not taught in the academy, very much to our regret, as it is certainly a branch of great importance, especially the history of our country and military history – this should not be neglected."<sup>44</sup> The Board did not state explicitly that its desire for the inclusion in the curriculum of United States history was the result of its perception that such study would tend to instill the cadet corps with a greater sense of nationalism, but this seems a likely motivation.

Perhaps partially in response to this complaint, the Military Academy added a fifth year to its course of study beginning in 1855, and began to instruct the Fifth Class in Lossing's *History of the United States* as part of its course in "English

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<sup>40</sup> See John C. Waugh, *The Class of 1846: From West Point to Appomattox: Stonewall Jackson, George McClellan, and Their Brothers* (New York: Warner Books, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1846 (USMA Library, accessed July 9, 2003); available from <http://www.library.usma.edu/>; Internet.

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1852 (USMA Library, accessed July 9, 2003); available from <http://www.library.usma.edu/>; Internet.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas E. Griess, "Dennis Hart Mahan: West Point Professor and Advocate of Military Professionalism, 1830-1871" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1969), 242.

<sup>44</sup> Annual Report of the Board of Visitors for 1854, USMA Library Special Collections.

Studies and Literature.”<sup>45</sup> This did not fully satisfy the Board, however, which continued to bemoan the lack of humanities training at West Point. In 1856 the Board recommended the establishment of a permanent professorship of English that would have dominion over studies in grammar, logic, rhetoric, chronology, history, intellectual philosophy, principles of government, and fine arts.<sup>46</sup> This suggestion was evidently ignored. Moreover, by 1859 the Academy no longer used a textbook devoted exclusively to United States history, as the First, Second, and Fifth Classes were instructed in Max Weber’s *Outline of Universal History* instead.<sup>47</sup>

All in all, the West Point curriculum in the antebellum years was characterized by a heavy emphasis on the technical and the practical, and any attempt to look to the course of study as a source of nationalistic pride would seem to be in vain.<sup>48</sup> The fact that this was never the Academy’s goal is confirmed by a 1946 pamphlet, published by the Academy itself, detailing the history of West Point’s educational objectives dating back to its formation in 1802. The publication, which is divided into three separate sections dealing with the curriculum itself, the physical training of the cadets, and the building of character, makes no mention of a desire to inculcate cadets with a feeling of nationalism or to impress upon them a sense of pride in training to defend their native land.<sup>49</sup>

James Morrison nevertheless attempts to find evidence of nationalism at the antebellum Military Academy in the cadets’ daily routine, asserting that “the student faced daily reminders that he had come to West Point for the one purpose of preparing to become an officer in a national army; every formation, drill, and ceremony kept that fact before him.”<sup>50</sup> But might exercises such as formations and drills merely have turned the cadets into soulless automatons instead of filling

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<sup>45</sup> Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1855 (USMA Library, accessed July 9, 2003); available from <http://www.library.usma.edu/>; Internet. The Annual Report of the Board of Visitors for 1855 states that Hale’s *History of the United States* was used and that the First Class was instructed in history (rather than the Fifth), but this conflicts with the more likely accurate account in the Official Register.

<sup>46</sup> Annual Report of the Board of Visitors for 1856, USMA Library Special Collections.

<sup>47</sup> Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1859 (USMA Library, accessed July 9, 2003); available from <http://www.library.usma.edu/>; Internet.

<sup>48</sup> It should be noted, however, that at least one historian does believe that the West Point curriculum had some nationalizing effect. In his discussion of mid-nineteenth century filibustering expeditions, Robert May notes that despite the pro-filibustering tendencies of some U.S. army officers, most were hostile to filibustering because they viewed it as undermining the professionalism of the military as well as the nation’s honor. “West Pointers,” writes May, “who were educated at government expense, exposed to a curriculum that incorporated ethics and international law, and increasingly numerous within the officer corps, perhaps naturally professed such attitudes.” Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 130.

<sup>49</sup> Sidney Forman, *The Educational Objectives of the U.S. Military Academy: A Historical Study of the Basic Academic, Physical and Character Training Aims of the United States Military Academy*, Bulletin No. 2 (West Point, New York: USMA, 1946).

