Journal of Philosophy & History of Education
vol. 64, no. 1, 2014, pp. 81–93

Early Congressional Activities on West Point: 1776 to 1861

Lee S. Duemer, Texas Tech University

Historically, there was a long period during which the physical condition of an army was one primary determinant of its success or failure in battle.[1] Over the last several centuries, however, with the increased importance of technology, warfare became more complicated, necessitating sophisticated training in order for military leaders to maximize the effective use of armaments. Military education became central to the soldier's professional development and the strengthening of national defense. The abilities of military leaders to adopt technological advances in order to maintain strategic and tactical advantages increasingly determined success or failure on the battlefield.

Military education scholarship tends to focus either on West Point or events following the Civil War. One of few pre-Civil War-era examinations, *The Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York* examines the early history of West Point, but does not explore congressional activity regarding the military academy.[2] Ira Reeves' *Military Education in the United States* focuses primarily on West Point and the post-Civil War period.[3] Even more contemporary works do not venture into legislative origins of West Point. Frederick Rudolph's *The American College and University and Curriculum* does not discuss social forces that created and shaped West Point.[4] More recent examinations of West Point, such as *Duty, Honor, and Country* by Stephen Ambrose covers the entire span of its history but fails to delve in any detail into its legislative antecedents.[5] *Mister Jefferson's Military Academy* provides the most detailed analysis of why Jefferson decided to support the creation of a military academy, but not the legislative activities during and immediately following the American Revolution.[6] In sum, examination of military education scholarship locates a sizeable gap in the literature on both the history of Congress and West Point, as well as the history of higher education.

The purpose of my argument is to document and analyze congressional activities regarding West Point from the American Revolution until 1861. Herein I develop an understanding of

congressional activities and responses to occasional opposition to a military academy's existence. I do not intend to provide a comprehensive documentation of all legislation debated in Congress on the subject of military education, but rather offer analysis of congressional activity with respect to West Point, the United States Military Academy. My focus here remains on one federally controlled institution: West Point. Annapolis, the Naval Academy, is not included in my investigation as it was not founded until 1845 and does not provide an historical examination as lengthy as that of West Point, founded in 1802.

In the United States, the approval of Congress is needed to establish and support financially a military and its support mechanisms, such as educational institutions. Standing professional armies, particularly those that aggressively pursue innovation, represent capital expenditures for governments. To establish and support financially a military academy requires approval of Congress, for the Constitution grants Congress the power to "raise and support armies…."[7] Recounting an understanding of how West Point developed must therefore include activities by the legislative branch of the U.S. government.

Legislative Activities during the American Revolution

Correspondence between Henry Knox and John Adams indicates that, before the thirteen colonies declared their independence from England, the idea of a military academy was a subject of dialogue between the army and Congress. On 2 November 1775, Adams, a member of the Congressional Board of War, wrote to Knox to inquire about military engineers, particularly those experienced in fortifications and gunnery, in addition to any available books on military science.[8] In his 16 May 1776 reply, Knox, by that time General Washington's Chief of Artillery, suggests the establishment of an academy where "the whole theory of the art of war shall be taught."[9] Though Adams supported the idea, no action was taken either by the Board of War or by Congress.[10]

The lack of a colonial military academy stands in contrast with British military science, whose officers were educated at Woolwich, a factor giving them a decided advantage on the battlefield, much to the concern of generals like Knox. On 25 September 1776, Knox replied to Adams, "Military academies must be instituted at any expense. We are fighting against a people well acquainted with the theory and practice of war, brave by discipline and habit."[11] Knox reiterated these views a short time later to a visiting congressional committee sent to investigate the war's progress. Knox reports in *Hints to Congressional Committee now in camp. Headquarters, Harlem Heights, 27 September 1776*, that:

> As officers can never act with confidence until they are Masters of their profession, an Academy established on a liberal plan

> would be the utmost service to America, where the whole theory and practice of Fortifications and gunnery should be taught; to be nearly on the same plan as that of Woolwich making allowance for the differences of circumstances.[12]

The committee reported back to Congress and, on 9 October 1776, passed a modest proposal for a "continental Laboratory and military Academy…."[13] The academy's purpose was to educate officers while they continued to serve with their regiments, for that is where they were most needed during war. The academy was the first action taken by Congress to provide officers with a scientific education including mathematics, arithmetic, and geometry. It operated from 1777 until the conclusion of the war in 1783, when it was terminated.[14]

Army Inspector General, William von Steuben, wrote to Alexander Hamilton following the war. Hamilton served on a congressional committee charged with investigating a permanent defense policy for the United States. In his letter he lays out an elaborate, complete plan for a proposed academy including a curriculum of natural philosophy, experimental philosophy, civil and international law, history, geography, mathematics, civil architecture, artillery, and engineering.[15] Von Steuben's plan was based on the British model at Woolwich, and much of his plan eventually would become incorporated at West Point.