<sup>50</sup> Morrison, “The Struggle Between Sectionalism and Nationalism,” 142.

them with love for their country, especially if such rituals were not explicitly linked to a sense of patriotism? At least one cadet thought so. John Tidball, an Ohioan in the class of 1848, noted in his memoirs that his drills were often sufficient “to extinguish the Fourth of July or Magna Charta spirit from the most rampant of cross-road patriots.”<sup>51</sup>

Ironically, Morrison himself seemed to recognize the drawbacks of the Academy’s regimentation when he penned, a year after his assertion that drills promoted nationalism, that “taken in totality the institution must have encouraged a mechanistic outlook. . . . Success at the military academy depended primarily on the exactitude with which a student met requirements imposed by an instructor, a textbook, or a set of regulations; initiative and imagination, if not actively penalized, were not rewarded.”<sup>52</sup> West Point’s mechanistic approach to regulating every aspect of a cadet’s life was partly behind Simon Cameron’s aforementioned attack on the Academy in 1861. Cameron believed that the defections of Southern graduates and cadets could be blamed to some extent on the fact that the Academy drew little distinction between acts that were inherently wrong and acts that merely violated regulations, resulting in the confusion of right and wrong and “in the decision of grave moral questions, [the substitution of] habit for conscience.”<sup>53</sup>

Not only is there a lack of evidence to support the proposition that drills and formations inspired nationalism, it seems that in some instances where the antebellum Academy had a clear chance to imbue its ceremonies with patriotism, it failed to do so. John Tidball describes in his memoirs the West Point graduation ceremony, which seemed to consist mostly of a ritual whereby graduating cadets would remove their hats and kick them, but little else.<sup>54</sup> Absent from Tidball’s description is anything of a nationalistic nature, including the playing of the Star Spangled Banner or other patriotic songs.

The Academy’s failure in this regard was not total, however. George Horatio Derby, the noted American humorist and a member of the class of 1846, reported in 1844 that George Washington’s birthday was marked at West Point with fireworks, rockets, and the performance of several patriotic songs, including the national anthem. To Derby, the patriotic displays were “quite exhilarating.”<sup>55</sup> Other cadets recorded the details of July 4<sup>th</sup> celebrations that included an artillery salute, a processional march, a reading of the Declaration of Independence, a cadet

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<sup>51</sup> John C. Tidball, “Getting Through West Point by One Who Did and for Those Who Want to Know,” Ch. III, 69, USMA Library Special Collections.

<sup>52</sup> James L. Morrison, “Educating the Civil War Generals: West Point, 1833-1861,” *Military Affairs* 38 (Oct., 1974): 110.

<sup>53</sup> Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 28.

<sup>54</sup> Tidball memoirs, Ch. IV, 78.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from George Horatio Derby to family, February 23, 1844, George Horatio Derby Papers, USMA Library Special Collections.

oration, and a celebratory dinner with the drinking of patriotic toasts (although this one-day exemption from the ban on cadet drinking was eliminated in 1838).<sup>56</sup> These holiday celebrations provide virtually the only direct evidence that West Point did anything affirmative to promote nationalism among its cadet corps.

Of course, the Academy did require each new cadet to take an oath of loyalty to the United States and the Constitution. The effect of this oath upon the cadets is questionable, however. The events of 1860-1861 apparently convinced Congress that the existing oath was inadequate, as it passed two new laws; the first, passed in August of 1861, required the cadet to take an additional oath promising that he would “maintain and defend the sovereignty of the United States paramount to any and all allegiance, sovereignty, or fealty I may owe to any state, county, or country whatsoever”; the second, passed in July of 1862, required a cadet to swear that “he had never borne arms against the United States, given aid to her enemies, held office under any authority hostile to the United States, or supported any ‘pretended government, power or constitution within the United States, hostile thereto’.”<sup>57</sup>

John Tidball recounted in his memoirs an anecdote suggesting that the oath may not have had the effect on the cadet corps that West Point and Congress intended. When Tidball’s class took the oath in 1844, one of their number, Enoch Q. Fellows, declined to do so, saying he no longer wished to be a cadet. He was not allowed to resign; instead, officers, professors, and his fellow cadets attempted to convince him to take the oath, to no avail. For months the matter seemed forgotten, until one spring day during drills. Abruptly halting drills, the commandant brought the cadets into formation so that they formed three sides of a square in front of the superintendent’s house. With great formality, Fellows was called to the front. As Tidball claimed in his memoirs, the cadets were prepared to take action upon realizing that Fellows might be flogged:

By glancing to the right and left I observed a rebellious pallor gathering on the faces of many, while others flushed scarlet with the hot blood of defiance. And this was not confined to us alone, his classmates; the feeling ran, as if by corps sympathy, through the whole body.

Fortunately for all concerned, Fellows was not flogged. Instead, the doors to the superintendent’s house opened, and the superintendent emerged with the entire

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<sup>56</sup> Sidney Forman, ed., *Cadet Life Before the Mexican War*, Bulletin No. 1 (West Point, New York: USMA, 1945), 21-22.

<sup>57</sup> Pappas, 338-339.

military and academic staff behind him. A Bible was produced, and Fellows, undoubtedly cowed by the whole proceeding, took the oath.<sup>58</sup>

Significantly, however, Tidball and his comrades, rather than being angry with their fellow cadet for refusing to take the oath, were willing to risk their own standing to defend him from what they perceived as official tyranny. Although Tidball's memoirs cannot be taken as gospel in this regard, as they represent the word of only one man and were written years after the fact, they nevertheless tend to support some historians' belief that West Point did produce new loyalties, but these loyalties were "less to the nation as an abstract ideal than to one's classmates, West Point, and the army." In this way, the Academy has been described as creating "a band of brothers," and a "corporate identity among army officers."<sup>59</sup> This is not, of course, the same thing as creating nationalism.

Another way in which James Morrison has sought evidence of nationalism at West Point is by looking at the Academy from the outside – specifically through the annual reports of the aforementioned Board of Visitors.<sup>60</sup> This is a difficult way to gauge the climate of life at West Point, however, as the members of the Board visited only once a year to conduct their inspections and examinations, and were not present for everyday events. Moreover, a closer look at the Board's annual report for 1838 – which Morrison cites as an example – demonstrates the problems inherent in relying on this type of evidence.

The Board did indeed praise West Point's nationalistic spirit that year, but the words it chose to express this sentiment sound more like a hope for the future than a statement of present affairs: "Surrounded by so many recollections of the glorious struggle of our forefathers in the cause of liberty, in sight of the monuments that commemorate them, the American youth cannot fail to imbibe strong feelings of patriotism and a love of country, which form the best security for the maintenance of our independence."<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the flowery language the Board employed included no mention of anything West Point affirmatively did to stir up nationalism among the cadet corps, suggesting instead that the cadets would become inspired merely by their presence at the Academy.

Although it would have been manifestly unfair to charge West Point with the responsibility of uniting the entire country, it would not have been unreasonable to expect the institution to take measures to deal with sectionalism within its own walls. Sectionalism had been a part of West Point's culture since its founding in 1802, but became much worse, as it did throughout the nation, in the 1850s. John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 infuriated Southerners and sent shock

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<sup>58</sup> Tidball memoirs, Ch. VII, 41-45.

<sup>59</sup> Skelton, 177-180.

<sup>60</sup> Morrison, "The Struggle Between Nationalism and Sectionalism," 143.

<sup>61</sup> Annual Report of the Board of Visitors for 1838, USMA Library Special Collections.

waves through the cadet corps, but slavery was not the only issue that divided North and South; the difficulty Southern cadets often had in competing with better educated Northerners was also a source of tension. As a result of what eventually became rampant sectionalism, fistfights between Northern and Southern cadets became commonplace at West Point.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, cadets in this period would often scheme to get themselves assigned to companies that were more Northern or Southern in nature.<sup>63</sup>

Morris Schaff, who attended West Point from 1858-1862, at the height of sectional tension, recorded in his memoirs that officers and cadets generally tried to avoid discussing political events that divided the nation, as such discussions were deemed unbecoming for those pledged to serve the country. Nevertheless, Schaff admitted that the cadets “were in miniature the country itself,” and that once letters and local papers from home brimming with “consciousness of a national crisis” arrived, “it was not long before [such consciousness] was felt at West Point.”<sup>64</sup>

As James Morrison points out, West Point did make some efforts to suppress sectionalism within the cadet corps. Specific examples included forbidding the Dialectic Society (a cadet literary, dramatic, and debating group), in the early 1840s, from debating whether a state had the power to nullify a federal law, removing from a textbook those chapters discussing the morality of slavery, and in 1858, not allowing cadets to attend a nearby church where the minister was preaching abolition. Nevertheless, admits Morrison, sectionalism persisted despite these efforts.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, while actions such as these may have had some negative effect on sectionalism, they were hardly calculated to have a positive effect on nationalism.