Washington's communications with von Steuben and Hamilton helped him formulate *Sentiments on a Peace Establishment*, which he sent to Congress in May 1783. The influence of Knox and von Steuben was apparent as he outlined a militia that easily could be called to order in the event of emergency. Washington felt it necessary that a number of young men in each community be educated in the science of war for the plan to work.[16] He also recommends the establishment of one or more academies "for the instruction of the Art Military; particularly those Branches of it which respect Engineering and Artillery, which are highly essential, and the knowledge of which, is most difficult to obtain."[17] He emphasizes the need for an institution devoted to military education, "Of so great importance is it to preserve the knowledge which has been acquired thro' the various Stages of long and arduous service, that I cannot conclude without repeating the necessity of the proposed Institution, unless we intend to let the Science become extinct."[18] Much of Washington's plan for deterring war is built around an overall strategy of maintaining a state of military readiness.

However, these carefully reasoned plans were almost entirely ignored by Congress. The political state of the nation under the Articles of Confederation was unfavorable to any consideration of a military

academy. The central issue, the survival of the states as a nation and adoption of a Constitution, crowded out discussion of military education, considered a comparatively minor subject.[19] Post-Revolutionary War, the United States had an army comprised of no more than one regiment of infantry and two companies of artillery: a total of approximately 800 men. The army was virtually nonexistent and no provisions were made for military education of the officer corps.

Early Presidential Appeals to Congress

Washington continued to press the issue though his earlier suggestions on military education were not implemented. In his second annual message to Congress on 8 December 1790 he recommends the establishment of a military academy as a subject Congress should undertake.[20] In his second term of office he again addresses the importance of a military academy to Congress. Washington states that "however pacific the general policy of a Nation may be, it ought never be without an adequate stock of Military knowledge for emergencies."[21] He argues such an institution necessary to the nation in order to preserve and transmit knowledge of military science, a field according to Washington that "…demands much previous study."[22]

In his eighth, and final, address to Congress on 7 December 1796, Washington again proposes the establishment of a military academy. He points out Congress' lack of activity on this subject and emphasizes this is a matter too important to be ignored based on how "a flourishing state of the arts and sciences contributes to national prosperity and reputation."[23] Washington's comments were particularly significant at the time in light of worsening diplomatic relations with France.

Despite his many exhortations, no action is taken by Congress to create a military academy. Meanwhile, relations with France continue to deteriorate, so that by 1798 the United States is at the brink of war with a nation of considerable, advanced military prowess. In a step toward formation of a formalized military academy, on 16 July 1798, Congress authorized President Adams to appoint four teachers of the arts and sciences to the Corps of Artillerists to teach officer cadets in West Point, New York at the fortifications on the Hudson River.[24]

Creation of the Military Academy at West Point

On 16 March 1802, Congress formally founded the United States Military Academy at West Point.[25] It was approved by President Jefferson and became formally known as the Military Peace Establishment Act.[26] Congressional approval of West Point in 1802 was likely enabled by continuing poor foreign relations with France coupled with harassment from Mediterranean pirates.

While the United States had succeeded in averting all-out war with France, international relations and tensions continued to be a critical national issue. On 2 December 1806, Jefferson submitted his annual address to Congress which he opened by speaking to foreign relations problems with Britain, France, and Spain, as well as on U.S. soil with Indians.[27] The threatening foreign relations climate is expressed by Representative Felix Grundy of Tennessee, who states that, if the British are successfully engaged in war, they will be driven "from our Continent—they will no longer have an opportunity of intrigue with our Indian neighbors, and the setting of the ruthless savage to tomahawk our women and children."[28] The British and Native American threats to the nation are echoed by President James Madison in his war message to Congress on 1 June 1812.[29]

Following the War of 1812, congressional support for military education increased. The House Committee on Militia submitted a 17 January 1817 report which includes the committee's concerns and recommendations on military education. The report is as much an endorsement of military education as it is a warning. That the committee preferred a citizen-based militia is clearly articulated in their report.

> The safety of a republic depends as much upon the equality in the use of arms amongst its citizens, as the equality of rights. Nothing can be more dangerous in such a government than to have a knowledge of the military art confined to a part of the people; for sooner or later that part will govern.[30]

The committee based much of their criticism on concerns about the power a professional military structure would command. They compared America to ancient Rome, which transferred military education from the masses to professional soldiers who, in turn, took arms against their own country. The most logical solution, according to the House Committee on Militia, was to disseminate military education throughout the population public education rather than leave it to a small, privileged elite.