Furthermore, it seems that beyond these isolated examples, West Point did not do anything to address sectionalism on an everyday basis. The annual reports of the Board of Visitors, which examined life at the Academy in minute detail, are instructive in this regard. In not one report between 1850 and 1861 did the Board address the growing sectionalism among the cadet corps (including the increasingly frequent fistfights), nor did it document anything the Academy was doing to combat the problem.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the Board’s only references to the subject of sectionalism or nationalism in the 1850s were a suggestion in 1851 that the Academy display military trophies to inspire patriotism in the cadets,<sup>67</sup> and another flowery proclamation of West Point’s nationalizing character two years later,

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<sup>62</sup> Fleming, 128, 142.

<sup>63</sup> Pappas, 310.

<sup>64</sup> Schaff, 162.

<sup>65</sup> Morrison, “The Struggle Between Sectionalism and Nationalism,” 142.

<sup>66</sup> See Annual Reports of the Board of Visitors for 1850-1861, USMA Library Special Collections.

<sup>67</sup> Annual Report of the Board of Visitors for 1851, USMA Library Special Collections.

which included the assertion that “no sectional or social jealousies can here be awakened.”<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, as Thomas Fleming has noted, “sectional bitterness” was “already mounting” by the time Robert E. Lee became West Point’s superintendent in 1852. According to Fleming, Lee did what he could to ease the tensions, reminding cadets that they were part of a “band of brothers,”<sup>69</sup> but West Point instituted no formal program for combating sectionalism or promoting nationalism.

In sum, the circumstantial evidence that West Point affirmatively promoted nationalism in the antebellum period is weak, and direct evidence on the point is nearly nonexistent. It is important to note, however, that the failure of West Point to affirmatively promote nationalism among the cadet corps is not necessarily to blame for the defections of Academy graduates and cadets. As Morris Schaff eloquently noted, Southerners had powerful forces drawing them toward the Confederacy that may have been stronger than any countervailing forces West Point could have brought to bear. Believing it to be remarkable “that any graduate or cadet from the South remained loyal,” Schaff exhorted readers of his memoirs to “put yourself in their places – all the yearning ties of home, boyhood’s friends, sweethearts, the old plantations beckoning them from their fields and runs and woods, the firesides, the churchyards whose silent dust had called their boyish tears to flow fast as they stood beside the freshly dug graves – all appealing to them to go with their section, come what might.”<sup>70</sup>

In addition, West Point must be absolved to some extent by the simple fact that prior to the Civil War, the concept of the United States as a nation was not a strong one. As Carl Degler has pointed out, Abraham Lincoln’s assumption upon the outbreak of war “that a nation had been endangered,” and “that a sense of true nationhood already embraced the geographical area known as the United States . . . was not that held by many people of the time, and especially not by Southerners.” To most, writes Degler, the “Union was just a union of states, and not a nation in any organic sense.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Henry Adams wrote of the winter of 1860-61, “secession was likely to be easy where there was so little to secede from. The Union was a sentiment, but not much more.”<sup>72</sup>

As would be expected in a nation with a weak sense of itself, American nationalism in the antebellum era was a far cry from what it would later become. As Benedict Anderson has famously noted, nations are “imagined communities.”

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<sup>68</sup> Annual Report of the Board of Visitors for 1853, USMA Library Special Collections.

<sup>69</sup> Fleming, 130.

<sup>70</sup> Schaff, 233-234.

<sup>71</sup> Carl N. Degler, “One Among Many: The United States and National Unification,” in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Lincoln the War President* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 95.

<sup>72</sup> John Niven, *The Coming of the Civil War, 1837-1861* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1990), 1.

Normally, part of what gives weight to nationalism is the subjective antiquity of the nation in the eyes of its proponents – a concept that is squarely at odds with the historian’s conception of the nation as objectively modern. In the case of the United States, however, the defining moment of its formation – the Declaration of Independence – was not only not grounded in history, but was perceived as a radical break with the past.<sup>73</sup> In addition, as the Civil War would prove, the ideals of the Revolution were subject to widely varying interpretations. Charles Royster points out that all of the participants in the Civil War “claimed to be guarding the legacy of the American Revolution.” As a result, “two internally contradictory stories of nation-making . . . became justifications for a bitter war to establish which myth was true.”<sup>74</sup> Even before the war, these conflicting interpretations undoubtedly contributed to the difficulty in viewing the United States as an organic entity rather than an artificial social construct.

In a similar vein, Susan-Mary Grant has explained that the United States was actually two different “imagined communities.” Rather than seeing antebellum Northern ideology as nationalistic, as have many other historians, Grant makes a convincing case that it was in fact sectional – relying on the South for definition and using it as a negative reference point. This brand of national identity saw the South as fundamentally different from the rest of the country, even in terms of national ideals and experience. These attitudes – although often portrayed as representing a national ideology due to the establishment of the Republicans as a national group despite their sectional ideology – were in fact “destructive of national cohesion.”<sup>75</sup> With Grant’s analysis in mind, it becomes easier to understand why Northern “nationalism” at West Point failed to capture the hearts and minds of Southerners at the institution.

Sectionalism was not the only barrier to the formation of a true national identity in the nineteenth century, however. Major Wilson has asserted that several theoretical concepts of nationalism competed for primacy in the antebellum years. Proponents of corporative freedom, which was based on qualitative improvement and increasing order through institutionalization, clashed with advocates of federative freedom, who believed in independence from the influence of the federal government and stressed local and individual autonomy. By the end of the 1840s, however, this debate had given way to one over which element of the nation – free or slave – would have the right to expand. The proponents of individual freedom – the Free Soilers – viewed themselves as representing the national ideal

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<sup>73</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 6, 193.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 144-145.

<sup>75</sup> Susan-Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 17, 20-21, 35.



of freedom against the expansion of an alien slave power.<sup>76</sup> These differing philosophical conceptions of nationalism, in addition to the growing sectionalism of the time, provided further obstacles to the formation of a unitary vision of American nationalism in the antebellum years.

Other historians agree that American citizens were being pulled in several different directions at once prior to the Civil War. Melinda Lawson has identified sectional strife, class resentments, suspicion of centralized government, and anti-abolitionist sentiment as factors competing with loyalty to the Union, even in the North. In addition, most citizens located their primary identities in the states in which they lived, and were consequently more concerned with the rights of the states against the Union than the other way around. As a result, Lawson asserts, “ambivalence about the national state became a mainstay of antebellum political culture.”<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, David Waldstreicher has noted that American nationalism should not be studied in isolation, but rather must be looked at “in relation to other identities, beliefs, and practices.” He stresses that national identity has always existed alongside local and regional identities, and that “nationalism is always one of several ideologies in a larger cultural field.” Even nationalistic rituals – such as the ones that sometimes occurred at West Point – cannot be taken at face value, but must be read as politicized attempts among various contestants to claim true American nationality.<sup>78</sup>

Clearly, any criticism of West Point in the antebellum years must take into account the ambiguous and contested nature of American nationalism during that period. That being said, we will never know how many more Southerners may have been persuaded to remain with the Union had the leaders of the Academy taken a view closer to Lincoln’s and made a greater effort to take the lead in establishing a nationalistic spirit among those who would ultimately be charged with the country’s defense.

Fortunately, the Military Academy’s failure in the antebellum years to instill its cadets with patriotism in addition to scientific and military knowledge undoubtedly provided lessons for the future. In 1898, West Point introduced a new coat of arms along with a motto that has become famously associated with West Point in the years since: “Duty, Honor, Country.”<sup>79</sup> Four years later, upon West Point’s centennial, Secretary of War Elihu Root spoke hopefully of the future when

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<sup>76</sup> Major L. Wilson, *Space, Time, and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and the Irrepressible Conflict, 1815-1861* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 4-7, 12-15.

<sup>77</sup> Melinda Lawson, *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 5-10.

<sup>78</sup> David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 6, 9.

<sup>79</sup> Theodore J. Crackel, *The Illustrated History of West Point* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 178.

he made the famous promise that no army inspired by the spirit of West Point would ever again desert the United States. Root sought to place West Point “in a new educational and military context,” and the Academy’s new motto perfectly summed up his goal. From then on, West Point “would claim to produce not valuable technicians, but valuable men.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Fleming, 281.