While the Revolution served to raise awareness of the need for West Point, the War of 1812 justified its the value. No fortification constructed by a graduate of West Point was captured by the British.[31] However, in spite of examples of competence and bravery, the army paid a high price for having been unprepared, ignoring the advice of Washington and others to maintain an army in a state of readiness.[32] While successes could be credited to West Point, disasters were accounted for by the lack of properly educated officers.[33]

That West Point proved its value was evident in two attempts further to expand military education. Representative Richard Johnson of

Kentucky submitted a 19 November 1818 resolution requesting the Committee on Military Affairs investigate the necessity to establish additional military academies.[34] Representative Daniel Cook of Illinois submitted a 4 January 1819 resolution asking the same,[35] submitting a similar resolution on 15 February 1819; however, no action was taken on their proposals.[36]

Attacks on West Point

Beginning in 1820, there began a series of attempts to persuade Congress to abolish West Point. Several of these were led by the academy's former superintendent, Captain Alden Partridge. Partridge began serving as acting superintendent in 1808, and was appointed superintendent in 1814. He was replaced in 1817 but refused to relinquish his command. President James Monroe ordered him court-martialed and he resigned his commission the following year.[37] After his departure from the army, Partridge embarked on a path of revenge against the institution. On 2 March 1820, Partridge presented a memorial to Congress in which he attacked West Point and warned of the threat of a growing military aristocracy.[38]

Partridge's complaints soon found sympathy; on 10 March 1820 Representative Newton Cannon of Tennessee submitted a resolution in the House Appropriations Committee which recommended the elimination of West Point. It was addressed the same day and rejected by a vote of 12 to 6. The committee reported the vote to the full House and no further action was taken.[39]

Andrew Jackson resembled other early-nineteenth-century presidents in his continued support for West Point. In his first address to Congress in December 1829 he encouraged West Point's continued support.

> I recommend to your fostering care, as one of our safest means of national defense, the Military Academy. This institution has already exercised the happiest influence on the moral and intellectual character of our Army; and such of the graduates as from various causes may not pursue the profession of arms will be scarcely less useful as citizens. Their knowledge of the military art will be advantageously employed in the militia service, and in a measure secure to that class of troops the advantages which in this respect belong to standing armies.[40]

The preceding passage contains several messages to Congress important to historians. While Jackson's tenure in office witnessed several attacks on West Point, Jackson himself was supportive of the institution, and demonstrated a clear recognition of its benefit. However,

Jackson indicates he expects men graduated from West Point will fulfill their military obligation as militiamen, not as professional soldiers.

On 25 February 1830, Representative David Crockett of Tennessee introduced a resolution that sought the elimination of West Point. Like Partridge's, Crockett's resolution on West Point was grounded in the idea it threatened to create a military aristocracy. Crockett further alleged West Point favored upper social classes in its admissions. The House Committee on Military Affairs took no action.[41]

Another attempt to abolish the academy was made on 17 May 1834 by Representative Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky. In a meeting of the Committee on Military Affairs, he cites formal resolutions from the Tennessee and Ohio legislatures that recommend closing West Point. The committee decides not to recommend closing to the full House and no further action is taken.[42]

On 7 January 1836, Representative Albert Hawes of Kentucky introduces a proposal asking for the appointment of a select committee to investigate whether West Point should be closed. His proposal is rejected in committee and goes no farther.[43] The only evidence of the Committee on Military Affairs having supported an attempt to close West Point is in 1837. Led by Representative Francis Smith of Maine, the committee approves a bill to discontinue government support for cadet education; however the House takes no action on the bill.[44]

On 12 October 1838, Captain Partridge and Edward Burke submit another memorial to Congress, petitioning for the elimination of West Point. Partridge's second memorial represents a change from his first when he recommended only a change in the form and organization of military education. Partridge's second proposal asks West Point be eliminated and military education be passed to the state level, each state with its own academy.[45] No action is taken on the petition, and the cessation of further appeals to Congress coincides with the death of Captain Partridge in 1854. After 1854 there are no further records of proposals to eliminate West Point.

Conclusions

Revolutionary War leaders recognize the value of military education during and after the war. Early congressional activities are characterized by resistance toward the idea of establishing a military academy, even at the request of Washington and other Revolutionary War leaders. The efforts of early presidents are impeded by a Congress suspicious of a standing army as evidenced in the lack of a clearly defined, post-Revolutionary War military establishment.

An examination of congressional proceedings during the early-

nineteenth century reveals a series of appeals to Congress to close West Point. These appeals begin shortly after Captain Partridge leaves West Point and continue until the 1850s. Criticism of West Point is generally grounded in the idea West Point might develop a military aristocracy and therefore represents a threat to a free society. Such a cursory review might initially lead one to the conclusion that West Point suffered from a general lack of congressional support. A more detailed look, however, reveals none of those proposals for West Point's elimination were sent to the full House for a vote. All proposals were defeated in committee. While a single attempt to eliminate West Point was approved in committee and referred to the House as a bill,[46] no documentation remains in evidence to indicate its final disposition. That only one of six attempts received enough support to be sent to the House indicates West Point benefitted from the support of a majority of its members.

The Mexican War may have played a role in dispiriting further attempts to abolish West Point, elevating perceptions about the value of a well-educated officer corps. While in Canada during the Revolution, ill-prepared U.S. troops suffered more defeats than victories, lost more men than were gained as prisoners of war, and the few victories they did win took place close to their bases of operation. The opposite was the case in the Mexican War, where a smaller U.S. force led by well-trained officers fighting against an inadequately prepared Mexican army won a series of victories, and in the end captured enough cannons, small arms, munitions, and territory to more than repay the cost of the war effort.[47] As evidenced within testimony offered by General Scott before Congress:

> 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, within 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.[48]

My historical examination reveals congressional activities toward military education reflect a larger conflict that took place following the Revolution. That conflict centers on whether the republic would be defined as a collection of sovereign states or a federally controlled system of government. Following the Revolution, political divisions began to develop and party affiliations began to polarize around the issue of increasing federal acquisition of authority. The Federalists were a conservative group concerned about an overzealous application of democratic principles which might remove the wealthy and educated from public office.[49] Those who identified themselves as Federalists,

such as James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and George Washington, considered the republic to be nationalistic in form, meaning a strong federal government should be superior to state sovereignty. Anti-Federalists tended to support the Articles of Confederation that implied the sovereignty of states over that of a central government. They opposed the growing central authority of the federal government and perceived this as an aristocratic move aimed at seizing governmental power, an idea completely incompatible with a democratic form of government.[50]

That Congress took no action on Washington's several appeals for the founding of a military academy parallels similar attempts to establish a national university to prepare civil servants and can be understood within the larger context of conflict between Federalists and Anti-Federalists. James Madison proposed the idea of a national university at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, but was opposed by those who reasoned government had no justifiable role in education because education was delegated to the states.[51] Anti-Federalists further opposed the idea out of fear such an institution would produce civil servants more loyal to the national government than state governments.[52]

In spite of consistent congressional support for West Point after its founding, evidence nevertheless reveals lingering suspicion toward a military academy. Such a finding is consistent with early United States' emphasis on the citizen-soldier rather than the professional soldier. It is also consistent with the message Captain Partridge articulates in his advocacy of private military education after he left the army in order to ensure military knowledge did not rest solely in the hands of a small elite. However, the citizen-soldier theme never received sufficient congressional support to have threatened the existence of West Point. If anything, it was an inconvenience that stalled West Point's founding until 1802 rather than during the Washington administration.

A lingering question remains as to why President Thomas Jefferson supported the founding of West Point when he had earlier opposed it. During the Washington administration the idea of a military academy was discussed at several cabinet meetings. Washington and several others supported the idea, but it was opposed by Jefferson on the grounds the Constitution did not authorize the federal government to establish such an institution. Washington decided to leave the matter to Congress due to Jefferson's concerns about constitutionality.[53] An answer to this question might be found in preference ordering. Preference ordering informs us individuals will behave in such a manner that their actions maximize utility.[54] While Jefferson opposed a military academy as a cabinet member, the prospect of war and an existential

threat to the young republic may have persuaded him a military academy was preferable.

An understanding of congressional activities surrounding West Point reflects the larger political conflict that took place following the Revolution. When viewed in such a framework, differing positions toward the establishment of a military academy logically emerge. While the need for a military academy continues to be supported in the present, the larger political debate over the power and role of the federal government continues. Our present political parties most clearly differ in terms of the extent of power that should be held by the federal government relative to the states, as well as the level of involvement in the lives of individual citizens. This ongoing debate largely mirrors the differences between Federalists and Anti-Federalists. Our present political parties trace their respective antecedents and differences to the early Federalists and Anti-Federalists.[55] In spite of an historic aversion to a standing army, the citizen-soldier principle was never fully implemented in the sense that the nation relied solely on a semi-professional militia. In spite of a philosophical ideal inspired by a citizen soldiery, the reality of national security in an unstable world ensured West Point's survival.

Endnotes

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 320.

[24] *Cong. Globe, 5th Cong., 2nd sess*. XXXX, 1798, 1415–1426.

[25] *Debates and Proceedings, 7th Cong., 1st sess*., 16 March 1802, 1306–1312 (1851).

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[33] Reeves, *Military Education*, 151–152.

[34] Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, 15th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, DC: DeKrafft), 22.

[35] Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, 16th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton). 103–104.

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